

## STEP 7:

# DO NO HARM

Be aware of unconscious bias in messaging, and avoid discrimination.



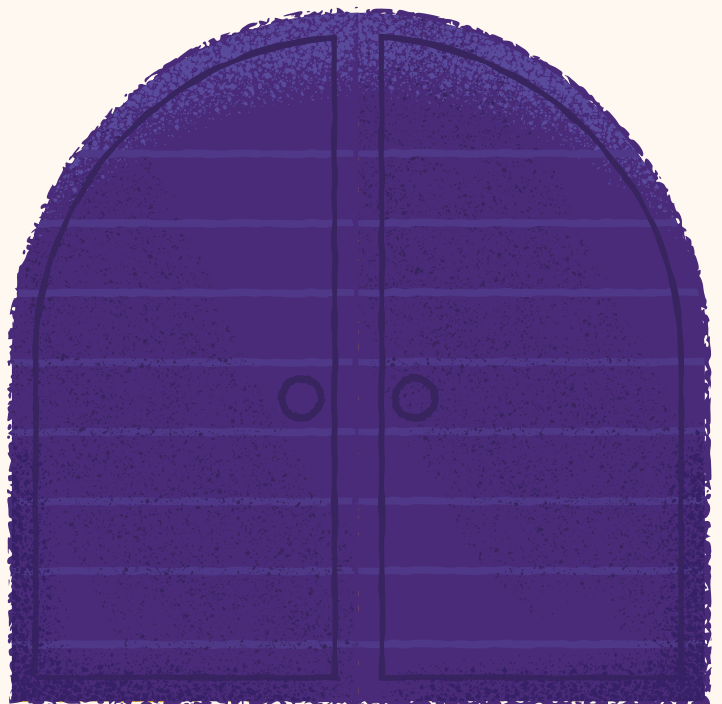
# Framing to Avoid

Sometimes, despite our best intentions, we can inadvertently reinforce harmful narratives on migrants and migration. This can happen through the language we use, the emotions we trigger, the visuals we promote or by not testing our messaging to ensure it connects with our audience in the way we intended.

Considering the following principles of do no harm will help us avoid pitfalls.

There is no single messaging or [framing](#) solution that can be applied across all geographies, circumstances and audiences. Unfortunately, it is not a math equation where the narrative will change if we simply follow the formula. Messages must be adapted to specific contexts and circumstances.

However, there are certain frames that you should avoid because they are likely to do more harm than good.





# The Victim & Hero Frame

Be careful of depicting migrants solely as victims to be pitied or saved. This contributes to an “us vs. them” narrative, labeling some people as rights-holders and others – migrants – in need of charity. This frame robs migrants of agency, equality and leaves their lives at governments’ discretion and mercy. Furthermore, it perpetuates an association with migrants as a “problem” that needs to be “solved” by others.

This frame may create the impression of a moral judgment – even inadvertently – that some people are more “deserving” of rights than others, or that some are entirely undeserving. Such assumptions can be based on migrants’ educational qualifications, achievements, country or region of origin or be in relation to a specific legal status as a refugee, undocumented migrant, trafficked person, etc.

Stories that celebrate exceptional migrants are a tricky extension of this frame. These stories can often be a “rags to riches” story, someone who has achieved nearly unparalleled professional success or a benevolent hero. While these stories can be uplifting, they can diminish and alienate people – both in your audience and migrants themselves – who are struggling to get by and are treated as “less worthy” or deemed “not good enough”. It can cause members of welcoming communities to react by accepting only extremely exceptional migrants demonstrating these super human qualities.

Instead, tell stories of migrants and migration that are about everyday life. Family, work, love, birth and death are all universal themes that are easy to relate to, and are as much a part of a migrant’s story, as they are part of everyone’s story. Normalizing stories of people who have migrated helps avoid the danger of “othering” and portraying migrants as either victims or heroes.



For example, in the book [\*The Undocumented Americans\*](#), author Karla Cornejo Villavicencio profiles the stories of individuals she encounters across five US cities. In an interview with National Public Radio, Villavicencio said, “I wanted to tell the stories of people who work as day laborers. Housekeepers. Construction workers. Dog walkers. Delivery persons. People who do not inspire hashtags or t-shirts. But I wanted to learn about them as the weirdos we all are outside of our jobs.” These stories underscore the broader human experience of everyday life. Find the book [\*The Undocumented Americans\*](#) and listen to the author’s [interview](#) on National Public Radio.

Read more about creating a positive hopeful vision of the world and depicting migrants as rights-holders in [Step 1](#).

# The Contribution & Scarcity Frame

Many well-meaning narratives promote the positive economic contributions migrants make to their countries of origin and destination, emphasizing the economic benefits of migration.

