

# Communicating advocacy messages about migration

Showcasing Approaches –  
Case Study No. 4



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This case study has been produced as part of an independent evaluation of The Atlantic Philanthropies Migration Programme. It highlights promising practices and lessons for grantees identified during the evaluation. Over 35 years, Atlantic has made grants totaling \$8 billion to advance opportunity, equity and human dignity. Further information about Atlantic and the evaluation is provided at the end of this document.

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## Key messages

- **Avoiding jargon and insider language that can confuse rather than clarify the issue is crucial in communicating clearly.** An organisation specialising in communications, the Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS) avoided using such language and instead relied on migrants' own words to describe the challenges they faced.
- **Placing individual migrant's stories and experiences at the heart of advocacy messages brings the issues affecting them to life and makes them relevant and meaningful for a range of audiences.** FOMACS worked with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the migration field in Ireland to enable them to communicate effectively in their advocacy work. The approach used arts, culture and media and placed migrants' stories and circumstances at the heart of communication activities.
- **Using innovative methods and exhibition techniques can harness the value and power of involving migrants' stories in media campaigns without identifying vulnerable individuals.** For example, FOMACS employed animations to describe migrants' real experiences while protecting the identities of those involved.
- **Influencing the migration debate is possible by focusing on one policy problem.** In this case, FOMACS carried out a campaign to raise awareness of sex trafficking that helped lead to a high-ranking government official initiating policy change.

## Background

Prevailing views expressed by the media and policymakers regarding migration are often negative. Many of the organisations supported by The Atlantic Philanthropies sought to challenge and shape the ideas, preconceptions and understandings of the public and policymakers in order to create an environment that was supportive of policy change.

## What Atlantic Funded

As part of its Migration Programme, Atlantic funded the **Forum on Migration and Communications (FOMACS)**, which aimed to support this change through campaigns using arts, culture and media to tell the stories of individual migrants.

Launched in 2007, FOMACS was based at the Centre for Transcultural Research and Media Practice at the Dublin Institute of Technology in Ireland. The core aim of the organisation was to work collaboratively with nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), migrants and others to enable them to communicate effectively in their advocacy work. As a part of this effort, FOMACS developed communication products that advocates can use to impact public opinion and shape policy.

## Lessons Learned

### Avoiding jargon and insider language is crucial in communicating clearly

FOMACS found that public debate on migration was often based on misunderstandings about migration and migrants. Previous efforts to challenge language and attitudes using more traditional advocacy approaches had not worked well and were becoming dominated by jargon and insider language that served to confuse rather than clarify the core issues involved.

“The challenge really was that the term family reunification [which advocates were using] meant absolutely nothing – it is a technical term that had no bearing on people’s ordinary lives. So, we said “park it” [and] bring it into the context of people on the ground who are being directly affected. We thought that children are the most honest advocates for that.

*Director, FOMACS*

A recurring theme across the FOMACS project was translating complexity into simple but meaningful communications. This allowed the Atlantic grantees collaborating with FOMACS to do more effective work with the media. They took difficult, abstract concepts such as ‘family reunification’ and recast it into language that different constituencies and the general public could understand. In this case, family reunification was replaced with simpler and clearer words such as ‘being reunited with family members’.

### Placing individual migrant’s stories at the heart of advocacy messages makes them relevant to many audiences

Storytelling was central to the FOMACS approach. In essence, this meant deconstructing a debate or an issue and reconsidering it from the perspective of the audience. A good example of this was in relation to family reunification of migrants. FOMACS enabled audiences to understand the importance of families staying together by highlighting the situation of individual people and families. By communicating an individual family’s story of separation and the subsequent consequences for all of those involved — including children — FOMACS provided a means through which the public could increase their understanding of the key issues.

FOMACS used this storytelling approach throughout their collaborative work with Atlantic’s grantee organisations including the Immigrant Council of Ireland, the Irish Refugee Council, Doras Luimní and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland. Those organisations regarded the FOMACS collaboration and the adoption of this approach and methodology as useful and timely.

## Using innovative methods can harness the power of migrants' stories without identifying vulnerable individuals

An important element of FOMACS' approach was a belief that placing migrants' real experiences at the heart of communication activities would increase the power of those messages and result in changes in the public's attitudes and beliefs. However, FOMACS also was acutely aware of the vulnerability of those migrants. They developed an approach that aimed to protect, support and empower migrants through involving them in advocacy and communication activities.

