UNDERSTANDING AND CHANGING PUBLIC ATTITUDES:

A REVIEW OF EXISTING EVIDENCE FROM PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION CAMPAIGNS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The aim of this report is to assist those working in the refugee sector (and beyond) to a better understanding of the factors that influence attitude formation, both generally and in relation to asylum and immigration. The report also explores potential learning from campaigning work undertaken in relation to other issues or groups about which the public holds negative or prejudicial views.

ATTITUDES TO ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION

Over the past five years there has been a plethora of opinion polls and surveys on attitudes to asylum and immigration. This evidence indicates that public attitudes towards asylum and immigration issues in the UK are generally - and increasingly - negative. Uneasiness about immigration and its consequences (social, economic and political) is shared by many European countries.

These attitudes are a cause for concern. Negative attitudes towards immigration may be reflected in negative behaviour toward immigrants and ethnic minority groups. This behaviour impacts directly on individuals and communities. Negative attitudes also influence the content and direction of government policies.

Problems with the evidence base

Very little is known specifically about the factors that influence attitudes towards asylum seekers and refugees. Most of the existing evidence relates to immigration and immigrants more generally and/or to wider issues of race and ethnic minority formation.

Although surveys and opinion polls provide a description of the variation in attitudes between different groups of the public and different areas of the UK and EU, they provide limited understanding of the factors and changes that underlie these differences in attitude. The fact that some characteristics are associated (correlated) with particular attitudes does not necessarily mean that they are the causal factor.

Factors influencing attitudes

Many factors influence public attitudes towards asylum and immigration. These factors are **demographic** (e.g. age, sex, race), **economic** (e.g. income), **social and cultural** (e.g. religion, media, information sources, actual and perceived social norms, ethnicity, lifestyle), **psychological** (e.g. personality type), **political** (e.g. left-wing/right-wing ideologies) and **geographical** (e.g. location, proximity to immigrants).

Although there is some evidence that women are likely to hold more positive attitudes towards immigration than men, this is not consistently demonstrated by all opinion polls or in other research studies. Evidence on the role of age in shaping attitudes to immigration in general and asylum seekers in particular is also contradictory.

Based on the theory of cultural affinity, those with cultural and ethnic ties to immigrants might be expected to hold pro-immigrant attitudes and support more open immigration policies. Although this is generally the case, the fact that ethnic minority respondents are more likely to be economically marginalised can lead to contradictory results.

Education plays an important role in shaping attitudes towards immigrants. A number of the surveys and opinion polls show a correlation between higher levels of education and more positive attitudes towards immigration.

These findings are supported by more in-depth research studies. Education can decrease reported opposition to immigration because it is associated with increased openness towards those from different backgrounds and acts as an important resource in relation to the labour market.

There are higher levels of tolerance towards immigrants and immigration in those geographical areas which are more ethnically diverse and have a longer history of migration. This is generally considered to reflect the extent to which individuals have contact with asylum seekers, refugees and migrants and for whom this personal experience acts as a counter to other information sources which would otherwise be an important contributory factor in attitude formation.

There is substantial evidence that, at a societal level, **social networks play an important role in attitude formation and change.** Social networks shape attitude formation because they provide the context within which individuals process messages (for example, from the government, political parties or the media) about asylum and immigration.

There is a small but growing body of evidence which suggests that in the period since 1997, **political and policy discourses relating to immigration have negatively affected attitudes towards asylum.** In particular, there is evidence of a vicious cycle connecting increased media coverage of migration issues with an increase in government statements and proclamations on the subject and, in turn, increased media coverage. Many government statements on migration issues have been negative in tone and content and have served only to confirm and exacerbate public anxiety. In particular, they have reinforced the popularly held idea that migration is a 'problem'.

There is also a growing body of evidence which suggests that **attitudes to asylum and immigration can only be understood in the context of much broader and more general concerns about the implications of globalisation** (for both economies and societies) and about security issues more generally. This evidence suggests that asylum may be best understood as a 'touchstone' issue which symbolises a range of much larger concerns.

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CAMPAIGNS

It is possible to distinguish between two types of public information and communication campaign.

Behaviour change campaigns seek to modify individuals' behaviour in order to improve individual or social well-being. This type of campaign is most commonly associated with initiatives in relation to public health and safety.

Public will campaigns aim to shape or change public attitudes as a mechanism of achieving policy action or change.

Public will campaigns – which may also be described as *value* or *attitude campaigns* - are most relevant to efforts to affect change in public attitudes to asylum.

Research shows that simply knowing more about an issue does not necessarily have a direct effect on behaviour. **In order to achieve the objective of achieving social change, public will campaigns must do more than simply generate awareness.**

Not all public will campaigns are the same. The campaign strategy and choice of message(s) will need to be tailored to the particular issue being addressed and, in particular, whether the campaign relates to a *valence* or *position issue*.

