COMMUNICATING ON MIGRATION

A GUIDE FOR SMALL AND MEDIUM NGOS

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On the Ukraine Now project

This guide has been developed under the framework of the European project Ukraine Now, which aims to raise awareness across Europe about migration and refugee movements, thus facilitating the inclusion of displaced people into local communities.

Implemented between November 2022 and October 2024, Ukraine Now brings together four European organisations that operate in the field of migration: Mareena (Slovakia), ARCA (Romania), Open Cultural Center (Greece), and Open Cultural Center (Spain).

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On the author organisations



<u>Mareena</u> is an NGO that visions Slovakia as a welcoming place for all people regardless of nationality, ethnicity, and religious background. Mareena assists foreigners with their integration process through volunteering and educational activities, connects locals with foreigners through community activities, as well as raises awareness about the topics of migration, integration, and diversity in society.

ARCA Romanian Forum for Refugees and Migrants is a non profit organisation founded in 1998 with the aim of promoting and defending the fundamental rights of refugees and migrants as well as facilitating their sustainable integration within the Romanian society.





<u>Open Cultural Center</u> is a registered non-profit organisation active in both Spain and Greece, working towards the inclusion of migrants and refugees through educational and cultural activities. It works mainly with volunteers to offer language classes, technical workshops, sports activities, cultural events, and women and children's support to the wide variety of communities it works with.

The development and writing of this guide are the culmination of a **one-week training** held in Bratislava, in the main headquarters of Mareena, from the 20th to the 24th of March 2023.

Throughout this training, we had the opportunity to **delve deep into the challenges we encounter in communicating the topic of migration**. By thoroughly analysing these challenges, our aim was to gain a comprehensive understanding of how various campaigns and communication materials effectively engage our target audience and the underlying reasons behind their impact.

By bringing together diverse perspectives and experiences, we engaged in fruitful discussions and shared valuable insights. This effort enabled us to **identify successful strategies**, as well as areas that require further attention and improvement. We aimed to strengthen our communication efforts, align our messaging, and enhance our impact in raising awareness and fostering understanding around migration-related issues.

This guide serves as a comprehensive resource, distilling the knowledge and expertise gained during the training.



Challenges of communicating on migration

When covering migration topics, communication practitioners encounter many challenges. One of the biggest ones is maintaining the audience's interest. Usually, public attention tends to wane once the immediate urgency diminishes. However, the tone, images, and message used to sustain engagement can increase the risk of feeding stereotypes to capture the audience's attention.

For instance, the use of **dehumanising images** of people in vulnerable situations to create powerful and emotional content strengthens stereotypical portrayals of migrant people in political discourse and the media. It is necessary to counter the predominant media narratives that associate migrants with an economic burden, as it contributes to hate speech, xenophobia, and even violence.

Picking the **right terms and language** in describing migration is also testing but extremely important. Depicting migration as something that must be contained can contribute to negative perceptions. For this reason, it is crucial to humanise the experiences of migrants and emphasise their individual stories and aspirations, while highlighting their dignity and resilience.

Another challenge is avoiding the **invisibilisation** of certain situations and prioritising others that may receive more attention. It's important to strike a balance and ensure that diverse migration experiences are represented, acknowledging the complexities and unique challenges faced by different groups.

Communication sometimes tends to be **oversimplified**. While it may be tempting to simplify the message for broad accessibility, there is a risk of misleading the audience or perpetuating stereotypes. It's important to find a middle ground where the information is accessible and engaging without compromising accuracy and depth.

Aim of the guide and how to use it

The aim of this guide is to provide a comprehensive and open-access methodology for small and medium-sized NGOs interested in raising awareness about refugee crises. It offers practical guidance on how to develop impactful communication campaigns and strategies that improve the quality of messaging, making it more inclusive, culturally aware, and long-lasting. One of the key objectives of the guide is to challenge and reframe common stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding migration. By offering insights into common pitfalls and mistakes in communication, it seeks to foster a better understanding and awareness of the issues at hand.

A central focus of this guide is to ensure that communication efforts do not unintentionally reinforce biases, stigmatisation, or marginalisation of migrant communities. By addressing these challenges, we seek to **inspire communicators to rethink how they speak about migration**, providing examples and inspiration for shifting the narrative and promoting a more accurate and respectful portrayal of the topic.

