



WEBINAR PROCEEDINGS

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SHAPING NARRATIVES ON MIGRATION IN HUMANITARIAN AND DISPLACEMENT SETTINGS

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UN Major Group for
Children and Youth
the space for children and youth in the United Nations

People
Beyond Borders

Webinar Proceedings

Shaping Narratives on Migration in Humanitarian and Displacement Settings

February 2021

Edited by

Jasmin Lilian Diab
Mohammed Ghabris

Organized by

United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth

In partnership with

People Beyond Borders

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Introduction

Jasmin Lilian Diab and Mohammed Ghabris

February 24, 2021

This webinar, organized by the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (UNMGCY)'s Migration Working Group (MENA) as part of its webinar series on Migration, in partnership with People Beyond Borders (PBB), intended to deconstruct negative perceptions of migration by addressing contextual realities and bringing to light practical interventions and evidence-based knowledge on what is happening on the ground in humanitarian settings. Challenging intolerance and discrimination by raising awareness about the complexity of migrant integration and promoting a human rights-centered approach to migration constitute pivotal pillars in shaping migration narratives in humanitarian and displacement settings. Forced Migration discourse has insisted that governments do not shape these narratives alone, nor do they operate in a political vacuum when it comes to pushing anti-immigrant policies. Grasping the exact manner through which media narratives and public opinion are constructed, as well as the manner through which they interact in application, is important in challenging negative rhetoric, hostile messages and anti-immigrant sentiments. This webinar shed light on the aforementioned realities through a moderated panel with PBBs' Organization Manager and its Co-Founder.

Organizers and Partners

United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (UNMGCY)

Established in 1992, the United Nations Major Group for Children and Youth (UNMGCY) is the United Nations General Assembly-mandated, official, formal and self-organized space for children and youth to contribute to and engage in certain intergovernmental and allied policy processes at the United Nations. The UN MGCY acts as a bridge between young people and the UN system in order to ensure their right to meaningful participation. It does so by engaging formal and informal communities of young people, in the form of child-led, youth-led, and child-and-youth-serving federations, unions, organizations, associations, councils, networks, clubs, movements, mechanisms, structures and other entities, as well as their members and individuals in the Design, Implementation, Monitoring, and Follow-Up & Review of sustainable development policies at all levels. In the areas of Migration specifically, the UNMGCY engages Regional Focal Points for its Migration Working Group around the world – including the MENA Region.

People Beyond Borders (PBB)

People Beyond Borders is run by, for and with displaced communities and refugees. It aims to shed light on, and humanize narratives of displaced women, youth and children fleeing conflicts, disasters, and human rights violations. People Beyond Borders co-creates safe spaces and connects displaced communities and refugees for self-empowerment, psychosocial support, entrepreneurship and skill-sharing. It aims to transform the way displaced communities and refugees connect with each other, as well as with the world around them. Their initiatives include Research Collaboratives, Wellbeing Workshops and an Entrepreneurship Platform.

Panelists' Biographies

Jasmin Lilian Diab, (Organizer, Moderator and Co-Editor) is a researcher, writer, editor, reviewer, instructor and consultant in the areas of Forced Migration, Gender and Conflict. She is the Refugee Health Program Coordinator at the American University of Beirut's Global Health Institute, as well as a Research Associate on the Political Economy of Health in Conflict under its Conflict Medicine Program. Jasmin is a Research Affiliate at the Centre for Refugee Studies at York University, an Adjunct Professor in Gender and Migration at the Fatima Al-Fihri Open University, a Junior Fellow and Program Lead at the 'War, Conflict and Global Migration' Think Tank of the Global Research Network and a Senior Consultant on Forced Migration and Gender at Cambridge Consulting Services. Jasmin is a Founding Member of the 'Migration and International Law in Africa, Middle East and Turkey International Network', dedicated to the research of Migration through the Global South (2018 to present), and has served as a Reviewer to the Journal of Internal Displacement, a Reviewer and Copy-Editor to the journal 'Refugee Review', and as an Editorial Board Member of the Journal of Applied Professional Studies at Marywood University since 2020. She is finalizing a PhD in International Relations and Diplomacy with an emphasis on Asylum, Refugees and Security from the esteemed Centre for Diplomatic and Strategic Studies of the School of Advanced International and Political Studies, INSEEC U. in France, and is the author of two books and over sixty academic and para-academic publications on intersectional issues across Migration, Gender, Conflict, Human Rights, International Relations and International Law.

