



Putting the people in the pictures first:

Guidelines for the ethical
production and use of content
(images and stories)



2024 (updated version)

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Putting the people in the pictures first: Guidelines for the ethical production and use of content (images and stories).

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Preface

About Bond

Bond is the UK network for 370 organisations working in international development and humanitarian assistance. We connect, strengthen and champion a dynamic network of diverse civil society organisations to help eradicate global poverty, inequality and injustice.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the various Bond member organisations that supported the production of these guidelines and to FCDO who funded the production of this updated version.

About the Ethical Storytelling Group

These guidelines were originally produced in 2019 by the Bond Ethical Storytelling Group (formerly the People in the Pictures Group), for Bond members. The group was established by Jess Crombie and the late Tamsin Maunder in 2017 after the launch of **The People in the Pictures: critical perspectives on Save the Children's image making**¹ research report. The group currently has over 300 members and serves as a space for discussion and advice on ethical approaches to producing and using content², and a platform to share best practice and knowledge across the sector. Ensuring the people featured are recognised and respected as partners in NGO communications/storytelling, is a key part of the group's ongoing aims.

¹ <https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/people-pictures-vital-perspectives-save-childrens-image-making>

² "Content" refers to raw story materials (images, unedited footage, interview transcriptions) and finished pieces of content (films, fundraising appeals, social media posts and more). We generally refer to content production throughout these guidelines but there are times when story production is also used.

Background to the guidelines

The original 2019 guidelines were informed by several workshop sessions with, and feedback from, members of the working group that was then known as People in the Pictures (now Ethical Storytelling). They also built on a review of existing NGO guidelines, particularly the Code of Conduct (2007) and accompanying guide (2014) produced by Dóchas.³ Siobhan Warrington prepared the original guidelines and this updated version with input from members of the group.

There is a one-page [Statement of Ethical Practice](#) to accompany these guidelines which has also been reviewed and updated in 2024.

The 2024 updated version

The Ethical Storytelling Group decided it was important to review and update these guidelines five years after they were first published. Since 2019 there have been significant changes both within the NGO sector and also in terms of local, national and international media and communications environments. It is important that the guidelines remain fit for purpose and reflect the

updated Bond Charter (2022)⁴ which outlines **Bond's eight core values: Civil society solidarity; Collaboration; Environmental Sustainability; Accountability; Anti-racism, inclusion and diversity; Locally-led; Responsibility and effectiveness; and Do no harm.** We are also witnessing reductions in overall funding which means it is critical we invest wisely and carefully in effective and ethical media and communications.

Across the NGO sector, many organisations are working to shift power and resources towards majority world⁵ actors and towards realising locally-led development. There is also increasing understanding and acknowledgement across the sector of the legacies of the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and racism as sources of injustice and inequity. Alongside this understanding is a recognition of the embedded coloniality and racism in our NGO sector, and that NGO imagery of brown and black people suffering and in need of 'saving' have created and perpetuated racism. The Bond value of Anti-racism must be upheld in the way we produce content and in the final communications and stories we share with our audiences.

This updated version includes a new Resources section with links to a selection of relevant guidelines and related resources which we feel may be useful for those in the sector seeking to reflect upon and enhance their ethical approaches to NGO storytelling and communications.

³ The Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations.

⁴ [The Bond Charter \(2022\)](#)

⁵ Majority world/Minority world: the term 'Majority World' originally coined in the 1990s by Shahidul Alam, Managing Director of the Drik Photograph Agency, Bangladesh. It is used in place of Global South as it is more geographically accurate and an important alternative to previous derogatory terms such as 'developing countries' or 'Third World'.

Introduction

As NGOs⁶ we rely on the images and stories of the people we work with⁷ to communicate the importance and impact of the work we do, and to support awareness-raising, campaigning and fundraising efforts. These contributors⁸ generously share their time as well as their images, experiences and perspectives with us and make our communications powerful and effective.

We must ensure that our content and story production is ethical and that it respects contributors' rights to participation and protection. As a sector we need to move towards an approach which recognises contributors as partners in the process of sharing **their** stories rather than as subjects for **our** stories.

We have a responsibility to improve public understanding of the realities of the inequalities, injustices and poverty we are working to overcome, alongside the capacities and agency of the people we work with. As such we also have a responsibility to recognise the wider impact of our communications on public audiences. The images and stories we produce and choose to share have the potential to impact the way audiences view the world (and themselves in relation to the rest of the world).

We must move away from images and narrative that could perpetuate racist stereotypes of the people and places where we work, particularly given that "racism, including coloniality, are root causes of current patterns of global wealth and poverty and global challenges such as the climate crisis."⁹

The global nature of communications means that our outputs could be seen by anyone, anywhere. For example, content intended for UK audiences can quickly end up on the Facebook page of someone in the country where it was produced. Audiences within the UK are not homogeneous and we must consider the specific impacts our communications could have on diaspora audiences who share aspects of identity with the people and places portrayed. Dr Edward Ademolu has published extensively on this (**see Resources**).

⁶ "NGOs" is used as a catch-all term throughout the document. It is acknowledged that the members of Bond represent a range of organisations working on international development, including: those that are secretariats with a large diverse member base; those that work with partner organisations; and those that work with the country programmes or teams of their own organisation.

⁷ Throughout this document we use the phrase "the people we work with" to describe those who some may refer to as either beneficiaries or participants.

⁸ The term "contributors" refers to the people who feature in films, photographs and accompanying interviews. It is a deliberate alternative to "subject" to better acknowledge their active role in, and contribution to NGO communications/NGO storytelling.

⁹ Lartey, N. and Beauchamp, E. (2022). Discomfort to discovery: exploring racism and anti-racism in development narratives. IIED, London.

What do these guidelines cover?

These guidelines cover the process of filming, photography and interviewing (story production), as well as the selection and use of content creation. They aim to support sector-wide best practice by urging NGOs to put contributors (the people who share their lived experiences) at the centre of content production, to recognise their rights, and to consider our responsibilities towards contributors while recording and using their images and words for our communications purposes. They also urge us to consider the short- and long-term impacts of the narratives we create – and to recognise that we can do harm while doing good. Working ethically requires us to deliberately consider (and respond to) the risks and impacts of our work, on both individuals and their communities (by geography or identity), as well as the impact of our communications on audiences.

These guidelines cannot cater for all ethical issues and dilemmas that different NGOs will face, and they do not replace the existing content or image guidelines that many Bond member organisations may already have in place.

Who are they for?

These guidelines are intended for anyone working in a Bond member organisation who is involved in the production and use of content. They are for **all** staff, including volunteers, wherever they are based and whatever role they have – whether that is a country programme team taking images of, and producing content about projects for reports, or a fundraising team producing content for an appeal. They are for freelance story and content producers, as well as those who may be involved in the creation of content but who are not under contract such as visiting donors and media representatives. The guidelines are also for those who manage and use content, whether that be for fundraising, awareness-raising, advocacy or supporter engagement.