Valence issues address common values where there is broad societal consent, such as peace, saving the environment or eradicating international poverty.

Position issues, by contrast, show two contrary positions on one dimension e.g. pro or anti abortion, pro or anti military intervention or, arguably, pro or anti asylum.

In order to be effective, campaign designers need to have an understanding of the reasons why people think and behave in the way that they do. In other words, **campaigns need to be based on a theory of change.**

The theory of change underlying most public will campaigns is based on agenda-setting and the concept of framing. The idea behind this theory of change is that the policy agenda is influenced by what the public thinks, cares about, and does. Public thinking and acting are, in turn, thought to be influenced at least in part by the media. In this way public will campaigns try to ignite a chain reaction in the agenda-setting process.

They do this primarily by working to influence the media agenda and by communicating to the public directly. Many public will campaigns also try to attempt to affect how the public thinks about an issue by changing the way that it is framed.

Social networks and norms play an important role both in the formation of attitudes and in the success (or otherwise) of campaigns directed at attitudinal change. An appreciation of the role of social networks and norms in attitude formation and the process of attitudinal change suggests, for example, that **an individual's**

detailed knowledge about an issue may be less important than their belief about what is expected behaviour. Some campaigns work because they activate a complex process of change in social norms rather than because they transfer knowledge that produces behaviour change.

Public campaigns are increasingly sophisticated and strategic. Very rarely do public communication campaigns feature *only* communications through media channels. More campaigns are paying attention to the social and political context in which they take place. And there are increasing efforts to link traditional media and behaviour change strategies with on-the-ground community action to make the social and policy environment more supportive of the desired campaign results.

The evidence suggests that **campaign strategies that use both mass communication and interpersonal communication channels are likely to be the most effective.**

Opinion leaders are particularly important to the success of any campaign strategy because they can serve as multipliers who pass on messages in everyday life, in small networks and groups. The effectiveness of any campaign will reflect, in significant part, the kinds of messages that are devised, and ways in which these messages may be interpreted and understood by target audiences.

Campaign messages must be tailored to the needs of the different audiences with which the campaign wishes to engage. Campaigns have an easier task of influencing or changing attitudes if they concern issues towards which audiences are already favourably inclined. This is because attitudes do not only influence behaviour: they also determine how we process messages regarding the attitude object.

For campaigns that seek to alter existing attitudes, the task is much more difficult. Messages that seek to change existing attitudes need to be much stronger than those that simply reinforce or confirm what a person already thinks.

It is very difficult to know what kinds of campaigns are most likely to be effective. Public campaigns are designed to affect outcomes that are also influenced by a complex and broad set of factors. It can be difficult to isolate the effects of campaigns on outcomes that are bombarded by so many competing influences.

This problem is exacerbated by the limited quantity and quality of campaign evaluations. **Within many evaluations there is a tendency to evaluate effort rather than impact. Many campaigns deem themselves a success without the evidence to prove it. There is also a tendency to over-rely on knowledge or awareness as a measure of success.**

Policy change in connection with a public will campaign can be particularly difficult to measure. While policies themselves are not difficult to track, understanding the contribution of the campaign to policy shifts can be challenging.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS

The report reviews existing evidence on the effectiveness of campaigns to change attitudes towards specific issues or particular groups in society.

The focus is on public health campaigns, campaigns around mental health and the stigma of mental illness, anti-poverty campaigns, and campaigns to promote equality and diversity. Campaigns in these areas offer the most potential learning in relation to future work in the area of asylum.

There are very significant contradictions in existing emerging evidence about the effects of public health education and communication on health outcomes. There is considerable evidence that even in an area such as personal health (where the motivation for behavioural change is theoretically high), **simply providing information and increasing knowledge about a topic is not enough to lead to attitude and behaviour change.** But there is also evidence that such campaigns can be effective, particularly if they relate to issues about which individuals are highly motivated, and where the principles of effective campaign design are carefully followed.

In all cases it is necessary to adjust estimated campaign effects for possible selection bias due to systematic differences between respondents that are exposed to the campaign and those that are not.

The primary purpose or function of a campaign can vary significantly even while the broad issue or concern that forms the focus of the campaign is the same. An increasing number of public campaigns in the area of HIV/AIDS and mental illness are directed at challenging attitudes towards groups in society rather than promoting individual behavioural change. Many of these campaigns can be described as 'anti-stigma' campaigns.

There is emerging evidence from Australia, New Zealand and Scotland that carefully co-ordinated campaigns based on social marketing technique are associated with improved attitudes towards issues of mental illness.

