

Summary: **From Fear to Solidarity: The Difficulty in Shifting Public Narratives about Refugees**

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Executive Summary

- This report looks at different narratives that tend to emerge in communities welcoming forced migrants by looking at a variety of geographic, socioeconomic, and historical contexts, and at how these narratives may vary in response to different crises or triggers.
- Public narratives on forced migration are often pulled to the extremes: either depicting refugees and asylum seekers as heroes and exceptional contributors or as security threats and opportunists.
- In reality, people can hold multiple, competing beliefs: they can demonstrate sympathy and compassion for refugees alongside expressing anxiety over competition for scarce jobs.
- Despite gaps in measuring public opinion on refugees, several trends have merged over the past decade, including:
 - (1) Forced migrants do not necessarily elicit more support than other immigrants,
 - (2) The perception of unfairness can ramp up anxiety,
 - (3) Specific narratives such as “Afghan allies” or “Venezuelan brothers” are time-bound and context-specific,
 - (4) Abstract compassion for forced migrants does not always mean practical support, and
 - (5) Solidarity and support are difficult to maintain.
- Addressing negative perceptions of forced migrants cannot happen in a vacuum. Governments and other actors need to restore confidence in the immigration system and address underlying anxieties over scarce resources.
- To promote solidarity with and reduce public anxiety over forced migrants, this report recommends the following strategies:
 - Identifying pockets of intense anxiety, and paying attention to what makes concerns more or less salient;
 - Moving away from a narrow focus on trying to change people’s attitudes;
 - Reinforcing perceptions of fairness;
 - Invoking pragmatism instead of compassion;
 - Demonstrating plans for newcomers’ long-term integration, not just short-term reception.

Public Opinion and Narratives on Refugees

- Attitudes about immigration are formed by a combination of internal/individual and external/public dynamics.
- Building on previous frameworks, this report focuses on the following three factors that affect the formation of attitudes about immigration:
 - **Individual factors:** Individual characteristics as well as core values inform beliefs about immigration’s costs and benefits. Some studies have co-related anti-immigration sentiment with factors such as older age and lower education, conservative political ideology, and attachment to core values such as social dominance and hierarchy; however, these correlations do not hold true everywhere.

- **Contextual Factors:** People’s lived experiences, as well as the frequency and quality of their exposure to different groups, during their key moments in their lives, can form their attitudes. The type of contact and the circumstances under which it occurs are critically important. A rapid influx in places ill-prepared for refugees can lead to hostility.
- **Mediating Factors:** Different factors such as how politicians and media frame issues can affect or reinforce internal and external factors. Survey questions can shape how individuals give weight to different concerns. While beliefs may be relatively stable after early adulthood, how people rank competing concerns may fluctuate.

Understanding the limitations of public opinion data on refugees

- One-off polling and even longitudinal surveys often miss cyclical ebbs and flows in public perception.
- Surveys may overlook contextual differences, e.g., rural vs urban. In other words, averages can artificially flatten significant peaks of concern.
- Seemingly insignificant word choices can lead to different responses. For example, asking “do you support an increase” or “oppose a decrease” can affect the result.
- Surveys cannot capture crucial differences between abstract and concrete support for refugees. A widespread support for refugees in principle, does not equal to willingness to allocate resources or welcoming them in their communities.

Current Trends in Public Opinion

- Refugees and asylum seekers are often viewed as “less-welcomed” in hosting countries than other immigrants. Numerous surveys suggest that hosting countries, while agreeing that refugees deserve protection, see them as causing social and economic problems.
- While in the wake of pandemic public support for refugees increased in some countries like the United Kingdom, it waned in early 2022 after media attention focused on refugee crossings of the English Channel.
- After two months into the Ukraine crisis, the EU and other countries show unanimous support for Ukrainian migrants. It remains to be seen how long this level of support can be maintained.
- There is often a threshold of support beyond which hospitality fatigue sets in and support wanes. This trend was recognizable in Europe after the 2016 influx of refugees and in Colombia after hosting 1.7 million of Venezuelan refugees.
- Instead of trying to discern patterns over specific periods of time, it may be more productive to pursue a better understanding of the conditions under which positive and negative sentiments flourish.