Research has shown that this messaging does not tend to resonate with audiences. It risks reinforcing the perception of migrants as a commodity or instrumentalizing them as exploitable units of labor to fulfill labor market needs. Furthermore, reducing anyone to their aggregate GDP contribution undervalues individuals. It undervalues many people who are engaged in unpaid work, such as providing care for older persons or children at home, the majority of whom are women. It also minimizes the value of many people – including many migrants – who work hard but are paid insufficiently and treated as expendable.

Such messaging may also invoke the scarcity frame, which assumes a “zero-sum economic model” in which migrants are seen as threats to jobs, the economy, employment standards and union power or the welfare system. It may also undermine the recognition of migrants as rights-holders, first and foremost, who are entitled to decent work, social protection and benefits regardless of their contributions.

Instead of any single group’s contribution, focus on a narrative of abundance, which values social and cultural abundance and where respect for people’s rights improves everyone’s situation. Give examples, which illustrate that when we work together, we can achieve shared goals and improve our communities. Focus on values that are not economic, but equally fundamental to your target audience and for our societies to prosper, such as showing kindness, caring for each other and solidarity.



# Using Statistics & Data

While data and statistics can be effectively used in successful narratives, be careful of when and how to deploy them. In framing public narratives, data can alienate an audience and move your messaging further away from humanizing individual migrants. However, good, representative data is instrumental in designing evidence-based policies.

Some audiences may be skeptical of migration data itself or its particular sources. Migration studies can be contested, incomplete or only cover a specific geographic area. Skeptics may easily dismiss the information.

Similarly, using global or national numbers of migrant arrivals to frame the need for urgency in taking policy action can create a sense of “crisis”, leading people to take more comfort in narratives of control rather than welcoming.

Instead, be strategic about using precise evidence. Understanding your audience will help you estimate how certain data will be received and interpreted.



# The Myth Busting Frame

When engaging in “myth busting”, we take a pre-established frame based on an assumption or stereotype and seek to dispel it, pointing the viewer to the “truth” often by using statistics and data. As discussed in the [introduction](#), by invoking an existing frame or narrative, even if we intend to discredit it, we reinforce its power through repetition.

A myth is powerful also because it often affirms or relates to your target audience’s values system. New information that contradicts preconceived beliefs is likely to be met with skepticism at best, or cause people to search for counterarguments that further strengthen their original view, leading to polarization, at worst.

However, addressing myths and stereotypes can be effective if embedded as part of a larger storytelling effort. This can be accomplished with satire or humor to undermine the myth. Nevertheless, this should be done sparingly and with attention to detail because it can backfire.

Focus on stories that make a completely new statement not associated with the negative “myth” or narrative. By turning towards values-based and solution-focused messages, we can shift away from the myth towards a different narrative.

💡 For example, NGOs and political movement Operation Libero [successfully campaigned against a referendum](#) in Switzerland that sought to automatically deport foreigners who commit certain crimes. Instead of engaging in myth-busting, they directed the debate towards how the proposed law represented a direct attack on the rule of law and Swiss values. Repurposing the opponents’ red, white and black poster style, depicting the national symbol “[Helvetia](#)” [under attack](#), and getting people to do handstands to show how the rule of law was being turned “upside down” in [social media challenges](#), were some of the tactics they used to mobilize voters.

The role of the messenger is key in myth busting. If your audience places a [high level of trust in the messenger](#), and if the messenger uses dialogue and listening techniques, dispelling a particular myth may be more successful. Furthermore, when migrants themselves speak with a skeptical person they may be [more likely to persuade the audience](#). This is another reason why it is important to carefully choose messengers when communicating about migration.

# Terminology

We need to be mindful with the language we use when framing communication on migration. Do not use terms which dehumanize, demean and stereotype migrants. Harmful terms that invoke a large group or invasion force should not be used, such as swarm, tide, flood or influx. Despite the repeated referral to people in an irregular situation as “illegal”, States have actually committed not to use such terminology:

## Words Matter

In 1975 the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 3449 (XXX), in which it requested “the United Nations organs and the specialized agencies concerned to utilize in all official documents the term ‘non-documented or irregular migrant workers’ to define those workers that illegally and/or surreptitiously enter another country to obtain work”.

In its general comment No.2 (2013) on the rights of migrant workers in an irregular situation and members of their families, the Committee on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families expressed the view that the term “in an irregular situation” or “non-documented” is the proper terminology when referring to their status. The use of the term “illegal” to describe migrant workers in an irregular situation is inappropriate and should be avoided as it tends to stigmatize them by associating them with criminality.

