

# Migration narratives in the past and present

*Why and how to use archives and repositories for policies and practices*

## POLICY BRIEF

**This policy brief delivers concrete suggestions on the use of archives and repositories of past and present narratives for policies and projects, routines and activities in the field of migration.**

**Archives, repositories, and collections of qualitative research data** are often underutilised by policymakers, researchers and practitioners. Yet, they are an essential tool in fields such as policy and decision-making, research, journalism, and for practitioners working in the field of migration.

This policy brief expands the [second ITHACA policy brief](#), which discussed the **need to connect qualitative research on policies and practices** as an essential basis for non-emergency policies, social work planning and evaluation, and fair communication.

Collecting and studying migration stories helps to **explain the reasons behind the migration phenomenon as a long-term global process** and to **contextualise** them where needed most, whether in political, educational, labour, health or reception settings.

**Databases and platforms dedicated to migration narratives do more than simply collect stories:** they process and translate them into actionable knowledge. They weave together diverse stories to illuminate the broader contexts of their time and space, transforming isolated narratives into cohesive insights. Thus, such platforms are essential not only for preserving histories and stories but also for **addressing present challenges and anticipating future needs**.



*ITHACA's team and stakeholders at the third Policy Council, Crete, 3 October 2024*

## A novel approach

Between September and November 2024, the EU-funded H2020 ITHACA project organised a series of Policy Councils (PCs), set up to allow a broad group of stakeholders to meet and exchange thoughts, views and proposals at local, national and international levels on the uses of archives, repositories and databases of qualitative research in the field of migration.

Engaging interested/affected groups can enhance the likelihood of impact in any research domain (Reed, 2022), increasing the understanding of potential research applications and enhancing the relationship between research results, policies and practices.

## Who participated and where

Policymakers, researchers in migration studies, sociologists, anthropologists, historians, migrant associations' representatives, journalists, teachers, intergovernmental organisation representatives and lawyers, all convened by the ITHACA partners. Around 60 participants took part in 6 meetings in Italy (Pieve Santo Stefano, besides the final event of the ITHACA Diary Contest), Greece (Athens), The Netherlands (Amsterdam), Morocco (Rabat), Tunisia (Tunis), France (Paris). An international meeting gathering stakeholders from 12 countries (Italy, Greece, The Netherlands, France, Switzerland, Belgium, United Kingdom, Jordan, Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, and Azerbaijan) was held in Crete during a series of events dedicated to the project's results and impact.

In this policy brief, the unique reflections developed during these various meetings involving ITHACA's stakeholders are organised according to the working field of its audience:

- **policymakers, policy and public officers;**
- **migrants, migrants' associations;**
- **social workers and NGOs;**
- **researchers and university students;**
- **journalists and artists;**
- **school teachers and pupils.**

A list of resources is provided at the end of the document to allow readers to start using migration narratives platforms in their professions.

*This action is part of the ITHACA project (G.A. 101004539) which aims to analyse migration patterns from the Middle Ages to the present day within a rigorous historical framework, and to make the results available via a web platform. This will provide migrants, researchers, practitioners and policymakers with a digital database of narratives, documents and archival sources. The Consortium pays particular attention to making an impact at political and social level in order to transform narratives and policies on migration. The topics, practices and discourses that arose during the ITHACA PCE concerned different geographical, social and economic contexts; however, the feedback from stakeholders revealed some significant areas of uniformity in terms of problems, opportunities and recommendations.*

*This policy brief represents the views of the ITHACA project partners. The support received from the Horizon 2020 Programme for the project publications does not constitute an endorsement of their contents, which reflect the views of the authors only. The European Commission cannot be held responsible for any use that may be made of the information contained therein.*

## 1. Harnessing Research-based Migrant Narratives for Migration Policy

Research-based archives, repositories, and databases of migration narratives are based on qualitative research methods in different disciplines. In the case of the ITHACA project, which allowed the co-creation of this policy brief, these disciplines are mainly history, sociology, anthropology and ethnography. The archives, repositories and databases serve as effective consulting tools for policymakers navigating the complex and dynamic field of migration. They offer many resources that enhance understanding, inform decision-making, and **bridge the gap between data and action**. They play a pivotal role in broadening knowledge across diverse sectors, including schools, universities, local authorities, media, and non-governmental organisations (NGOs)/civil society organisations (CSOs), fostering collaboration among them.

