Future Brief: Communication in development cooperation

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Part 3 – Production practices in humanitarian communication

This is the third and final Future Brief in the trilogy about humanitarian communication. Here, we discuss the role of production processes in humanitarian communication and highlight how not only representations but also productions of international solidarity can become more ethical, inclusive, equitable. We propose three modes of *shifting the power* in content production: on the level of INGOs and their partner organisations (the *institutional mode*); one the level of (the work of) creative agencies, artists and professionals who are close to the projects that are represented (the *creative mode*); and, finally, on the level of civil society organizations, community activists and ordinary citizens activists who are part of the projects (the *civic mode*).

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Introduction: The production side of humanitarian communication

- Production-centred approaches to humanitarian communication
- Localization of aid: are NGOs walking the talk?
- How development organizations can tell stories more ethically

The production of communications about international development and humanitarian assistance has received relatively little attention from professionals, critics and academics alike. While the challenges of humanitarian representations and audiences have led to quite a significant body of research, the topic of production has been largely kept out of sight. This while (the persistence of) problematic representations can be, at least partially, be explained by unbalanced production processes and practices, where Western perspectives (still) prevail as a result of crews whose privileges determine the choices made when writing articles, interviewing participants, and shooting footage.

This third Future Brief, therefore, departs from one of the key findings in the previous one. In the second Future Brief, we argued that, in order to produce more ethical, inclusive and equitable stories, it is key to actively include the people that a story is about. This practice was referred to as *participatory storytelling* or *co-creation*, and explained as a mode of producing communication where all people involved in a project get a say, stake and role in how their stories are told. Involving and engaging people can, however, be done in various ways, and it is therefore important that INGOs 'maximise' the participatory efforts and have it run parallel to a shift in the power-relation between INGOs and the people represented. Parallel to this, participatory storytelling can and should be aligned with a general 'relocation' of production processes and practices in development cooperation and humanitarian assistance. Over the past decade, the international cooperation sector has elaborately discussed ideas of localisation,[1] that is, the need 'that local, national and regional actors should be at the heart of humanitarian responses'.[2] In this Future Brief, we aim to highlight that this should also apply to production practices in humanitarian communication as well.

Traditionally, most communication professionals in the sector work at 'head offices' based in the global North, where they create stories about places and people in the global South. *Participatory storytelling* advocates a shift in this production process from North to South,

parallel to the more general aim of shifting the power in international cooperation. In this Future Brief, we want to outline three (mutually beneficial) modes of shifting the power in humanitarian communication: the *institutional*, the *creative* and the *civic mode*. These three modes should not be understood as definitive or separate categories. They are mentioned here as a way of giving structure to a range of different ideas and fundamental choices to be made across institutional, creative and civic forces.

Media and participation
In his book *Media and Participation* (2009), Nico Carpentier offers an instructive distinction between 'minimalist' and 'maximalist' notions of participation in media production.[3] This distinction amounts to the fact that many perceived forms of participation in practice do not adequately redistribute power between media professionals and citizens. As such, Carpentier argues that we cannot be content with any form of participation that does not structurally improve the position of ordinary citizens, minority groups and democratic movements. A notorious example of 'minimalist' participation can be found in social media, where many can indeed speak out, while at the same time social media platforms (through algorithms and moderation) hold the power to strictly regulate whose voices are muted or amplified. As these platforms also accumulate vast amounts of personal data and capital, the power balance tips to their advantage, in spite of their seemingly participatory character. As social media are just one example of how participation does not in and of itself change power imbalances, INGOs should be aware of the different levels on which participation can be implemented, from the early set-up of campaigns to the production and distribution of content.

The institutional approach to co-creation: Within and between organizations

- OECD's guide on successful partnerships
- Visualizers of solidarity
- Example of institutional co-creation: DTS/CNV's 'Working together, Jobs for young people'

The institutional approach refers to various forms of co-creation in which media campaigns and other representations are produced in collaborations between different departments within an organization, or together with partnering organizations. In its easiest (but quite far-reaching) form, this would entail a loosening of the ties between the 'head office' and communication department and an alignment of communication activities with the 'country offices' (evidently, this amounts to the broader aim to altogether reconsider the distinction between 'head' and 'country' offices). In short, this would mean that communication professionals are not based at the head offices of international NGOs, but that communication professionals work at all the different offices of an organization. This would also mean that (the role of) communication would be more clearly embedded within the work that INGOs do.

