

Communication in development cooperation

Future Brief - Part 1 - The history of communication by and about development cooperation

The document you have before you – the first in a trilogy – takes both a historical and cultural approach. We will demonstrate how communication by and about development cooperation and humanitarian aid is part and parcel of the unequal power relations established by colonialism and development. In doing so, this brief discusses the history and the current debate on humanitarian communication in order to understand the present and move ahead towards a future with more ethical, sensitive and inclusive communication.



What is humanitarian communication?

Humanitarian communication encompasses all the communication by and about the development cooperation. This communication focuses on human suffering and vulnerability in an attempt to probe public awareness, concern and action about global development and humanitarian issues. [1] [2] In the narrow sense, humanitarian communication refers to the representations created by development actors and particularly international NGOs (INGOs). [3] In the wide sense, humanitarian communication could be seen as the totality of the development and humanitarian discourse that is produced, shaped and perpetuated by the unequal power relations in the sector and the world at large. [4] A critical debate on the aesthetics and ethics of humanitarian communication has been going on since the 1980s, often called the imagery debate, and humanitarian communication could nowadays be considered an emerging research field.

Language, meaning and power

- [Introduction to representation & discourse by Stuart Hall](#)
- [Introduction to language and power by Robin Lakoff](#)
- [Partos future brief on the decolonisation of development cooperation](#)

In development cooperation, communication is often seen as a means to an end, i.e. as a means to raise awareness and funds. However, when we consider communication as part and parcel of the end itself, and as constitutive of the world's power relations, we can start thinking of a more equitable, inclusive, and secure global society – as it starts and ends with communication. To put it more simply, communication is the use of language to produce and circulate knowledge. Or, as the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall once described it, 'language is central to the processes by which meaning is produced.' [5] As such, language – and this could be 'sounds, written words, (...) [visual] images, musical notes, even objects' [6] and body language – structures and determines our perception, interpretation and understanding of the social world and the power relations that constitute it.

Language and power intersect in at least two ways. First, language expresses power in the sense that how we communicate often expresses the interests of powerful groups in society. Second, language reinforces power in the sense that, when we keep using this same language, we keep existing power relations in place. Language is thus part of a cycle that retains and reinforces historically rooted unequal power relations, which are often expressed and reinforced in colonialist, racist, sexist and other forms of oppressive practices. In other words, there is always a 'linkage between relations of power and the modes of knowledge that give power its potential for effectivity. (...) There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge.' [7]

One strategy of challenging this perpetual cycle is to change our language in an attempt to overcome the power relations that inform our ways of communicating in the first place. Therefore, actively discussing and deconstructing language is part of an aim to break that cycle and shift the power. Yet, we cannot just change language and be satisfied with the result. Our changes should be informed by a thorough interrogation of reductionist and stereotypical language and imagery and their colonial and neo-colonial roots. In doing so, we make sure that the transformation process raises questions on the broader implementation of such language in inclusive organisations, power shifts and the production of our communications.

Development scholar Eilish Dillon recently argued that, apart from the level of representation, there are four more levels which together make up, what she calls, the 'framework for understanding ethical communications' in global development: the practice level, the organisational level, the (internal) cultural level and the broader contextual level. [8] Such a broader understanding of ethical communication allows for continued efforts in changing language, which is necessary because the process of escaping power relations in language is never done. Because language is an ever-changing phenomenon, power relations always creep into it. Words, stories or images that are hailed as progressive and emancipatory today, may become problematic and regressive tomorrow. We should therefore train ourselves to continuously phrase and rephrase the words, stories and images we use.

