

(Re)Framing migration: Discursive power across the Global South and the Global North



Figure 1: Cartoon created for International Migrants Day 2013 as part of a campaign by the UN Human Rights Office and the International Labour Organization to debunk myths about migration (Fiami, 2013)

Key highlights

- Migration narratives shape public perception, policies and migrants’ daily lives.
- Framings from the Global North largely dominate migration narratives, overshadowing, and at times, affecting perspectives from the Global South.
- There is a need to support inclusive, locally grounded knowledge and frameworks, moving away from fear-based constructed narratives and promoting rights-based, factual communication.
- Ensuring narrative justice and promoting alternative migration narratives are a political and ethical imperative to enable migrants to integrate into host communities.

The ‘pictures in our heads’: Why migration narratives matter?

Narratives are **socially constructed stories** created by individuals, communities, the media and policymakers to make sense of the world and direct how they respond to certain issues.¹ In the context of migration, there has been a growing interest in how narratives are framed—and by whom—as they are not apolitical and can bear a lot of power. As William L. Allen² highlights, narratives comprise the **‘pictures in our heads’**³ that guide how migration and migrants are perceived (e.g., as threats, burdens, victims or contributors), who is deserving of protection and which policy responses are supported.⁴

Several studies conducted in Europe have shown that **political actors and the media play a key role in shaping and influencing migration narratives**, while civil society tends to emphasise human rights concerns, legal protection and integration as counter-narratives.⁵ **Research and academia** itself are also part of a complex web of mutual influence, involving the media and public perceptions

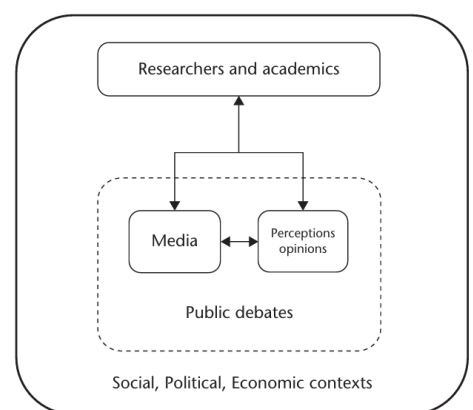


Figure 2: Model exploring research impacts on public debates⁶

¹ OHCHR. (2020). *Seven key elements on building human rights-based narratives on migrants and migration*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/tools-and-resources/seven-key-elements-building-human-rights-based-narratives-migrants>

² Allen, W.L. (2025). *(Re)framing migration: Examining migration narratives in the Global North and the Global South* [Webinar]. IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at University Mohammed VI Polytechnic. <https://aires.fgses-um6p.ma/node/9370>

³ Lippmann, W. (1922). *Public opinion*. Harcourt, Brace.

⁴ Rheindorf, M., & Vollmer, B. (2025). *Discourses about irregularised migrants: Representation and narratives in media, politics, and civil society in Europe. Comparative report*. I-CLAIM. <https://i-claim.eu/project/discourses-about-irregularised-migrants-comparative-report/>

⁵ Rheindorf, M., Vollmer, B., van Liempt, I., & Sigona, N. (2025). *Understanding and reframing migration narratives: Towards an evidence-based policy discourse in Europe. Policy Brief*. I-CLAIM. <https://i-claim.eu/project/understanding-and-reframing-migration-narratives-towards-an-evidence-based-policy-discourse-in-europe/>

and opinions, framed within broader social, political and economic contexts (see Figure 2).⁶ For example, public debates can shape research questions, data collection and the dissemination of findings, especially when the goal is to influence these debates.

Diverging and converging migration narratives in the Global North and the Global South

Migration narratives vary widely both between and within the Global North and Global South, shaped by different political ideologies, policy approaches, historical migration patterns and colonial legacies.^{4,7}

Frequently relying on language of **crisis and emergency**,^{4,8} migration is often portrayed in the Global North as challenging national security, economic stability and cultural identity.^{4,9} Such narratives have contributed to the public perception of migration and displacement as **potential threats** to the stability of institutions in the Global North, reinforcing political agendas that promote externalised border control and justify restrictive policy measures.^{4,8} Even humanitarian narratives are often **selective**, framing specific groups to be more deserving of protection, such as Ukrainian refugees.¹⁰

