



INSIGHTS SUMMARY

HOW CAN WE ENSURE COMMUNICATIONS ARE HUMAN-CENTRED, EMPATHETIC AND ENGAGING?

COMMUNICATING SOCIAL IMPACT / ONLINE WRITTEN DISCUSSION / 23 MAY 2024

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WITH THANKS TO OUR EXPERT PANEL – we are very grateful to each member of the panel and to other members of the Business Fights Poverty community for their contributions:

Alice Allan, Collaboration Director, **Business Fights Poverty**; **Annabel Beales**, Collaboration Director, **Business Fights Poverty**; **Bridget Cubble**, Strategic Marketing Lead, **Fairtrade Foundation**; **Carolyn Tarr**, Executive Director, **Posner Center for International Development**; **Deepti Ann Joseph**, Assistant Manager, Communications, **CottonConnect**; **Deepshikha Singh**, Senior Manager, Communications, **CottonConnect**; **Kalkidan Lakew Yihun**, Program Coordinator, Women Respond, **Women's Economic Justice Care**; **Michael Sani**, CEO, **Play Verto**; **Nick Rosen**, Programme Communications Manager, **TechnoServe**; **Rochelle Atizado**, Senior Advisor Partnerships and Special Initiatives, **UN Foundation**; **Sarah Jane Saltmarsh**, Head, Thought Leadership, **BRAC**; **Timothy Fort**, Eveleigh Professorship in Business Ethics, **Kelley School of Business at Indiana University**

Moderator: Katie Hyson, Director of Thought Leadership and COO, **Business Fights Poverty**

Effective communication about social issues is critical to fostering engagement and driving positive action. However, it requires a delicate balance of sensitivity, respect and authenticity to ensure communications are human-centred, empathetic and engaging. Involving the voices of those represented in the co-creation process is essential. It is important to tailor communications to local contexts, embrace change and prioritise inclusive practices. To ensure longevity and durability, communications should be built on trust and implemented through transparency, ethical practices, and regular feedback loops.

This Insights Summary is developed from the [Business Fights Poverty Forum Discussion which took place here](#) on 23 May 2024. The forum aimed to explore best practices for sensitively communicating and personalising challenging topics. We are grateful to all who contributed.

Contributors shared their experience, expertise and strategies for effective

human-centred communications aimed at social impact. The following key points summarise their insights, shared openly so others can learn and build on them. The goal is to improve our communications, particularly when addressing and portraying people's experiences of social issues.

What strategies can be employed to guarantee the effectiveness of human-centred communications aimed at social impact?

Below are the top ten strategies shared by contributors based on their experiences. Combined, these strategies form the basis for effective human-centred communications and should be considered by anyone developing communications which aim to tell social impact stories.

1. CO-CREATE AUTHENTICALLY

Authenticity in communications is achieved through co-creation with the individuals being represented. Bridget Cubble from Fairtrade Foundation shared feedback she received from a cocoa Farmer from Ghana: “If it’s not by me, it’s not for me”.

The farmers expressed that they were unhappy ‘to be represented’ if they were not directly involved in the communication of their work.

2. EMPOWER COMMUNITY-LED NARRATIVES

Nick Rosen from TechnoServe provided a strong example of how [The Everyday Justice Project](#) in Colombia trains and equips local individuals to tell their own stories about how they experience justice and co-existence in areas of conflict. Nick explained how this method provides visibility to stories “that would otherwise likely go unnoticed and untold” and therefore, “making us see the situation differently”.

3. LISTEN TO LEARN

[CARE’s Women Respond initiative](#) demonstrates the power of community feedback and leadership. Kalkidan Lakew Yihun began this initiative in 2020 to focus on “listening to women and girls’ experiences during the pandemic” to capture the “shocks communities are facing”. These actions provide an example of how organisations can adapt strategies accordingly by simply listening as well as giving the community ownership of this data.

4. CONTEXTUALISE APPROACHES AND LOOK OUT FOR BIAS

Recognising the diversity of experiences within different regions is crucial. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and successful communication strategies must be tailored to fit the local context. In the Rebel Spirit Collective’s Critique to (Re)Creation Storytelling Series, Carolyn Tarr explains they use a “triangulated focus technique”, which includes: 1) choosing a focus, 2) ensuring co-creation, and 3) understanding “what is the listening and learning that needs to be done BEFORE any storyboard is created.”

