



Communication in development cooperation

Future Brief - Part 2 - Storytelling genres in humanitarian communication

The document you have before you – the second in a trilogy on humanitarian communication – takes a storytelling approach. We seek to demonstrate how communication by and about development cooperation and humanitarian aid has been shaped by and in genres that all bring in their own storytelling challenges and opportunities. In doing so, this brief discusses some of the most common genres used by INGOs in order to better understand the complexities of storytelling in the field of humanitarian communication and to move ahead towards a future with more ethical, inclusive and equitable communication for development.

Genres as key storytelling devices in humanitarian communication

Within the field of humanitarian communication, which encompasses all the communication by and about development cooperation and humanitarian aid, genres could be seen as key storytelling devices. In general, genres are composed of various elements and conventions that are repeated from story to story, particularly in terms of stylistic techniques, narrative approaches, and symbolic meanings. In other words, genres are telling 'familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations' (or, in formula form, 'story + character + setting = genre'). [1] In addition, genres create 'an implicit contract' between the maker and the audience, in the sense that both agree to follow the expectations of a particular genre. This mutual agreement, which is based on the cultural familiarity with genres, makes that they are often 'endorsements of dominant ideology', i.e. containing, reflecting and confirming prevailing ideas in society.[2] As genres are rooted in both storytelling and ideology, they could be considered as highly relevant units of analysis in humanitarian communication.



Photo by Emiel Martens

The classic problematic genres: poverty porn and white saviorism

- 🔗 [Why poverty porn needs to stop](#)
- 🔗 [The white savior trope explained](#)
- 🔗 [The problem with celebrities in humanitarianism](#)

In our first Future Brief we explored the history of humanitarian communication and particularly the emergence of the 'imagery debate' as a response to the heavy use of poverty imagery in the famine relief campaigns for Ethiopia in 1984-1985. Reducing vulnerable people to suffering bodies for shock value, this genre in INGO appeals got criticized for being exploitative, denigrating and dehumanizing. However, while so-called *poverty porn* (also known as *famine porn*, *misery porn* or *development porn*) has become increasingly unacceptable in the sector, graphic images of distant suffering are still often applied by INGOs to appeal to their (predominantly) Western audiences.

An oft-heard reason for using poverty porn in appeals is that they are more successful in terms of fundraising. In other words, graphic images of suffering victims bring in most donations for humanitarian causes. Indeed, empirical research has found that portrayals of passive, dependent and helpless people usually generate more audience engagement and donation willingness.[3] However, this does not automatically mean that fundraising success justifies the use of mediated distant suffering.

In fact, in the same empirical research, it was emphasized that 'humanitarian organisations that continue to rely primarily on images of passive victimhood in their campaigns are doing a considerable disservice to the future of the [development cooperation] sector'.[4] This disservice largely consists of privileging economic over ideological and ethical considerations that could potentially challenge the unequal power relations in the sector and the world at large. According to Nandita Dogra, author of the pioneering book *Representations of Global Poverty* (2014), colonial

representations of Othering are still often very much part of INGO campaigns, with that perpetuating hierarchical (power) differences between 'Western' and 'non-Western', 'white' and 'non-white', 'developed' and 'underdeveloped', and 'savior' and 'victim'.[5]

The *fundraising argument*, i.e. the argument that unethical communication is legitimate as long as it raises funds, reduces communication to a means to an end, instead of constituting the end itself, i.e. development discourses and practices that support solidarity, equality and justice. As discussed in our first Future Brief, when we keep using the same language of Othering, we keep the existing power relations in place. A successful campaign in terms of fundraising can thus be unsuccessful in terms of creating solidarity, challenging inequality, and imagining justice.

In addition to the *fundraising argument*, which potentially acknowledges the ethical considerations at play, many INGOs use the *reality argument* to justify poverty porn, i.e. the idea that these images represent reality and should therefore be shown. However, refraining from poverty porn does not mean that 'negative' images should be abandoned altogether. Poverty porn denotes a specific kind of 'negative' images, not all representations of poverty and other adversities.