Of course, this can also be expanded beyond one's own organization. For starters, and on a micro-scale, the act of giving credit to partner organizations that have been working on a project should be a given. All too often, partner organizations are sidelined in communications of INGOs. While INGOs often pride themselves in working with 'local communities' or 'partner organizations', their efforts are rarely represented on screen. While giving credit is a first step, which can be taken without involving partners in the process of drafting or shooting content, the best option would be to co-create campaigns.

In this set-up, partner organizations are invited to represent their efforts and stakes in different projects – and ideally they take the initiative and lead the way themselves.

A good example this can be found in CNV International, a Dutch federation of trade unions, which has an 'international' department that functions as an independent NGO for global justice. CNV works closely with partner unions across the world, an approach that shows in their communications, in which all participating trade unions are credited and represented on an equal basis. In addition, media are used to further the aims of the organization, such as an app that allows workers monitor working conditions, where subsequently the data generated is used for lobbying and advocacy. In another instance, the organization joined forces with UDTS, a Senegalese trade union, and two Senegalese influencers (Ninou and Kaay Job) to launch a campaign for better youth employment.[4]

The creative approach to co-creation: Involving locally-based creatives

- The cultural turn in international development
- How the cultural and creative industries can power human development
- Example of creative co-creation: The Lam Sisterhood

The example of CNV, where the power of influencers from the country where the project takes place is used, highlights a second mode of shifting the power in the production of 'communication for development'. Here, the strategy is to reach out to locally-based creative journalists, artists, filmmakers and other media professionals, rather than to rely on a fixed team of (international) communication professionals from within the organization. This strategy detaches the production process from possibly institutional complexities (such as internal politics and concerns about practicalities or formalities) and allows for using the skills, expertise and creativity that are not available with the (partner) organization(s). Just as is the case with more general tendencies to localise international cooperation, the practice of working together with locally-based creative professionals is both more accurate and just.

While working with locally-based professionals sounds (and is) promising, it might, at least at first, be easier said than done. It can be hard to navigate a creative industries landscape that is new to your organization and to outsource work to parties that you are not yet familiar with. However, it can and should be done, and you could start with a partial shift, where local crew members are added to teams that have done the job before. Building a network and familiarising yourself with the different agencies and professionals that are around take time – and time should be taken.

The creative approach to co-creation holds significant additional benefits. Most importantly, creatives who work (most) proximate to the represented places, communities and projects are generally better able to embed the campaign within the wider context. They usually speak the language of those who will be within the storytelling frame, both in a literal sense and regarding the political, economic, social and cultural dynamics. In addition, a campaign produced 'in close proximity' of the project often more easily resonates with the participants of the story and across audiences from that community, region or country.

An interesting point in case here is The LAM Sisterhood, a Nairobi-based storytelling collective that produces stories for the people that they are about, even if the production is commissioned by an external party, such as an INGO.[5] This means that The LAM

Sisterhood always centralizes the stakes of the subjects of the communication and always involves them from planning the production to reflecting on the final edit.

The civic approach to co-creation: involving the people the story is about

- Putting the people in the pictures first
- Example of civic co-creation: Youth Voices for Change
- Example of civic co-creation: Voices for Just Climate Action

Like partner organizations who are often not given credit, grassroots actions are regularly sidelined in representations of international development and humanitarian assistance. Indeed, as noted in a report from the 'Shifting the Power' project in the UK, 'community contribution as first responders in emergencies, [are] not normally recognized, acknowledged, quantified, documented and shared in the wider international disaster response discourse.'[6] This can be changed by directly and actively involving the people who are working for change in the production process, and have them represent themselves.