Example: the changing meaning and power relations of the term 'Third World'

Allegedly coined in 1952 by Alfred Sauvy, the term 'Third World' emerged on the scene to signify countries that were playing little role on the international scene. In the context of the Cold War, the 'Third World' became a concept of political non-alignment with either the capitalist Western or communist Eastern bloc. [9]

At the 1955 Bandung Conference, the first large-scale Asian-African conference where representatives from almost 30 governments of Asian and African nations gathered, the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) embraced the title Third World 'as a positive term and virtue, an alternative to past imperialism and the political economies and power of the US and the Soviet Union', [10] and progressively took up the term to underline autonomy, independence and neutrality in their struggle for decolonisation. While this early use of the term can also be contested [11], it mainly became problematic when its meaning changed in accordance with the interpretations given to it by imperialist forces. Already in the 1960s, but particularly since the 1990s, the term 'Third World' came to refer to countries considered to be in a situation of 'underdevelopment'.

The colonial use of language thus made the term problematic – and determined its fate. The term is now mostly abandoned, and for good reasons, as it is an outdated and derogatory phrase, that is largely being associated with poverty, underdevelopment and instability. [12] However, various proposed



Bandung Conference, photo by Howard Sochurek

alternatives, such as 'developing nations', 'low- and middle-income countries', 'majority world', 'non-West' and 'Global South', all come with their own problematic uses and interpretations as well. [13] While there are attempts to simply abandon these container terms altogether (referring to countries, regions or specific communities instead), this might incapacitate our attempts to address shared experiences, histories, and politics. As such, the use of language is always a balancing act that demands high levels of knowledge from communication professionals.

The Imagery debate

- [A genealogy of the concept of poverty](#)
- [Why poverty porn needs to stop](#)
- [The risk of hope-based communication](#)

The so-called 'imagery debate' in the development sector emerged in the 1980s. The immediate cause was the Ethiopian crisis of 1984 and the images, stories and events that were generated by INGOs to appeal to (Western) audiences to donate for famine relief. Although criticisms of INGO representations depicting vulnerable people were already voiced from the 1970s, most famously by Danish aid worker Jørgen Lissner who called such images 'pornographic' [14], the heavy use of poverty imagery, in order to raise money for the Ethiopian famine victims led to a more widespread imagery debate among the INGO community and researchers during the late 1980s and early 1990s. [15]

While these campaigns were successful in terms of fundraising, they were criticized for the negative, dehumanizing and exploitative images they used, thereby reducing the victims of the famine - often children - to black suffering bodies (not seldom barely clothed and having bloated stomachs and flies around their eyes) – and making them into a spectacle for the comfortable Western spectator. [16] Or, as Lissner put it at the time, 'it puts people's bodies, their misery, their grief and their fear on display with all the details and all the indiscretion that a telescopic lens will allow.' [17]

Clearly, these so-called poverty porn images dated back to the early colonial encounters, when images of Africans and other 'natives' as primitive, savage, childlike and submissive became salient to justify European colonialism in Africa, Asia, and the Americas. [18] To date, poverty porn, which is also known as famine porn, misery porn or development porn, is still being exploited in appeals of INGOs to compel people to donate.

However, the use of such graphic imagery of extreme suffering for shock value has become increasingly unacceptable among development cooperation actors.

In response to the criticism of the 'negative' aesthetics used in the Ethiopia famine and other early campaigns, INGOs started to set a more positive agenda for their communication. Rejecting images of suffering victims, drawing up on emotions of guilt and anger among audiences, they increasingly included images of 'happy beneficiaries' of Western aid and development in their appeals, which were intended to play on emotions of empathy and gratitude. In the field of humanitarian communication, this strategy became known as deliberate positivism, [19] as it was a conscious effort by development actors to create 'positive' instead of 'negative' appeals.

However, while poverty imagery slowly but steadily got used less (though it is unfortunately still very much out there), the turn to positive images as the solution to the controversy around negative appeals was not without problems – and actually not a solution at all. In fact, positive images, such as campaigns with smiling children, resilient communities and idyllic landscapes, often contained similar 'issues of spectacle, simplification and decontextualisation' [20] and were equally based on colonial tropes and stereotypes, though this time largely through the lens of romantic and idealist exoticism. It has even been argued that positive stereotypes are more dangerous than negative stereotypes, as they 'fly under the radar' but equally partake in the process of (racial) othering and the construction of (racial) difference and hierarchical power relations.