First, the genre poverty porn refers to highly graphic representations of suffering bodies that generally do 'not meet ethical standards commonly applied in medical practice'.[6] Second, poverty porn consists of highly isolated representations of distant suffering, i.e. isolated from history, context and politics. In other words, what makes poverty porn, poverty porn, and into a problematic genre in humanitarian communication, is that it uses ahistorical, decontextualized and apolitical images that simplify reality and reduce vulnerable non-white people in the Global South into passive, dependent and helpless victims.



Photo by Andrea Piacquadio

In other words, when representations of poverty and other adversities in the Global South are done ethically, i.e. not isolated from, but shaped by, history, context and politics (and a history, context and politics in which the Global North is included and complicit), they are not poverty porn. In the past few decades, the call to refrain from poverty porn has unjustly led to a call to abandon all 'negative' images, and towards the strategy of deliberate positivism. This, as already mentioned in the first Future Brief and discussed in more detail in the next section, has pushed the imagery debate in a direction that largely remains adverse to solidarity, equality and justice.

Closely aligned with the genre of poverty porn is the genre of *white saviorism*. Whereas vulnerable non-white people in the Global South have traditionally been represented in development discourse as passive, dependent and helpless victims, privileged white people in the Global North have often been portrayed as active, autonomous, and supporting saviors. Deeply rooted in the colonial tradition of Western expansionism, and particularly the modernizing and civilizing mission of colonial authorities in Africa and other colonized territories, the white savior character has occurred, and still occurs, time and again in Western popular culture.

The genre of white saviorism in popular culture generally refers to stories about struggling non-white people that centre on the benevolent but risky actions of a white character

– who is usually strong-willed, brave and optimistic – to help them overcome their struggles. As such, the white savior inappropriately takes centre stage as the hero of the story, thereby sidelining and simplifying (the role of) the non-white people whom the story is actually about. In addition, the white savior genre is usually problematic for representing minor acts of doing good as the solution. In other words, the genre proposes that 'complicated, deeply entrenched problems can be fixed by an individual who simply cares enough.'^[7]

Throughout the decades, the white savior character has also been omnipresent in Western humanitarian communication. First, in many INGO appeals the (potential) donors 'at home' are addressed as heroes who, with their financial contribution, are able to save (or at least enhance) the lives of many suffering non-white people – often only for a few dollars or euros per month. Second, the white savior regularly appears in campaigns showing humanitarian workers and, particularly, celebrity humanitarians 'in the field'. In many campaigns, an INGO employee or ambassador explains the adversities of a community in the global South and shows what the INGO could do, or has done, about it. In doing so, they are often shown while talking about, instead of with, the community while addressing the (potential) donors.

Within the field of humanitarian communication, the so-called 'mediation of celebrity humanitarianism' has become a particularly 'contested field',^[8] to the extent that several INGOs have decided to stop using celebrities as ambassadors altogether.^[9] However, since it often generates more attention to development programs and humanitarian efforts, the use of celebrities to 'galvanize support and care' for distant populations in adversity remains a widespread storytelling strategy in the sector.^[10] Yet, celebrity humanitarianism, being a product of neoliberal capitalism itself, almost never goes well ideologically and ethically, as it tends to consolidate colonial hierarchies, inequalities and stereotypes instead of challenging them.^[11]

The whiteness of white saviors

White people who are supporting non-white people are not automatically white saviors. As outlined above, the genre of white saviorism is based on a specific set of storytelling conventions, and the white savior is a figure with a specific set of character traits. It could even be argued that today's white saviors do not even need to be of white ethnicity. That is, non-white people with power and privilege, such as non-white celebrity humanitarians, could be (behaving) as white saviors as well. However, as the term is so deeply tied up in racialized colonial history where white Europeans and Americans came to, particularly, the African continent to 'civilise' the black poor, and traditionally so embedded in white supremacy and racial hierarchies, it remains preferred to emphasize the whiteness in the white savior genre and figure.



Photo by Rodnae Productions

The turn to positive genres: the misery simulation, adventure journey, and individual changemaker

- [Travel writing as a colonial project](#)
- [The individual changemaker](#)
- [Countering toxic narratives about grassroots activists](#)

As discussed in our first Future Brief, during the 1990s the controversy around negative poverty porn appeals led to a turn to deliberate positivism. Since then, positive stories and images have often been used by INGOs to gain funds and other support from allegedly 'poverty-fatigued' audiences. However, such stories and images should always be critically and carefully assessed as well, since they run the risk of containing similar colonial representations, now in the form of harmful positive stereotypes. In contemporary appeals, there are at least two genres based on such positive storytelling: the adventure journey and individual changemaker. In addition, there is the genre of the misery simulation, which usually combines 'negative' storytelling of the Other with 'positive' storytelling of the Self.