During one of the ITHACA meetings with stakeholders, a policymaker told us:

*Caught up in emotion, we believe the arrival of migrants is the heart of the matter. The arrival of migrants makes it clear to us that there is a problem. New people arrive. If migrants arrive - be they children or adults - and do not speak the language, or speak it differently, or have different experiences, first of all, we have to understand who these people are. A repository of stories becomes essential for understanding who they are, it is a first step towards useful and manageable decisions.*

### Repositories of Narratives and Insights

While quantitative research often evaluates migration trends, **qualitative data provides a richer, more nuanced perspective**. It delves into the motivations, challenges, and aspirations of migrants, offering critical insights that are often missing from purely statistical analyses. These stories challenge policymakers to step outside silos and engage with the realities faced by migrants, fostering a deeper understanding of migration as both a personal and societal phenomenon.

Moreover, migration narratives offer transnational perspectives when discourses on migration tend to be nation-oriented. From the various points of view on migration, we can access comparisons in space or time. Comparisons introduce nuances and complexity and lead us to understand that “here and now” is not unique.

### Reflecting on Past Experiences

By anchoring current decisions within a historical context, policymakers can test the viability of proposed solutions against recorded evidence and past outcomes. This reflective process ensures that lessons learned from history inform contemporary and future actions. However, since linking the past to the present is never a linear process, this reflective process must always be discussed in the light of the current context.

### Identifying Policy-Relevant Themes and Humanising Policy Discussions

Qualitative repositories allow policymakers to trace recurring themes, or “common threads,” within migration narratives. These threads provide anecdotal evidence that supports policy design and evaluation.

By reconnecting policymakers with the human stories behind migration data, migrant narratives repositories counteract the disconnect often created by purely statistical approaches. These

narratives foster empathy and understanding, ensuring that policies reflect the lived realities of migrants rather than abstract concepts.

### Advancing Advocacy, Awareness and Agency

Platforms can be leveraged to organise targeted presentations for specific groups, such as associations of individuals with migration backgrounds, or lobbying organisations. These events highlight the relevance of individual migrants' and migrant groups' experiences in promoting migrant agency, offering concrete examples that resonate with stakeholders.

By harnessing the power of archives, repositories, and qualitative databases, policymakers and stakeholders can **move beyond surface-level analyses to address migration challenges with depth and humanity**.

These tools are not just about preserving the distant and recent past but also actively shaping a better-informed and more justice-based future.

### Incorporating Legal and Policy Frameworks

The archival research conducted within platforms like ITHACA demonstrates the potential of linking qualitative narratives with dynamic and interlinked information, such as legal frameworks and historical contexts. This interconnected approach supports both immediate policy needs and long-term strategic planning.



*ITHACA's Third Policy Council, 24 October 2024, Rabat, Morocco*

## 2. Empowering Migrants and Migrants' Associations

Archives, repositories, and databases of qualitative research data in the field of migration are valuable for migrants themselves, providing opportunities for **empowerment, connection, and advocacy**. These platforms can serve as tools that support migrants in navigating their challenges, engaging with their communities and building resilience.

### Connection Through Shared Stories and Histories

One of the benefits of research-based migrant stories and history repositories is the opportunity for migrants to connect with others who have faced similar experiences. Thanks to the work of researchers and professionals who organised and analysed the data, individuals can gain insights into how others have navigated their migration journeys.

Migrants can learn from others' experiences, discover solutions to obstacles they might encounter, and find new pathways to integrate into their new environment.

Migration narratives allow the writing of a “history from below”. **This provides a sensitive embodiment of migration and the possibility of identification.**

### Access to Support Networks

Qualitative archives contain information about trusted contacts, organisations, and community resources that can help migrants. Though reliable and well-organised sources, they can identify support networks—whether legal services, social organisations, or community groups—that can assist them in overcoming barriers such as language, housing, or employment.

### Political Engagement and Advocacy

As highlighted by several participants in the ITHACA policy councils, migration databases can serve as a tool for political engagement, enabling migrant communities to become active in advocacy. By sharing their personal stories and experiences on platforms like [ITHACA](#), [OPPORTUNITIES](#) and [INNOVATE](#), migrants can amplify their voices in policy discussions. This narrative space helps migrant communities to push for recognition and engage in collective efforts that call for better policies, legal protections, and social inclusion.

### Tool for Advocacy and Social Change

Qualitative data archives play an essential role in advocacy efforts, particularly in the drafting of grant proposals, policy recommendations, or community-based campaigns. By providing comprehensive and dynamic data, these platforms offer migrants and their organisations the evidence and narratives necessary to advocate for better policies, funding, and support. Whether it's raising awareness of systemic issues or promoting specific community needs, these resources help frame migrants' experiences within broader political and social contexts.