It has been almost thirty years since the emergence of the imagery debate, and in this period progress in the aesthetics and ethics of humanitarian communication has remained rather limited. This is in part due to the prominence of the 'negative'/'positive' divide [21] that keeps steering the debate in the wrong direction. Negative as well as positive stereotypes reproduce ideas of non-Western Others as exotic, primitive, and in need of help. [22] Instead of being stripped of historic, contextual and political complexity, humanitarian communication needs to be historicized, contextualized and politicized (and this complexity could be 'negative').

More fundamentally, efforts to 'reframe the message' have often been done in isolation rather than as part of a broader agenda to shift the power in representation as well as in production in the development sector at large. Internal discussions about communication within INGOs should therefore be both means to an end and an end in itself. The end, i.e. ethical communication on development cooperation, is clear, but any attempt is also a means to discuss how communications by any organisation express their position and working methods regarding partnerships and power relations. Unfortunately, the sector is largely shaped by market-driven, institutional and ideological pressures, and funding concerns are often still deemed more important than ethical considerations. While humanitarian communication, like the development sector at large, should be focused on 'shifting the power', most of the appeals confirm the (colonial) power relationship between those who watch and those who are being watched, which, according to Chouliaraki, is 'a relationship whereby the figure of the spectator is fully sovereign in her/his agency over the sufferer (...) whereas the sufferer remains passive, unaware, quasi-human.' [23]

Positive stereotypes

Positive stereotypes are commonly held ideas about a social group that are considered to be 'good' and 'favourable'. Examples of positive stereotypes are 'Asians being good at math', 'Africans being more athletic', and 'women being warmer'. However, positive stereotypes are as problematic as, or even more problematic than, negative stereotypes, for at least three reasons: (1) positive stereotypes are, like all stereotypes, essentialist, i.e. reducing people to simplistic categories; (2) positive stereotypes romanticize and idealize people and as such potentially create unrealistic expectations and solutions (e.g. 'poor people are happy') [24]; and (3) with positive stereotypes, negative stereotypes are always around the corner, being the other side of the same coin (e.g. Asians are competent but cold, Africans are athletic but unintelligent, women are warm but weak) [25].

Positive stereotypes thus arguably legitimize and reinforce the existing social order in a more subtle and seemingly benevolent way than negative stereotypes. [26] As such, positive stereotypes, more so than negative stereotypes, may contribute to and perpetuate systemic differences in power and privilege in society. Many attempts to change the language of humanitarian communication result not in a move beyond stereotyping but rather in a move towards positive stereotypes. This 'swapping' of negative stereotypes for positive ones brings to light the highly reductionist approach to which the imagery debate has fallen prey to in the past decades. In recent years, the popular approach of hope-based communication, while having potential, once again runs the risk of proposing positive images and stories as the solution in the imagery debate.

- [A broad range of resources by Ethical Storytelling](#)
- [The Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages](#)
- [Communication codes outside the development cooperation sector](#)

Another consequence of the emergence of the imagery debate, and the growing interest in imagery in the 1980s and 1990s more generally, was that it led to considerable introspection within (communication departments of) INGOs. Media scholar Lilie Chouliaraki has called this 'the reflexive style'. [27] This meant that appeals started to emphasize that they were acts of representations instead of truth claims, and included, while dealing with familiar popular genres, moments of self-conscious reflection. At the same time, many INGOs got to develop (visual) communication codes to make their communication more ethical, sensitive and inclusive. [28]

When, in 1989, the General Assembly of European NGOs settled on its 'Code of Conduct on Images and Messages Relating to the Third World', it was one of the first of its kind. Codes like this one have slowly become more common from the 1990s onwards, drafted both by individual organizations such as Christian Aid, Save the Children and Oxfam and through cooperative platforms, particularly INGO confederations. The publishing of codes by INGO confederations proliferated when CONCORD published an update of the 1989 Code of Conduct on Images and Messages in 2006. In the ten years after this update codes of conduct were published by various CONCORD members, including, BOND (UK, 2011), Globale Verantwortung (Austria, 2012) Coordinadora (Spain, 2014) Dóchas (Ireland, 2014), FORS (Czech Republic, 2014) and CISU (Denmark, 2015).