***If it’s not by me,
it’s not for me.***

—Cocoa farmer from Ghana

Feedback received by Bridget Cubble
from Fairtrade Foundation

5. MAINTAIN TRANSPARENCY AND ENSURE FEEDBACK LOOPS

Establishing regular feedback loops and being transparent about the use of data and the impact of communications fosters a sense of joint ownership and trust. Sarah Jane Saltmarsh from BRAC highlights the importance of self-reflection in this process by asking, “Would I want my story told in this way?” It’s crucial to consider if one would want their photo, voice or story shared in the manner being proposed.

Embracing imperfection and being open to iterative processes allows for continuous improvement and adaptation based on feedback and new insights. As Kalkidan from the Women’s Economic Justice Care aptly notes “Embrace imperfection – don’t aim for a perfect strategy, tool or process” and that planning from the beginning is essential; “human-centred communication is not a one-time off activity ... plan and budget for it from the start”.

6. BUILD TRUST TO LAND DIFFICULT MESSAGES

Long-term engagement builds trust. Sharing data and insights with people encourages joint ownership. When people are coming from opposing positions, finding areas of shared interest is essential. Timothy Fort of the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University argues that “constructive dialogue is essential” for those involved in creating and consuming communications. “Human beings have a lot of identities, and finding common ground can change the tenor of the conversation to be more civil and constructive.”

Michael Sani underscores the need for non-alienating messaging: “Serious work doesn’t have to be serious. Our world is so full of fear – that sometimes fearful messaging can be so alienating.”

7. ENSURE INCLUSIVITY

Ensuring that storytelling processes are inclusive involves co-creating content with underrepresented storytellers and leveraging technology to enhance inclusivity. As Rochelle Atizado from the UN Foundation highlights, it’s crucial to “ensure your content is available in the languages understood by the audiences you wish to reach.” Additionally, Carolyn Tarr emphasises the importance of a broad definition of diversity, noting that inclusivity means “co-created with storytellers that have not been at the table” and extends beyond mere representation. Platforms like [Play Verto](#) harness the power of play and technology to gather and share real-world data effectively, supporting these inclusive practices.

8. ADDRESS POWER IMBALANCES

Recognising and addressing power imbalances is critical. [Restless Development’s methodology](#) empowers young people to conduct research and advocate for change, ensuring their voices are central to the narratives. Annabel Beales from Business Fights Poverty stresses that, “Storytelling approaches can be very effective to humanise people rather than referring to statistics or numbers.” This method ensures that the stories are more relatable and impactful, giving a voice to those who might otherwise be overlooked.

9. ADOPT ETHICAL STORYTELLING PRACTICES

Maintaining high ethical standards in content creation and data protection is crucial. Essentially authentic and effective communications must be true and ethical, especially in a landscape where the public is increasingly cynical of greenwashing. Organisations must integrate moral best practices into their storytelling processes to respect and uphold the dignity of the individuals involved. Sarah provides a list of examples in Devex’s [Better Conversations about Ethical Storytelling](#).

Bridget underscores the importance of this approach, stating, “It’s vital to have a full ecosystem that supports ethical content gathering or recording. A bespoke role for someone responsible for content, along with a data protection officer, can add a layer of ethical storytelling to the process. It is all interlinked.”

10. LEVERAGE TECHNOLOGY FOR ETHICAL COMMUNICATIONS

To make storytelling more engaging and inclusive while upholding ethical standards, technology can be a powerful tool. Platforms like Play Verto facilitate inclusive data collection and storytelling by engaging communities directly. For instance, in a multi-organisation collaboration, [Play Verto involved 17,000 people](#), enabling target communities of social enterprises to share their realities.

Social media platforms also provide effective avenues for inclusive and authentic storytelling. [Bisan Owda](#), a young filmmaker, uses Instagram to depict daily life in Gaza, while [Aketch Joy Winnie](#) shares her experiences in a Ugandan village through her Instagram account. These platforms allow individuals to directly share their stories with a broad audience. As Annabel Beales notes, “The best communication often comes when platforms create space to hear directly from the people who have experience of the social issue.” This approach highlights the importance of using technology not only to engage and include diverse voices but also to ensure that the messaging remains authentic and relatable.

CONCLUSION AND CALL TO ACTION

The insights shared during this discussion underscore the importance of human-centred, empathetic and engaging communications. Thoughtful, considered curation of these communications, regardless of their medium, is required to authentically tell important stories. The efforts laid out in the ten strategies above provide a framework for developing these communications.