Content and story production is an increasingly decentralised process with the role of producing stories held by a range of people including: professional filmmakers and photographers; content producers based in the regions of the world where their work takes place; local/national NGO staff; and at times the people we work with engaging in content creation themselves. While some aspects of these guidelines will apply differently depending on who is producing the content and stories, the core principles and approaches are designed to support contributors in the story production process; they therefore apply to whoever is behind the camera or holding the microphone.

Ethical not legal guidance

While these guidelines have been developed to be in line with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) that relates to processing personal data (which includes imagery), they are primarily ethical, and not legal, guidelines¹⁰. It is the responsibility of your organisations to ensure your communications are legally compliant in relation to GDPR, data protection and intellectual property rights. NGOs are also responsible for considering any national laws that may affect their story production and content creation (i.e. the country that content is produced in as well as the country where the content is stored and published), and to comply with any local or cultural restrictions in relation to taking images of people, places or objects.

Do less to do better

Invest the time in thinking carefully about your communications and what you really need in terms of stories and images. Developing a more focused brief allows you more time to produce the content that you know will be used. Having more time to spend with individual contributors should result in better stories. Think about doing less but doing it better.



Student midwives in Maridi, Western Equatoria State, South Sudan, are photographed by Steve Kagia and Kennedy Musyoka
Photo credit: © Amref Health Africa, 2022

¹⁰ General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) came into force across Europe in May 2018. GDPR require all organisations to have a lawful basis to process personal data, which includes images and personal information. The Information Commissioner's Office website contains detailed guidance and resources on GDPR for organisations: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/>.

Power, inequity and race

It is important for all those involved in NGO story production and content creation to acknowledge the considerable power inequalities at play in both the production and the consumption of NGO stories.

In many cases, UK-based NGO staff and a professional filmmaker/photographer are paid to produce communications materials that are intended to elicit donations from supporters to help those featured in the images. The people being asked to feature in NGO communications are likely to feel obliged to participate, due to their relative lack of power and their existing relationship with the NGO. Story production is often mediated by staff from country programme teams or partner organisations. They experience more power and privilege than those who are being photographed/filmed, but significantly less than any visiting staff or freelancers from the UK. These layers of inequality, inherent in the production and consumption of NGO images, are also racialised: those with the most power and privilege are generally white, and those with the least are generally people of colour.

While these power dynamics will be different in every scenario, an understanding of these layers of power and inequality should urge us to work to deliberately disrupt or challenge images and narratives that serve to perpetuate such inequalities, and that are based on racist tropes that perpetuate the normalisation of white supremacy. The image or story may be true in that it really happened, but how we show it will influence our audiences to think about the people in the stories in a certain way.

We have a responsibility to challenge audience stereotypes by sharing stories that include context and information that humanises and shapes new narratives.

We must also think critically about **who** is making the decisions about media and communications within our organisations and consider long-term strategies to address the inherent coloniality within NGO leadership¹¹.

¹¹ The Bond Anti-racism and decolonising framework includes a series of challenging questions in relation to Communication (page 10) <https://www.bond.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Anti-racism-and-decolonising-framework-com.pdf>

Putting the people in the pictures first

The people who NGOs work with, and who contribute their images and stories for our communications, are likely to face complex challenges in their daily lives and some may be experiencing specific vulnerabilities. We must appreciate and respect the value they bring to our work by ensuring they are supported and empowered to safely participate in story production. We must recognise and respect their rights to participation and protection during story production. Story production should be governed by the same high standards in relation to human rights, safeguarding and accountability as any other NGO activity. Contributors' wellbeing will always take precedence over our communications requirements.

Putting contributors first means:

- We will take the time to find out about contributors and their circumstances in advance of the story production; whether that is during the planning stage, during a meeting with partners, or with the contributors themselves in advance of story production.
- We will be clear with contributors about the role that our NGO will have, or not have, in their community¹². We will never suggest or promise something that we cannot deliver. We will be honest and accurate with them and our audiences about our role in their lives.
- We will endeavour to inform contributors in advance of our intentions to produce stories, except for in rapid-onset emergency contexts, where this is not possible.
- We will give contributors a clear explanation (avoiding NGO or legal jargon and in a language they understand) of the purpose of recording/documenting their image/story and how it will be communicated to others. This will take place ahead of any legal informed consent forms being completed and will involve sharing examples of similar finished communication materials.
- We will provide contributors with the opportunity to ask questions about the story production, and we will encourage them to express their preferences and any concerns about being filmed, photographed or interviewed.
- We will respect an individual's right to refuse to be photographed, filmed or interviewed.

¹² 'Community' is used here in the broadest sense to refer to those living in the same geographic area, but also those who may be connected to others through their identity or their interests.

- **We will ensure contributors are aware of their right to:**
 - Change anything regarding the set-up of the story production.
 - Choose not to answer a question.
 - Decide to stop participating at any point.
- It is our responsibility to manage contributors' expectations: we will make it clear that story production will not lead to direct assistance for them or their families. We must recognise that, for a contributor, story production will be experienced as a group of people demonstrating significant and genuine interest in their/their family's life. Understandably a contributor may expect some form of follow-up to this initial interaction. NGOs must take care to explain what will happen next and be honest and truthful in their explanations.
- We will listen carefully to contributors' accounts and record what they tell us accurately.
- We will recognise contributors' expertise and critical opinions on the issues affecting their lives. Contributors are more than their own individual stories; they are experts by experience and we must recognise their ability to be insightful and powerful spokespeople on the issues we are focused on.
- Wherever possible we will collect and use in-depth interviews that tell rounded stories of contributors; stories that find out more about them as individuals with experiences and ideas beyond the issue our organisation is focused on.
- We will be open to documenting the stories people want to tell and actively seek out their story preferences rather than going out with a narrow brief and looking for people to meet it.
- Wherever possible, we will use contributors' own words in the messaging and captioning that accompanies their images, whether that be online, or in film, where we will use their own voice as a priority over our own.
- We will be honest and transparent with contributors about what aspects of their lives we are interested in documenting and communicating to our audiences. We will also therefore be open to our plans shifting in relation to the contributors we meet and the stories they share.
- Where possible and appropriate, with our partners/staff in context, we will return copies of finished content and/or images taken to contributors¹³. As well as being respectful, returning finished content can help to manage expectations. We will not promise to return content if we will not be able to fulfil that promise.

¹³ This may be more important for communications on sensitive issues or with contributors who are considered at risk; when reassurance will be required by those contributors (and the organisations that support them) that the final outputs do not put them at any additional risk.

- At the time of planning a story production trip, NGOs should consider together with country teams/partner organisations, if and how returning content will be possible, and include in the budget the costs associated with this (staff time, travel and printing). Country programme teams should have contact details of contributors, and if appropriate and possible, finished content/images could be shared digitally with contributors.
- While not a substitute for returning content, having a method of taking and giving photos at the point of story production (e.g. a Polaroid camera) is appreciated by some contributors.



