

21 February Multi-Stakeholder Hearing on Refugees and Migrants

The Multi-stakeholder hearing on Refugees and Migrants took place on February 21, 2018 in the Trusteeship Chamber at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City. The Anglican Communion Office at the United Nations (ACOUN) was present for four panels. The two panels discussed in this report were titled: the challenge of inaccurate narratives about migration and combatting xenophobia and stereotypes with evidence-based narratives. Neither of the panels discussed the role of faith-based organizations, religious institutions, nor religious leaders in promoting evidence-based approaches to migration, but instead discussed the role of traditional and social media in the elimination of common misconceptions and stereotypes of refugee narratives.

In the first panel, Mr Bill Orme, Ms Tendayi Achiume, and Ms Monami Maulik discussed three common political fearmongering tactics used by the media to disperse negative refugee narratives. The tactics use national, economic, and cultural security concerns as a way to garner support. The media emphasizes the threat to national security through the portrayal of all refugees as terrorists; economic security highlights refugee job procurement as generators of economic anxiety; while cultural security describes refugees as threats to cultural preservation of the “American” ideal, which has generated harmful nativist rhetoric.

The panelists provided recommendations on improving the media and the implementation of policies. One specific goal was to mend the broken refugee narrative that collectivizes rather than individualizes the refugee experience, and thus altering the portrayal of refugees in the media. Providing a face and a story that differs from the usual mechanisms in place to generate empathy can establish the humanistic relationship that normally appears as the savior complex.

In focusing on broader goals of media, as media shapes public opinion and how public opinion shapes policy, the panelists discussed how important a pro-migrant narrative is in the role of advocating for refugee rights. On a national level, the reduction of “othering” by promoting accountability to xenophobia, developing and implementing country action plans to eliminate xenophobia, and infusing human rights vocabulary into the public sphere could be key measures that allow for the implementation of the global compacts.

An important discussion revolved around the role of language in the media and the use of words such as “swarms” and “invasions” of people and “illegal” versus “undocumented” in reference to immigrants. The panelists agreed that the terminology in place emits a perception that some people deserve human rights and protections while “others” do not. Evolving our use of language and policies to reject the idea of borders, to stop identifying refugees as security concerns, and to terminate investment in detention centers could greatly affect the refugee narrative. If the Compact creates the conditions that would allow people to contextualize refugee situations through proper language and without negative preconceived notions we would have the chance to implement positive change.

The second panel focused on similar components of the media and how it can be used to combat xenophobia and stereotypes with evidence-based narratives. Ms Catherine Tactaquin, Mr Joshua Bennett, and Mr Ahmed Toumi were the panelists who responded to civil society groups. The groups discussed the importance of including active migrant constituencies in the advocacy, discussions, and writing of the Compacts. The Compacts in place could mimic the Secretary General's Together Campaign, which aims to obtain respect and dignity for all. The exclusion of false narratives from the media, advocating for the release of information that shows the contribution that refugees and migrants have to their host communities, and advancing with the negotiations are of utmost priority in the discussion of the Global Compacts.

The recommendations for the global compact led to discussions on the necessity of gender responsive approaches to refute the narrative of the vulnerable women and instead demonstrate their agency as protagonists of change. However, with the rise of technology, the elimination of false narratives is difficult as fake news has the capability to generate confirmation bias within host communities.

The session reported that eliminating false narratives, adjusting the terminology, collecting statistics, creating a narrative of solutions, repairing the image of migration, ensuring equal access to social media, and enlightening the tone on the perception of migration is important in the protection of refugees and migrants in the evolving world.

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