Inclusive Communication

Guiding Principles

PARTOS

EXPERTISE CENTRE HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION

P.3

1.Communication matters

P.3

2. Deconstruct communication

P.4

3. Consider storytelling challenges

P.4

4. Avoid stereotypes

P.5

5. Be clear and transparent

P.5

6. Obtain informed consent

P.6

7. Adopt participatory storytelling

P.6

8. Ensure equal exchanges

P.7

9. Support self-identification

P.7

10. Keep learning

1. Communication matters

Communication about development cooperation is often seen as a means to an end; as a means to raise awareness and funds. However, communication should be seen as part and parcel of the end itself, that is, a more just world, since it is shaping the world's unequal power relations. Only if we take (the power of) language and communication seriously, we can start thinking of a more inclusive, sustainable and equitable global society.

2. Deconstruct communication

Understanding (the history and politics of) communication enables shifts in the world's unequal power relations. All of those involved in communication for development should be equipped with a so-called postcolonial perspective and critically assess – or deconstruct – all communications from this perspective. Making such assessments in the (pre-)production phase is an effective way to prevent colonial discourses, stories and stereotypes.

3. Consider storytelling challenges

Take the various storytelling challenges of the commonly used humanitarian communication genres – like poverty porn, white saviorism, celebrity humanitarianism, misery simulations, adventure journeys and individual changemakers – into consideration, and critically and carefully think about how they could be overcome. These genres are often engaged in (colonial) othering, (exotic) spectacle and (white) heroism – all elements that should be avoided.

4. Avoid stereotypes

Communication for development often contains stories and images that are based on colonial stereotypes, which are either negative or positive, but always exotic and damaging. Instead of proposing simple, individualised and depoliticised solutions to systemic problems, stories need to be historicised, contextualised and politicised. In other words, stories about poverty and other adversities should not be isolated from, but shaped by, history, society and politics, providing nuanced and multi-layered understandings of the issues at stake.

5. Be clear and transparent

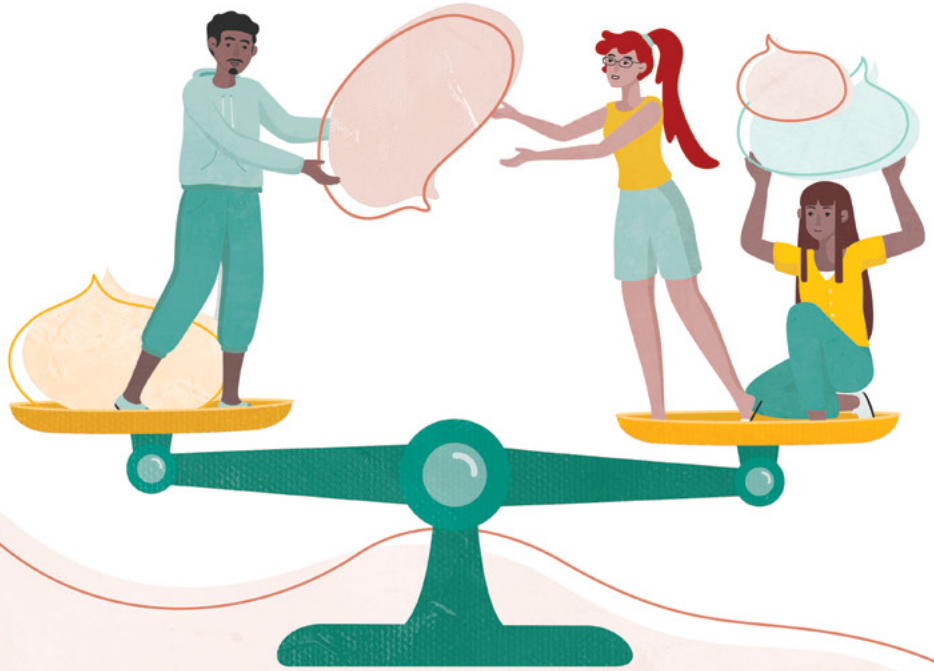
Make sure you treat each communication with care and accuracy. Be clear and transparent about your role and your sphere of influence in the world. International cooperation and humanitarian aid are highly complex fields, with many partners that work together and leverage each other's strengths. Acknowledge this when communicating about your work – and name your partners. In addition, don't be afraid to acknowledge challenges, limitations and failures.

6. Obtain informed consent

Always obtain informed consent of subjects who appear in your communications. Explain the possible uses and consequences of the stories and images you produce and acknowledge people's right to be anonymous and/or unidentifiable. In the case of minors, always seek out a parent or responsible guardian to obtain consent. Be aware that in various situations it is difficult for people to give meaningful consent due to the unequal power relations at play. Finally, always put safety first, i.e. think about the potential risks and harms of the subjects in your communications, and always prioritise their safety and wellbeing first and above all.

7. Adopt participatory storytelling

Participatory story-telling is the most effective strategy in the pursuit of ethical, inclusive and equitable communication. Participatory storytelling refers to a range of different ways to include the people who the story is about, both in the production and representation. This also means that, instead of 'parachuting' in (foreign) crews and ambassadors, NGOs should collaborate with crews and communities involved to create engaging content encouraging solidarity, equality and equity.



8. Ensure equal exchanges

Participatory storytelling is based on co-creation and other forms of collaboration, and is as such part of the wider process of shifting the power in international cooperation. Make sure that the stories you tell are also stories that the people who the story is about want to tell. They should have agency and ownership over the stories and images made with and by (not about) them. Ideally, they should have control over (the creation, production and circulation of) their own stories and images. In addition, as an act of reciprocity, the results should always be shared with and consented by the people involved in the production, both behind and in front of the camera.

9. Support self-identification

As an element of participatory storytelling, always support how people want to be referred to. Self-identification, that is, the ways in which individuals and communities define themselves in terms of their identity/identities (regarding ethnicity, gender, religion and more), plays an important role in shaping a person or community's sense of self and their interactions with the world. Ask people how they wish to be identified, honor the names and pronouns that they want to go by, and accept that identities are diverse and dynamic.

10. Keep learning

Words, stories or images that are hailed as inclusive today, may become problematic tomorrow. Continued efforts in changing language are necessary because the process of escaping power relations in language is dynamic and never-ending. Since language is constantly evolving and adapting, power relations always creep into it. We should therefore train ourselves to continuously rephrase and reframe the words, stories and images we use.

Colophon

The **Basic principles for Inclusive communication for International Cooperation** is a product of the Partos Innovation Hub in collaboration with the Humanitarian Communication Expertise Centre (HuCom). Partos is the membership organisation for Netherlands-based organisations focused on international cooperation. The Partos Innovation Hub offers international cooperation professionals the space to learn and innovate with each other to be better able to navigate the future and accelerate structural change within themselves, their organisations and in international cooperation. HuCom is a non-profit organisation dedicated to improving communication about international cooperation. They consider ethical, inclusive and equal communication as essential for creating a more just world and offer international cooperation organisations in the Netherlands and abroad feedback and tools to become aware of and contribute to this.

The **Basic principles for Inclusive communication** are part of the **Inclusive Communication Guide** which consists of three parts that form a whole but can also be read and used independently: the **Basic principles for Inclusive communication**, the **Inclusive glossary** and the **Future Brief**s on the history, representation and production of humanitarian communication. Together, this publication offers depth and reflection on the practice of ethical, inclusive and equal communication in international cooperation and humanitarian aid.

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