Tumo, 13, captures the daily reality of life on the streets in Nairobi as part of a Toybox funded project giving participants the opportunity to tell their own stories through the medium of photography.

Photo credit: © Toybox / Pendekezo Letu 2023

Participatory approaches

Putting the people in the pictures first could also mean taking a participatory approach towards story production and content creation and supporting the people we work with to produce their own images and stories. Participatory approaches to media and communications have been practised for decades, however they have become more popular across the sector in the last five years, fuelled in part perhaps by increases in smartphone ownership and advances in their functionality.

These approaches clearly have the potential to shift the power towards contributors as content creators and working in this way can have multiple benefits for all involved in terms of skills development, accessing locally-led narratives to support original communications and advocacy, and in some cases supporting social cohesion among communities. If your organisation decides to work in this way it is important to recognise that this approach requires expertise in facilitating these methodologies safely and effectively paying particular attention to ethical practice. There can be specific ethical risks and practical challenges with this approach from unpaid labour for those involved to participants being unable to fully participate in the editorial process. We suggest that you seek out the support of expert practitioners in this area and take some time to familiarise yourself with all that this way of working entails by researching similar projects.¹⁴

¹⁴ On Our Radar's Toolkit: From contributors to co-producers: a guide to participatory production is a good place to start. <https://onourradar.org/resources-hub/>

Our content and stories must do no harm

The humanitarian principle of Do No Harm must apply to all story production and content creation. NGOs have a responsibility to protect contributors (and their families and communities) from any harm caused by them participating in its story production.

The first consideration is whether you even need a particular story in the first place, and particularly if that story is likely to involve contributors who could be considered at risk of harm. We should only produce stories that we intend to use, and explain that if we do not use the story it is not because of anything the contributor did or did not do, but instead due to changing external communication opportunities. Engaging contributors in story production and then not using it can be disappointing and distressing for them.

All NGOs should require their staff and others who are working with or for them to adhere to their Code of Conduct, and/or a Child Protection or Safeguarding Policy. This requirement must extend to all those involved in NGO story production, including visitors (such as supporters) and media representatives who are not

otherwise under contract. If during the process of story production you become aware or concerned that a contributor is at risk of harm (unrelated to your story production) you should follow your organisation's safeguarding policy and alert the appropriate staff member.

During story production with anyone, but particularly with those who are identified as marginalised and/or at risk of harm, contributors' wellbeing and safety should always take priority over the need for an image or a story. This means that there will be times, even when a person has given informed consent to contribute, that an NGO will decide to either not proceed with the planned story production, not to use a story, to anonymise a contributor, or to remove details that could increase their risk profile.

Support staff closest to contributors to direct safe story production

Ensure that staff (irrespective of their location or seniority) who have most familiarity with contributors (or the issues they face) are supported to inform the story production. Check in regularly throughout the process to ask for their input. They must feel able to say no to story production requests if they feel that the process either a) poses a risk for contributors, or b) risks damaging their relationship or reputation with the people they work with or c) poses a risk to the programme itself existing in that location.

They must feel able to intervene:

- If they feel contributors are requested to pose/act inappropriately.
- If they feel contributors are no longer feeling comfortable.
- If they recognise a risk to the contributor that they did not anticipate in advance.
- If they feel anyone on the story production team is behaving inappropriately.
- If the way that the story is being told may cause upset or offence to the community, local or national leadership or any other partner.

Remember when a staff member or potential contributor says no to your request to film, photograph or interview them, this is a positive outcome of working ethically and empowering local staff and contributors to be able to freely express their preferences.

Take your time

Responsible story production requires time. Building in sufficient time allows for good communication with contributors and allows contributors to properly consider your request for their image and/or story. Short and rushed visits can be unsettling and potentially harmful to contributors, particularly children and young people.

It is also not possible to identify all sensitive situations in advance, hence the importance of unhurried, good communications with contributors, so any unknown or unexpected sensitivities can surface and be handled responsibly.

No GPS

All cameras should have their geographic information system (GIS) setting turned off so that images do not contain retrievable information on the exact location of contributors. If using the GIS setting for programmatic mapping purposes, make sure you have systems in place to ensure that information is protected and not available to all potential users of the image.

Assessing risks for (and with) contributors

NGOs have a responsibility to assess the risk to individual contributors of their participation in story production and of their image and/or story being shared.

A risk assessment should take place during the planning phase of story production (as part of the Terms of Reference development). Consider the implications of image use not just on the individual, but also on the wider communities that they represent (either in terms of identity or geography). Some risks may not be immediately obvious: for example, women being photographed in a women's group without veils – who would typically be seen veiled in public. Seek input from those who are most familiar with the context and the potential contributors.

In the majority of cases, the NGO commissioning or organising the story production will be aware of the context and any specific sensitivities and this should inform the Terms of Reference (TOR)/brief¹⁵. It is good practice to keep a record of how you have taken the safety and welfare of all contributors into account.

Responding to the risks identified may at times be predetermined by organisational policy. For example, some NGOs choose to never publish children's real names and to always conceal the identity of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), even if the individual concerned is willing for their identity to be shared. Take the time to find out the policy for your organisation.

Where possible, we should support contributors to be involved in risk assessment, rather than making decisions on their behalf; some of the guidance on informed consent also supports this process – sharing examples of content, asking contributors if there is anyone that they would not want to see their image.

If someone expresses any concern about being seen by others, their visible identity should not be revealed, and you should check if they also want you to disguise the sound of their voice.

Decisions about whether to reveal or conceal the identity of a contributor should be made in consultation with those who are familiar with the context and contributors themselves where possible and appropriate. Decision-making will be different for individuals who have an existing public profile in relation to the sensitive issue and for whom the NGO content is unlikely to pose any additional risk.

¹⁵ Some NGOs have developed specific guidance on content production in humanitarian contexts and with children and adults at risk. See Resources Section. Save the Children have published guidance on media and communications with children in humanitarian contexts (see Resources); Blue Venture's image guidelines contain specific guidance for content production in healthcare settings; and BBC Media Action have a set of editorial guidelines relating to vulnerable adults: <http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/pdfs/vulnerable-adults-media-action.pdf>.

Individual at risk (through experience, context and/or their identity)

Most NGOs recognise certain groups of individuals who are or may be at risk. Such contributors may have experienced, or be at risk of experiencing further, trauma or stigma and it is important that any content production is sensitive to this. Concealing the identity of contributors may be essential to addressing the risks of negative consequences, such as reprisals, violence or stigmatisation in their communities. These contexts and individuals include, but are not limited to:

- People living in or fleeing from conflict zones.
- People affected by natural or human-made disasters.
- People seeking asylum, refugees or stateless individuals.
- People living with HIV.
- People with a disability.
- Members of LGBTQI+ and queer communities.
- Survivors of sexual assault.
- Survivors of gender-based violence.
- People speaking out against government, authority or large corporations.
- People facing religious or caste-based discrimination.