Nonetheless there remains considerable scepticism about the ability of campaigns in the area of mental health to produce meaningful and sustainable change. This is largely because of the lack of

research studies that examine the effectiveness of real-world anti-stigma campaigns. It also reflects the difficulties in ascertaining causal relationships between campaigns and attitudinal change.

One positive feature of anti-stigma strategies in the area of mental health is that **people are responsive to hearing service user stories and can change their minds after encountering user perspectives.** This is an important lesson.

Evidence from anti-poverty campaigns suggests that these have been generally effective in re-framing issues in order to secure greater public understanding about issues of national and international poverty.

Recent campaigns have also been particularly effective at taking advantage of political context and at utilising new media (such as email, the internet and mobile phones). There are some concerns however that although such campaigns raise awareness they do not necessarily lead to behavioural change and lack strategies for long-term sustainability.

The effectiveness of campaigns intended to change attitudes towards issues of race and racism is particularly difficult to assess. This is because of the difficulties associated with trying to disentangle the effects of public information campaigns from those associated with legal and policy initiatives introduced to deliver equality and diversity.

There has been some research which explores the effectiveness of anti-racism advertising and, in particular, the messages used in this advertising.

This research highlights the importance of clarity and strength in campaign messages because attitudes towards ethnic minorities are often ambivalent. **Campaigns that lack strong content and messages but seek to elicit sympathy may reduce rather than increase public understanding.**

There is also some evidence that anti-racist campaigns can create negative 'backfire' effects, particularly where they are based on negative stereotyping. It is therefore critically important to develop messages that elicit more positive attitudes toward ethnic minority people among message recipients who are initially ambivalent toward them.

THE EVIDENCE BASE

The report is based on desk-based research and analysis. There is a very large number of resources relating to attitude formation and behavioural change primarily in the fields of social psychology, evaluation, public health and social marketing. Where appropriate the report draws on this work, but with the important caveat that there is insufficient space fully to reflect the complexity of debates around attitudinal and behavioural change.

The published literature does not represent the full spectrum of campaign evaluation work. Both the number and quality of campaign evaluations is limited. The campaigns discussed in the report are illustrative rather than representative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR CAMPAIGNING WORK ON ASYLUM

It is important to recognise the difficulties associated with efforts to affect attitudinal change, particularly where those attitudes are already based on misinformation and prejudice. **In order to influence or change attitudes it is necessary first to understand the reasons why such beliefs or attitudes are held.** The first step toward producing attitudinal change in relation to asylum therefore is the identification of a set of primary beliefs relevant to the behaviour in question. Once identified, these beliefs can serve as the basic arguments in a persuasive communication.

Organisations seeking to generate public good-will around asylum will need to develop a long-term view, based on realistic understanding of how change can be brought about, and then persistently and consistently follow that course.

Although the evidence is mixed and in some cases contradictory, it seems likely that many campaigns to change attitudes and behaviour are ineffective or have a relatively modest degree of impact over the long term.

Successful campaigning in the area of asylum needs to do more than simply provide information or 'myth-bust'. It needs to tackle some of the deeply held prejudices and misconceptions that manifest themselves in negative attitudes and behaviours.

Campaigns to change attitudes may have unexpected or unintended effects. Particular care will be needed when designing campaign messages in relation to asylum and in evaluating the impact of any work directed towards attitudinal change.

There is evidence that asylum may be a 'touchstone' issue for a range of other issues and concerns. It is also possible that these attitudes are a reflection of popular feelings of insecurity in which the outside world is perceived as a threat and/or growing distrust of public authorities and the political establishment. **In order to be successful, campaigning work on asylum will need to take into consideration the fact that concerns about asylum may, in reality, be shorthand for a range of other concerns.**

Although campaigns to change attitudes and engender public will towards particular issues are notoriously difficult, it is clear that some campaigns are more successful than others. This is because they are based on a theory of change, have clearly defined aims and objectives and strong campaign messages tailored to the groups in society towards whom they are targeted.

Successful campaigns also employ a range of strategies to ensure that they do not rely on the mass media but engage with opinion leaders, grass-roots organisations and those on whom the campaign directly impacts in order to maximise effectiveness and campaign sustainability.

The report concludes by outlining the following eight principles which, when incorporated in campaigns to influence attitudes towards asylum, will maximise the possibilities of success.

Successful campaigns on asylum will need to have:

- **A clear theory of change;**
- **Sensitivity to the political and policy context;**
- **Clear and agreed aims and objectives;**
- **Strong and explicit messages that reframe the terms of the debate;**
- **The involvement of those directly affected by the campaign;**
- **A range of mass communication and interpersonal communication channels;**
- **Strategies targeted at particular groups in society; and**
- **A commitment to research and evaluation.**

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