
UNHRC63 - Side Event Report: Countering Anti-Migrant Narratives — The Role of Local and Regional Governments

On 30 September 2026, the Amman Center for Human Rights Studies (ACHRS) participated in the side event *Countering Anti-Migrant Narratives: The Role of Local and Regional Governments*, organised by the OHCHR Migration Unit. ACHRS was represented by Coordinator Filipe Dias Kalgaard and Human Rights and Advocacy Intern Romina M. Iramloo.

The discussion focused on the growing hostility towards migrants, the rise of far-right movements and the use of migrants as scapegoats for wider social problems. Representatives from different countries and organisations shared how they are working to challenge these narratives and build more inclusive communities. On this topic, ACHRS wants to advocate that migrants should not be blamed for society's problems. They are people with rights, experiences and voices that deserve to be heard.

Challenging misinformation and political rhetoric

The representative from Spain spoke about the importance of challenging anti-migrant narratives with facts and evidence. Spain has worked to promote independent journalism, more balanced public debate and community initiatives that bring people together. The representative also highlighted that challenges such as climate change and conflict cannot be solved through a “my country first” mentality. These issues cross borders and require countries to work together.

ACHRS supports these approaches, especially the focus on facts rather than assumptions. When migrants are repeatedly blamed for social and economic problems, it becomes easier to justify their exclusion and deny them their rights. Political leaders have a responsibility to challenge these narratives rather than reinforce them. But how do we ensure that people seek facts instead of relying on assumptions? ACHRS believe education has a key role to play here, particularly from an early age. Children should learn to question what they hear, think critically and recognise when information is misleading. If we want to see a change in how migrants are discussed and treated, we need to start by equipping the next generation with the tools to challenge misinformation and prejudice.

As mentioned, Spain also spoke about community work, but we would have liked to hear more about how this can be put into practice. When people have little contact with one another, assumptions can easily replace actual knowledge and understanding. Creating spaces where people from different backgrounds can meet, share their experiences and see what they have in common is therefore just as important. It gives people the chance to hear perspectives they might never encounter otherwise. This all contributes to challenging misinformation.

Migrants must be allowed to speak for themselves

The Mexican delegation highlighted how dehumanising narratives can emerge from both political leaders and society itself. When politicians portray migrants as a threat, they can shape public attitudes and fuel discriminatory and exclusionary policies. Mexico has worked with local communities and governments, including through social media campaigns, to challenge these narratives and promote a more inclusive view of migration.

Catalonia spoke about the challenges of hate speech and violence against migrants. Catalonia has established a non-hate office that studies online hate speech, monitors its development and works to prevent it from escalating. The representative also highlighted the importance of sharing facts and giving migrants a platform to speak for themselves.

This is something ACHRS particularly wants to echo. There is a lot of talk about migrants, but not always enough space for migrants to speak. Migrants are often discussed as a problem to be solved or as people who need others to decide what is best for them. Their own experiences, opinions and needs can easily be left out of the conversation. If we want to build inclusive societies, migrants must be included in decisions that affect their lives. They need opportunities to participate in workplaces, community spaces and public life. Integration is also a two-way process. Migrants must have opportunities to participate in their new societies, but the wider society must also accept them and be willing to listen, understand and adapt. Inclusion cannot be the responsibility of one group alone.

Understanding frustration without blaming migrants

Tony Dyer, Leader of Bristol City Council, spoke about Bristol's efforts to welcome newcomers while also facing far-right protests. He noted that some people who supported far-right movements felt ignored and believed that no one was listening to their concerns or the challenges they faced in their own lives.

History has shown how easily people can become scapegoats when society faces difficulties. When people feel unheard or frustrated, they may look for someone to blame, and migrants have often become targets. Their presence is then used to explain wider social problems, even when they are not responsible for them. It is important to listen to people's concerns, but this should never come at the expense of migrants' rights or dignity.

Bristol is working to strengthen social cohesion through education and community initiatives. ACHRS believes that education about the history of migration is particularly important in challenging misinformation and prejudice. Migration is not a new phenomenon; it has always been part of human history. Understanding this can help put current debates into perspective and challenge the idea that migrants are responsible for society's problems. While asylum

systems may face challenges, people fleeing conflict and persecution should not be blamed for seeking safety. We must address people's concerns without turning communities against each other or allowing migrants to become scapegoats for wider social problems.

Building trust through local action

The city of Sherbrooke in Canada presented its Anti-Rumour Strategy, which works with local partners, including schools, to challenge stereotypes and misinformation. Through education and dialogue, the initiative brings people together and encourages greater understanding between communities.

More in Common explored how concerns about migration and demands for stricter border controls can reflect wider frustrations within society. As Tony Dyer also highlighted, it is important to listen to these concerns without compromising the rights and dignity of migrants.

The discussion also turned to the spread of online hate and its potential to fuel hostility and violence in local communities. Global City Hub stressed the importance of trust in preventing these developments and building stronger relationships within society.

ACHRS strongly agrees with this point. While we have emphasised the importance of community work, we also recognise that building trust is essential to preventing division before it takes hold. Trust cannot be built overnight, nor can it only be addressed when tensions arise. It grows through everyday interactions and relationships between people who might otherwise never get to know one another. When there is trust, people are more likely to listen, question their assumptions and feel less threatened by those they see as different. But trust must go both ways. Migrants and minorities also need to trust that they are welcome, that their voices matter and that they can participate in society without being treated as outsiders. We cannot expect people to engage in their local communities if they feel unwanted or believe their participation will make little difference. This is why local communities need the resources and support to prioritise this work. Building trust takes time, and local initiatives need to be supported beyond short-term projects. If we want to prevent division rather than simply respond to it, we must invest in relationships that allow people to feel both welcome and understood.

The importance of equal rights and protection

These issues are also relevant to Jordan, where ACHRS is based and where many refugees live. Jordan hosts people displaced from several countries, including Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Yemen.

However, welcoming refugees is not enough. Their legal status, access to work and public services, and opportunities to build a future all affect their ability to live with dignity. Refugees

from different backgrounds can also face different legal barriers and levels of protection. Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. ACHRS supports stronger legal protection for refugees and calls for their rights and dignity to be upheld.

People do not leave their homes, families and lives behind without reason. Many flee conflict, persecution and violence in search of safety. They deserve the opportunity to rebuild their lives, not to face further exclusion in the countries where they seek refuge.

Conclusion

The side event made one thing clear: condemning hate is not enough. Across the discussions, representatives repeatedly highlighted the importance of community work, education and monitoring online hate speech. The challenge is to put these approaches into practice and recognise that countering anti-migrant narratives requires long-term investment, not just a response when tensions arise.

We cannot build inclusive societies by shutting people out or speaking for them instead of listening to them. Majorities and minorities alike need opportunities to meet, understand one another and challenge the assumptions they may hold. Governments have a responsibility to make this possible, both by supporting local communities and by ensuring that migrants can participate in society without having to prove that they belong. Their rights and dignity should never depend on public opinion or where they come from.