It is not possible to list here all groups of individuals who may be at risk through their experience, their identity and/or the context they are in. It is therefore essential to consider any sensitivities in relation to the specific time and context in which the story production is taking place and remember that there are both visible and invisible risks that those with local knowledge will be best placed to understand. For example, in the UK there is significant stigma attached to poverty which means many parents or caregivers would be reluctant for their children to be identifiable in any NGO communications that would imply they were living in poverty.

Story production with children and young people

For some NGOs, children and young people (CYP) are their most frequent contributors. It is essential that NGOs conform to the highest standards in relation to children's rights according to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). Some children and young people can face multiple vulnerabilities, such as children living in institutions or in care systems. Additional care must be taken when producing stories with these children or their caregivers. For example, if interviewing a caregiver and the child is present, it would be important that you avoid exposing children to information about their own history or their family's history which they do not already know, or is inappropriate for them to hear.

During all story production that is likely to involve children, there should be a designated child protection focal point within the group of staff involved.

At no time should any individual in the story production team be left alone with a child; there should always be more than one adult present.

Some NGOs will have additional requirements such as reference checks (DBS for UK-based individuals) and/or requirements to complete child protection training prior to story production involving children. Story production should be supported by a child safeguarding policy to use alongside story production, which focuses on the practicalities of keeping CYP safe and reporting anything that is seen to contravene this guidance.

Some NGOs have chosen to not use any recognisable images of children, or children's real names alongside their images in NGO communications. Others may decide to use the child's first name only. It is also usual to never publish the child's exact location (i.e. the name of their neighbourhood or village). Others use the triangle of risk¹⁶ to ensure there is never more than one of the following three elements in a story: recognisable face, real full name, or exact location. It is important to also never include any identifying features (school uniform, landscape or signage) that could reveal their exact location. The rationale behind these decisions is to ensure that children are never traceable by anyone who intends to cause them harm.

Story production in humanitarian emergency or disaster settings

In many humanitarian emergency or disaster settings a rapidly-changing situation means that risks to potential contributors can be harder to comprehensively assess, and those involved in story production may not have existing relationships with contributors. It may also be more difficult to establish contact with contributors prior to story production, and to maintain contact with them afterwards. In addition, there may be pressure to produce content fast in order to maximise fundraising or advocacy while there is strong public awareness about the crisis - and to capture the stories of those 'worst affected' to portray them only through the lens of their tragedy.

However, the context of a disaster could also pose the greatest risk to those affected, and be the moment when they are least able to comprehend the impact of being featured in content. For example, if someone has recently experienced a severe traumatic situation such as on a rescue boat after attempting a sea crossing, a live conflict, or after a major rapid-onset emergency, they will still be experiencing shock. They may also not fully understand the risk that sharing their story could pose for them at a later date, or feel so compelled to share their experience with the world (in the hope of raising awareness and receiving help for example) that they give consent in a moment of desperation. In these instances, extra care should be taken to consider the impact of the disaster on people's ability to give informed consent, and all stories should be produced anonymously with names changed and specific location details concealed. Be conscious of the full lives that people lead before and

¹⁶ See: https://www.girlsnotbrides.org/documents/1822/Guidelines_for_ethical_communicaitons_around_child_marriage.pdf

after a disaster, and that by capturing their moment of distress through a single image or quote for example, you are confining them, in perpetuity, to what may be the worst moment of their lives.

Despite the limitations of what story producers are briefed to capture at short notice in a disaster, there should be a concerted effort to revisit affected communities when there is more time - even if not the same individuals featured initially - and give them the opportunity to tell their stories with more context and nuance after the initial phase of the crisis.

Humanitarian disaster settings also provide an opportunity to highlight the efforts of local responders who are usually the first on the scene to help their community - often the true 'heroes' of the story.

Additional care for contributors who may have experienced traumatic events

Story production must at all costs avoid re-traumatising someone. Expert advice should be sought in advance from safeguarding and protection staff, those who have worked closely with the contributor (or those in a similar situation). And again, consider whether your communications even need personal stories from such individuals.

Individuals who have experienced traumatic events may respond to an interview in unpredictable ways; the presence of people who have an existing relationship with contributors is critical as they are probably best placed to assess the situation and determine what is appropriate. This may be a trusted friend, family member or staff member the contributor knows well.

Anyone recording a story from someone who has experienced traumatic events should ideally be trained in how to approach this situation with best practice and must be prepared to use their judgement to respond appropriately if someone becomes upset. Becoming upset may not necessarily mean that you should end an interview, and to do so could be detrimental by sending out a message that it is wrong to become emotional. Individuals may be grateful for having the opportunity to talk about their experiences even if it does make them feel upset; they may not have had a chance to discuss these experiences with others. But in other situations, you may decide that it would be appropriate to pause or end an interview.

Be aware of the impact of asking people to share their experiences. In some more sensitive contexts, it may be safer for the individual to talk about their current situation or their ideas for the future than to recount a previous traumatic experience. This is particularly true of children and young people.

Strategies should be in place should a difficult situation arise.

Story producers entering a context of interviewing people with trauma should have distress and referral protocols prepared in advance. This means being prepared to respond appropriately if someone becomes upset when recounting their story, and being able to refer people to services they need (if that is possible and appropriate). It is also advisable to support your country programme or partner organisation to conduct a follow-up visit to check on the contributor shortly after the story production has taken place.

It is however important to recognise that when carried out well, contributor-centred, creative and long-term communications and storytelling interventions can have a positive and therapeutic impact for those who have experienced traumatic events. As per the guidance above regarding participatory story production, when working with people who have experienced traumatic events, it is critical to work with facilitators who have appropriate expertise to design and run such initiatives safely and in ways that uphold contributors' rights to protection and participation.

Working with models

At times, an NGO may decide to use a model or actor in their communications. If you do, you must ensure that this is made clear to the audience. The rights and wellbeing of child actors/ models should also be governed by an NGO's child protection and safeguarding policies.



Meseret Abraham, 18, is photographed by Genaye Eshetu at her school in South Ethiopia Regional State, Ethiopia

Photo credit: © Amref Health Africa, 2024

Informed consent

Informed consent is the cornerstone of ethical story production and content creation. It is much more than form-filling alone. It is a process that requires meaningful dialogue, and is about listening and asking questions.

This guidance will help ensure that your process of informed consent meets the interests and needs of the contributor as well as the organisation producing and using the resulting content. It should help NGOs to plan and facilitate an informed consent process that is both ethical and meets the legal requirements of GDPR. GDPR has made informed consent a legal requirement in relation to the 'processing' (production as well as storage and use) of any personal data (including images) that will be used by organisations for promotion or fundraising purposes. For organisations, ensuring their content is legally compliant is critical. Without evidence of informed consent, images should not be used for any promotion or fundraising purposes¹⁷.