Additionally, the guide addresses the specific need to sustain communication efforts even after the decrease in media coverage and society's attention. It offers strategies and insights on how to create content that remains relevant, ensuring that the message continues to resonate and make a lasting impact.

Overall, this guide serves as a valuable resource for communicators, empowering them to effectively raise awareness about refugee crises, while promoting understanding, empathy, and advocacy for the rights and well-being of migrants.

What's in this section

In this section, the focus will mainly be on showing and emphasising the importance of first-person narratives in the communication strategies of organisations working with refugees or migration topics in general.

The aim is to present why it's important to involve the voices of communities. The usage of voices of communities or first-person narratives enables us to create honest and inclusive communication and an environment for diverse, respectful, and impactful awareness-raising campaigns.

The importance of first-person narratives

As narratives play a **key role in shaping opinions, behaviour, and policy-making** regarding migration topics, the organisations that deal with migration are essential in civil society. The purpose of their communication is not only **to raise awareness of the migration issues** but also **to shift the narratives of civil society** and **create more positive public opinion** and acceptance in the host country (Dimitrova & Ozdora-Aksakb, 2022).

The first-person narratives play a vital role in communication strategies. Organisations working with refugees and people with migrant backgrounds have a great responsibility for how their stories are shared and represented in the eyes of the general public.

By using the narratives from the point of view of the people from the communities themselves, organisations can **create inclusive and effective communication** that promotes understanding, empathy, and empowerment of marginalised communities but also challenge stigma and stereotypes, and contribute to social change as well as to the well-being of migrant communities.

Stories to shift the narrative

People with a migration background often have **limited access to platforms where they could share their stories**. Therefore, it is essential for organisations to present authentic and inclusive stories of migrants that empower individuals to share them. Moreover, **the stories should promote the individuality** of each migrant, because they are more than their "migrantness" (StandUp4Migrants, n.d. b).

By sharing the stories of migrant people and of people in communities who welcome them, we can **emphasise connection**, **shared values**, **and humanity** (StandUp4Migrants, n.d. a). Moreover, if we promote local stories based on the shared values within the neighborhood, we can create stories of "us", rather than the us vs. them narrative, that **show togetherness and solidarity between migrant communities and the local community.** By sharing stories about our common experiences and connections, and by creating opportunities for people to come together, we can bring about social change (StandUp4Migrants, n.d. c).

It's important to move from the negative narratives regarding migration that evoke fear and exclusion, and are harmful and generally prejudicial, to the **more positive** ones to welcome people into our communities.

The literature on narratives of migration states that personal narratives of migrant experiences can help in shaping migration policies and give insight into individual life experiences. The lived experiences of migrant people and their stories counterbalance the prevalent negative narratives within the political discourse and media (Boswell, 2021).

Narratives shape how we see the world and how we act in response to migration. If we recognise the values, behavior, and policies we want to promote, we can achieve positive actions and societal transformation by shifting our narratives from fear to hope (OHCHR, n.d.).

HOW TO IMPLEMENT

What are the foundations of firstperson narratives and why are they important?

STRENGTHENING AUTHENTIC VOICES

Thanks to a platform given to the refugees, their lived realities are given an authentic representation as well as it shows their challenges and aspirations. It even helps to fight stereotypes, misconceptions, and generalisations about refugees or people with migrant backgrounds.

ENHANCING CREDIBILITY AND TRUST

Using the voices of communities adds credibility and authenticity to the organisation's work. By sharing their stories, organisations demonstrate transparency, honesty, and a commitment to representing the communities. It ensures that the strategies and processes are more responsive, inclusive and better understand the real experiences and aspirations of the refugee communities. This can build trust among stakeholders, donors, and the public, which can lead to stronger support and engagement. It is easier to raise awareness and advocate for policies that are ensuring refugee rights, protection, and integration.

BUILDING EMPATHY AND CONNECTION

Hearing first-hand stories from refugees humanises their experiences and creates empathy among the broader audience. Personal stories carry powerful messages, which evoke emotions and a sense of connection. Sharing refugee stories brings more understanding, compassion, and support from the public. The stories in their own words allow one to connect with their experiences on a human level and active listening builds bridges of understanding.

