



Narrative & Language

*What is working for social
impact professionals in 2026*

*By Katie Hyson, Director, Community Insights
Informed by the Business Fights Poverty Community*





Contents (Updated March 2026)

Insights from Business Social Impact Professionals.....	2
Action Planning: Summary.....	3
Five Actions That Are Working.....	4
1. Simplify the Message. Strengthen the Credibility.....	4
2. Speak Impact Like a Business.....	5
3. Move From Polarisation to Performance.....	7
4. Centre on Real People and Real Examples.....	8
5. Make People & Planet One Story.....	9
Conclusion.....	10

Insights from Business Social Impact Professionals

Recently, in some countries, the argument that companies that manage and integrate social impact into their core activities do better business has been weakened. Not because the work is less important, but for many, because the language around it has become increasingly politicised and, in some cases, misunderstood. As a result, well-intentioned efforts are being misread, questioned, or dismissed before their value is fully recognised.

Across markets, resistance is rarely to the outcomes themselves: stronger economies, stable workforces, resilient communities, but to the labels used to describe them. This paper focuses on how leading practitioners are reframing social impact around shared priorities rather than contested terminology. At the same time, it recognises that language adaptation must be handled carefully, so that efforts to reduce friction do not dilute important commitments around equity, justice, and rights.

Recognising that the ability to deliver greater positive social impact through business depends, in part, on how we communicate, we asked members of the Business Fights Poverty community to share what is working for them, both one-on-one and collectively, at special clinics held at Churchill College, University of Cambridge, during our hybrid Global Equity Summit. This paper brings together practical insights from a diverse group of social impact professionals from businesses and NGOs across sectors and continents. It explores the language and approaches they have found most effective to convey the value of social impact to business. It also reflects a broader shift in the field: from treating social impact as a standalone function to embedding it more deeply in commercial decision-making, supply chains, finance, workforce strategy, and cross-sector collaboration. It also offers guidance on how to apply them in ways that build trust, reduce friction, and strengthen impact.

Our aim is to support social impact professionals, business decision-makers, and communications teams with clear, practical guidance, helping to avoid misinterpretation and instead create shared understanding. It is also to support stronger execution, recognising that impact depends not only on strategy and messaging, but also on governance, incentives, relationships, and who holds decision-making power. Ultimately, we hope this helps break down barriers and enables businesses and communities to benefit together.

We hope you find this paper useful, and we warmly welcome your feedback. What is working well for you...and what is not?

Action Planning: Summary

What is Working	Key Communication Shifts for 2026
Simplify the Message. Strengthen the Credibility.	Use plain language, cut acronyms, and explain impact clearly. Be transparent about what is working and what is not. Share progress openly, invite others in, and make it easy for anyone to act. At the same time, ensure that simplifying language does not strip out the substance of commitments around equity, rights, and inclusion.
Speak Impact Like a Business	Use commercial language to position social impact as business-critical. Lead with measurable risks and outcomes, align with operational priorities, and back with evidence. At the same time, avoid reducing impact only to what is easiest to quantify commercially, and ensure that less visible but still material issues are not overlooked.
Move From Polarisation to Performance	Focus on business credibility, not politicised labels. Translate social impact into language of resilience, trust, workforce strength, operational continuity, and long-term value, while staying clear about what matters for people and communities.
Centre on Real People and Real Examples	Lead with a human story, use local words, frame progress in practical milestones, add memorable metaphors, and communicate realistic hope that motivates stakeholders to act. Treat people closest to the issue not only as storytellers or consultees, but as partners in shaping solutions and judging whether impact is real.
Make People & Planet One Story	Unite people and planet outcomes, create common ground, showing shared responsibility and measurable benefits. Reflect the reality that environmental and social risks are deeply interconnected, and that solutions depend on integrating livelihoods, inclusion, and local context from the start.

FIVE ACTIONS THAT ARE WORKING

1. Simplify the Message. Strengthen the Credibility.

'We avoid jargon and focus on practical outcomes'

There is strong agreement from social impact professionals that simple, jargon-free messaging is vital. The organisations that win trust and momentum in sustainability and social impact are not the ones with the most polished messaging.

They are the ones with the clearest and most credible language. Plain language has become a commercial advantage. It is also a discipline: the ability to say something clearly, memorably, and in words people immediately understand is often what makes a message travel across functions and contexts. When combined with credible data, real examples, and transparency about trade-offs, it becomes a trust advantage. When people hear acronyms, technical terms, or “impact jargon,” they disengage because it feels exclusionary or performative. Clarity does not dumb down your strategy; it removes friction so more people can understand, advocate, and act.