Some people will have questions around using the term migrant or refugee. Many migrants and refugees experience the impacts of harmful narratives in similar ways. When working to change how we speak about migration, creating the impression or prompting moral judgment – even inadvertently – that some people are more “deserving” of rights than others, or that some are entirely undeserving, can lead to perpetuating such harmful narratives.

Furthermore, not all public audiences will understand differences based on people’s legal status or circumstance but relate more with shared values and what we have in common, regardless of our background.

However, in technical or legal policy discussions, it is important to ensure policymakers uphold specific legal entitlements and protections. This includes the human rights principle that all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. Everyone is entitled to the same universal human rights, without discrimination.

See what human rights experts say about the [use of terminology](#) and why it is important to focus on the humanity of migrants.



In this table, you will find ideas on how to pivot away from harmful terminology and towards more positive language.

<b>AVOID terminology and visuals deliberately used to dehumanize and divide people.</b>	<b>DO celebrate that we have more in common than what divides us</b>
<b>Flow/inflow; influx; flood; wave; tide; surge; invasion; mass; swarm; contagion; plague; chaos; “migrant crisis/refugee crisis” etc.</b> dehumanize migrants and are used to polarize, as well as to induce fear, loss of control and security narratives.	<b>Humanize</b> migrant women, men, girls, boys and LGBTI migrants by telling <b>individual stories</b> that people in the community can relate to. These should not focus solely on the reasons migrants moved, their journey or return, but seek diversity and nuance in their stories that speak to shared values and universal themes of interest.
To <b>stem/curb/prevent/stop/fight</b> any of the above or <b>protecting/defending borders</b> rather than people. “War frames” are highly gendered and shift the focus from the human rights protection of people, likening them to enemies and legitimizing enforcement-heavy measures.	Highlight individual stories not just of migrants, but of their interaction with <b>local communities</b> , including their families, friends, neighbors, sports and faith groups, etc. that show how migration can be more effectively addressed through a human rights-based and people-centered approach.
<b>Illegals/illegal (im)migrants</b> dehumanizes and criminalizes migrants. Insisting without context that migrants are <i>not criminals/not illegal</i> also reinforces a negative security/crime narrative. Use “migrant in an irregular situation” or “undocumented migrant” instead.	UN Human Rights uses the umbrella term “migrant” or “people on the move”, which are not legally defined and inclusive of all people on the move who experience the effects of harmful narratives in a similar way. At the same time, avoid reducing migrants to just their “migrantness”, but provide space for <b>multi-dimensional stories</b> . This may mean describing a migrant as a sister, a health worker, a secret singer and passionate baker of great cakes. Note that technical narratives addressed to policymakers must uphold specific legal entitlements and protections, while continuing to remind audiences of the common humanity of all people on the move.
<b>Economic migrant, alien, ex-pat/expatriate</b> are terms, which imply artificial and harmful categorization or class-systems.	
<b>Burden/burden-sharing/overburdened</b> implies migrants are burdens and problems to be solved.	Support <b>solution-focused narratives</b> that show how everyone can contribute and participate, focusing on opportunity rather than threats or problems. Avoid a lecturing or moral superiority tone.



# Visuals

If a picture is worth a thousand words, we need to be careful when choosing our visual language. Images can be used to perpetuate stereotypes or reveal a person's identity, putting them at risk.

Avoid using images that show migrants in large groups, including visuals of boats "overflowing" with people or large groups of people on the move or at borders. Similarly, do not feed into negative narratives by using sensationalized images associated with criminal activity, prison, violence or which portray migrants solely as victims.

Instead, use images that invoke positive emotions and [shared values](#), which recognize migrants as equal members of our human family. Colorful images that give a sense of hope and a positive outcome have been shown to be effective.

## Visuals to Avoid:

- Large groups
- Images that do not uphold people's dignity
- Violent images
- Any association with criminality
- Migrants at fences, behind bars or in cages

## Visuals to Use:

- Emphasize individual humanity
- Images that normalize migrants in their many other roles
- Images that demonstrate shared human experiences: friendship, family, daily life
- Images that emphasize joint goals or shared prosperity
- Images that evoke positive emotions and inspire hope

# When Sharing Identity is Sensitive

We need to be cautious when sharing someone's image, video or identity. Make sure you have permission by the person in the image or in the case of a child, parental or guardian permission to use the image. Many people want to avoid sharing their face or identity. For example, children, people with an irregular status or those who have been victims of domestic abuse or other violent crimes might feel uncomfortable with displaying their face or image. Always respect this.

If the individual thinks it is important to share their story, make sure to talk it through with them. By showing a feature that does not give away their identity, such as feet or hands, you can provide a path for them to share while minimizing the risk of revealing their identity. Make sure to not show any identifying marks, such as a distinct ring, birthmark or tattoo.