First-person narratives

EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITIES

Incorporating first-hand narratives in communication strategies empowers the refugees by giving them a voice in shaping the narratives around them. It allows them to reclaim their stories and contribute to public discourse and it can lead to increased self-confidence, community cohesion, and active participation in society and decision-making.

Including refugee voices in decision-making processes ensures that policies, programs, or initiatives are shaped in collaboration with those directly affected – "nothing about us without us" – and it recognises refugees as active participants in shaping their own destinies.

CHALLENGING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

First-person narratives can challenge the negative perceptions such as prejudice, discrimination and stigmatisation by providing a platform for refugees to assert their identities and rights, and fight stereotypes. Sharing their own stories can help reshape public opinion, promote inclusivity, and advocate for their rights and dignity.

AUTHENTIC REPRESENTATION AND DIVERSITY

The first-person stories allow one to appreciate the diversity of the identities, such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or age and it creates an understanding of how multiple factors shape the refugee experiences.

It helps us to **recognise the unique challenges** different individuals and communities within the refugee population are facing.



Establish a safe and supportive environment where refugee people feel comfortable sharing their stories. Ensure confidentiality, privacy, and sensitivity throughout the process. This can be achieved through one-on-one interviews, focus groups, and storytelling workshops.

Build trust and relationships:

Develop meaningful relationships and trust with refugee communities. Engage in ongoing dialogue, establish partnerships with community leaders or other organisations, and demonstrate a genuine commitment to listening and understanding their experiences. Building trust is crucial for encouraging individuals to share their stories openly and honestly.

Ensure informed consent:

Obtain informed consent from individuals who choose to share their stories. Clearly explain the purpose of collecting their narratives, how they will be used, and any potential risks or benefits involved. Allow participants to decide whether they wish to share their stories anonymously or with attribution.

Collaborative Approach:

Involve people with a migration or refugee background in the storytelling process, allow them to review and provide feedback on their narratives, and even support them in creating their own content as authors. Collaborate with refugees as partners, ensuring they have a say in how their stories are represented and shared. Respect their decisions regarding story selection, language choices, and cultural considerations.

Educate:

Provide context and background information to help audiences understand the broader social, political, and economic factors that shape forced migration experiences. Educate the public about migration-related issues to promote informed and empathetic engagement with the stories of refugees.



Make sensation stories:

Always use ethical practices when sharing first-person narratives. Protect the rights and dignity of people with a migration background. Respect their privacy, avoid sensationalism or exploitation, and ensure that stories are presented in an accurate and respectful manner and that they are not created to fit preconceived narratives or stereotypes. Collaborate with the participants to ensure their narratives are represented authentically. Allow individuals to express themselves honestly, capturing the complexities and nuances of their experiences.

Using the same storytelling format:

Encourage refugee people to share their stories using various formats, such as written narratives, audio recordings, videos, photographs, or artwork. Embrace the diversity of how to share their own stories and allow the different expression ways that resonate with their personal experiences and cultural backgrounds.

Ignorance towards cultural sensitivity and trauma:

Recognise and respect the cultural nuances, norms, and sensitivities of the communities from which the stories originate. Seek guidance and input from community leaders, cultural advisors, or other organisations to ensure the narratives are represented accurately and respectfully.

Be sensitive to the potential trauma associated with sharing forced migration experiences. Provide a supportive and empathetic environment for individuals to express their stories. Offer resources or referrals to mental health services if needed.

What's in this section

The following section reflects on the words and concepts that are used to discuss migration and refugee issues. Although language is usually something taken for granted, it shouldn't; words have the power to reinforce or deconstruct systems that maintain inequality, as well as reproduce or break narratives that promote racism and division.

For this reason, this section will provide information with a strong focus on the vocabulary and the emotions and actions that language can evoke, aimed at reframing traditional narratives to build more positive and constructive ones.