### Long-Term Support and Access to Resources

Beyond immediate needs, qualitative databases provide access to long-term information that can support migrants in their ongoing journey. These platforms provide not only historical context and policy documents but also ongoing, fresh narratives that inform migrants.

## Fostering Migrant Agency

Archives are more than just passive data stores; they are dynamic, interactive spaces where migrants can actively contribute their voices to the broader narrative. **By sharing their experiences, migrants take control of their own stories and contribute to shaping the policies and public perceptions that affect their lives.** This shift from being passive subjects of policy to active participants in decision-making processes is a crucial aspect of migrant empowerment.



*ITHACA's Third Policy Council, 22 November 2024, Leiden, The Netherlands*

### 3. Working practices: tools for social workers and NGOs

The value of platforms extends beyond research and policymaking.

Migration narratives play a crucial role for professionals by providing research-based narratives that raise awareness, advocate for human rights, and challenge stereotypes about migration. Migration databases, repositories and archives are **essential tools for project development, capacity building, and fostering stakeholder collaboration.**

#### Advocacy and Awareness

Referring to research-based collection of stories, practitioners can use their findings to raise awareness about migration issues, advocate for human rights, and support policy changes. By highlighting personal migration narratives, particularly success stories, they can counter negative stereotypes, debunk myths, and emphasise migrants' resilience and contribution to society. The platform can serve as a tool to challenge and deconstruct mainstream narratives about migration.

By providing historical context and personal stories, it shows that migration is not a recent phenomenon but a long-standing global process, helping to shift the conversation from emergency responses to a broader understanding.

#### Project Development, Collaboration, Networking Tool

Data collected through reliable and research-informed platforms can serve as a narrative foundation for creating compelling research projects and proposals, whether they are grant applications, calls for papers, or conferences. This provides the necessary context and authentic evidence to support the goals of migration-focused projects.

The platforms can act as a network hub, connecting stakeholders working in the field of migration, including researchers, policymakers, NGOs, activists, and communicators.

#### Capacity Building

The platform offers valuable resources for capacity-building activities, particularly for NGOs, community leaders, and other stakeholders. By engaging with the platform's content, practitioners can gain new insights into migration challenges, better understand the issues faced by migrants, and enhance their ability to address these issues effectively.

#### Educational Use

For migrants and migrants' associations, the platform provides a rich source of qualitative data, allowing them to conduct in-depth analyses and develop their understanding. Story collections can also be used as an educational tool to teach others about migration history, policy, and personal experiences.

#### Storytelling for Communication

Practitioners can leverage the qualitative research findings to craft impactful narratives for media, education, and advocacy. Migrant voices can be integrated into communication campaigns, exhibitions, and artistic projects, giving a face to the migration experience and fostering empathy.

## 4. Migration narratives for journalism, communication and arts

Archives, repositories, and databases containing qualitative research data on migration enable journalists and communicators to produce **well-informed, impactful, and responsible reporting on migration issues**. These resources support various journalistic needs, from fact-checking to the enrichment of investigative reporting, and provide new ways to engage audiences through creative and advocacy-driven storytelling.

### Reliable Source for Information and Fact-Checking

Archival platforms, such as the ITHACA platform, offer journalists access to research-based, reliable, interlinked data, including policy documents and historical context. This makes them a useful fact-checking tool, particularly in complex and often politically charged areas like migration. Journalists can use these resources to cross-check claims, support arguments with lived migrant experiences, and confirm policy details, ensuring that their reporting is based on solid evidence and authentic sources.

### Enhancing Investigative Journalism

The rich qualitative data archived within migration repositories allows journalists to document the journeys and experiences of migrants, uncovering patterns and identifying potential risks. This data can help journalists to pinpoint regions where migrants face heightened risks of human rights abuses or exploitation, facilitating targeted, investigative reporting that highlights systemic issues. By connecting migrant narratives with policy frameworks and historical context, journalists can create more comprehensive investigations that delve into the causes and consequences of migration patterns.

### Fostering Advocacy and Human Rights Awareness

The use of migrant testimonies in research-based narratives repositories can support advocacy work, raising awareness about the risks, challenges, and human rights violations that migrants face. These personal stories help to humanise abstract policy discussions, providing compelling evidence to inform debates and push for change. Journalists can use these narratives to challenge discriminatory attitudes and advocate for migrants' rights in the public sphere. This kind of work can have significant influence, particularly in shaping public opinion and policy at local, national, and international levels.