💡 For example, OHCHR produced a documentary film in 2015 titled, [I Am Not Here](#). The documentary featured a young woman named Nasimah. Nasimah felt strongly that she wanted to share her story but because of sensitivities surrounding her identity, the documentary team filmed her hands and feet during her interview and did not display her face on screen.



# Message Testing

Message testing is a process by which you check whether your audience interprets a message as you intended and if it resonates with your audience. It is used widely across many industries and is an important tool to understand an audience's reaction.

There are multiple methods to test a message. The most important factor across methods is to make sure you test the message with people who are representative of your target audience. If you test the message with a group that is not representative of your audience, the feedback will not be useful.

For example, if my audience is 40-50 year old women in a specific geographic area, I should test my message with women in their 40s in that geographic area, not with men in their 20s from an undefined area.

Many people assume message testing is an expensive exercise involving an external agency. In fact, there are varieties of inexpensive and easily available options to test messages in advance of launching a campaign. Consider what the best method is for you given time, available resources and cost.

## A/B Testing

A/B testing compares one item against another to determine which is most effective. In narrative change work, this could be performed with two messages, visual images, social media posts or any other aspect of your messaging.

In A/B testing, a sample audience is presented with two versions of the same communications material and asked to report on their reaction or interpretation. You could be surprised by the result. By accumulating this data, you can make a more informed decision and strengthen your narrative change work.

Often, we are already doing a highly informal version of this process internally when we debate between two versions of a graphic or a campaign slogan within our own organization. By simply externalizing this process in a more formal and systematic way with our target audience, we can make a more informed decision on what messaging to use.

## Focus Groups

As defined in [Step 2](#), a Focus Group is a small group comprised of individuals representing your audience. A moderator guides the group through a discussion about the materials you have prepared to get an understanding of the group's reactions. The benefits of a focus group are the opportunity to observe the discussion, receive in-depth feedback and a nuanced view into the group's emotional response to your messaging. Focus groups can be more expensive if facilitated by a professional agency or consultant.

Convening virtual focus groups can be a good solution to bring people together across different localities. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual meetings have become much more common. As focus group participants can meet from the comfort of their own home, you can potentially save on the costs of renting a physical space, travel time and transportation costs.

## Online Surveys

Another good strategy for testing your message is to email an online survey to a group representing your audience. When creating the survey, make sure you have a clear message testing goal in mind, keep the survey short and ask direct questions. Leave open-ended questions towards the end of the survey. This can be a cost effective strategy for receiving feedback but can lack the depth of a focus group.

There are multiple methods to reach individuals to take the survey. You can send it to your existing email database, promote it via social media or include the survey in larger pools of surveys.



## Community Engagement

Your online community and social groups can be a good resource for messaging feedback. By simply posing questions to this online community in an engaging and systematic way, you can receive insight on your messaging. Similar to the listening section, this requires asking open-ended questions and resisting the urge to jump in to explain your opinion.

- For example, [Stop Funding Hate](#) was able to obtain feedback on their messages through convening an open discussion on their [Facebook](#) page. The online conversation informed the development of Stop Funding Hate's highly effective [Christmas video campaign](#). This campaign called out top brands on their hypocrisy of asking viewers to be generous and openhearted, while at the same time, these brands were funding publications that profit from inflammatory anti-migrant speech.

## Conclusion

Informal message testing, such as posing questions to your online community, may provide more qualitative than quantitative research. You may want to develop a broader data collection methodology if you want to focus on large-scale quantitative results. Furthermore, be mindful of the extent to which your online community overlaps with your target audience. Make sure they are not two completely separate groups.

Evaluate each method to understand what is best for your purpose. Try to test your messages and visuals in some form. Think about a time in your personal life when what you said was misinterpreted, resulting in negative consequences. This can easily happen and we need to avoid it at scale. Message testing is a useful tool to avoid harm and to ensure we contribute effectively to narrative change on migration.



# Summary

- Despite our best intentions, we can inadvertently reinforce negative narratives on migrants and migration.
- Avoid frames that are likely to do more harm than good. These include the “victim and hero frame”, the “contribution and scarcity frame”, relying only on statistics and data, and the “myth busting frame”.
- Do not use terms or images that dehumanize, demean and stereotype migrants.
- By testing your message, you can adapt it to reach your target audience, avoiding miscommunication or inadvertently reinforcing harmful narratives.



# Take Action

- Apply the Do No Harm principle in your communications work and everyday conversations with others.
- If you have unintentionally used harmful messages, words, or images in the past, find ways to adapt or correct them if possible.
- Share these tips with friends and colleagues.
- See our additional [resources](#) and partners
- ♥ Thank you for using our toolbox to change how we speak about migration. Follow our campaign and join us to stand up for migrants' human rights.