All these codes differed in the depth of their interrogation of language and power. While some thoroughly reflected on how their institutional perspective and position impact communications,

others mainly addressed how INGOs can survive in a competitive 'market' of fundraising. As a result, many codes came to sit in between instrumental and ethical considerations, seeking (sometimes unattainable) ways of upholding ethical standards without compromising on fundraising targets. [29] From this strained perspective, the codes actively seek theorisations in which instrumental and ethical considerations necessarily run parallel, without acknowledging that ethics should be a primary consideration on and of its own.

Another problem in the implementation of the communication codes has been their lack of enforcement capacity. While individual or sector organisations can commit to codes like these, compliance is scarcely upheld. Together with pressing short-term goals in terms of fundraising and competition, NGOs are therefore tempted to either apply or leave out the agreements to which they subscribed when it suits them. As such, guidelines regarding the ethics of representation have for decades been both underwritten and sidelined at the very same time. This is not only a matter of legislation and institutional shortcomings, but also a result of the fundamental open-endedness of language, in which contexts, meanings and associations shift and change. [30]

As a result of such open-endedness, strict rules about what words, stories or images should or should not be used are hard to pin down – if such rules are desirable in the first place. If directives and enforcement are at least partially incapacitated, it means that the development cooperation sector, alongside the introduction of communication codes, has to double down on discussions on the fundamental forces that problematize communications. Within INGOs, knowledge on how history and power shape the language we use should therefore become more common, so that any existing code can be a helpful source for communications professionals who implement them from a more informed and critical perspective.

Recently, and in the wake of broader movements to shift the power, more wide-ranging, encompassing and

inclusive interpretations of the debate have surfaced increasingly. In these documents, considerations of justice prevail over ideals of charity, and language is more thoroughly deconstructed. Also, and importantly, discussions have become more inclusive in terms of gender, (dis)ability, social class and other axes of the intersectional struggle.

Resources

- The [Partos Dream Paper](#) on Shift the Power; particularly chapter 6 on communication and representation, by Alan Fowler.
- The [Ethical Storytelling](#) blog and community, with webinars designed as conversation starters for NGOs.
- [BOND's language guide](#) is a list of terms to avoid and its alternatives; they also have a [webinar](#) on language and disability.
- [IOM's guidelines](#) for gender-inclusive communication contains a list of words to use and to avoid, some directions for the use of gender-related data in forms, surveys and databases and a Q&A on language and gender.
- [Decolonise. Now!](#) is a practical inspiration guide for equitable international cooperation made by NGO Federatie, especially p.23 The Impact of words and images.
- [How to tell an African story](#) is an ethical storytelling handbook made by Africa no filter.

Conclusions

This brief has reviewed the history of humanitarian communication, i.e. the communication by and about the development cooperation. Starting in the 1980s, the sector made some first efforts to challenge the mediation of distant suffering and move towards more ethical communication. As the brief has shown, however, the so-called imagery debate is not without limitations and still has a long way to go in.

This brief is the first in a trilogy developed by Partos and the Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication that aims to support development cooperation practitioners in their quest to more ethical, sensitive and inclusive communication. In the next future briefs, we will dive deeper into the current trends and challenges in communication in development cooperation as well as explore the way forward.

Photo by Ron Lach



Colophon

This Future Brief on Communication in development cooperation is a product of the Partos Innovation Hub. Partos is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in development cooperation. The Partos Innovation Hub is a hybrid ecosystem where development professionals interact, create, inspire, undertake, work, learn and innovate together to become better able to navigate the future and accelerate change within themselves, their organisations, and in development cooperation.

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