Videographer Walter Kigali, captures video for Sightsavers of people participating in a community MDA to combat trachoma in Gweru, Zimbabwe, May 2024.

Photo credit: © KC Nwakalor / Sightsavers

¹⁷ Many NGOs are likely to possess images produced prior to May 2018 when new regulation came into effect, for which there may be no evidence of informed consent. Some have chosen to delete all such imagery from their records; others have chosen to review using such imagery on a case-by-case basis with due consideration of any risks involved for the contributor (and the NGO) in publishing those images.

Knowledge is power

The “informed” in informed consent relates to ensuring the potential contributor(s) understands:

- **Why** the NGO wants to film/photograph/interview them (for fundraising/communications/ campaigning purposes etc).
- **What** the resulting communications will be (advert/ publication etc).
- **How** and **where** it will be communicated (through what channels/mediums and to **whom**).

If it isn't informed, it isn't consent!

In addition, GDPR also requires organisations to let contributors know:

- **How long** their image and other personal information will be kept by the NGO – an expiry on consent must be provided and shared with contributors – in perpetuity consent is not supported by GDPR.
- That they **have a right to withdraw consent** for further use, at any time.
- **How** they can withdraw consent.

The evidence you obtain (either a signed form, video recording of verbal consent, or using a consent app) must demonstrate that the information above has been shared with the contributor, so that there is evidence that their consent is informed.

Informed consent must be **freely given** and this is also a GDPR requirement. Many contributors are likely to feel obliged to agree to NGO requests to film/photograph themselves or their child. It is important that your informed consent process is one that supports contributors to feel comfortable and encourages them to ask questions and share any concerns. You must reassure them that there will be no negative consequences for them or others if they choose not to be filmed/photographed/ interviewed. You should provide multiple opportunities for contributors to say no or express their concerns, **by asking**, for example:

“Would you feel more comfortable if we didn't take your/your child's photograph?”

“Are you still comfortable with being filmed?”

“Is there anyone who you don't want to see this photograph?”

“Do you understand that this story could be seen by people overseas but also by people you know?”

“Do you know that this story may exist online and be viewable for a long time into the future?”

The information shared during the informed consent process must be **clear and in a language contributors can understand**. If a photographer or interviewer does not speak the language of the contributor(s), an interpreter must be arranged. Your interpreter must speak in a clear and accessible way – using the equivalent of plain English rather than NGO or legal jargon. If a contributor is someone with health conditions or impairments, ensure the necessary resources are in place to support meaningful informed consent.

Any consent forms should be translated into the language (or the national/local language) of the contributor. Ask your country teams to check this and ensure that the forms you are using to obtain evidence of informed consent are clearly understandable.

Remember it is important to facilitate an informed consent process with everyone that you are interviewing/photographing or filming including staff and partners.

Informed consent with children and young people

Many NGOs work to a principle of obtaining informed consent from parents, caregivers or guardians when producing content with anyone aged under 18 years; and it would be important to check national laws if choosing to do otherwise.¹⁸ The GDPR legal requirement in the UK is that children aged 13 or over can sign an informed consent form by themselves; and for children aged under 13, a parent/caregiver/legal guardian would need to sign the form. However we recommend that parents/caregivers/guardians are asked to sign a form as standard for all those aged under 18 years. Some NGOs seek to obtain dual consent from both child and guardian as the child approaches adulthood. When producing stories with children and young people, remember it is recommended (and respectful) to obtain informed consent from the child themselves, using age-appropriate language.

We also recommend that you include children in the consent process from an age where they can be involved in discussing and understanding why people are recording their story and how it might be used. Children have strong opinions on how they should be depicted and it is their right (as enshrined in the Convention of the Rights of the Child) that they are heard and taken seriously by adults. We suggest including children from around 7 or 8 years but this will depend on the child.

It is good practice to retire images of children or renew the informed consent to continue to use them after three years since the original image was taken or when they turn 18, whichever is sooner.

¹⁸ If, for any reason, obtaining consent from a parent/caregiver or legal guardian is not possible or appropriate, a social worker or child protection professional could act as a witness to their consent.

Guidance for the informed consent process

The guidance below is designed to support an approach to informed consent that is based on supportive and effective dialogue with contributors before, during and after story production. Every situation will be distinct and present its own challenges and limitations. You should always consider someone's capacity to be able to provide informed consent; different approaches may be required with children and some adults who are considered at risk. For example, the discussion might take longer, or it might need to be shorter and for some contributors a follow-up visit is essential.

Before story production

- **Assign responsibility for consent:** At the planning stage determine who is responsible for facilitating the informed consent process with contributors (this might be someone from your country programme/a partner organisation/or your assigned interpreter).
- **Identify and talk to contributors in advance of story production:** Plan and budget for country programme/partner staff to visit potential contributors in advance to carry out initial informed consent dialogues, and to identify potential contributors who are willing to participate. In situations where this is not possible, there should be time and space created for informed consent, in advance, and distinct from, the story production itself. Potential contributors should be provided with the information and time to make a considered decision, to ensure that consent is both informed and freely given.

It is recognised that this will be more difficult to achieve in emergency contexts or with people on the move.

- Be aware that in certain contexts, cultural/social norms may require you to first obtain consent from the head of the family or a local leader in advance and in addition to individual contributors.

Essential elements of informed consent

The dialogue around informed consent should be relaxed and carried out in the contributor's own language, ideally by someone they have an existing relationship with, and without a large crowd present.

You may need to explain that the reason you are taking the time to explain everything is out of respect for the contributor and as an alternative to just taking their photograph without asking people if that is ok. The process, and any forms used, are designed to respect and protect their wishes.

Your organisation should have its own form for obtaining evidence of informed consent, or a required checklist to guide a video recording of informed consent. The table on page 25 can be used to cross-check against your own forms and procedures or to produce one if you don't have one in place already.



Ripple Effect project facilitator Hassan conducts an informed consent process with Fatuma Hamisi. Fatuma is a project participant from Kwale, Kenya.

Photo credit: © Antony Kahaya / Ripple Effect 2024

Essential elements of informed consent

Introduce organisation and individuals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Names of individuals and their roles. Name of NGO and clear short introduction to its aims.
Explain why you would like to photograph/film/interview them	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Provide a short and clear explanation, for example: to raise funds for X; to raise awareness of X etc.
Manage contributors' expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Be clear that the filming/photography/interviewing is not going to result in any direct benefits for that contributor/their community etc. (unless it is).
Clearly communicate contributors' right to refuse to participate and explain there will be no negative consequences in doing so	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Very clearly state that there will be no negative consequences - for individuals, their families and any project work - if they decide not to participate in story production.
Explain how their image/story will be used and what the resulting communication will look like.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Help contributors to visualise the results of the story production by sharing digital and/or printed copies of sample content.
Talk about who is likely to see it.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While you may have specific audiences in mind, make sure contributors are aware that their images and stories could be seen by anyone, anywhere, including their neighbours/ family/ employers. Make sure all contributors are urged to consider carefully whether they are happy for their image and story to be public and potentially seen by anyone, including those close to them. Ask contributors if there is anyone that they would not want to see their image/read their story. It can also be useful to talk about audience numbers. For example: "We will share your photograph on our Facebook page which has 100,000 followers."