Mohammed Ghabris (Panelist and Co-Editor) brings an ongoing five years of experience in the humanitarian-gender-protection nexus while responding to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. His expertise includes program quality assurance, gender and different protection-related aspects. Since 2013, Mohammed has been working in the domains of personal and community development with Initiatives of Change, and in the domain of accountability mainstreaming in organizations such as Action Against Hunger, Norwegian Refugee Council and recently with ABAAD - Resource Centre for Gender Equality in Lebanon. He has worked in India, Sri Lanka, Lebanon and other parts of the world through different initiatives. Mohammed completed his MA in International Affairs and Diplomacy, with a focus on nationalism and identity, at Notre Dame University-Louaize, and currently works as the Organization Manager of PBB, while also supporting their creative trainings cluster with facilitating various capacity-building workshops and trainings.

Prerna Rathi (Panelist) is a humanitarian practitioner who has worked with the government, non-profit and private sectors to facilitate accountability towards beneficiaries in the U.S., UK, Belgium, Lebanon, Nigeria, Nepal and India for nine years. Prerna's expertise is in knowledge management, impact analysis, program designing and capacity building processes. Given her strong intercultural and conflict assessment skills, she has proactively provided surge support in

emergencies such as the Syrian refugee response, Boko Haram crisis, Nepal earthquake and Kashmir flood relief. Prerna has been applying a peacebuilding lens through participatory research, sustained dialogue and storytelling with refugees and displaced communities. She received her BA in International Studies and Philosophy from American University and an MSc in International Development and Humanitarian Emergencies from the London School of Economics and Political Science. Through these experiences, she is a creative, passionate and motivating team-builder and Founder of People Beyond Borders.

Understanding the Spectrum of Those Displaced: Narratives, Identity, Mental Health and Ways Forward

Presented by:

Prerna Rathi, Co-Founder and Advisor, People Beyond Borders

Mohammed Ghabris, Organization Manager, People Beyond Borders

Compiled by the Editors

February 20, 2021

I. Legal Terminologies to Understand the Spectrum of those Displaced:

Keeping the wider humanitarian and displacement context in mind, it is important to highlight legal terminologies in order to grasp the diverse marginalized and displaced groups globally. Since the end of 2019, about 1% of the world's population has been forcibly displaced – that means 1 in 97 people are fleeing conflicts, human rights violations or climate change. Forced displacement has almost doubled since 2010 (41 million then vs 79.5 million to date). About 50% of these are women and children. Those displaced fall into a spectrum of categories, such as refugees, asylum seekers, IDPs, migrants, immigrants, stateless groups, etc.

A refugee is a person who has fled their country of origin and is unable or unwilling to return because of a well-founded fear of being persecuted due to their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. An asylum seeker is an individual who is seeking international protection. In countries with individualized procedures, an asylum seeker is someone whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he or she has submitted it. Not every asylum seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum seeker. Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) are those who are forced to flee their homes because of armed conflicts, natural disasters, human rights violations and other emergencies, without crossing the national borders and staying within the country where they reside. A migrant chooses to move not because of a direct threat or persecution but mainly to improve life and socioeconomic conditions of reasons such as employment, education or family reunification. An immigrant is someone who comes to live permanently (often via permanent residence) in another country, and a stateless person is not considered as a national of any state or nation.

II. Narratives in Displacement Settings: Hospitality-Guest vs. Victims-Perpetrators:

Humanitarian Spaces

Common narratives dominating the displacement-migration context include: (1) Hospitality-Guests Narrative: During emergency crises, hospitality has often served as a public discourse for “measuring” and assessing the host country’s generosity or hostility. And as with any guests, we

are generous to and favor some guests over others. Refugees are not a homogenous entity rather they are internally divided and there is a hierarchy of “*refugeeness*” among them with their own social barriers that prevent their cohesion. (2) Victims-Perpetrators Narrative: The challenges of terrorism and displacement have become increasingly inter-linked in political and humanitarian discourses. Over the past decade, the threat perception of displacement being linked to perpetration of terrorism has particularly increased since specific violent groups have infiltrated and weaponized migratory routes and settlements. In reality though, as the UNHCR 2016 report states “there is no evidence that migration leads to increased terrorist activity” warning that “migration policies that are restrictive or that violate human rights...create conditions conducive to terrorism”.¹

