



Photo Frank van Lierde/Cordaid

TOWARDS A POSITIVE NARRATIVE ON MIGRATION AND DEVELOPMENT

1. A POLARISED CONVERSATION

Political and public support for migration, humanitarian assistance and development cooperation has been under pressure for years. Some politicians and opinion makers contribute to this by playing on ‘fear of the other’ and by dismissing migrants and refugees as ‘fortune seekers’.

It has polarised the public and political debate. The new SIRE campaign on polarisation also explicitly mentions migration and asylum policy as one of the topics that is driving people further and further apart. People with strong opinions are taking the floor. We hardly hear the vast majority who do not take to the streets or air their displeasure online. Migrants and refugees themselves hardly get the floor either.

In search of a new narrative

Against this background, Cordaid organised a search for a new narrative on migration and development cooperation in 2022. We asked ourselves how to turn the conversation around: how can development and migrant organisations contribute to increasing support for migration and development cooperation? How do you reach target groups in ‘the middle’ and what story appeals to them?

A wide variety of Dutch CSOs collaborated in formulating a constructive and connecting narrative. In this publication, we highlight the key points and results. We conclude with concrete insights and recommendations for development and diaspora organisations, journalists and political influencers.

Co-creation process

Formulating new narratives was done through a co-creation process. In this, Cordaid collaborated with [IOM](#), [KUNO](#), [Dutch gender platform WO=MEN](#), [Partos](#), [PimpMyVillage](#), [Stichting Vluchteling](#) and [Wilde Ganzen](#). Each time, a different organisation took the initiative to organise a workshop. Five workshops took place between April and November, attracting an average of 20 - largely changing - participants. Representatives of migrant and diaspora organisations were present at all meetings.

Each workshop had a different focus. The first meetings focused, for instance, on the role of migrant organisations and the effect of the perception of Africa on the diaspora.

“The debate and event are a change in itself. I think it will pave the way for future open discussions.”

Participant in the co-creation process

The discussions gave direction to the follow-up meeting. In it, participants concretely set about choosing texts and images that could appeal to a wider audience in the so-called ‘quiet middle’. This sometimes required ‘out of the box’ thinking, as it involved communication that did not always appeal to people personally.

In the final phase, campaign and research agency Meute tested some of these texts and images among ‘the silent middle’ in the Netherlands. The process concluded on 13 December 2022 with a public conference in The Hague, where the insights gained were discussed with diaspora representatives, journalists and political insiders.

THE PROCESS IN A NUTSHELL

- The process started in late 2021 with a baseline survey and a webinar in collaboration with KUNO.
- Between March and November 2022, Cordaid and partners organised 5 interactive workshops with varying participants.
- Five organisations (Wilde Ganzen, WO=MEN, IOM, Partos and Stichting Vluchteling) acted as hosts for these sessions.
- Around 80 people from 20 development and diaspora organisations participated.
- In a co-creation process, they formulated new narratives on migration and development.
- Meute tested 6 narratives and 4 images among the ‘silent middle’ in the Netherlands.
- Participants engaged with journalists, political influencers, and the diaspora during the final conference on 13 December 2022.

2. THE 'QUIET MIDDLE'

Part of the process revolved around reaching 'the quiet middle'. By this we mean people in the Netherlands who are neither decidedly positive nor negative towards migration. Sometimes because they recognise themselves in the arguments of both supporters and opponents. Sometimes because they are not engaged with the issue. The quiet middle is not very visible and is less likely to speak out. But we know from research that they are numerically the largest group - between the supporters and opponents on the poles. Moreover, the quiet middle is a very diverse group. We find it in the supporters of centre parties such as the CDA and the VVD, but also among the supporters of GroenLinks and the PVV (see Figure 1).