These strategies highlight that to develop human-centred messages of positive social impact effectively, organisations must prioritise collaborative efforts that

embrace diversity, harness local insights and ensure the inclusion of those directly affected by social issues. This entails establishing a continuous loop of feedback and co-creation with communities, ensuring that their voices and experiences drive the narrative and content creation.

By integrating empathy into strategic planning, organisations can foster more profound and meaningful connections with their audiences. This approach should focus on transparency, showing the impact of social initiatives through real stories

that highlight individual and community agency. A partnering mentality is crucial in achieving this. Unlocking the expertise and deep understanding that resides in different sectors – from community organisations to NGOs, corporates, media and beyond – is an important part of this.

Ultimately, ensuring that communications are human-centred requires a commitment to understanding and reflecting the complexities of human experiences in all messaging, fostering an environment of respect and dignity for all stakeholders involved.

Where are the examples of exemplary social impact communications that centrally feature individuals directly affected by the issues at hand?

Below is inspirational content in all forms and from all corners of the globe, as suggested by the discussion contributors:

350.org. (n.d.). *Matagi Malohi*. Available at: <https://350.org/matagimalohifilm>

This film and multimedia project celebrates Pacific Climate Warriors, portraying them not as victims but as leaders and cultural stewards in the climate crisis fight. It emphasises the role of strong community narratives and activism in confronting global challenges.

Aketch Joy Winnie on Instagram and Youtube. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/aketchjoywinnie/?hl=en> & <https://www.youtube.com/@AketchJoyWinnie>

Warm, creative original content with high social media focus.

Bisan Owda on Instagram. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/wizard_bisan/?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==

Filmmaker and journalist reporting from Palestine.

BRAC. (2024). The Good Feed.

Available at: <https://blog.brac.net>

This blog presents knowledge from the global south, offering insights into and solutions for major global challenges. It highlights local innovations and direct implementation experiences from one of the largest NGOs, BRAC, focusing on various topics such as climate, health and financial inclusion.

BRAC. (2023). Women in Coastal Bangladesh Losing Uteruses to Climate Crisis. Available at: <https://blog.brac.net/women-in-coastal-bangladesh-are-losing-their-uteruses-to-the-climate-crisis>

In coastal Bangladesh, rising sea levels are increasingly affecting women's reproductive health. Saline intrusion into freshwater sources is linked to a range of health issues, particularly affecting the reproductive systems of women in these areas, leading to significant medical and social concerns.

CARE. (2022). Data as a Force for Good – Women Respond Quarter 3 Briefing. Available at: <https://www.care.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Data-as-a-Force-for-Good-Women-Respond-Quarter-3-Briefing-March-2022-1.pdf>

This briefing covers how women and girls in Village Savings and Loan Associations (VSLAs) across several African countries have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic from December 2020 to December 2021. It highlights the resilience and adaptability of these groups,

revealing trends in how they have managed economic impacts and supported community health and welfare during the pandemic.

CARE. (n.d.). Women Respond. Available at: <https://www.care.org/our-work/disaster-response/emergencies/covid-19/women-respond-leadership-covid-19-response>

CARE's global Women Respond initiative focus on listening to women to put their voices and experiences at the center of crises response. The initiative was launched at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and after two years of implementation, expanded to continue to listen to women's voices in any crisis that communities are experiencing, including conflict, climate change, food insecurity, and many others. The initiative aims to understand the unique and evolving challenges women face, highlighting their crucial role in community resilience and response and the support they advocate for from leaders at local and global levels.

Carling Black Label on YouTube. (2022). Bride Armour Campaign. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2jRDalTUS8>

This social awareness initiative tackles the issue of domestic violence by creating symbolic protective wedding attire, aiming to spark conversations and promote change regarding the safety of women in their homes.

Co-op on YouTube. (2019). Co-op Fairtrade Example Video. Available at: <https://youtu.be/AQPy0zloRY0>

The video showcases how the Co-op supports Fairtrade initiatives, emphasising their impact on improving the lives of farmers worldwide by promoting fair trade practices, sustainability and economic stability. The video highlights specific products or stories demonstrating the benefits of Fairtrade certification.

Devex. (2023). Better Conversations about Ethical Storytelling. Available at: <https://pages.devex.com/rs/685-KBL-765/images/better-conversations-about-ethical-storytelling.pdf>

This guide emphasises the importance of ethical storytelling in the non-profit sector, aiming to elevate diverse voices and experiences where aid and social impact work occur. It offers a platform for various stakeholders to engage in conversations that challenge

traditional communications practices, encouraging a shift towards more inclusive and responsible storytelling methods.