### Debunking Myths and Combating Misinformation

In a media environment where migration is often framed as an urgent crisis or threat, repositories provide the historical depth and context needed to counter these oversimplified narratives. They show that migration is not a new phenomenon but a long-standing process with deep historical roots. Journalists can use these resources to challenge harmful stereotypes and educate audiences about the broader, more complex realities of migration, helping to combat the spread of fake news and discriminatory discourse.

### Solutions-Oriented Journalism

Research-based narratives platforms also encourage solutions-oriented journalism, where journalists focus not just on the challenges faced by migrants, but also on their stories of resilience and success. By highlighting positive examples of migrant integration, community support, and policy innovations,



journalists can present migration not just as a problem but as an opportunity for societal growth and development. These constructive narratives are crucial for shifting the conversation around migration from one of crisis to one of potential solutions and positive change.

### Creative Storytelling and Cross-Disciplinary Collaboration

Archives also serve as rich sources for creative storytelling. Materials within repositories, including podcasts, video documentaries, and photo reports, can inspire new forms of journalistic expression and cross-disciplinary collaboration. For instance, artistic projects that explore migration themes—such as novels, drama plays, or public art installations—can be informed by the research and narratives found in the archives. Additionally, collaborations with data journalists, researchers, and IT professionals can lead to innovative, data-driven storytelling techniques that engage audiences in new and interactive ways.

Communication can be enhanced by devoting a specific place to visual sources and their use, as they are nowadays a very common way to build migration narratives.

Stories from the archive can be presented in exhibitions, virtual installations, or interactive digital games, transforming research into accessible, engaging formats. Journalists can collaborate with artists and communicators to display these narratives in public spaces, further amplifying migrants' voices and creating a broader dialogue spanning the range of migration issues.



*ITHACA's Third Policy Council, 15 September 2024, Pieve Santo Stefano, Italy*

## 5. Research empowerment

Well-organised resources facilitating the search for migration stories and history enhance **academic research, training activities and advocacy efforts** while fostering **collaboration and engagement among scholars** in the field.

### Rich Source of Information and Inspiration

These platforms provide access to in-depth qualitative data, including migrant narratives, historical context, and policy analysis, through case studies. Additionally, the variety of materials—such as stories, documents, and interviews—serve as a source of inspiration for researchers during their teaching activities.

### Educational and Pedagogical Tool

In universities and schools, the stories and research data can be incorporated into curricula, allowing students to explore migration through a more personal and human lens. Students can analyse migrant trajectories, engage with multimedia content like videos and podcasts, and develop a deeper understanding of migration issues through assignments and projects. This also fosters critical thinking and empathy, particularly in fields such as political science, history, and sociology. The integration of these resources into student learning can make complex migration topics more accessible and relatable.

### Collaboration and Networking

These platforms offer a powerful tool for connecting researchers, academics, and practitioners working in the field of migration. By providing contact information and facilitating networking, they help expand professional networks, promoting better collaboration among stakeholders. This can lead to enhanced coordination across different sectors and improve the overall response to migration challenges.

### Capacity Building and Training

The platform's potential for hosting training programs, workshops, and Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) is an important asset for building capacity among migration professionals, including social workers, human rights advocates, and legal practitioners.

### Multidisciplinary Collaboration

These platforms also promote interdisciplinary work by linking data from different fields, such as law, geography, history, and human rights. Researchers can collaborate across disciplines, using the platform as a common resource to exchange ideas, methodologies, and findings. This cross-pollination of knowledge enhances the depth and breadth of research on migration issues and promotes innovative solutions to migration-related challenges.

### Community Engagement and Advocacy

The platform fosters communication and community engagement by facilitating the sharing of migrant stories and research findings. By organising events and workshops, and creating social spaces for discussion, it strengthens ties between local communities, migrants, and the broader

public. The narratives housed in these archives can also support advocacy efforts, providing authentic stories that challenge stereotypes, humanise migration, and promote policy change.

### Enhancing Research and Public Discourse

For researchers, having access to a repository of authentic migrant stories offers a unique way to begin academic projects, such as writing articles or books. These narratives can help ground theoretical concepts in real-life experiences, making research findings more accessible and engaging. Additionally, the platform offers a tool for debunking misconceptions about migration, shifting public discourse from a crisis-focused narrative to one that includes the diverse and long-standing history of migration.

### Interactive and Innovative Outreach

Beyond traditional research, these platforms can be used to create engaging public events and exhibitions. The stories within the archive can be transformed into interactive digital games, public art installations, and virtual exhibitions, which make migration research more accessible and impactful. These efforts also contribute to the deconstruction of negative stereotypes surrounding migration by allowing diverse, authentic narratives to reach broader audiences. By making data and stories accessible, these platforms allow the public to engage directly with migration research. Public access to these resources can help counter misinformation and raise awareness, particularly in regions or communities where migration-related issues are underrepresented or misunderstood.