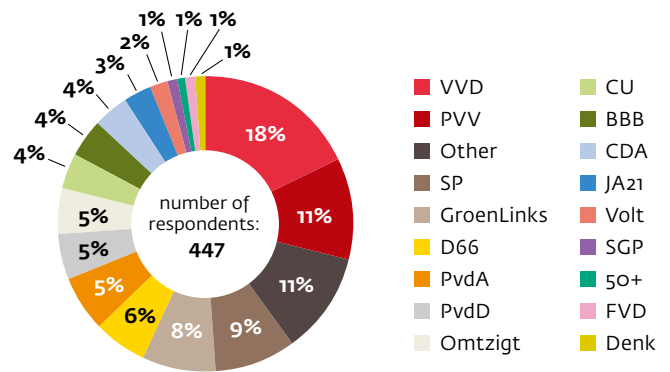
What moves the quiet middle?

To gain more insight into what drives the quiet middle, we delved into US psychologist Jonathan Haidt's [Moral Foundations Theory](#). This theory describes six foundations that make up our moral compass: care, honesty, loyalty, authority, freedom and purity (see figure 2). A person does not value all these foundations equally: everyone's moral equaliser is tuned differently, so to speak. However, patterns can be recognised in this tuning. For instance, research shows that people who identify themselves as 'progressive' usually value 'care', 'fairness' and 'freedom'. More conservative-minded people also consider these values important, but they also allow 'loyalty', 'authority' and 'purity' to play a role alongside.

Moral pillars of humanitarian and development organisations

Progressive-liberal humanitarian and development organisations, according to this theory, identify [strongly with the moral pillars of 'care' and 'fairness'](#). This means they view migration and development cooperation primarily through the lens of social justice and our duty to help the weak. These moral drivers are also frequently reflected in their communication campaigns.

FIGURE 1









However, if organisations want to reach other groups in society - in the quiet middle, for instance - the other moral pillars will also have to appeal. For instance, slightly more conservative people, on average, value loyalty and respect for authority more. This means they also see migration and development cooperation through a lens of identity, pride, national security and respecting rules. These theoretical insights, alongside the exchange and discussions, guided the formulation of new narratives and the shaping of the research in which they were tested.

“If they flee from danger to their lives, then it is okay and understandable. Not when they come only because it is better here in terms of finances.”

Respondent from survey 'The movable middle' - mob, 2022

FIGURE 2: SIX KEY MORAL FOUNDATIONS

| |  CARE / HARM |  FAIRNESS / CHEATING |  LOYALTY / BETRAYAL |  AUTHORITY / SUBVERSION |  SANCTITY / DEGRADATION |  LIBERTY / OPPRESSION |
|---------------------------|---|---|--|---|--|--|
| ADAPTIVE CHALLENGE | Protect and care for children | Reap benefits of two way partnerships | Form cohesive coalitions | Forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies | Avoid contaminants | Keeping dominant individuals in the group "in check" |
| ORIGINAL TRIGGERS | Distress or neediness expressed by child | Cheating, cooperation, deception | Threat of challenge to group | Signs of dominance and submission | Waste products, diseased people | Bullying and contraining others |
| KEY EMOTIONS | Compassion | Anger, gratitude, guilt | Group pride, rage against traitors | Respect, fear | Disgust | Anger at oppression |
| RELEVANT VIRTUES | Caring, kindness | Fairness, justice, trustworthiness | Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice | Obedience, deference | Temperance, chasity, piety, cleanliness | Freedom and self-determination, protection of victims |

Source: Johnathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind

3. WHAT RESONATES WITH 'THE MIDDLE'? A SURVEY

An important part of the process was testing various stories among the 'quiet middle'. For a detailed description of the research, please refer to the publication: [Narratives for the 'silent middle': a study](#).

Implementation

In October 2022, campaign and research agency Meute, commissioned by Cordaid, presented several stories on migration and development to 447 Dutch people who are considered to belong to 'the silent middle'. They had been selected from a group of over 1,200 respondents who had answered two basic

questions on 'refugees' and 'development cooperation'. Some of the respondents indicated that they had distinctly positive or negative feelings on these topics. The rest were in between. This 'middle group' of 447 participants moved on to the next phase of the study.