Everyday Peace Indicators. (2020). The Everyday Justice Project. Available at: <https://www.everydaypeaceindicators.org/san-jose-de-urama>

This project constructs everyday indicators of justice and coexistence from the viewpoints of rural communities in Colombia and the DRC, regions with a history of intense armed conflict. By collaborating closely with local communities, the project gathers insights on local conceptions of justice and the effectiveness of peacebuilding institutions. This community-driven approach helps bridge the gap between local experiences and institutional efforts, aiming to enhance the implementation of Peace Agreements and contribute to lasting peace and coexistence.

Fairtrade Foundation. (2023). Endangered Aisle – Fairtrade Fortnight Briefing Paper 2023. Available at: https://www.fairtrade.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Endangered-Aisle-Fairtrade-Fortnight-briefing-paper_2023.pdf

This briefing highlights how climate change is threatening the future of the UK's favourite foods like bananas, coffee and cocoa. The report, created for Fairtrade Fortnight 2023, emphasises the vulnerability of these essential commodities to environmental risks such as climate change, deforestation and biodiversity loss. It underscores the need for sustainable practices to protect these vital food sources and the livelihoods of farmers in vulnerable regions.

Fairtrade on Instagram. (2024). International Tea Day. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/C7ObzldNhbn/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA== & https://www.instagram.com/p/C7PFYheO2-//?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==

Farmers Voice Radio. (n.d.). Farmers Voice Radio. Available at: <https://www.farmersvoiceradio.org>

This organisation focuses on empowering smallholder farmers across various countries by using radio programmes to share agricultural knowledge, experiences and innovations directly from farmers to farmers, thereby fostering community learning and growth.

Global Goals Week. (n.d.). Global Goals Week Coalition. Available at: <http://www.globalgoalsweek.org>

This website brings together individuals, governments and organisations, communicating the various events and initiatives driving action and raising awareness during the Global Goals Week.

IllumiNative. (n.d.). IllumiNative. Available at: <https://illuminative.org>

IllumiNative is a Native woman-led organisation that works to increase the visibility of Native peoples and challenge prevailing narratives about them. Established in 2018, the organisation aims to build power for Native peoples by amplifying contemporary Native voices, stories and issues, thus advancing justice, equity and self-determination. IllumiNative's activities are rooted in extensive research and include efforts to change narratives and cultures, both within Native communities and the broader public. Their work spans various sectors, including media, entertainment and social justice, seeking to correct invisibility and misconceptions that persist in mainstream representations.

Justice Defenders on YouTube. (2024). Justice Defenders: Reforming the System Together. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7HN3YAPv48Q>

The video highlights the organisation's work in training inmates and others in defenceless communities across Africa to become paralegals and lawyers, empowering them to defend their rights and those of their peers effectively.

Peek Vision on YouTube. (2022). Making the Invisible Visible. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R2qet-RU5Jg>

The video explores Peek Vision's mission to combat global vision loss by providing simple, cost-effective solutions. They aim to make quality eye care accessible, especially in areas with a shortage of specialists.

Riders for Health. (n.d.). Ebrima: A Day in the Life of a Motorcycle Health Worker. Available at: https://riders.org/ebrima_ceesay

This documentary short highlights Ebrima Ceesay's role as a community health worker in The Gambia. Supported by Riders for Health, Ebrima uses a motorcycle to deliver

medical care and nutritional support to children in remote areas, showcasing the vital role of mobility in healthcare access.

Skoll on YouTube. (2017). Still I Rise by Maya Angelou – Skoll WF 2017. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fthuqMaPeOY>

Listen to the powerful recitation of Maya Angelou's inspiring poem, emphasising resilience and dignity in the face of oppression, which resonated deeply with the themes of the 2017 Skoll World Forum.

The New Humanitarian. (2023). Flipping the Narrative – The New Humanitarian. Available at: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/first-person/2023/02/28/flipping-the-narrative-life-as-a-refugee-in-malawi>

A series focused on giving refugees, asylum seekers and migrants a central role in discussions about policies affecting their lives. The series showcases personal stories that challenge traditional narratives and highlight the lived realities of displaced individuals. It aims to shift the perception of refugees from passive aid recipients to active participants in shaping policy and public opinion.