Drawing on both poverty porn and white saviorism, often celebrities, the genre of the misery simulation is increasingly being used by INGOs as a fundraising and advocacy strategy. In this genre, poverty and other adversities in the global South are imitated in privileged and often joyful settings in the global North, with the aim to create awareness and compassion. Striking examples are children who get to sleep in self-built shacks to feel how it is to live on the streets, or celebrities and other people who voluntarily lock themselves up in a small cage for twelve hours to emulate girls who are caught in prostitution (which is then followed by a festive afterparty). Such simulations of misery are ethically challenging for at least two reasons. First, the systemic nature of the human vulnerability is almost impossible to imitate in a respectful

manner. Second, within the genre, the experience of poverty and other adversities of the Other is often made into an educational and entertaining activity for the Self. In other words, simulating the adversities of suffering, non-Western Others becomes an inspirational and exciting activity for the privileged, Western Self. As such, these campaigns once again tend to exoticize and romanticize poverty and other adversities in the global South.

Within the related genre of the adventure journey, supporters of an INGO in the global North travel to a place in the global South where the organisation is doing development cooperation work. Here they embark on a challenging trip, not seldom by foot or cycle, and usually visit or participate in a project along the way. In most campaigns surrounding these adventure journeys, the emphasis is put on the heroism of the northern participants – their physical and mental achievements are taking centre stage. Charity here largely seems to bolster the personal fulfilment of the privileged northern participants rather than the underprivileged southern communities to whom the trip is supposedly for.

The genre of the adventure journey typically relies on positive (colonial) stereotypes, largely through the romantic exoticization of landscapes and people in the global South. Often the landscapes that the participants are crossing during their journey are depicted as 'unspoilt', 'rugged' and 'idyllic', while the people they meet are considered as 'beautiful', 'resilient' and 'happy' despite the hardships they endure. These forms of romantic exoticization are firmly rooted in colonial discourse, in which 'wild' landscapes and 'primitive' people had to be discovered, conquered, controlled and civilised.

Throughout the years, the 'positive' exoticization of the suffering Other seems to have been strengthened in development discourse, particularly through the stereotype of authentic poverty. On the hand, marginalized communities in the global South are often exoticized as 'poor-but-happy' Others (since they are considered to be rich in community, culture or



Photo by Tima Miroshnichenko

spirituality). On the other hand, do-gooders from the global North mainly consider poverty and other adversities fascinating and inspiring for the Self (since they find themselves lacking community, culture or spirit in the West or come to appreciate their own privileged status of not being poor or otherwise disadvantaged).

The genre of the individual changemaker, finally, seems to be a progressive step towards moving the focus, and therefore the power, from the Western Self to the non-Western Other. In recent years, and in line with the rising promise of 'shifting the power', campaigns of INGOs have increasingly highlighted community leaders as agents of change. Many of these campaigns are concentrated on (supporting) local individuals to make a transformative difference in their wider communities. The storytelling genre of the individual changemaker allows for (more) visibility, voice and agency for people in the global South, and in that sense marks a step in the right direction. However, the storytelling strategy of the individual changemaker does not come without challenges either.

Probably the biggest challenge with the genre of the *individual changemaker* is that it, like most other humanitarian genres, tends to focus on individual solutions for systemic problems. The idea is that if an INGO supports certain individuals in becoming changemakers, they will take along the wider community in their success. Although it has been demonstrated that collective changemaking programs can work, particularly INGO support for (leaders of) civil society organisations, in their communication to Western audiences often only a few individuals are being celebrated, such as educators, entrepreneurs or activists who courageously enhance their community on their own, through the training and other support provided by the INGO.