In the Global South, migration is more **embedded in everyday realities**,¹¹ emerging from long-standing patterns of circular migration, cross-border social networks and economies and regional integration, including historical movements that predate colonialism and legal governance frameworks, which continue to shape contemporary mobility dynamics.⁷ In many countries, migration is perceived as a **driver of development**, with remittances often playing an important role in supporting households, national economies and poverty reduction.¹² In West Africa, for instance, one of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) protocols supports the free movement of people within a certain timeframe, facilitating human mobility and regional integration.¹³ Regional instruments like the Cartagena Declaration and the 1969 OAU (Organization of African Unity—now African Union) Convention on Refugees provide more expansive protection for displaced populations.¹⁴ At the same time, however, it has been observed that some migration narratives in the Global South have started to **mimic** those of the Global North, fuelled by anti-immigrant sentiment and externalisation of border control.⁸

Key challenges in shifting dominant migration narratives

1. **Narrative power imbalance between the Global North and the Global South:** Asymmetries in narrative power continue to shape global perceptions and understandings of migration. Through universities, think tanks, the media, donors and political actors, knowledge production and dominant discourse remain concentrated in the Global North.^{7,11} Migration narratives and knowledge systems in the Global South remain undervalued, sidelining complex Southern realities and promising local practices, and risking the replication of Northern framings of migration and migrants.^{7,11,15}
2. **Dominant crisis framing:** The persistent use of crisis and emergency language, particularly common across different contexts in the Global North,^{1,4,8} has created the perception that migration is out of control, prompting urgent and more restrictive responses.⁴ Importantly, the power of narratives stems not only from their content but also from their delivery, repetition and resonance.^{1,2} Fear-driven anti-migration narratives often use migrants as scapegoats for security concerns

⁶ Allen, W., Blinder, S., & McNeil, R. (2019). Informing realities: Research, public opinion, and media reports on migration and integration. In M. Ruhs, K. Tamas & J. Palme (Eds.), *Bridging the gaps: Linking research to public debates and policy making on migration and integration* (pp. 50–66). Oxford University Press.

⁷ Achieng, M., & El Fadil, A. (2020). What is wrong with the narrative on African migration? In A. Adepoju, C. Fumagalli, & N. Nyabola (Eds.), *Africa Migration Report: Challenging the narrative* (pp. 1–14). International Organization for Migration. <https://publications.iom.int/books/africa-migration-report-challenging-narrative>

⁸ FGSES-UM6P. (2025, January 24). *Experts Talk: Migration narratives* [Podcast]. SoundCloud. <https://on.soundcloud.com/3VGFEM1IMOXDWdH4jzb>

⁹ Borjas, G. J. (2016). *We wanted workers: Unraveling the immigration narrative*. W. W. Norton & Company.

¹⁰ Diab, J. L. (2025). Hues of refuge: Framing compassion and condemnation in refugee portrayals through a political-media cycle of reinforcement. *The Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Politics*, 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/rep.2024.36>

¹¹ Banerjee, P. (2025). *(Re)framing migration: Examining migration narratives in the Global North and the Global South* [Webinar]. IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at University Mohammed VI Polytechnic. <https://airess.fgses-um6p.ma/node/9370>

¹² Ratha, D. K., De, S., Kim, E. J., Plaza, S., Seshan, G. K., & Yameogo, N. D. (2020). *COVID-19 crisis through a migration lens* (Migration and Development Brief 32). World Bank Group. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/989721587512418006/covid-19-crisis-through-a-migration-lens>

¹³ Garba, F. & Yeboah, T. (2022). Free movement and regional integration in the ECOWAS Sub-Region. In J.K. Teye (Ed.), *Migration in West Africa: IMISCOE Regional Reader* (pp. 19–34). Springer.

¹⁴ Cantor, D. J. (2021, January 4). *Cooperation on refugees in Latin America and the Caribbean – The “Cartagena process” and South–South approaches. Southern Responses to Displacement*. <https://southernresponses.org/2021/01/04/cooperation-on-refugees-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean-the-cartagena-process-and-south-south-approaches/>

¹⁵ Faal, G. (2025). *(Re)framing migration: Examining migration narratives in the Global North and the Global South* [Webinar]. IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at University Mohammed VI Polytechnic. <https://airess.fgses-um6p.ma/node/9370>

or economic challenges, gaining even more traction when communities believe they are in a crisis. However, such narratives fuel discrimination, exclusion and xenophobia, directly affecting migrants' human rights.¹