The 'middle group' was given six short texts to read that had been formulated during the co-creation sessions. For each of the texts, they indicated what feeling it gave them (positive or negative) and how important they thought it was. They also saw four images to which they could respond openly.

APPEALING STORIES

1. 'Vital communities'

In a healthy society, everyone does their bit. People with a migration background do so in many forms. With their talents, skills and ideas. They open businesses, work in universities, shops and hospitals, and volunteer in neighbourhoods and districts. Many also engage with family, friends and entrepreneurs in their countries of origin. In doing so, they help in keeping communities vital here and around the world.

2. 'Development cooperation'

Everyone should have the prospect of building a decent life for themselves and their families in their own country. Development cooperation contributes to this. In the poorest

countries, it gives people support to tackle poverty and exclusion, and improve access to education, work, food and healthcare. However, development cooperation cannot prevent migration. People often flee for various reasons, war, natural disasters and poverty.

3. 'Positive contribution to our prosperity'

People with a migration background make a positive contribution to our prosperity. Research shows that migration has increased GDP and reduced unemployment in recent decades - without putting pressure on wages in our country. As consumers, migrants create new demand for products and services, which benefits the economy.

LEAST APPEALING STORY

'Economic development'

We need people from migrant backgrounds to keep our economy healthy. Targeted migration can help address bottlenecks in healthcare, construction, manufacturing, agriculture and other sectors. With their knowledge, experience and money, migrants in turn contribute to the economic development of the countries they come from. In this way, everyone benefits.

APPEALING IMAGES



Foto Caritas België



Conclusion

Participants reacted most positively to stories and images showing that migration provides something to our society. The narrative about the positive effects of development cooperation was also well received. A nuance is in order here: none of the texts caused a major turnaround, it was rather a limited shift in sentiment. But even small shifts can make a difference. Moreover, the study suggests that the exact wording matters: the message that we ‘need migration for our economy’ (building block ‘economic development’) struck less of a chord. Possibly the idea that migration is a ‘must’ evokes resistance.

Food for discussion

The results provoked the necessary discussion during the final co-creation sessions. This happened, for instance, with the photo ‘eating herring’ - which was well appreciated by respondents from the middle group. However, some participants in one of the co-creation sessions did not feel comfortable with this photo. However, it is not the aim of the study to prescribe which images or texts organisations should use. Adapting communications is not a must, but a choice that each organisation must make for itself. However, those with a desire to better reach target groups in the middle can be inspired by the results of the study. These organisations can use the tested stories and images as building blocks to work on campaign materials, lobbying activities, opinion pieces or other communication expressions.

4. IN CONVERSATION WITH JOURNALISTS, MIGRANT ORGANISATIONS AND POLITICAL INSIDERS

The closing conference of the Migration and Development process took place in The Hague on 13 December 2022. An important part of the afternoon was devoted to discussions with representatives of the media, migrant organisations and the political domain. We highlight below the key points from these exchanges.

Role of the media

In conversation with Auke van Eijdsen, political journalist for Trouw, and Elian Yahye, freelance journalist for Nederlands Dagblad, De Correspondent and Vice Versa, among others

The ‘quiet middle’ is little heard in reporting on migration and journalists acknowledge the media’s role in this: it is easier to seek out conflict and go for the extremes. There is little space and capacity for reflection on journalistic choices in the daily hectic; sometimes it is difficult not to go from crisis to crisis with their coverage.

Positive stories on migration should be given more space - but journalists warn against bringing stereotypical stories of ‘the successful migrant’, like the mayor of Rotterdam. This paints an unrealistic picture of people with a migration background in our society.

Context is more important than language

The journalists also reflected on the importance of language. There is much discussion, for example, about the use of water metaphors such as ‘inflow’ and ‘wave’. Language imparts a certain connotation. But more important than the choice of words, according to the journalists, is the context of the story. The causes of problems - for instance, the shortage of houses, nuisance caused by asylum seekers or the chaos in Ter Apel - almost invariably come down to policy and political decision-making. This has to be highlighted.