Essential elements of informed consent

Explain contributors' right to conceal identity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> If they would like to share their story but do not want anyone to know it is them, there are different ways their identity can be concealed: no images of face, no recording of their voice, changing their name.
How long the agency will keep image/story for.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For example: "We will store your image and story carefully and only use it for purposes described above/we don't know yet exactly how we will use your story but it is likely to be in the ways shown in the examples. After [e.g. five] years your image and story will no longer be used. If we do want to use your images and story again, we will need to come back to you at this point to re-consent."¹⁹
Contributors' right to withdraw consent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For example: "We will make all reasonable efforts to remove the images from circulation, certainly online. (This is of course more complicated when it comes to printed materials.) We will not use your image in any future communications."

Once all of the above has been covered, you can get on with the process of checking whether the contributor is happy or not to proceed with the photography/interview/filming, and to **obtain evidence of their consent**, either collecting their signature on your informed consent form, or video recording their consent, ensuring that the elements above are included (or referred to) in that recording.

¹⁹ GDPR states that organisations should not hold personal data for any longer than is necessary. The length of time an organisation chooses to store and use someone's personal data (ie the lifespan of the image/story) is up to the organisation, but GDPR does require that time limits are stipulated and that those are communicated to the individual whose personal data is being held. This is part of the Storage Limitation principle of GDPR. For further information: <https://ico.org.uk/for-organisations/uk-gdpr-guidance-and-resources/data-protection-principles/a-guide-to-the-data-protection-principles/the-principles/storage-limitation/>

At the end of the interview/filming/photography

- Where possible, **review and share any images taken with the contributor**, and read back key parts of any interview, as a way of checking they are happy with them being published.
- At the end of any interview, when the contributor has told their story and had their image taken, it is important to **revisit the consent agreement by checking**: “Is there any part of what you have told us that you would prefer us to leave out?” and confirming whether they still do (or do not) want to be identifiable in the resulting communications.
- Leave contributors with the **contact details of partner/communications officers in-country** with a clear statement (in their language) that they can contact them in the event they have any concerns about the photographs or they decide they no longer want the NGO to use it. (It is a GDPR requirement to ensure that contributors are made aware of how they would go about withdrawing consent if they wished to.)
- You need to also clearly explain that images and stories that have already been published cannot always be removed, but an NGO can guarantee that existing communications featuring a contributor won't be re-used, and that **no future communications will be produced once consent is withdrawn**. This information, together with the contact details, could be on a small laminated card, a thank you letter, or a copy of the consent form – something that is left behind with contributors.



After recording an interview about her work with Sightsavers, Constance Gumbo, district environmental health officer in Gweru, Zimbabwe, reviews pictures of herself with photographer Jason J Mulikita, May 2024.

Photo credit: © Julia Tessari / Sightsavers

Informed consent with groups

The way in which informed consent should be managed when photographing or filming groups of people, as opposed to individuals, is determined by several factors, including the age of the people involved and whether the context of the group is considered sensitive. NGOs should determine, in advance, how the informed consent process with groups and crowds will be conducted, and how they will obtain evidence of informed consent. They should also consider the chance that one individual in a group will withdraw consent, and what this means for the use of the material. As a guide:

A group of children and young people in any context

Parental/caregiver/guardian consent in advance is required, and the NGO must have some form of evidence of this consent. How that is managed will vary from place to place; some schools may have existing consent arrangements in place with all parents/caregivers/guardians (although be aware that many do not), while others may choose to inform them in advance of story production taking place and ask them to inform the school if they do not give consent for their child to participate. A responsible staff member from the school should sign an appropriate consent form, guaranteeing that parental consent has been obtained. Informed consent should also be conducted with children, in a way that is meaningful and appropriate, before any story production starts.

A group of adults in a context which is deemed to be non-sensitive

For example, participants at a training course, members of a savings group, partner organisation's staff meeting.

In these contexts, it would be considered appropriate to go through an informed consent process with the whole group and ask individuals to declare their consent either by a show of hands, or a signature on a group consent form. If you decide not to collect individual signatures, then an appropriate group consent form must be signed by someone who is recognised as the group leader/representative and is happy to guarantee the consent of those individuals present at the time of story production, and that the individuals are also happy for this individual to do this on their behalf.

If you go on to do one-to-one filming/photography/interviewing with any individuals from that group, you will also need evidence of that individual providing consent.

A group of adults in a sensitive context

For example, a protest group, an HIV support group, or patients in a medical treatment centre.

It is advised that you obtain informed consent on an individual basis when producing stories with such groups. As with individuals who are considered at risk or in sensitive contexts, consider carefully with contributors (and those who are familiar with them and their context) whether or not their identity should be concealed to protect them from any risk associated with being identified in that context.

Informed consent with crowds in public space

For story production that will involve imagery of large groups or crowds in public spaces, the consent arrangements should ideally be thought through in advance of the story production.

If an individual is recognisable in a crowd shot, the decision as to whether informed consent is required or not depends on whether the context of that crowd reveals information about that individual which is considered personal (health, sexuality, asylum/refugee status, political beliefs, religion).

You do not require consent from identifiable individuals in the background of an urban or rural public scene which does not reveal any personal information about the individual. But, the situation for identifiable individuals in a queue outside an HIV testing centre, in many refugee camps, or at a political rally is different. Publication of their images could lead to risks for themselves or their families

and consent should never be assumed. Unless it is possible to facilitate informed consent with everyone who is recognisable in that scene, images need to be taken in ways which do not reveal the individual identities of those at the scene, or you should blur the faces of anyone whose consent you don't have.

Storage of the evidence of informed consent

Consent documentation will often contain personal information (places, names, contact details) which must be stored securely so that there is no risk that this information is published alongside the content. It is important to have a system in place to ensure that the content files (images, case studies, notes etc.) can be linked to evidence of consent, but this evidence should not be accessible to all users of the content. Consent forms (or verbal recordings of consent) may be stored on a separate server or be password protected with limited access.

It should be clear to the users of content, at the point of selection and using an image, that there is: a) evidence of consent; b) the date at which content was produced/recorded; and c) information about any restrictions/instructions on use.

Evidence of informed consent should be kept for as long as you are still processing the personal data which is based on that consent.

Responsible portrayal

Responsible portrayal means producing accurate representations of contributors that communicate context alongside individual stories, and that do not perpetuate racist stereotypes.