At the same time, transparency is now expected. Audiences are sceptical of “perfect” narratives and headline ambition. Instead, credibility comes from openly stating what is working, what is not, and what you are still learning, without defensiveness. This “work in progress” narrative invites collective ownership, reduces greenwashing risk, and sustains internal momentum because teams feel safe to discuss complexity. This signals confidence, as organisations that are secure in their direction can afford to be honest about uncertainty. It also creates room for better internal judgment, helping teams distinguish between what can be adapted in the language and what must remain intact in the

substance. In short: make it simple, make it honest, and make it shared; so impact becomes something people can join, not just observe.

Key Social Impact Communication Advice:

Use plain language, cut acronyms, and explain impact clearly. Be transparent about what is working and what is not. Share progress openly, invite others in, and make it easy for anyone to act.

2. Speak Impact Like a Business

'In reporting, narrative-led and evidence-backed language helps donors and partners clearly understand.'

Social impact professionals are finding that the most effective social impact language uses terms which are familiar to people across the business. The phrase “social impact” on its own often fails to mobilise commercial teams; instead, anchor your narrative in outcomes leaders already track and defend: business continuity, security of supply, operational stability, productivity, cost efficiency, innovation, and long-term competitiveness.

Social impact professionals report that the framing of risk-and-resilience is working best right now, positioning impact as essential to organisational performance, not ideology. That includes language such as:

- risk mitigation and disruption prevention
- supply chain resilience and security of supply
- workforce readiness and retention
- climate transition preparedness
- reputational protection and license to operate
- stability under shock.

The goal is to make impact legible as part of business survival and strength, not a moral add-on. This framing directly counters the perception that social impact diverts attention or resources from performance; instead, it positions impact as a driver of resilience, innovation, and long-term value creation.

Even in organisations with a strong purpose culture, this approach remains useful because it connects impact work to tangible business value, building pride, leadership capability, adaptability, and future-ready skills, while strengthening communities and supply networks. It also often requires impact teams to build new fluency themselves, becoming more confident in the language of finance, operations, investment, and risk without losing sight of the human realities that sit behind those terms. Use collaborative, cross-functional language to increase legitimacy and reduce the perception of impact teams as “solo heroes.”

Above all, avoid vague concepts. Lead with specific risks, actions, and proof points (e.g. health and safety, or compliance), supported by evidence, evaluation, and local insight. Where the evidence base is still emerging, it is better to be clear about what can be evidenced now, what remains directional, and what would require further investment in measurement, than to imply certainty that is not yet there.

Key Social Impact Communication Advice:

Use commercial language to position social impact as business-critical. Lead with measurable risks and outcomes, align with operational priorities, and back with evidence.

3. Move From Polarisation to Performance

Language that is pragmatic, outcomes-led, and anchored in shared benefits is working well. The goal is to bring more stakeholders in, not to win a debate.

Terms that once signalled credibility, such as ESG, DEI, SDGs, or just transition, can now create friction in some markets where they have become politicised. This is not about lowering ambition, but about translating it into language that keeps doors open and makes the work legible to decision-makers, employees, customers, and investors as part of business continuity and competitiveness. This requires judgement about where adaptation helps and where it risks becoming over-correction.

The social impact professionals who informed this paper shared that the language highlighted in Section Two is also helping to depoliticise this agenda. Emphasise outcomes people broadly support: stronger communities, better livelihoods, safer workplaces, cleaner environments, and healthier futures. Show how these outcomes also reduce costs, improve performance, and build trust.

Externally, avoid over-promising and culture-war signals. Be clear, specific, and evidence-based about what you are doing, why it matters, and how progress will be measured. Internally, maintain ambition, but communicate with discipline. Different audiences may require different framing, not because the substance changes, but because effective communication starts from where people are. Done well, this is translation, not manipulation. Where evidence is incomplete, be open about assumptions and limitations rather than overstating certainty. In contested spaces, humility and openness are essential to building durable trust. This does not dilute impact; it makes it more strategic, credible, and resilient.

Key Social Impact Communication Advice:

Focus on business credibility, not politicised labels.

4. Centre on Real People and Real Examples

‘Clear explanations, real stories and small measurable results help people understand.’

What works depends not only on what is said, but who it is for and where it is heard. The strongest impact communication does one thing exceptionally well: it brings outcomes to life.