This already begins with the basic act of asking consent for recording and publishing someone's story, which in essence can be understood as involving people in the production process. This should be done at all times, and it should be done in a comprehensive way. However, ideally people tell, create and circulate their own stories, and they are often skilled and media-savvy to do so. In fact, civil society organisations, community activists and ordinary citizens often have great skills in media production. A great example can be found in the Youth Voices for Change campaign by the Down to Zero Alliance, where are group of young activists from around the world took care of the 'photography shoots, to blogs, social media campaigns and videos.'[7] More generally, a tendency to be welcomed is the sharing of content produced by activists and citizen journalist by NGOs. An example of an NGO that is actively doing this is Hivos, for instance in the case of Voices for Just Climate Action, which is an alliance that "brings together global and local voices by connecting a diverse range of civil society organizations representing women, youth, indigenous people, urban poor, digital activists and more".

As the civic approach to co-creation engages civil society organizations, community activists and ordinary citizens, it is most far-reaching and should be most sought-after in terms of shifting the power in the production of humanitarian communication. However, it could be experienced as challenging, at least at first, as INGOs have to rely on people who are not necessarily institutionally anchored or professionally trained in content production. At the same time, people in vulnerable situations might not always be in the position to be involved in the production process. Yet, as this approach is the one that allows for most agency and power to people, it is the route to follow in the quest for ethical, inclusive and equitable communication.

Consent and power

The process of getting consent for the depiction of individuals has been on the agenda at INGOs for quite some time already. A range of concerns have sparked this interest, particularly about the position of children (and who is allowed to consent on their behalf) and the linguistic and cultural barriers that, to the persons who are about to be represented, can make unclear what they actually consent to. However, in discussions about content one fundamental element receives surprisingly little attention: the role of power. When representations are about international cooperation or humanitarian aid, a significant part of the participants are in such a position of vulnerability and

dependency that they might consent on the basis of their vulnerability and dependency. Particularly when confronted with a media professional representing an official institution, the role of power cannot be neglected. Therefore, the sector would do well to shift the baseline from a relatively formal understanding of informed consent (in which consent is a matter of abstract rules and signatures alone) to a more ethical understanding of consent. In the latter, potential vulnerabilities and dependencies on the side of the participant are actively considered. As a result, INGOs should thoroughly assess the power relations inherent in the consent procedure, maximize the participants' authority and agency in the decision-making process and minimize the pressures involved. It means to invest time in building a relationship with the people that might be filmed, interviewed or photographed, and discussing the options regarding if and how someone would like to participate in the production. In this process, a rejection should be a viable option – as it indicates a thorough consent procedure. Also, the full range of possibilities regarding the disclosure of a person's identity on screen or in writing is something to be considered, ranging from elaborate attention to someone's background and identity (as a way of giving credit and fully representing someone's personal motivation) to full anonymization (for reasons of safety or privacy, or other personal considerations).

Opportunities and concerns regarding equipment, training and platforms

- Whose photo? Whose voice? Who listens?
- International orogramme for the development of communication
- Participation and media production: critical reflections on content creation

The already mentioned Down to Zero Alliance worked together with a group of youth leaders to 'strengthen their communication and advocacy skills while connecting them through a digital communications platform.'[8] This highlights the fact that some modes of participatory storytelling require additional support in terms of skills, equipment and infrastructure. In these cases, the strengthening of civil society organizations, community organisations and ordinary citizens in these regards can be regarded as an end in itself. Indeed, as noted in our second Future Brief, access to the means of media production must be considered a human right, as it allows people to participate in societal debate and to speak out *and* be heard.

This brings us to the 'amplification' of people's voices in and through humanitarian communication, where INGOs increasingly emphasize how they provide a platform for people to be seen and heard. It can be productive to (at least partially) look at the communication channels of INGOs as platforms: that is to say as places where civil society organizations can take the stage. Yet, if this is done, one general misunderstanding about platforms should be noted. Whether talking about 'social media platforms' or other notions of platformisation, the notion of the platform tends to be misunderstood as neutral facilitators of social action. This is to say that in the use of the word platform (provided for others to use) usually implies that the space provided is a neutral stage, for others to take. This is, however, never the case: any kind of platform is build and curated, and functions as an actively mediating institutions or machines.[9] NGOs should be aware that any kind of support, amplification, or platform-like function is just as much a social act as a top-down produced campaign is.