*ITHACA's Third Policy Council, 14 November 2024, Tunis, Tunisia*

## 6. School teaching empowerment

Repositories, archives, and databases of qualitative research data and stories are valuable tools for teachers. They can draw on platforms offering research-based migration narratives as **material to educate themselves and their pupils**. These platforms not only enrich the classroom experience but also empower students to engage with migration issues and **better understand migration as a complex phenomenon**.

### Inspiration and Rich Educational Content

Teachers can utilise migration narrative databases as educational material. The authentic migrant stories, data, and historical narratives provide teachers with content that can complement traditional teaching methods, offering students a deeper, more human-centred understanding of migration.

### Supporting Civic Engagement and Advocacy

Platforms like these can promote civic engagement and advocacy by offering educational tools such as [MOOCs \(Massive Open Online Courses\)](#) and training materials. These resources help students develop critical thinking skills about migration and encourage them to engage with migration issues from multiple perspectives.

### Storytelling for Education

The qualitative data available on these platforms is especially valuable for storytelling, which can be used as a pedagogical tool in classrooms. Teachers can incorporate migrant stories into lessons to humanise complex issues, challenge stereotypes, and encourage empathy. Migrant narratives can be used in a broad range of subjects like history, media studies and social sciences, enriching students' understanding of migration.

### Interactive Learning and Workshops

Teachers can use the platforms to organise workshops, discussions, or student conferences around migration topics. These events could include analysis of stories from the repositories and collections, also inviting migrants to share their first-hand experiences.

### Accessible Resources for Assignments

Platforms collecting research-based migrant stories offer a wide range of resources that can be directly used by students in their coursework. Teachers can assign readings from the database, such as migrant stories, videos, comic books, or publications. These resources can be used to inspire final projects, research papers, and presentations, encouraging students to explore migration topics in a more personal and reflective way.

### Bridging Gaps in Understanding

Many students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, may face biases or hurdles in the educational system. These platforms can serve as a tool to bridge these gaps, fostering a more inclusive environment where students can relate to the stories and experiences shared. By exposing students to diverse migrant narratives, teachers can help challenge preconceived notions and promote cultural understanding.

## 7. Resources to start from

### **UNHCR Archives**

*UNHCR records are available to guide and assist UNHCR in planning and conducting its activities, and to provide information to meet the research needs of the persons of interest to UNHCR, the scholarly community, and the general public.*

<https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/history-unhcr/archives-and-records>

### **ITHACA, Interconnecting Histories and Archives for Migrant Agency Platform**

*ITHACA started to build a database that makes available migrations from the Middle Ages to the present day. Its platform collects a digital database of narratives, documents and archival sources dedicated to researchers, practitioners, policymakers and migrants.*

<https://ithacahorizon.eu/>

### **OPPORTUNITIES**

*The project platform offers a wealth of resources to encourage migrants, and stakeholders on national, local, and regional levels in several African and European countries, to listen to each other and create shared narratives of migration.*

<https://www.opportunitiesproject.eu/>

### **BRIDGES**

*BRIDGES develops a typology of government strategies for responding to populist narratives and provides policy recommendations on how to redress a tendency towards increasingly symbolic policies in the field of migration at EU and national levels.*

<https://www.bridges-migration.eu/>

### **INNOVATE**

*The project explores policy-relevant migration research and offers training and networking resources, including the findings of all European research projects in the last 20 years.*

<https://migrationresearchtopolicy.eu/>

### **Archive of Migrant Memories**

*AMM collects and disseminates life stories and testimonies on migration, both oral and written. It produces audio and video documentaries and organises personal narratives and antiracism workshops for schools, with the active participation of migrants.*

<https://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/?lang=en>

### **Archivio Diaristico Nazionale (DiMMi, in Italian)**

*DiMMi collects autobiographical migrant testimonies in Italy and around the world. Thanks to the ITHACA project it has further extended its contributions.*

<http://archiviodiari.org/index.php/iniziativa-e-progetti/dimmi.html>

**This list has just started; help to enrich it by writing to: [ithacahorizon@unimore.it](mailto:ithacahorizon@unimore.it).**

## ITHACA Project Contacts

**Project full title:** ITHACA, Interconnecting Histories and Archives for Migrant Agency: Entangled Narratives Across Europe and the Mediterranean Region

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