Business audiences are saturated with claims, dashboards, and ambition statements. What cuts through is language that is specific, human-centred, and grounded in reality. Stories that make complexity feel close, not abstract, are effective. Instead of leading with distant targets or overwhelming scale, start with a real person, place, or decision point: a flood on a known street, an entrepreneur’s cash-flow challenge, a family’s energy bill, a community’s access to work. These stories turn “climate resilience” into something people can picture and remember.

Social impact professionals recommended pairing urgency with realistic hope to keep engagement high. Acknowledge what is hard, then show what is working and what progress looks like in smaller milestones. This builds agency; people feel their contribution matters. Use metaphors and accessible phrasing to speed up understanding across non-expert teams, and choose language that matches your audience’s culture and context, sometimes literally, through local and bilingual communication. This includes adjusting tone and emphasis for boards, frontline teams, investors, policymakers, or communities, even when the underlying strategy remains the same. That flexibility matters not only for reach but for trust: audiences are more likely to engage when language feels recognisable, respectful, and grounded in their lived reality. The rule: make impact real, relatable, and rooted in the everyday conditions people can already see and feel.

Key Social Impact Communication Advice:

Lead with a human story, use local words, frame progress in practical milestones, add memorable metaphors, and communicate realistic hope that motivates stakeholders to act.

5. Make People & Planet One Story

‘Connecting social and environmental goals without jargon is important at this time.’

Effective social impact language is treating “social” and “environmental” as joined-up agendas. It frames them as one system with one outcome: resilient communities on a thriving planet. Social impact professionals remind us that the goal of messaging is not to sound expert; it is to be understood, trusted, and acted upon.

Strong impact messaging connects the dots between livelihoods, well-being, supply chain stability, and environmental stewardship. It shows that protecting ecosystems also protects jobs, health, and long-term market resilience, and that supporting people strengthens environmental outcomes through better practices, stronger institutions, and shared accountability. Examples of where this is already happening are particularly important to overcome narratives (and, unfortunately, common experience) that decarbonisation and environmental protection have often been achieved at the expense of workers and communities. This integrated framing works especially well in multi-stakeholder settings because it creates common ground: investors hear risk and resilience, communities hear wellbeing and dignity, and partners hear collaboration and shared responsibility. That common ground matters because effective collaboration depends on more than shared terminology. It depends on creating enough shared meaning for different groups to see themselves in the same story, even when their priorities, incentives, and starting assumptions differ.

The key is to describe impact in ways people can see and feel. When your language links people and planet outcomes clearly, you reduce polarisation, build alignment, and invite participation rather than debate. At the same time, language should not become so sanitised that it loses contact with the values, trade-offs, and lived experience that make these issues matter in the first place.

Key Social Impact Communication Advice:

Unite people and planet outcomes, create common ground, showing shared responsibility and measurable benefits.

Conclusion

In a more politicised and sceptical environment, the challenge for social impact professionals is not only to deliver meaningful outcomes, but to communicate them in ways that build trust and drive action. The insights shared in this paper show that what works is clear, credible, and grounded language: simplify the message, be honest about progress, and make impact easy for others to join.

Social impact becomes stronger when it is expressed in business terms, linked to risk, resilience, productivity, supply chain stability, and long-term competitiveness, rather than framed as a moral add-on or discretionary cost. At the same time, moving from polarisation to performance helps protect ambition while reducing friction. This does, however, require judgement: organisations need to know when to translate, when to hold firm, and how to adapt language without losing clarity of purpose. Human stories and real examples bring impact to life, while practical milestones and realistic hope sustain engagement. Finally, integrating people and planet into one connected narrative creates common ground and strengthens shared accountability. In a communications environment increasingly shaped by speed, automation, and polished but generic language, authenticity, comprehension, and human judgment are becoming more, not less, important. With disciplined, relatable communication, businesses can unlock wider alignment and deliver impact that endures.

'Focus on language that is grounded, practical and people-centred: focusing on resilience, livelihoods and real-world conditions.'



The Business Fights Poverty Institute aims to advance knowledge and foster peer learning to ignite business innovation and drive actionable, cross-sector collaboration for a more equitable and resilient world.

Launched at the Business Fights Poverty Global Equity Summit on 7 March 2024 at Murray Edwards College, University of Cambridge, the Institute is the culmination of nearly 20 years of Business Fights Poverty's community-driven approach to peer learning and collaboration. Through the Institute, we create cutting-edge thought leadership reports and toolkits that drive forward thinking and, importantly, bridge the gap between academic research and business action.