NGO communications have the power and potential to inform public understanding of the people we work with, the challenges they are experiencing and the broader context and root causes of those challenges.

Whatever the issues we are working on – the climate crisis, conflict, poverty, health – we have a responsibility to ensure our communications accurately represent contributors, their stories and their situations, and do not perpetuate racism. We should commit to telling fuller stories that convey people's experiences, in ways which generate solidarity and compassion but that also improve public understanding of the challenges and circumstances facing the people we work with. We must avoid "the dangers of the single story"²⁰.

"If you show a people as one thing over and over again this is what they become... If all we see is how poor people are it becomes impossible to imagine them as anything else, their poverty becomes the single story... The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they aren't true, [it] is that they are incomplete and they make one story become the only story."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) from her TED talk, The danger of a single story.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9lhs241zeg>

²⁰ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) from her TED talk 'The danger of a single story'.

Ensuring accuracy and communicating information about the context respects both contributors and audiences. By context we mean linking individual stories to related wider national and global issues and also explanations of **why** your organisation is working with the people featured, to address that issue, in that context, at this time. Sharing images and stories without context can, alongside other potential impacts such as misrepresentation and misinterpretation, perpetuate racism and the myth that issues of poverty and global inequality are natural phenomena “rather than a result of broader, social, economic or political factors.”²¹

Many Bond members will be signatories to the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief ²² **which states:** “In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.” In a humanitarian crisis ensuring our communications include clear information about the wider socio-economic context and why a humanitarian emergency is taking place, is especially important. For example, in the past storytelling about famine has been dehumanising and inaccurate with a tendency to portray people only in relation to their suffering. We must find ways to communicate the issues facing the people with whom we work with context that demonstrates their active agency and roles in also helping themselves, without reducing them to symbols of helplessness and need.

Responsible portrayal means:

- We will represent a diversity of people and voices in our communications.
- We will not only show a person’s problems, we will also show the active steps, however small, that they are taking to support themselves and their family or community.
- Across our communications we will prioritise content which illustrates people supporting or caring for each other, leading work, or being capable agents of change. This is distinct from ‘positive stories’, as we may still show a ‘negative story’ but we will show it with the person depicted as an active rather than passive character in their own lives despite their need for support.
- Unless a person is non-verbal, or a young child, we will always include at least one quote from them explaining in their own words what is happening to them, and where possible their words will make up the majority of the content.
- We will create content which shows local and national staff supporting contributors and features their voices and full names.

²¹ The Illustrative Guide to the Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages (2014).

²² <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/the-movement/code-of-conduct/>

Responsible portrayal means:

- Content that features celebrities should serve to amplify rather than silence the voices of the people we work with. We should not frame the celebrity as the hero of the piece, but instead use them to help frame an issue and as a platform for the voices and opinions of the affected populations.
 - We recognise the existence of the problematic white saviour trope and will ensure that any communications which include white celebrities or experts show contributors as their equals, rather than as people who are dependent on their knowledge, assistance or pity. We recognise that **all** communications featuring white experts or celebrities visiting people of colour living in poverty play some part in perpetuating racism and the myth of the white saviour. We will continue to explore alternative approaches to communications that are effective in terms of audience engagement and support.
 - We will avoid images of lone children in visible need of assistance and children who appear to be abandoned, as this very rarely represents reality and perpetuates racist and prejudicial views about those who experience poverty.
 - We will avoid images that look down on someone with the intention of creating a greater sense of vulnerability or need.
- Image makers will never take images of topless pubescent or post-pubescent girls, or images that display the genitalia of people of any age.
 - We will always ask partners and country programmes if there are any cultural sensitivities to be aware of when taking photographs or filming certain places, objects or actions.
 - We will take care with the language we use to refer to people and their contexts and seek guidance from them and organisations that work with them on what is the most appropriate language to use, recognising that this can be subject to change. For example, while some UK organisations refer to working with people with disabilities, there is an increasing preference among others for the term Disabled people²³.
 - We will learn about the context before and during story production. TORs for story production should contain verified information about the immediate and wider context (if known) of the individual(s) and the issues to be communicated. Record and file additional information about the context at the time of story production, so that it is available to those planning to use the content creation.
 - We will produce comprehensive captions that answer who, when, what, where, and why to accompany images. This information will support the responsible use of images.

²³ See: <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/social-model-disability-language>

Responsible portrayal means:

- Where it is necessary to 'set up' images, we will replicate individuals' realities. For example, if a child who is visually impaired moves around by holding their parent's hand, we will not set up a photograph or film that shows the child by themselves, not holding anyone's hand. It can be beneficial to carry out interviews first and then use this detailed information to re-create the story with imagery. If in doubt, talk to your contributors, and those who support or work with them, to check that your set-up is an accurate reflection of their experiences and circumstances.
 - We will never use an image of an individual or group of individuals to illustrate a story or an issue which has nothing to do with them. For example, if you are running a campaign about HIV treatment for women in Zimbabwe, you should not use an image of Zambian women accessing maternal health services.
 - We will not use images from one location to illustrate a story in another location, unless we can make this clear in the caption along with the reason for doing this.
 - We will not create "composite stories" where several different people's stories are merged together into one "generalised" story as this can dehumanise the individual contributors and their personal circumstances and mislead audiences.
- We will take care when using images taken at a previous time to represent a current situation in the same place. Talk to others in your organisation, and check with people in that place about whether the image continues to accurately depict the situation or place. There is no exact guidance on when an image becomes out of date; as with many ethical decisions what is important is to be aware of risks and make a considered decision. Ensure you use the right tense in your writing and if in any doubt date your image and caption so that it is clear when it was recorded.
 - Wherever possible, enable your audiences to easily find out more about the context in which an image or a story was recorded, as part of your commitment to telling fuller stories. For example:
 - Avoid using images without captions.
 - Where the channel/design does not allow for full captions, create a clearly visible link for people to access further information - a clear and short user journey from a single image to the fuller story.
 - Use multiple channels to provide depth, context and detail: a short TV advertisement can be complemented by a fuller, more complete, story online.

Digital manipulation - no changes that alter meaning

It is understood that designers and those editing and using images will make some post-production changes (such as cropping) for reasons relating to design and layout. It is not, however, acceptable to make any changes to an image (photograph or film) which change its context or meaning. It is important that our audiences can rely on our images as “credible evidence” and proof that something happened at a certain time and place.

Do not crop, edit, colour or do anything else that enhances the perception of poverty or abandonment.

At times, NGOs will manipulate images to use these in creative or fictional ways that are not intended to communicate reality. In all cases, it should be made clear to the audience that these are “set up” and never presented as reality.

The importance of good interpretation and translation

Work with experienced interpreters, so that, as far as possible, you can accurately record and represent contributors’ stories. Many contributors will not be able to communicate their story effectively in their own words to you without one. Poor interpretation risks misrepresentation. Translation may also be required during the processing of content, particularly when reviewing and editing video footage.