Constructive communication

Language is the basis for constructive communication, understood in this guide as opposed to **crisis communication**. Whereas in the latter, migrant and refugee communities appear dehumanised and as passive victims of a negative situation, **constructive communication** advocates for a narrative focused on solutions to create confidence in our societies' ability to support refugees. This type of communication aims at bringing positive emotions and solution-based content to communication (Human Rights Strategy | Hope-based Comms, n.d.). The logic behind using constructive language can be summarised in two concepts:

- Humanisation of the target communities → The goal here is to promote that the audience feels empathy, which will then help them understand better their situations and will improve the likelihood of them getting engaged with the story and acting about the issue.
- Hope-based approach → Communication needs to inspire people to stand up for human rights and to change minds. It's right to expose abuses but focusing all the attention on the worst crises and abuses drives people away, makes them feel useless or desperate, and can even make people accustomed to them.

Communication's influence on emotions

Emotions need to be taken into account when designing successful strategic communication in the field of migration, as they entail actions from the audience. It is for this reason that **the close link between language and emotions should not be underestimated**.

In this sense, such an emphasis on rethinking the language used to talk about migration and shifting towards a more constructive one has several benefits:

- 1. It can enhance engagement with the movement, moving the audience from being passive to becoming supporters, and even advocates. Problem-based activism may make audiences feel helpless. A solution-based approach to activist strategic communication can present examples of how audiences can work to remedy the problem, encouraging engagement and action. People need to see the solution in order to support it (Ciszek, 2018).
- 2. It can shift the narratives that have historically shaped migration issues, distancing them from the negativity that has dominated the discourses around the topic. Solution-based strategic communication can provide a narrative of survival and hope for the future that may be socially, politically, and commercially viable.

Emotions can be used in communication to make one's messages more resonant and impactful on both attitudes and behaviours. Moreover, research shows that emotion-based messaging using negative emotions should be combined with solutions to avoid reactive, maladaptive, or "boomerang" effects (Dennison, 2023).

However, while emotion-based communication can enhance one's message, it should be **simultaneously based on facts**, values, identities, and efficacy. Emotions should not be confused with the appeal to emotion fallacy—arguing that something is true because of its emotional content. This becomes especially important when communicating on migration (Dennison, 2023).

HOW TO IMPLEMENT

Changing your mindset is easier than it seems. Here we provide easy steps to start with!

Some resources

- Inclusive Language Guide by Oxfam
- Hope-based comms website
- Why Words Matter by PICUM
- <u>Using emotions in migration policy communication</u>
 <u>by ICMDP</u>

And remember

Constructive communication is not idealistic communication, but **change and action-oriented communication!**

GO BEYOND

Dare to debate with your team on white-saviourism, otherisation, and orientalism. **Develop your NGO's communications strategy by training your team on in-depth methods.**

IDENTIFY YOUR NARRATIVE

Ask yourself some questions to **reflect on the kind of language you are using** and discover whether or not your words are reproducing negative narratives:

- What are the main words used and what do they mean?
- Are these words the same ones used in the media or in politics? Who uses them as well?
- Are they dividing? Are we promoting negative stereotypes or breaking them?
- Are they coherent with the mission and values of my NGO? Do they reflect the work and efforts of my NGO?
- What is their potential impact on society? Are they fostering tolerance and inclusion? Are they negatively influencing society's behaviour towards migration?

REMOVE THE OBSTACLES

If your narrative does not reflect the values, objectives or activities of your organisation properly, identify what is the obstacle. **What if the way you communicate changed?**

DEVELOP THE COUNTER-NARRATIVE

Take into account the two main concepts mentioned before: **humanisation** of the target communities and hope-based approach, and create a small list of alternative words or even your own dictionary (we give you some ideas in the next page!).



On the topic of migration:

Talk about migration as what it is: a natural phenomenon that has always existed. Focus on the added value and the potential contributions to society that migration can have.

- Promote the use of words like opportunity, experience, etc.
- For emergency situations like wars or armed conflicts, it is justified to use more negative words in a descriptive way. However, try to lower the pessimistic tone by combining them with more neutral words like issue or situation.

On the target communities:

Promote the use of words that put the focus on the individuals as humans and foster values of humanity, inclusion, equality, and empathy:

- People with a migration background, migrant and refugee people, displaced people, people/ men/ women fleeing Syria.
- Our community, project participants.