Both these narratives are based on the assuming foundation that “societies are contained within a single border, which represents the geographic, political and social boundaries of that society”.² There is an ongoing tendency among host countries to perceive the “refugee” label as static, whether it is that of guests coming from the outside land or that of threats to the land, but these labels do not exist in a vacuum rather they serve sovereign agendas of states. In such circumstances, refugees and displaced people face barriers less because of their own identities but more due to the way that they are identified by humanitarian and political actors.

Displacement Spaces

In displacement spaces, people tend to find that molding their identity to fit a wider accepted narrative is key. Some resort to detaching aspects of identity to access security and humanitarian aid. In this case, displaced people frame their vulnerabilities in order to qualify for the different humanitarian assistance programs by being an “ideal victim” or “ideal guest” to fit into the label that governments and organizations have created for them. In these spaces, people also tend towards diversifying identity to fit into multiple norms and opportunities. “I have two Facebook accounts, of course one is with my real name and the other is a fake one. I personally side with the protestors and freedom fighters in Tibet but I cannot openly support them because the Chinese spy on me and I still have family back in Tibet - so I need two accounts. In my real one, I follow the Chinese government, add their supporters to understand their politics and schemes so that I can support the independence movement in a better way. Surprisingly, in my fake account, I can honestly be myself and openly support the freedom of Tibet. Because all of us contain multitudes, we can choose among identities, emphasizing those we share with others rather than those we do not” – Tibetan Refugee, India.³

Analysis of such narratives reveals that the way humanitarian actors and governments label, monitor and rigidify uni-dimensional aspects of identity, prompts refugees to perform adaptive

¹ UNHCR (2016), Refugees and terrorism: “No evidence of risk” – New report by UN expert on counter-terrorism, Retrieved at: <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20734>

² Wilding, R. (2009). Refugee youth, social inclusion, and ICTs: can good intentions go bad? *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society*, 7(2/3), pp.159-174.

³ Personal Communication, 2020.

tactics to manage their multi-dimensional identities so that they can "fit" into the expectations and norms of both their host and home countries. And therefore, it is important to reconsider a shift from a singular/linear policy discourse to accommodate these diverse displacement practices that actually take place in reality.

III. Social Capital as a Human-Centered Tool:

The majority of the misunderstandings and tensions in the migration-displacement context happen not because of the facts, but rather because of the stories we formulate about the facts. Stories that are visible, and more importantly those that are invisible, can become part of our subconscious narratives either as civil society, nations or humanitarian actors. In order to consciously flesh out and understand the invisible threads, patterns and ideas that shape our stories in the humanitarian sector, there are many frameworks and mechanisms – one example is the social capital lens as a human-centered tool.

Simply put, social capital refers to the relations, networks, norms and values that affect political, social, economic activities and overall functioning of the society. The networks and resources themselves are not social capital – it refers instead to the individual’s ability and capacity to mobilize these resources and networks on demand. As highlighted in Figure 1, the concept of social capital at the macro-level includes vertical affiliations and “broader institutional environment in which communities are inherently embedded”, e.g. international/national geopolitical factors. Second, micro-level approach of social capital is associated with horizontal features “such as networks of individuals or households that create externalities for the community as a whole”, e.g. this includes culture, religion, norms, attitudes and values of different groups.