One innovative way in which this was achieved was through the use of animation rather than photographic or filmed images of migrants. A three-part animation developed by FOMACS for the Educate Together project that focused on issues of family reunification was based on experiences and stories of real people but was animated and thus protected their identities.



**Figure 1: Images from 'Memory Box' animation**

The 'Memory Box' animation (see Figure 1) centres on the story of a young Nigerian girl living in Dublin who wants her father to attend her school graduation. However, her father, who remains in Nigeria, is refused a visa and is unable to attend. The child sends him a memory box she made at school.



**Figure 2: Images from 'Team Spirit' animation**

The 'Team Spirit' animation (see Figure 2) is focused on the experience of a young boy who is living in Ireland with his mother. Both are refugees from Darfur and the rest of their family remains in Darfur, waiting for their visas to be processed. Ultimately his grandmother has to stay behind as she does not fit the policy definition of 'a family member'. This animation was subsequently integrated into the mainstream education system via the national curriculum on integration issues.

The use of animation enabled the challenges faced by families to be presented visually, in an easily understood format, without using specific identities.

## Influencing the migration debate is possible by focusing on one policy problem

In 2010 FOMACS supported a public campaign called ‘Turn off the Red Light’, which aimed to combat sex-trafficking. FOMACS chose to concentrate on this one policy problem because the communication of the fundamental issues was especially challenging but also vital due to the vulnerability of the victims. FOMACS believed that they could employ communication methods and tactics to effectively raise awareness of the issues and enable policymakers to better understand the problem.

FOMACS positioned the campaign as a high-end photographic project called ‘Not Natasha’, which presented images by a Romanian Artist Dana Popa telling the stories of female survivors of trafficking. A fundamental aspect of the ‘Not Natasha’ exhibition was that it enabled the women concerned to tell their story without making them visible or exposing them directly to public scrutiny. ‘Not Natasha’ focused on stories of women who had been trafficked into the sex industry from Moldova, providing a frame for the debate and public information campaign. Many of the women involved felt endangered and in order to protect their identity they were not recognisable in the images. The campaign consciously avoided direct advocacy messages, allowing the photographs to speak for themselves.

This approach meant that a broad audience – including politicians and policymakers along with the general public – could engage with their narrative without the risks of direct visibility. The project gained considerable public attention and attracted international reviews.

An inventive approach was used to gain maximum exposure for the work by using a site on a busy street in a commercial environment with significant foot traffic. This ‘shop window’ style of communication meant people passing by could engage with the topic.



The current Minister for Justice literally passed by on the street and came in, and

immediately responded to stories in the exhibition.

*Director, FOMACS, 2014*

The site was divided into two distinct spaces – an art gallery and a campaign hub with public engagement activities programmed across both spaces. The layout of the site aimed to link the campaign lobbying and briefing work to communications and audience engagement.

The impact of the ‘Not Natasha’ project – which contributed to the ongoing ‘Turn off the Red Light’ campaign — was to help re-shape the public perception of the issue of

sex trafficking. This culminated in an indication in January 2015 by the Minister for Justice in Ireland Frances Fitzgerald that the forthcoming Sexual Offences Bill would criminalise the purchase of sex.



Images of the 'Not Natasha' exhibition



View of the environment outside the exhibition



Crowds attending the Not Natasha venue

“

I would say that you don't change public opinion ... you plant seeds of doubt or you shift certain perspectives around an issue. I think we did that to a certain extent ... we created some turbulence in the system.