Pay attention to the narrative:

When describing the work of your organisation, prioritise talking about humanity, portraying the target communities as 'actors' and not 'receivers', calling moments for actions and not crises, and showing positive stories that show the change.

• We work WITH and FOR people with a migration background, we support, we promote, we work to improve certain situations, etc.

On the topic of migration:

Avoid framing migration as a negative phenomenon - which is the predominant narrative in politics and the media - and use words that evoke negative emotions in society and make people react against it. Fact-check to identify false claims, lies, and fake news.

• Crisis, problem, conflict, burden.

On the target communities:

Avoid the use of words that act as "labels" standing as the only way to refer to people, and that dehumanize them and bring negative stereotypes.

 Migrants and refugees, massive flows of migrants, illegal migrants, irregular migrants, etc. People should not be defined by their legal status.

Pay attention to the narrative:

- The word INCLUSION is preferred because it contains a less assimilative approach than INTEGRATION.
- Any narrative/ approach that directly or indirectly promotes white saviorism, the distinction North-South, the division of "we" and "them" to talk about displaced people, that presents the collective with no power to change things, that creates alarmism/ catastrophism, etc.

What's in this section

This section will mainly cover theoretical aspects of **the power of visuals in communication** about refugee and migration-related topics. We will navigate through the steps needed to implement **ethical visuals** in one's communication strategy, as well as through some of the most important do's and don'ts.

The power of images

Visuals transmit messages faster. An image can simplify complex messages and speed up their processing - what is known as **instant comprehension with minimal effort**. According to the Visual Teaching Alliance:

- The brain can see images that last for just 13 milliseconds.
- Our eyes can register 36,000 visual messages per hour.
- We can get a sense of a visual scene in less than 1/10 of a second.
- 90% of information transmitted to the brain is visual.
- Visuals are processed 60,000X faster in the brain than text.
- 40 percent of nerve fibers are linked to the retina.

To better grasp the power of visuals, think about a specific object. What comes to mind first: an image or a definition? Proposed by Allan Paivio, the **dual coding theory** is based on the following assumption: that **mental images assist the learning process**. According to Paivio, there are only two methods of learning: through visual images and verbal associations.

This theory proposes that both elements are used as assimilated information. Processing routes are different for everyone.

Humanitarian aid communication uses the 'shock effect' and 'positive style'. **'Shock effect' communication** positions the receiver at the "mercy" of the benefactor's decision to help, while **'positive style' communication** emphasises the receiver's power and dignity. Chouliaraki (2010) highlights empathy as being the core value of the viewer-subject relationship.

There are 2 main risks in this positive style communication process. Amplifying the role of campaigns, benefactors, fundraisers can lead to a self-absorbed view on the power and ability to take action. On the other hand, too much visual 'positivity' of the people in need gives the target audience the false presumption that no more actions are needed as misery is being taken care of.

The third communication style called the 'post-humanitarian style' does not make use of universal discourses of morality, but focuses on practicalities. This style gives prominence to the viewer rather than the recipient and asks viewers to reflect on their own attitudes, lives, and behavior.

Chouliaraki (2010) argues that the 'post-humanitarian style' makes a new public sensibility possible by moving the focus from exalting grand emotion towards suffering to creating the opportunity for viewers to rely on their own judgement whether public action is possible or desirable.



HOW TO IMPLEMENT

Every organisation has its own mission, expected outcome of a specific project, visual identity and many other elements to keep in mind when communicating visually, but the next steps are here to aid you in the process.

WHO IS YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE?

Are you communicating cross-culturally and cross-generationally? Does your audience belong to a very narrow segment? Oftentimes, the public is made up of people with different backgrounds, who respond to different visuals.

It is important to discover what your target group **knows**, **feels**, **and does** about the issue at the heart of your visual message and what would you like them to know, feel or do after watching it. Maybe through your message, a person with a refugee background would move from feeling lost to feeling hopeful or empowered.

