Effectively communicating and messaging on refugee and migrant issues in a changing environment

This report summarises a conference focusing on effective ways for civil society to engage in public narrative building and policy making concerning migration and refugee protection in the current environment.

At the conference, jointly organised by EPIM (European Programme for Integration and Migration) and SCI (The Social Change Initiative) in Brussels on the 7th and 8th February 2017, civil society organisations from across Europe reflected on the challenges in achieving a more balanced perception of migration and of current refugee policies, and how public narrative is influenced by communication and messaging.

Some key points of the conference presentations and debates include:

* The importance of reaching out to people that are undecided in their views on immigration is essential if the public debate is to move away from a polarised debate. Awareness of this allows messages that speak to people’s concerns as well as appealing to their values. This requires activists to challenge themselves as to how they can best serve the overall cause, rather than focusing on reinforcing accepted certainties.
* Civil society actors have a range of advocacy pathways available: engagement with the process, critique or boycott. The alternative to critique or boycott is engagement based on arguments that are both principled and politically viable, with the reality being that there are no perfect answers.
* Currently, it can be difficult to identify the primary locus of policy influence given a shift towards policy decision-making by EU Heads of State and a greater reliance on operational decision-making rather than legislation.
* Research suggests that while only a small section of civil society organisations engage directly in advocacy work, there is much under-utilised information held by those organisations that are essentially service providers to refugees and migrants. This highlights the importance of greater partnership working and collaboration between civil society organisations themselves.
* Recent polling of the fears, hopes and concerns of what has been termed ‘the anxious middle’ suggest that this is not a homogeneous category. For example, in Germany, while ‘economic pragmatists’ (accepting the economic need for immigration) and ‘liberal cosmopolitans’ (viewing immigration as being positive for society) make up 42% of the population, the 23% of ‘humanitarian sceptics’ have serious doubts about the effectiveness of current integration strategies (while still believing that Germany has a moral responsibility towards refugees). The 18% ‘moderate opponents’ hold deep reservations about Germany’s refugee intake, with a significant proportion of them supporting the closure of borders. While they share many of the same views in opposition to immigration as demonstrated by the 17% of ‘radical opponents’, these views are not held with the same level of intensity.
* These data and comparable results from France suggest that it is typically possible to identify two to three distinctive segments among ‘the anxious middle’ groups with mixed views. These views tend to be shaped more by emotion than by reason, as these segments of the public are less ideological and less deeply engaged in the issues. Different strategies and messages are needed to reach each segment, depending on the beliefs and fears of each.