Interpretation must be honest and accurate – reflecting the individual’s turn of phrase as closely as possible. Interpreters should be made aware that they should not report or probe for the information that they think story production teams want to hear.

Where possible, make an audio recording of any interviews. This will provide an accurate record of the interpretation provided at the time, and the contributor’s words (in case you feel you need to get any of the interpretation checked).

Take care with captions

The need for an accurate caption must not override the need to manage risks in relation to disclosing someone’s identity through sharing their name, location or circumstance. With images of children, do not include any identifying information in the caption, for example exact location or parent’s surname.

Accompanying text affects how an image is interpreted. It can incriminate contributors or stereotype them in an unfavourable way that they would not agree to if asked. For example, people whose images are used in communications about diseases, child soldiers, or rape survivors will be assumed to have experienced those issues themselves. Using imagery where individuals are unidentifiable to illustrate stories about sensitive issues may be the best approach.

Responsible use of stock imagery from libraries and news agencies

Many organisations, at times, use images produced by others, including 'stock' or media images purchased from commercial, news and photography agencies, as well as those that are freely available under a Creative Commons licence.

There can be different reasons why some organisations may use stock imagery, including budget and the nature of their work. Many organisations may also choose to use stock imagery in the immediate aftermath of a rapid-onset emergency when there is pressure to generate awareness of the emergency, and raise funds, as soon as possible. Some organisations work to the principle that, in these contexts, they will use third party content until they are able to generate their own communications.

When using stock imagery, NGOs should always use an internal sign-off and risk assessment process to identify any risks before publication, to both the person in the image and the organisation using it. Stock imagery that is produced and processed as journalistic is unlikely to have any evidence of informed consent associated with it. For this reason, we advise NGOs to avoid the use of stock images in which individuals are identifiable, that come from news agencies and journalistic photographic agencies.

Use of stock imagery featuring models obviously poses far less risk than imagery featuring individuals as themselves. It is, however, important to signal in any accompanying captions when images are posed by models in order to maintain audience trust.



A man hugs his daughter and granddaughter as they cross the border from Ukraine to Poland in February 2022. The image, which conceals the identities of people fleeing conflict, became the face of the DEC appeal that raised over £426 million.

Image © Michael Kappeler/dpa. Advert © Disasters Emergency Committee

Checklist for using stock imagery

All third-party/stock imagery that features an identifiable individual that is not a model should:

- Come from a trusted and verifiable source (such as a reputable agency).
- Have a guarantee that anyone identifiable in the image provided informed consent and in the event that this is not provided should be put through a rigorous internal risk assessment process before the decision to use it.
- Have caption information available.

In addition you should:

- Ensure correct copyright terms and appropriate licence fees are agreed.
- Investigate whether other organisation(s) have bought the imagery, to avoid it being used across different organisations or for different purposes.
- Ensure the imagery is used accurately in relation to the specific situation depicted.
- Ensure the image is not used alongside a story from a different person.

Adapted from 'Guidelines for ethical communications around child marriage, Girls Not Brides' (2022).

Responsible use of AI-generated images and content

There may be instances where organisations decide to use AI-generated images to support their communications and storytelling. Whenever you do use AI-generated images you should ensure your audiences are aware of this and that you provide specific details about how the image was generated and why you decided to use AI in this instance. Honesty and transparency in our communications is essential for building trust between NGOs and their audiences.

AI imagery is also not a way of solving problems of representation (or to avoid consent issues). AI image-generators are built on existing photography, and contain documented biases that are colonial, patriarchal and heteronormative. They could therefore contribute to or even exacerbate the problem of representations that stereotype the people we work with. Users of AI images must be mindful of these biases when writing AI prompts and choosing AI images.

Reasons to use AI-generated images

There are two main reasons to use AI-generated images.

- 1. For budget reasons** – for smaller NGOs with limited media and communications budget, this might be a cost-effective way of generating visual content to support its communications work.
- 2. For ethical reasons (sensitive contexts)** – for NGOs working in contexts or with individuals at risk where images and photographs could put individuals at risk of harm or reprisals, and/or there are other reasons it is not possible to produce original imagery, AI-generated images could be helpful. In these contexts NGOs need to produce imagery in creative ways which engage audiences without compromising the risks to those who contribute their story.

We do not recommend that you use AI-generated images unless you are doing it for either of these reasons.

Whenever AI-generated images are used it is critical that you always make it clear and obvious that it is an AI image. You should include, 'this image is AI-generated' within the caption. And if relevant a justification, such as – 'We have used this AI-generated image because we cannot use images of real people, as to do so would have placed them at a risk of harm or reprisals. In this instance, using AI-generated imagery is an ethical approach that protects the people we work with while ensuring we communicate the realities of their lives and the causes of the injustices they experience.'

Examples of communications using AI-generated images:

www.exhibitai.com.au

Nauru island in the Pacific is used by the Australian government to detain asylum seekers arriving by boat. There is no photographic evidence of detainees on Nauru island and so AI technicians, photojournalists and survivors worked together to create images based on the review of legal testimony and engagement with survivors.

Stories from the Future series on Instagram by Vidushi Yadav:

'A series of speculative fiction that invites us to envision and craft the world we dream about'.



**'We officially left the state of
climate emergency'**

A Story from the Future
Author: WECF International

"We officially left the state of climate emergency" scientists communicated on the news.

Photo credit: © Vidushi Yadav

Resources

[Anti-racism and decolonising: a framework for organisations, Bond \(2023\)](#)

[Ethical Content Guidelines: Upholding the rights of the people in the pictures in content gathering, management and use, Oxfam \(2020\)](#)

[Ethical Communications Guidelines, UNHCR \(2023\)](#)

[From contributors to co-producers: a guide to participatory production, On Our Radar \(2023\)](#)

[Guidelines Guidelines for ethical communications around child marriage, Girls Not Brides \(2022\)](#)

[Principles of INCLUSIVE, EQUITABLE and ANTI-RACIST communications, Amnesty International \(2024\)](#)

[Promoting anti-racist narratives in development sector research, International Institute for Environment and Development, IIED \(2022\)](#)

[Reimagining Comms: A bitesize toolkit for supporting development organisations to begin the journey of decolonising the way that we think and talk about their work, Najite Phoenix \(2024\)](#)

[Taking British politics and colonialism out of our language, Bond \(2021\)](#)

[The Ethics of using AI in Fundraising, Rogare \(2024\)](#)

[The People in the Pictures: Vital Perspectives on Save the Children's image making, Siobhan Warrington & Jess Crombie \(2017\)](#)

[UK GDPR guidance and resources for organisations, Information Commissioner's Office](#)

[Who Owns the Story? Financial testing of charity vs participant led storytelling in fundraising, Amref, UAL and UEA \(2022\)](#)

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/nvsm.1783>



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