Recommendations for policymakers and implementing stakeholders

Based on the podcast discussion and the presentations and discussion in the webinar, three key policy priorities emerge:

- 1. Rebalance narrative power through promoting inclusive and locally grounded knowledge and frameworks:** Supporting equal partnerships with researchers, policymakers, civil society actors and institutions in the Global South can lead to more inclusive knowledge and discourse production on migration. This involved strengthening local research and media ecosystems, promoting migrant-led storytelling and creating space for alternative narratives on migration and displacement.^{7,8,11} Addressing power asymmetries helps question the dominance of migration framings from a Global North perspective and ensures that migration narratives reflect the lived realities of migrants, as well as local practices of reception and integration.^{11,15} In addition, regional frameworks rooted in collaboration and solidarity—such as the ECOWAS Free Movement Protocol, the Cartagena Declaration and the 1969 OAU Convention on Refugees—also deserve greater visibility within public debates and policymaking on migration.
- 2. Move away from crisis and fear-based framing:** Political actors and the media should avoid communication emphasising crisis and emergency language when communicating about migration and migrants. Metaphors such as 'floods' and 'invasions', but also describing migrants in irregular situations as 'illegal', often lead to sensationalising and dehumanising migrants.¹
- 3. Promote rights-based migration narratives, based on factual information:** Political actors, the media and international organisations should implement rights-based communication strategies that proactively challenge misinformation, foreground facts and counter discriminatory and xenophobic discourse.^{1,16} Particular attention should be given to ensuring that migration narratives are sensitive to gender, race, ethnicity, age and disability, and do not reinforce exclusion.

Campaigns promoting rights-based narratives and positive change

Successful campaigns have been launched on global, regional, national and local levels aimed at influencing migration narratives to support the integration of migrants and refugees and ensuring they can enjoy their human rights.

For example:

- ["I am a migrant"](#) (IOM)
- [Toolbox on migration narrative change](#) (UN Human Rights)
- ["Je ne m'appelle pas Azzi"](#) (Morocco)

Conclusion: Reclaiming narrative power

Migration narratives matter because they hold **power**: they determine whose perspectives are foregrounded, heard and can influence policymaking. To ensure that diverse narratives are reflected in policies that influence the daily lives and realities of migrants and refugees, **narrative justice** must be prioritised. This policy brief emphasised that reframing migration and reclaiming narrative power—both for migrants and for the Global South—is not just a matter of communication, but an **ethical and political imperative**. To shift dominant migration narratives, stakeholders should promote inclusive and locally grounded knowledge and frameworks, avoid crisis and fear-based framings, and adopt rights-based, fact-driven communication strategies. Alternative narratives can **create space for migrants** to access resources, build meaningful lives and support their integration into host communities.

This policy brief was co-authored by the [IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at University Mohammed VI Polytechnic \(UM6P\)](#)'s team, in close collaboration with the podcast and webinar contributors:

- Prof. William L. Allen discussed how migration narratives shape public opinion, policy and practice, emphasising the role of information, messengers and (social) media in influencing attitudes toward migration.

- Prof. Paula Banerjee highlighted the asymmetrical power of narrative production between the Global North and the Global South, stressing how northern framings dominate discourse and overshadow locally grounded realities in the Global South.
- Prof. Gibril Faal examined community-based models of integration and argued for recognising and potentially replicating Global South practices.

¹⁶ Allen, W. L., Ahlstrom-Vij, K., Rolfe, H., & Runge, J. (2023). Communicating economic evidence about immigration changes attitudes and policy preferences. *International Migration Review*, 58(1), 266–95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01979183221142779>

- Prof. Nando Sigona explored how irregular migration is constructed, showing how the media, politics and civil society influence public perceptions and policy responses across Europe.

Produced with support from University Mohammed VI Polytechnic (UM6P) and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). The views and opinions expressed in this brief are those of the authors.

The *UM6P Research Chair's 2025 Webinar Series* aims to foster dialogue between researchers, policymakers and practitioners from both the Global North and the Global South. While most forcibly displaced people reside in the Global South, research on migration and displacement remains largely shaped by the Global North, where funding, policy and theoretical frameworks dominate. This focus often sidelines the complex realities and inequalities shaping migration and displacement in the Global South. The Webinar Series, hosted by the IDRC Research Chair on Forced Displacement at UM6P, aims to address this imbalance by generating regionally grounded insights to inform policy development.