United Nations Foundation. (2023). Early Warning: Forecasting the Next Superstorm. Available at: <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/early-warning-forecasting-the-next-superstorm>

An article focusing on enhancing global readiness for extreme weather through improved early warning systems. These systems are vital for predicting and mitigating the impacts of severe weather events like hurricanes, which are becoming more frequent due to climate change. The initiative aims to ensure that everyone on Earth, especially those in vulnerable regions, receives timely alerts about potential disasters. This effort involves collaboration with international organisations to implement comprehensive disaster risk reduction strategies.

United Nations Foundation. (2023). For The Caribbean's Last Indigenous Community, Sustainability Is Survival. Available at: <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/the-caribbeans-last-indigenous-community-is-living-proof-that-sustainability-is-survival>

This article highlights the plight of the Kalinago people of Dominica, who are facing severe

challenges due to climate change. Their survival depends on sustainable practices rooted in their ancestral knowledge, which they apply to manage and protect their environment effectively. The community's resilience is tested by increasingly frequent and severe climate events like Hurricane Maria, which devastated their territory and underscored the urgent need for sustainable development to secure their future.

United Nations Foundation. (2023). Meet 3 Women in Brazil Who Are Protecting the Amazon Rainforest — and Indigenous Rights. Available at: <https://unfoundation.org/blog/post/meet-3-women-in-brazil-who-are-protecting-the-amazon-rainforest-and-indigenous-rights>

This article profiles three Indigenous women in Brazil who are actively involved in defending the Amazon rainforest and advocating for Indigenous rights. These women, representing various professions, including journalism and activism, utilise their unique positions to combat deforestation, promote sustainable development, and protect the cultural heritage of their communities. Their efforts highlight the critical role of Indigenous leadership in environmental conservation and social justice movements in Brazil.

United Nations Foundation, on YouTube. (2024). 7 Questions: Conversations with Young Leaders – Jevanic Henry. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KYD-iM4rSaA>

The episode features Saint Lucian climate advisor Jevanic Henry discussing his views on climate action, emphasising the significant impact of climate change on small island developing states like Saint Lucia, and the global need for environmental advocacy.

United Nations Foundation, on YouTube. (2024). 7 Questions: Conversations with Young Leaders – Karimot Odebode. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FcDIArCPqYg>

The episode features Karimot Odebode, an advocate for gender equality and founder of the Black Girl's Dream Initiative. She discusses the challenges and achievements in striving for a gender-equal world.

United Nations Foundation, on YouTube. (2024). 7 Questions: Conversations with Young Leaders – Saru Duckworth. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XBcwqklecu4>

The episode features Saru Duckworth, a Nepalese American researcher and youth leader. She discusses global poverty, policy choices, and the roles of young leaders in shaping future development strategies, emphasising the need for inclusive and aware policymaking.

FURTHER USEFUL RESOURCES

ACT Climate Labs. (2022.). Audience Insights: Meet the Persuadables in the UK. Available at: <https://www.actclimatelabs.org/audience-insights-meet-the-persuadables-in-the-uk>

Center for Social Impact Communication. (n.d.). Stories Worth Telling. Available at: <https://csic.georgetown.edu/research/strategic-storytelling/stories-worth-telling>

Debating Development Research. (2021). Some Steps for Decolonising International Research-for-Development Partnerships. Available at: <https://www.developmentresearch.eu/?p=1088>

Google Docs. (2024). Play Verto - Redefining Strategic Decision Making & Catalyzing Social Impact. Available at: https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/17fgJnvKrWxe2GuLSuLQmbiF4w5xD_1hOrV2VVVilKHw/edit?usp=sharing

Mile 91. (n.d.). Story Network/Mile 91. Available at: <https://www.mile91.co.uk>

Our Future Agenda. (n.d.). Unlock the Future Coalition. Available at: <https://www.ourfutureagenda.org/unlock-the-future>

PhotoVoice Methodologies in Peru. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/AlianzaCAFEPeru>

Play Verto. (n.d.). Play Verto Catalogue. Available at: <https://client.playverto.com/play-verto/verto-catalogue>

Play Verto Wash-up Video (2021). Available at: <https://youtu.be/AxepuYZ1qc?si=Q08lQnlfrjV3-kjn>

SBS. (n.d.). *The Boat*. Available at: <https://www.sbs.com.au/theboat>

World Economic Forum. (2022). Development Needs to Change. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2022/01/development-needs-change-bangladesh-can-show-us-how>