Benefit and threat narratives

- Public opinion polls and surveys often fail to capture how refugee stories are framed and how refugee narratives interact with people’s perception and lived experiences.
- Refugees’ stories are often framed along “victimhood”, “benefit”, and “threat” narratives.
- Refugees as victims stokes sympathy, while the benefit framework focuses on long-term benefits that refugees can bring to the hosting communities.
- The threat narrative frames refugees as economic, security and cultural threats to the social fabric and harmony of the hosting communities.

- Increase in support for refugees can be tied to collective responsibility and solidarity, as demonstrated by the bipartisan and public support for the Afghan refugees who aided American military operations.

The Connection between Public Opinion, Narratives, and Policy

- Data from public opinion polls and common refugee narratives shed light on how opposition or support is triggered, and what the impact on policy may be.
- Different phases of a crisis can activate different threat frames. As opposed to the beginning of the pandemic, public support increased by easing restrictions and countries focused on long-term recovery. Immigrants were perceived to be needed after a period of border closure.
- Perceptions of fairness and deservedness, more so than the volume of arrivals, can shape attitudes toward refugees. Surveys indicate an increase in the perception of receiving countries that refugees take more than their fair share and that they abuse the system.
- Unanticipated or poorly managed crises can trigger a threat mindset, even when refugee numbers are low.

What Does This Mean for Humanitarian Actors and Governments?

- Humanitarian actors and governments can learn from waning or fluctuating support for refugees.
- Public attention to refugees can be a double-edged sword. While heightened attention to refugee crisis, like the exodus of Afghans following the fall of the Taliban regime, may mobilize public support, it may also trigger public anxiety and anti-immigration sentiments.
- How people say they feel in the abstract does not always translate into how they react in reality, particularly when receiving communities are grappling with scarce resources.
- Solidarity may be highly context-specific and not always generalizable. The context-specific supports for newcomers are based upon particular narratives such as helping “Afghan allies” who helped American military operations in Afghanistan.
- Public opinion may diverge based on manner of entry: regulated entry through established channels like private sponsorship garner more support than spontaneous and irregular arrivals.
- Geographic differences within countries can be significant, and these are rarely picked up by public opinion polling.

Policies and Interventions that can Promote Solidarity

Campaigns to Counter Negative Narratives and Promote Solidarity

- Allaying the fears of a skeptical and anxious public and tapping into feelings of generosity has been difficult to achieve in practice.
- Echo chambers may prevent skeptics from coming into contact with information that challenges their beliefs. Once beliefs are formed, they are highly resistant to corrections.
- People often rationalize new evidence as the “exception to the rule.” Beliefs are tied more to social cues and identity than to a process of scientific inquiry.

Contact Interventions to Strengthen Social Cohesion

- For decades, a vast body of research has suggested that increasing contact between different groups can unearth common ground and reduce prejudice. This contact can be grouped into three broad categories:
 - (1) Intergroup contact for leisure, sports, or building shared spaces, designed to build trust and promote positive interactions;
 - (2) Intergroup contact for livelihood or economic recovery interventions that benefit entire communities; and
 - (3) Engaging communities in designing and delivering services, such as community sponsorship or refugee cohousing initiatives.
- There are some flaws with contact activities, such as selection bias, as activities are voluntary.
- The quality of interaction also matters, as gatherings may not happen on equal footing. Being in the same physical space does not guarantee meaningful contact or actual collaboration.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Identify pockets of intense anxiety and pay attention to what makes concerns more or less salient. The natural ebbs and flows in refugee support are better understood when the underlying causes of anxiety and frustration are addressed.
- Amplifying positive messages to boost support for refugees and asylum seekers is not enough in this ecosystem of overlapping and competing stories.
- Move away from a narrow focus on trying to change people's attitudes. Rather, allocate resources to provide what different layer of society needs. This can mean first addressing concerns over unemployment or overburdened infrastructure rather than focusing on curbing xenophobic rhetoric
- Invoke pragmatism instead of compassion by showing economic and social benefits created by welcoming and integrating refugees.
- Reinforce perceptions of fairness around how forced migrants enter the country and use the public resources. The public is more likely to invest in refugee protection and integration if it is seemed not as something we do "for them," but for the benefit of the whole society.
- Demonstrate that there is a plan for newcomers' long-term integration, not just short-term reception. After the initial emergency phase of a crisis, the public's concerns shift toward newcomers' performance and whether or not they become self-sufficient and find jobs.
- Messages should not try to "sell" the benefits of welcoming and supporting humanitarian migrants, but rather help people see solidarity with newcomers as something that furthers their own goals—not something imposed upon them.