As political anthropologist Elliott Prasse-Freeman aptly put it, within this *small-is-beautiful approach*, 'the individual client becomes the cipher through which the entire world of impoverished people is perceived: saving her (it is usually a her, with the associated connotation of feminised victimization) becomes saving the world.'^[12] Evidently, this idea is too simplistic, as it again makes the setting ahistorical and apolitical, and hides the more systemic problems of poverty, inequality and injustice – problems that cannot be individualized and depoliticized. At the same time, a greater focus on history and politics would bring in the picture of the wider community or civil society that has contributed to, and benefitted from, the efforts of the changemakers – in other words: the community is the changemaker.



Photo by Cottonbro Studio

Towards ethical, inclusive and equitable humanitarian communication

- [Community-led stories](#)
- [How INGOs can tell stories more ethically](#)
- [Nambwa FM](#)

What are, then, the solutions to all these storytelling challenges in humanitarian communication? How should the development cooperation sector embark on efforts to decolonize and reimagine communication for development? How can INGOs make their campaigns more ethical, inclusive and equitable? The answers to these questions must be sought in a practice of communication in which values such as solidarity, equality and justice are made central. INGO campaigns that are steeped in the complexity, history and politics, and based on the agency, dignity and humanity of vulnerable people in the global South, are able to contribute to a more just global society. Particularly two umbrella strategies could be used in the pursuit of ethical, inclusive and equitable communication: *postcolonial criticism and participatory storytelling*.

First of all, each campaign should be critically evaluated – or deconstructed – from a postcolonial perspective before being produced and released. *Postcolonial criticism* refers to a field of critical inquiry that, from the 1950s onwards, interrogates narratives surrounding the inequal (power) relationships between 'the colonizer and the colonized'.^[13] Adopting a postcolonial perspective means being equipped with a 'set of analytical and theoretical perspectives' (based on history, context and politics) to critically explore the 'historical geographies of colonization' as well as challenging 'their continued effects in the present', particularly the 'construction of identity of the colonizer and the colonized through often racialized ideas of difference'.^[14]

Fundraising versus advocacy campaigns

It could be argued that fundraising campaigns most frequently result in problematic images and stories. This not only raises questions about these campaigns, but also about the practice of fundraising more generally. In other words, the challenges of fundraising campaigns seem to highlight a larger problem within the sector, i.e. the centrality of fundraising. As Karen McVeigh recently put it, structural change in and of the sector is 'hampered by the need to pursue funding, by the expectations and demands of donors.'^[16] Potentially, fundraising campaigns could take inspiration from advocacy campaigns, which are often more successful in representing solidarity, equality and justice. While fundraising and advocacy campaigns are often considered different from each other, as the aims of these campaigns are different (i.e. raising funds versus raising awareness), they are fundamentally the same as they are both focused on calling attention to human rights issues and bringing about change for a more just world. Often already by making relatively small adjustments to the call for action, an advocacy campaign can be transformed into a fundraising campaign (and vice versa). Considering the complexity and sensitivity of humanitarian communication, it is usually recommended to use long-formatted genres that allow for such complexity and sensitivity, such as explainers, animations, documentaries and podcasts. These genres typically have room for longer stories, i.e. for stories with the details and nuances that are often required to do justice to the issues that are being addressed. To respond to the fundraising call for short videos and texts, INGOs could consider multi-layered or *transmedia storytelling*, i.e. telling a story across multiple platforms. This storytelling technique allows for breaking a long and complex story down into various parts, forms and sizes.

According to the late cultural theorist Stuart Hall, critical postcolonial analysis is the most effective way to challenge colonial discourses, stories and stereotypes, and to make them, as he called it, 'uninhabitable' – unusable because they have been exposed and marked as problematic.[15] Because of the involvement of development cooperation in colonial domination, neocolonial exploitation and decolonial resistance, all those involved in communication for development should be equipped with a postcolonial perspective and assess each campaign from this perspective. This means, among other things, taking the various storytelling challenges of the commonly used humanitarian communication genres into consideration, and critically and carefully think about how they could be avoided and overcome – and to abandon a genre altogether if necessary (which several INGOs have already done, mainly concerning poverty porn and white saviorism).

At the same time, new genres could be created, and have already been created, that offer opportunities for ethical, inclusive and equitable communication. These genres all seem to be the result of, and could be captured under the umbrella of, *participatory storytelling*. In short, *participatory storytelling* refers to a range of different ways to actively include the people that the story is about, both in the process and product. This way, they can tell their own stories, and, following the Ethiopian filmmaker Haile Gerima, experience the 'empowerment of telling your own stories'.[17] In fact, access to the means of media production should be considered a human right, making communication not a means to an end, but an end of (advancing) dignity, equality and self-determination in itself.