An example of this can be found in the research of Tiffany Fairey's study of participatory photography projects by INGOs. In these projects, citizen journalism is encouraged, and the results are circulated widely – but not without the INGOs being active at crucial

moments of the decision-making process. As such, she highlights that these projects should just as well be understood as sides for negotiation, where different expectations, preferences and dependencies collide. Indeed, she states that 'it is rare that participants retain full editorial and curatorial control' in these projects, and she therefore 'calls for practitioners (…) to be transparent and reflexive about these negotiated processes.'[10] Whether indeed by means of training, supplying equipment or providing a platform, INGOs should just as well reflect on how their co-creative projects are configured by power relations.

Fairey particularly notes one concern as central, and that is the editorial control that INGOs hold on to because 'projects have to compete in an image market which demands the selection of compelling images in order for the images to gain an audience.'[11] Indeed, the role of audiences, in this case audiences from the global North, is key to understanding the main concerns INGOs can have about the different modes of shifting the power in production practices in communication: will the target audience understand and appreciate the results?

In some sense, it could be argued that communication professionals based in Dutch or European 'head offices' are in the best position to produce content that resonates with their target audience, because of their knowledge of (Western) audiences, (media) cultures and (philanthropic) market mechanisms. However, while this might be true from a fundraising point of view, this does not do justice to the more structural aim to have non-Western voices heard – and heard properly. As discussed in the second Future Brief, the fundraising argument often hampers the goal of ethical, inclusive and equitable representation. Indeed, to centralise the (expectations of) Western audiences would once again marginalize the position of the subjects of representation. Indeed, as emphasized in the example of The LAM Sisterhood, it is the people within the frame that the communication is ultimately made for – their perspective should remain central at all times. Alternatively therefore, communication professionals from the global North can employ their knowledge about Western audiences to create interest in, harness support for, and promote self-representation. In addition, they might guide Western audiences through stories that are 'new', 'different', or 'unexpected' to them.

As such, rather than conforming to Western audiences (whose preferences may be at odds with the results of participatory storytelling), communication professionals should play a role in changing the expectations to a pattern that allows for better representation. As such, communication professionals could potentially be seen as experts in what Westerns audiences *need* to get more balanced and just narratives. Where intercultural communication always involves an effort to 'translate' between contexts, languages and expectations, this role means a shift in the burden of translation. Where in traditional humanitarian communication this burden mainly lies with the subjects of the communication (whose stories were told to fit donor expectations), in this new set-up it would lie with the communication professionals in the global North (who garner support for a broad variety of self-representations).

Conclusion

The different modes of shifting the power in the production of humanitarian communication encompass a loose set of ideas and ideals that can help to balance out the work of content production in humanitarian communication. Contemporary production practices are often not very balanced out yet, mainly because such content is not produced by or in cooperation with the people who it is actually about. The common practice to work with communication professionals based at 'head offices' of INGOs in the global North results

in representations that are mostly produced from an outsider perspective. Along the lines of institutions, creativity and civil society, different strategies can be used and combined to get an insider perspective. Concrete steps that can be taken include working on co-productions with partner organizations, building a network of media professionals and creative agencies in the same region where projects take place, and the act of handing over control to locally-based civil society organizations, community activists and ordinary citizens. These steps require time but even more so a commitment to working together on an equal basis. Particularly, there is work to be done in changing (audience) expectations and (power) relations, to ensure that participatory storytelling can enhance (the production of) ethical, inclusive and equitable communication.

Colophon
This Future Brief on communication in development cooperation is a product of the Partos Innovation Hub in collaboration with the Humanitarian Communication Expertise Center (HuCom). Partos is the membership organization for Dutch-based organizations working in international cooperation. The Partos Innovation Hub offers professionals in the field of international cooperation the space to learn and innovate with each other to be better able to navigate the future and accelerate structural change within themselves, their organizations and in international cooperation. HuCom is a non-profit organization committed to better communication about international cooperation. They consider ethical, inclusive and equitable communication as essential to creating a more just world and offer feedback and tools for INGOs in the Netherlands and abroad to become aware of and contribute to this.

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