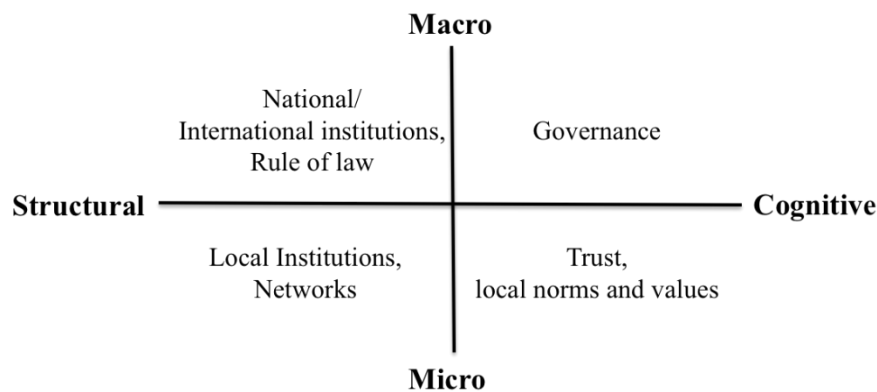


Figure 1: Dimensions of Social Capital (adapted from the World Bank, 2001)

As social capitalists, refugees turn to one another to reconstruct their mobility, networks and resources in exile in the following three ways: (1) Bonding social capital: that is they turn to their intra-community relationships with families, friends and those sharing similar demographic characteristics (even those back home through technology or those in their host countries (eg. Palestinians supporting Palestinians); (2) Bridging social capital: this includes

intercommunity links between different geographic, ethnic and occupational backgrounds (eg. Afghan refugees in India support Iranian refugees for their resettlement); (3) Linking social capital: this includes ties with formal organizations such as local authorities, police, banks and schools. An example would be how NGOs and religious actors support refugees through language acquisition, sharing skills and support systems to transition and settle down into the host countries.

Ultimately, it is through mapping and analyzing via different tools and frameworks such as the aforementioned that one can examine the multi-dimensions and aspects of a refugee's identity, rather than just labeling them and building the foundation of a single uni-dimensional category. It is important to bring attention to different sides of a story, and to understand their stories holistically, especially when so many identities are at stake in the humanitarian field.

IV. Mental Health is Neglected in These Settings in Times of COVID-19

UNHCR continues to warn that the consequences of Coronavirus (COVID-19) are taking a significant toll on the mental health of refugees, displaced and stateless people. While many attribute Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as being the most prevalent condition among refugees, it is certainly not the only mental health-related issue they face. Some of the most common mental health issues this community faces in times of COVID-19 are depression and anxiety. Depression is often related to loss – a loved one, a home, a job, social standing or social circle. Prior to the pandemic, refugee mental health was a severely overlooked and under-prioritized issue. Amid the stigma associated with being a refugee, and the misconception that refugees are somehow "more threatening" and more likely to be contaminated – negative forced migration narratives develop every day.

As the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi highlights, "[...] the overwhelming majority, 84%, of the world's refugees are hosted in developing regions and their access to quality mental health care was already very limited even before the pandemic. Now at this devastating juncture, with coronavirus causing great physical and mental affliction, the need to invest in continued health services, including mental health, and ensuring their accessibility to all is as evident and critical as ever".

In addition to the stigma refugees endure, contributing factors to the spread of mental illness within the refugee community includes the following: (1) the widespread socio-economic damage inflicted by the pandemic; (2) the loss of daily wages and livelihoods is resulting in psychosocial hardship; (3) physical distancing measures and mobility restrictions that also affect the ability to cope with emotional distress; (4) difficulties in the provision of mental health support and care becoming difficult during lock-down; and (5) restricted travel. Refugees are often unable to travel to seek adequate care and many face-to-face group-based activities are cancelled in-line with the COVID-19 response. The fear of being infected and the association of discrimination and social stigma with their refugee status also add additional pressure.

Recommendations for Shifting Narratives and Providing Needed Support in Humanitarian Settings

Compiled by

Jasmin Lilian Diab and Mohammed Ghabris

February 20, 2021

Throughout the webinar, light had been shed on four main aspects that are often either overlooked and/or deprioritized during the responses/interventions of humanitarian actors. These aspects stem from tackling the common narratives that dominate the displacement-migration context. With time, it has become evident that there is an urgent and growing need to transform narratives in order to provide displaced people with efficient, sustainable and holistic services that are relevant to their own contexts and needs. The mentioned issues and misconceptions include challenges of social integration or cohesion of refugee communities in the host country, provision of mental health, gaps of adopting remote working modalities during COVID-19 and its impact on the service delivery of humanitarian assistance. With the aim of addressing these challenges the following set of recommendations had been formulized:

I. Mental Health Provision:

Providing displaced people with guidance on how to cope with the stress around COVID-19 is pivotal in improving their mental health, building their self-esteem and challenging stigmas surrounding their communities that pose strains on their mental health and wellbeing. This must be coupled with training humanitarian staff working with people in distress – as they will be working closely with refugees, IDPs and stateless people who have endured years of physical and mental hardships.