In the past decades, and particularly in recent years, various humanitarian communication projects have successfully adopted participatory storytelling. In many of these cases, INGOs collaborated with artists, activists or ordinary people from vulnerable communities to create engaging campaigns encouraging solidarity, equality and equity. One out of many examples in this regard is

Nambwa FM, a feature film about female (child) trafficking in Kenya. While co-funded by an INGO, the film was produced through a process of co-creation by girls and young women, themselves survivors of sexual violence, and the wider community, including community leaders and government representatives. As such, the production was a social justice project in itself – one that expressed agency, brought recovery, and raised awareness. Such participatory storytelling campaigns, some of which can be found below in the Resources, are the future of ethical, inclusive and equitable humanitarian communication.



Photo by Lê Minh

Resources

- [Activism, Artivism and Beyond: Inspiring Initiatives of Civic Power](#) is the first publication in The Partos series about civic power highlighting various examples of engaging activism and artivism campaigns.
- [Africa No Filter](#) is an initiative promoting stories that seek to shift harmful stereotypical narratives about Africa by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns.
- [Doing Things with Stories \(DTwS\)](#) is an initiative from Oxfam Novib, ArtEZ University of the Arts and Radboud University to create conditions of narrative change and meaningful interventions and approaches toward collective action.
- The annual [Humanitarian Communication Awards](#) discuss the most and least successful campaigns by Dutch INGOs in terms of ethical, inclusive and equitable communication.
- [Mohammed Hammie](#) is a Tanzanian human rights journalist and social change storyteller whose book *Mandiga's Well* (2022) has been recognized for its creative and participatory storytelling approach.
- [The LAM Sisterhood](#) is a Kenya-based African feminist content studio founded by Laura Ekumbo, Aleya Kassam and Anne Moraa with the aim to produce stories that centre African women.
- [The Narrative Hub](#) is an initiative launched by JustLabs and the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) seeking to create support to integrate narrative ideas and research into human rights work.
- [Voice for Change](#) is an initiative of the Down To Zero Alliance aimed at preventing sexual exploitation by amplifying the voices of young leaders for change in Latin America and Asia.

Conclusions

This Future Brief has reviewed some of the most commonly used genres in contemporary humanitarian communication. Starting off with the traditional problematic genres of poverty porn and white saviorism, the sector has made various efforts to challenge the mediation of distant suffering and move towards more ethical, inclusive and equitable communication. However, as this brief tried to show, several of the newer, 'positive' genres, i.e. the misery simulation, adventure journey and individual changemaker, are not without challenges either. These genres are still often engaged in colonial othering, spectacle, heroism, and proposing simple, individualized and depoliticized solutions to systemic problems that require collective political action – all storytelling elements that should be questioned and avoided. Still, decolonizing and transformative communication is possible when grounded in a commitment to postcolonial criticism and participatory storytelling – and the core values of social justice and equity. In the third and final Future Brief aimed at supporting development cooperation practitioners in their quest for more ethical, inclusive and equitable communication, we will dive deeper into the practice of participatory storytelling and other inclusive creative tools in the production process of communication for development.

Colophon

This Future Brief on communication in development cooperation is a product of the Partos Innovation Hub in collaboration with the Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication. The Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication is a non-profit organisation committed to better communication on development cooperation. Partos is the membership body for Dutch-based organisations working in development cooperation. The Partos Innovation Hub is a space where development professionals can learn, interact, experiment, and focus on innovation and collaboration to navigate the future and accelerate change.

Authors

Wouter Oomen, Senior Lecturer in Media Studies at Utrecht University, and Co-Director of the Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication.

Emiel Martens, Assistant Professor in Media Studies at the University of Amsterdam, Senior Researcher in Arts and Culture Studies at Erasmus University, and Co-Director of the Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication.

Contributors

Various members of the Community of Practice Inclusive Communication, started in April 2022 by Partos in collaboration with the Expertise Centre Humanitarian Communication.

Design

Majorie Kool, koola.nl

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