*Director, FOMACS, 2014*

**FOMACS produced more than 30 products, facilitated publication of newspaper and journal articles, and hosted public events.** These included:

- A living archive to record recent migration experiences in Ireland disseminated online as well as through exhibitions and materials
- FOMACS website
- A digital storytelling project using a workshop format and allowing stories to be told by migrants: 'Undocumented in Ireland' (2009) and 'Living in Direct Provision' (2009)
- Films 'Here to Stay' (2006), 'Promise and Unrest' (2010), 'The Richness of Change' (2007) and 'Sanctuary' (2009)
- A three-part series of short animated films, 'Abbi's Circle' between 2007 and 2009
- Three photography exhibitions between 2007 and 2010
- The 'Curious Ear' radio programme (2009) and a radio mentoring programme with migrant women, 'Having Your Voice Heard'
- Print products including newspaper supplements, articles and educational guides

The work undertaken by FOMACS, including the communication tools developed, is archived at <http://www.fomacsretrospective.org/>

## Challenges of Bringing Migrants into the Centre of a Communication Campaign ... and How These Challenges Might be Overcome

While the FOMACS project highlights some of the benefits of bringing migrants into the centre of a communication strategy, the evaluation of The Atlantic Philanthropies Migration Programme also identified a number of challenges in using information to inform policy and practice in the migration field.



### Posing potential risk to individuals

This approach presents a possible risk to individuals involved in the communication by attracting unwanted interest in their personal circumstances or potentially exposing them to legal issues. Migrants are often very vulnerable economically, legally and personally, and their involvement in public communications about migration might expose them to even greater risks. One way to overcome this is to use other people to represent a particular individual's story (e.g., an actor representing the migrant in a video about his or her personal journey and life) and to go through a check list of potential legal issues with experts before producing and disseminating products.



### Oversimplifying complex problems

Highlighting a specific individual's case may result in oversimplifying the complex problems and issues faced by migrants. Using a single case to demonstrate a point can result in assumptions about the generality of that particular problem – that one migrant's experience is common across all migrants. One way to overcome this is to link the individual story to the wider context by either indicating that the story is representing a large group of migrants or showing that while this is an individual story the experience is highlighting a system-wide issue that other people with different life stories still face.



### Focusing on one issue to the exclusion of other important ones

Highlighting the issues for one group of people can result in the main policy debate becoming over-associated with one part of the migration context (e.g., sex trafficking). This may result in misconceptions that one specific issue is the only area to be dealt with. This could be addressed by putting the issue in the context of a wider debate around migration.

## Conclusion

This case study has described how FOMACS brought an innovative approach to communications within the migration sector. Focusing on individual stories enabled the public to engage more readily with migration issues. Advocacy organisations can bring together art and policy challenges in creative ways, such as through exhibitions and displays.

Effective communications can be a vital component in advocacy work for organisations, especially when they partner with experts in that field. The FOMACS project produced material and outputs that were included in the school national curriculum. It also directly contributed to the high-profile 'Turn off the Red Light' campaign, which gathered considerable momentum within the Irish policy context.

## Endnotes

1. Interviews with grantee organisations, 2013.

## About this case study and the evaluation of The Atlantic Philanthropies Migration Programme

### Atlantic Philanthropies Migration Programme

Over 35 years, Atlantic has made grants totaling \$8 billion to advance opportunity, equity and human rights. A limited-life foundation, Atlantic completed its grantmaking in 2016, and will cease operations by 2020.

The Atlantic Philanthropies Migration Programme is a central delivery mechanism for their Reconciliation and Human Rights strategy in the Republic of Ireland. At the heart of the strategy is the fundamental objective of improving access to justice and services for migrants. Atlantic has provided 46 grants to 18 organisations (or initiatives) working domestically in the Republic of Ireland and at the European Union level since 2004.

### RAND Europe's evaluation

Atlantic commissioned RAND Europe to undertake a summative evaluation of their Migration Programme. The overarching aims of the evaluation are to:

- Undertake a programme-level review of the work supported by Atlantic up to the end of 2012
- Monitor ongoing progress, developments and impacts up to the end of 2014
- Identify any emerging issues, challenges or opportunities that may be on the horizon for the programme

Full details of the methodology for the research can be found in the final evaluation report available at [www.rand.org/t/rr484](http://www.rand.org/t/rr484).

### About this case study

As part of the evaluation of the Migration Programme, a series of case studies have been developed to highlight innovative practice, showcase promising practices, and identify lessons relevant to other organisations and grantmakers working in the migration field. The information presented in this case study is based on a review of documentation produced by Atlantic's grantees, and interviews with grantees and stakeholders conducted as part of the evaluation. More information underpinning the key messages included in this case study can be obtained in the final evaluation report.

### Contact information

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