Finally, a point of interest is diversity in journalistic editorial departments. If you want to tell stories about migration well, you need to have entrances to various groups in society. Within those groups, there is not always enough trust to talk to the press. More diversity within newsrooms can help lower barriers and bring more diverse stories.

“It is easy to write an article that is about the flanks. That is a trap for journalism. The biggest group is the quiet middle. But making an article about the other groups is easier.”

Auke van Eijdsen, political journalist at Trouw

THE ROLE OF MIGRANTS AND MIGRANT ORGANISATIONS

In conversation with Niloufar Rahim, general practitioner and board member of the Afghan-Dutch foundation Keihan, and Babah Tarawally, writer and columnist

The Netherlands has many diaspora organisations and experts with a migration background. They could be an important cooperation partner of institutions working in their countries of origin, for instance development organisations or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. People with a migration background can build bridges, they know the sensitivities and they know who to engage with.

Yet speakers experience that people with a migration background are often not involved in policies. They are quite often perceived as ‘troublesome’. This field of tension is not new. However, the speakers see promising opportunities in cooperating with the younger generation, many of whom are highly educated and have specific expertise.

Not one single bloc

However, working with migrant organisations also raises questions about their legitimacy: they do not automatically represent an entire group. More importantly, there is no such thing as one bloc of people with a migrant background who think alike. This was shown, for example, by experiences in Flanders, where young migrants reflected on communication frames: opinions varied widely.

Migrants themselves could also work to be more forward-looking. Not as ‘top refugees’ but as people who are part of this society. People with a migration background could also get involved in helping newcomers find their way. [New Dutch Connections](#) does this, for instance, by linking migrants to the business community. Talking to others is at the heart of this: many people in the Netherlands have never spoken to a refugee, while we know that meeting really works to get closer together.

“As a migrant, I can build bridges. I know the sensitivities there, I know who to work with or not.”

Babah Tarawally, writer and columnist.

THE ROLE OF POLITICS

In conversation with Trineke Palm, director Scientific Institute ChristenUnie and Rick van der Woud, director of Mensen met een Missie and active within the CDA

According to the representatives of the two Christian centre parties, the current debate in The Hague has its roots in the arrival in the Netherlands of a large number of Syrian refugees in 2015. Mercy and solidarity were linked to fear of foreignness during that period. That battle between mercy and security is settled in the parliament by a select group of MPs. However, the centre parties as a whole are much more in tune with mercy. There is a gap between party members and political representatives in The Hague.

The speakers therefore mention the importance of looking for a narrative that connects the different wings and positions in the parties. That narrative - besides caring and justice - should also be about loyalty and authority: the story of being a community to which everyone can contribute resonates across parties. However, it is not always easy for political insiders to make these kinds of insights land with politicians. Politicians sit in a bubble and roll on. It is an ongoing challenge to create time and space.

‘Unsavoury’ links

For both the CDA and the Christian Union, migration is an important issue - not least because it is linked to other issues, such as housing shortage and agriculture. In doing so, ‘unsavoury’ links with migration are sometimes made. It is important to counter this, through discussions with influential voices in The Hague and at local level. Attention to emotions is important here. With negative emotions like fear, it is important to look at what lies underneath. Narratives about migration should tap into that underlying layer and be about more than migration alone.

“What emotions do you evoke with your stories? In the case of fear: is it fear of the migrant? Or is it fear of something being taken away? Narratives should do more with that instead of focusing strictly on migration”

Trineke Palm, director scientific institute ChristenUnie

5. INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The workshops, the survey and the final conference provided many insights and recommendations. We summarise them below, partly focusing on different target groups.

Recommendations for everyone

- **“People from migrant backgrounds contribute to societies here and there”.** This narrative resonates with many groups in society. Spread it and repeat it as much and as often as possible.
- Attitudes towards migration are not isolated but **linked to concerns about housing and the labour market**, for example. Listen to that and address concerns about it.
- Make sure there is no room for stereotypes of the ‘good’ refugee versus the ‘undesirable’ migrant. **Do not play off groups against each other.**
- Avoid the word **‘migrant’** wherever possible. Migrating is not an identity. Instead, emphasise being human, as in ‘people on the run’ or ‘people with a migration background’. Or, whenever possible, just talk about neighbours, friends and colleagues.