THE GOAL OF YOUR COMMUNICATION

Whether your are simply conveying information, telling a story or wishing to make a positive impact on the world, it is important to **reflect on the message you intend to deliver**, as it will naturally develop into one or more specific ways in which it can achieve its purpose. This step will determine **why you're using a specific visual communication strategy**, while needing **minimal to substantial efforts** to integrate the visual component.

EVALUATE THE IMPACT

Remember that the most impactful visuals, once the message is delivered to the target audience, become memorable.

You can evaluate the effectiveness of visuals used in communication through observed changed perspectives.

HOW TO COMMUNICATE

Don't tell it if you can show it!

Pictures, images, infographics, videos, graphics, animations, and slide presentations – these are all methods for achieving the goal of your organisation's message. Moreover, you can emphasise or strengthen your message by using keywords.



- Visuals create emotion as they cause a faster and stronger reaction than words. They help users engage with the content, and such emotional reactions influence information retention. The brain is set up in a way that visual stimuli and emotional responses are easily linked, and together the two form memories.
- Images are amplified by text. This combo improves information retention and refines the viewer's perception.
- Keep the message simple and clear and engage the target audience.
 Elements such as portrayed setting, people, their mimicry and behaviour, angles and proximity, colors, keywords and editing techniques can communicate different perspectives and influence, positively or negatively, public opinion.
- The responsibility of selecting an image lies with the transmitter: by
 consciously selecting a part of the reality it gives the receiver the
 possibility to see only one side of it. The responsibility of interpreting an
 image lies with the receiver, as he must always be aware that he only
 sees one frame of a more complex reality.
- Be careful on **culturally sensitive issues** transcend cultural barriers by focusing on the **universality and humanity** of the conveyed message.



Avoid stereotypes:

• Stereotypes are mental images of what people from certain groups are like: what all women are like, what all homosexual people are like, what all Romanians are like... There are both positive and negative stereotypes. And while they might make our reality simpler to grasp, they also, by definition, impair our capacity to see individuals. Instead of seeing the unique person in front of us, we get hung up on their gender, skin color, religion, or the presence of a disability – and we shape our image of what that person is like based on these superficial qualities. The antidote is visibility. To show more images, more role models.

Propaganda and disinformation on social media:

 Spread false information, influence public opinion and policymakers/ information warfare - This tide of unfiltered (or barely filtered) information is immediate and constant. It certainly makes a difference to the level of engagement that individuals around the world may have with dramatic events, often far away. But might that feedback affect the course of wars themselves? (The Guardian)

Making the wise choice;

- The right visual can constructively shift the audience's perception and deepen their understanding. An inappropriate visual can do more harm than no visual at all.
- Sometimes wrong editing techniques can diminish the impact of a visual: by enhancing too much the colors of an image for example the receiver will come in contact more with a magazine shooting pictorial than with the rawness of the context, therefore with the reality. To communicate the truth or embellish it is only one of the choices the transmitter has to make.
- Don't manipulate, send subliminal messages, create confusion or use discriminatory messages trough the visuals transmitted.

Limitations of the guide

This guide is aimed to be used as a **starting point** for developing more informed awareness raising-campaigns and encourages users to adapt the methodology based on their needs, resources, and local contexts.

From this starting point our suggestion would be to **seek additional resources and expert advice as necessary**. Moreover, as mentioned, communication is strictly related to culture and target audience, so it is important for practitioners to **reflect on how to adapt the guide's material to their context**. The guide may not address the resource limitations that some organisations or individuals may face. Implementing certain strategies or techniques requires financial, human, or technological resources that are not readily available to all users.

For this reason, we encourage users of the guide to **adapt the recommendations based on their available resources**. Lastly, the guide does not extensively cover the tools to measure the effectiveness of awareness-raising campaigns. So users should consider incorporating monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to measure the outcomes.

Invisibilised conflicts

Implementing effective and inclusive communication on migration plays a pivotal role in **shedding light on the often-overlooked conflicts** and challenges that remain invisible to the general public. By adopting an inclusive and diverse approach to communication, we aim not only to draw attention to immediate crises but also to produce **content that resonates in the long term**.

The narrative surrounding migration tends to be dominated by sensationalised stories of crisis and upheaval. While it's crucial to address these pressingissues, it's equally important to recognise the multifaceted nature of migration.

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