

Communications guide for development organisations

1

Introduction

The Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication is a non-profit organization committed to better communication on international development.

We consider representation and discourse as integral to the production of the Global South and sees the communication on (the needs of) developing nations and peoples by government, industry, NGOs and the media in the Global North as part of the problem of (the failure of) international development and worldwide issues of poverty, inequality and injustice. In other words, we do not consider humanitarian communication as a means to an end, but as part and parcel of the end itself.

This guide contains several recommendations that can assist organisations working in the field of international development in producing their communications content in a ethical manner. These recommendations are divided into four categories. The categories are closely linked and can therefore show some overlap.

Nuanced communication

1.1 Try to avoid one-sided representation. Avoid single stories¹. Emphasise that international development is multi-faceted and that countries in the global South are incredibly diverse. Show this diversity in choosing topics, stories and images.

1.2 Be clear and transparent about your role and your sphere of influence in the world.

- Show tangible results. This will help avert 'compassion fatigue'.

- Acknowledge your own limitations and failures. Your audience is critical and therefore they will understand that not everything you do will be successful. Don't be afraid to show it, because it will improve your credibility.
- Give credit where credit is due. Success usually comes from a team effort and rarely can be ascribed to a single organisation. International development is an complex field, with many actors that influence one another and make each other stronger and/or are interdependent. Acknowledge this when communicating your results.

Female entrepreneur in Assuit, Egypt.

The Assiut Business Women Association, founded in 2000, offers microcredit loans ranging from 60 to 600 euros to help the poorest women (and recently also a few men) to start their own businesses.

Credit: Opmeer Reports



2

Communicate with dignity

2.1 Represent beneficiaries in a respectful manner.

- Do not exploit the suffering of people for your own gain (donations, attention). Portray people in a dignified manner, by not merely showing their needs, but also their potential, talents and strength. In this way you avoid generalisations and you can help debunk stereotypes such as poor children in dirty rags who are fed because of a 'white saviour's' generosity.
- Before producing a campaign, contact the people who will feature in it and give them a voice. Cooperation with the main characters will ensure their story will be told in a respectful and truthful way.
- Let the main characters speak for themselves as much as possible, instead of letting others speak on their behalf (for example by using voice-overs or scripting).
- Ensure portrait rights are respected by asking permission beforehand to those who will be portrayed. Also consider what impact the images will have on both the portrayed and the audience in the short and long term. Thoughtfully determine whether the pros outweigh the cons.
- With humour and positivity one can dissociate from notorious frames consisting of negative narratives and melancholic music and alternately emphasise a common humanity and people's strengths instead.
- When portraying people, focus on commonalities, situations and emotions that resonate with your audience. Evoke connectedness and solidarity by pointing out the equality of all. Refrain from evoking pity, as this will create a sense of inequality.

Employee of Indu Farm harvesting her beans

Indu Farm in Kongoni, Kenya, grows haricots verts and several herbs for Safari Fresh, a supplier to a Baker in Barendrecht in the Netherlands. Indu Farm buys produce from farmers in the region and employs 200 people. Both farmers and employees have a stable income thanks to the production of these beans. Credit: Opmeer Reports



2.2 Respect your audience. Avoid strong moral appeals. Do not exaggerate a single person's actions. For instance, by suggesting he/she is able to save another person's life.

2.3 Formulate your own code of conduct in a clear unambiguous way. Be inspired by either this document or other codes of conduct like CONCORD's² or Dochas³.

3

Provide context

3.1 In your external communication (including fundraising campaigns), share as much knowledge of the context, the bigger perspective and the long-term solutions as possible.

- Be specific: to whom/what are you drawing attention and why? Not all people in a country are in need of development aid.
- Give your local partners a voice. Have them narrate their own stories in your communication and treat them as equal partners.
- Show how local stakeholders (individuals and/or organisations) take responsibility for the development of their own country or region. Not only is this fair, but it also gives the audience confidence in the commitment and capability of the local population to continue development processes in the long term.

3.2 Explain as thorough as possible the true, underlying causes of the problems. This way, you prevent that development cooperation is promoted as a cheap and easy solution to global issues.

3.3 Do not limit contextual explanation only to your website. You might use a broad range of images and share the full story behind the images on your website. However, you must remember that a simplified television ad of 30 seconds reaches many more people than a newsletter to your supporters or your website. Also be aware that you reach more than just 'givers'. You are reaching 'viewers', which amounts to millions of people.



Tamiru Getachew on his way to school with his friends in Soddo, Ethiopia

Tamiru was born with club feet and was unable to walk until a Community-Based Rehabilitation programme reached out to him. At school, he plays football during the breaks with his friends and other children. Credit: LIGHT FOR THE WORLD

4

Inspire

4.1 Make both your target group and your audience co-owner of the solution. By stimulating both parties to participate actively on the basis of solidarity, you create more possibilities for them to contribute to the process of international development.

- In order to do justice to the concept of development 'cooperation', ensure your target group has ownership and an active role in providing solutions. In this regard, also give a voice to local organisations and active citizens in your communication.
- Provide your supporters with an outlook for taking action which goes beyond donating. Showcase local solutions for global challenges as well. Give people a helping hand with concrete options to contribute, such as through conscious consumerism.

The Torres sisters, Peru

Ely, Cathie and Yuli run Sumaq Qara, a business for which women manufacture embroidered products in the villages surrounding Ayacucho, Peru. They export belts and other accessories to countries such as the Netherlands, the United States, Australia and Colombia. Credit: Opmeer Reports



Background

The recommendations made in this communications guide originated from 'Imaging in Media', a co-creation event organised by ID-Leaks and UPACT in August 2013. About seventy enthusiastic participants – among which were international guests from the Philippines, Uganda and Zimbabwe – formed groups and discussed several campaigns and media items on development cooperation. The assessment criteria included content, availability of context information, human dignity, a realistic outlook for taking action and credibility of the communication. Each group presented their own recommendations for both development organisations and the media. The Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication has bundled and published these recommendations and presented them at various public events.

In addition, HuCom has invited its members and several external experts to provide feedback on the document, which has resulted in a more extensive theoretical framework. This Communication guide is specifically directed towards development organisations. We hope that this document will inspire professionals working in the international development sector to reflect on these recommendations and put them into practice. We also hope to inspire organizations and media to create their own Code.

More information:
humanitariancommunication.org

Questions and/or comments
info@humanitairecommunicatie.nl

Footnotes

¹ Chimimanda Adichie, a famous Nigerian author, warns in a TED-talk for 'the danger of a single story', or the danger of unilateral framing. 'Show people as one thing, over and over, and that is what they will become.'

http://www.ted.com/talks/chimimanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story.html

¹ <http://www.concordeurope.org/115-code-of-conduct-on-images-and-messages>

¹ http://www.dorcas.ie/Shared/Files/5/Images_and_Messages.pdf