

## Refugee Realities: Policy-Making and Recreating the Refugee Narrative

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Narratives, whether positive or negative, can have real and meaningful policy implications. Narratives are used to build individual, group or national life stories, and can be both a construction, and a claim of identity. Dominant narratives of refugees have tended to portray them as passive victims, who should be grateful for the assistance they have received and for the chance to start over. Often, they are expected to shed their identities, to assimilate, to prove themselves worthy. More recently, a darker, more negative narrative has begun to emerge, with some refugees portrayed at best, as dangerous infiltrators with different beliefs and conflicting cultures, or at worst, as potential terrorists.

We speak of 'hordes' and 'masses' and forget that each refugee is an individual, with their own identity, their own experience, and their own aspirations. We speak of a refugee 'crisis' and are overwhelmed by the sense that it is beyond our capacity to deal with those clamouring to get through our front doors. Refugees are a 'burden' that we must all share, an object of charity in a time when we have nothing left to give. These narratives breed fear and are not conducive to developing solutions-driven policies.

By recreating the refugee narrative, we can create spaces in which refugees become symbols of hope, triumph and dignity. Humanitarian and development actors increasingly note the need to better understand the needs, motivations and aspirations of displaced populations. They advocate for a shift in perception, for the recognition that refugees are human beings with capacities, skills, and knowledge to contribute. From a policy perspective, it is important to engage "the voices of those rarely heard" from both displaced and host communities so that we better understand why people move but also how we can empower them to feel connected to, and fully participate, in their new societies.

This panel discussion will explore how we can recreate the refugee narrative so as to better reflect refugee realities. It will point to meaningful ways in which policy practitioners can engage with refugees to reinvent social narratives at the local and national level, and examine the role of media in creating and dismantling public narratives of disenfranchisement. Discussions will centre on the role of language and rhetoric in constructing the 'other', creating spaces for civic engagement to support social cohesion and integration, and highlight the need to reconceptualise narratives around solutions.