Recommendations for NGOs

- **Delve into the people you want to reach** - especially people in the ‘quiet middle’. What values and moral drivers are important to them? What is going on in their lives? And what does that mean for the message you deliver? You may have to communicate differently than you were used to.
- **Ask people with a migration background what they think of your communication.** What do they feel good about and what would they communicate themselves? And above all, give them the floor themselves.
- **Make diaspora organisations an equal ally.** Put trained experts in your country teams and put people with a migration background in the lead. Fund them. Many want to contribute something to their country of origin.
- **Seek contact and cooperation with municipalities and (local) politicians.** Get them to better identify with the migration story. Set up a positive campaign together.
- **Organise meetings** between migrants and other Dutch people. For instance, through community sponsorship programmes, as in Canada. Approach local newspapers for positive results from such encounters.
- **Share stories of volunteers** in the Netherlands supporting migrants and refugees. Emphasise compassion in mutual contact.

Recommendations for diaspora organisations

- Seek **cooperation with development organisations and government agencies.** Work on constructive partnerships and use your expertise for projects and programmes in countries of origin.
- Initiate **meetings with other Dutch people** and/or work with organisations that facilitate these meetings, such as New Dutch Connections. Consider specific activities, such as setting up coffee mornings or buddy contacts, or focus on specific target groups, such as young people and women.

Contact and connection are key ingredients for mutual understanding, increasing self-confidence and removing prejudice.

- Approach **local media** to bring positive results from the above meetings to a wider audience. Invest in relationships with local journalists.
- **Share your personal story.** Show how you are part of society and/or how you contribute to society in your country of origin.
- At the same time, take a step further and **cast yourself as a spokesperson on migration and development.** Get involved in political and policy decision-making.
- **Invest in relationships with local businesses.** Help entrepreneurs and migrants looking for jobs or internships to connect with each other.

Recommendations for journalists

- **Give space to the - less outspoken - voices in the middle.** One-sided focus on the wings can fuel polarisation and reinforce the perception that migration is exclusively a problem.
- **Give people with a migration background a place in your stories.** Build networks and relationships of trust. Journalists with a migration background can help with this.
- **Give a stage to citizen and business initiatives** - such as those of volunteers or entrepreneurs working on migration and development.
- Be **careful about promoting success stories of extremely successful migrants.** This raises unrealistic expectations.
- **Avoid water metaphors**, such as a ‘wave’ or ‘stream’ of refugees ‘flooding’ our country. That conjures up a threatening image of a disaster coming our way. Rather, speak of ‘the arrival of refugees.’
- **Normalise migration.** Ensure representation of people with a migration background in your messages. Show them in roles other than that of ‘migrant’, for instance as an employer, expert or parent.

Recommendations for politicians and political insiders

- **Speak out on migration with a unifying narrative** of mercy, solidarity and loyalty. Counter the prevailing dominant narrative of fear of foreigners.
- **Make diaspora organisations an ally.** Put them in your policy proposal, give them a place at policy tables. Make sure the wants and needs of migrants are in your party programme and develop it with them.
- **See who feeds the discussion and who is listened to.** Try to reach influential voices. Not only in The Hague, but also locally.
- **Emphasise the importance of good, humane and quick reception.** Only when migrants are well settled and integrated can they mean something to others - both here and in their country of origin. Bet on that.

6. IN CONCLUSION

This paper is not an endpoint but a phase in a process. The issue of migration and development is expected to remain a hot topic in political The Hague and in society. Polarisation also has prominent attention - as shown, for example, by SIRE's recent campaign. It remains important to give both the middle and people with a migration background a prominent place in the conversation on this topic. This publication hopes to contribute to this.

This publication was produced by media expert Mirjam Vossen of OnMigration. For more information about OnMigration, visit the website: [Home - OnMigration](#)

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