II. Ensuring a Coherent and Solid Accountability System in Place:

Ensuring that all humanitarian agencies have an integrated accountability framework, and an independent, confidential and neutral complaint/feedback mechanism assists in safeguarding virtual accessibility of the accountability mechanism for the affected population. One that would ensure an active capturing of the affected populations' inputs, reports of any breaches, feedback, suggestions and complaints. A system needs to be co-designed, that would eventually incorporate feedback into their project cycle management, ensure that the affected populations' inputs are captured and incorporated within the project phases. In addition to safeguarding virtual accessibility of the accountability mechanism for the affected population, this needs to be user friendly, inclusive, accessible and comprehensible (Accountability mainstreaming includes info provision, consultations and Complaints Feedback & Response Mechanism (CFRM)).

III. Information Digestion:

All humanitarian crises are multi-faceted in both their symptoms and their causes. The majority of the misunderstandings and tensions in the migration-displacement context happen not because of the facts but rather due to the stories formulated about the facts. It is important to engage with a range of participatory frameworks and tools to prevent misinformation, conduct community-driven needs assessments, understand the authentic needs of the target population and be mindful of the diverse narratives at play.

IV. Local Ownership:

The principles of local ownership and community engagement require considerable shifts in attitudes and approaches to humanitarian crisis response. At the macro level, it is more effective to prevent disasters and conflicts than to respond to them – even more so as global vulnerability has increased with the pandemic. It is important to build on and support local capacities, indigenous community-based systems thereby re-orienting “humanitarianism”. Humanitarian agencies must seek to move beyond ‘catastrophe-first’ model of innovations, towards putting ‘vulnerability first’.

Further Readings

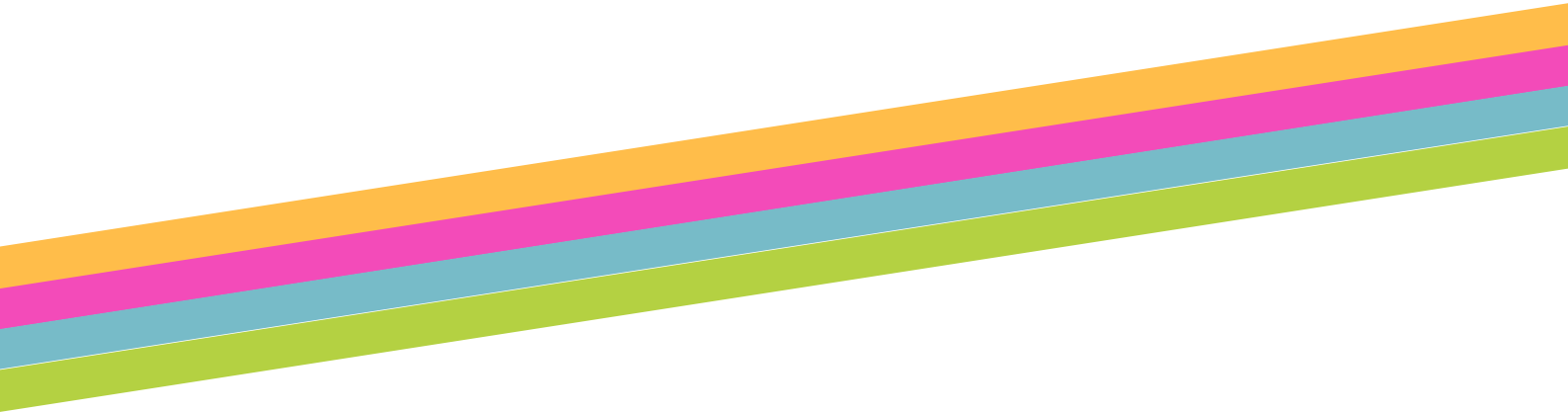
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