
The ethical use of images and messaging

Dualta Roughneen

NGOs, international organisations and donors alike must consider the impact of the images and messaging they use in seeking to raise funds for humanitarian assistance.

When a disaster strikes, the generosity of individuals is triggered by a concern for humanity. However, some disasters tend to receive more funds than others, and the role of the images and messaging used to depict such situations can be significant. The intuitive view is that images and messages that portray the difficult plight of disaster-affected populations in as much vivid reality as possible will have the most significant impact, generating feelings of sympathy, pity and guilt, prompting charitable donations. Often the more graphic and heart-rending the images, the greater the emotion, and thus willingness to donate.

But how graphic is too graphic? This is the question that those working in marketing

and fundraising ask themselves, as they do not want the public to be put off. However, is this where the line should be drawn?

The principle of humanity, with its explicit references to respect and the dignity of the disaster-affected individual, suggests that the line should be drawn well before a discussion around gratuitousness is reached.

An individual who has lost autonomy, the essentials of life and some of the basic requirements of dignity (having a place to wash, dress, go to the toilet, deal with menstruation) will not want their situation broadcast far and wide.¹ Being unable to provide for oneself and one's family, being forced to become dependent on the charitable assistance and altruism of

June 2019

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another, for whatever reason, can erode the dignity and autonomy of individuals, families, communities and even sometimes States. Being brought low in life is challenging enough without the situation being broadcast far and wide with all of its difficulties communicated, and often exaggerated, merely to get some money.

Yet money is needed in order to deliver humanitarian assistance and this money primarily comes in the form of charitable donations from individuals who are moved by images and messaging depicting great need, or from donor governments who hope to attract public support for their provision of overseas aid. For donors, such public support is more easily attracted at times of great disaster than it is for ongoing development assistance. For their part, humanitarian organisations need to elicit an emotional and immediate response in order to maximise donations, recognising that giving tends to be highest in the immediate aftermath of a disaster.

The Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messaging

In Ireland, as elsewhere, debates over these tensions are decades old. In 2007, the Irish network of development and humanitarian organisations, Dóchas, agreed a voluntary Code of Conduct on Images and Messaging.² Its primary principles establish that the choice of images and messages should be based on respect for the dignity of the people concerned, belief in the equality of all people, and acceptance of the need to promote fairness, solidarity and justice. In practical terms this translates into a commitment that in all our communications, and where practical and reasonable within the need to reflect reality, we strive to:

- choose images and related messages based on values of respect equality, solidarity and justice
- truthfully represent any image or depicted situation both in its immediate and wider context so as to improve public understanding of the realities and complexities of development

- avoid images and messages that potentially stereotype, sensationalise or discriminate against people, situations or places
- use images, messages and case-studies with the full understanding, participation and permission of the subjects (or their parent/guardian)
- ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves
- establish and record whether the subjects wish to be named or identifiable and always act accordingly
- conform to the highest standards in relation to human rights and protection of vulnerable people

These very wide-ranging guidelines encompass practical issues which can and should be complied with through good processes, such as those relating to permissions and identifications. However, there are challenges in agreeing what can be classed as stereotyping and sensationalising and there are differing interpretations of the reality that is supposed to be reflected. For humanitarian disasters, particularly rapid-onset natural disasters, presenting the wider picture can be a challenge because of the need to take account of public and media attention spans – not to mention that reality can change very fast in such situations. And in complex crises, where often the causes and effects of displacement are unclear (because they are deeply embedded in historical, socio-political, tribal, colonial, geographical and agrarian contexts), it is virtually impossible to present an objective wider context.

Plan International Ireland's approach

At Plan International Ireland we have signed up to the Code and report annually on our adherence. We recognise the complexity that is articulated in the Code's preface: "It is a reality of our world today that many of the images of extreme poverty and humanitarian distress are negative and cannot be ignored. To ignore them would run counter to the spirit of this Code which is to

portray the reality of the lives of people with sensitivity and respect for their dignity.”

For us, we consider this guidance on use of images and messages to be closely interconnected with our policy on safeguarding of children and young people, requiring permissions and written approval, as well as protecting dignity and rights. In situations of displacement or emergency, where children have become separated from their families and do not have a legal guardian to give consent, extra care should be taken to protect them. Unaccompanied children under the age of 13 are not legally able to give consent so their stories and images cannot be used at all – presenting a challenge for a children’s rights organisation, like Plan, that particularly works on issues of displacement and separated children. The identity of children aged 13–17, who are generally recognised to have the capacity to consent to the use of their stories, should be concealed, and their images and real names not used under any circumstance.

Plan recognises that in emergency situations it is often a struggle to find hard-hitting pictures that show respect for their subjects and represent the complex reality of an emergency without promoting stereotypes or incorrect assumptions, yet the requirement of respect supersedes fundraising imperatives. This is an organisational choice and possibly not one that others may agree with. It could be considered the politically correct option rather than addressing reality. And it may result in raising less funding, being able to implement a smaller-scale response and thus having less impact and benefit for those affected by disaster.

We do not use images depicting extreme suffering, dying or dead people. However, these are very much part of conflict and displacement and the reality presented through images can be important in helping people recognise the gravity of the situation. This can in turn encourage public pressure on governments, and prompt donations. Plan tries to portray an objective image of emergencies, highlighting the capacities and aspirations of those affected, not just their vulnerabilities and fears – aiming to show a

more positive view of reality while adhering to the truth of the situation (at least as we see it). We aim to find images of people helping their own communities and responding to the crisis themselves and we very much try to avoid stereotypes such as the Western aid worker tending a helpless victim.

Plan’s approach to imaging and messaging in emergencies is one approach on a continuum of possible avenues and it is not to say that this is the right approach. It is the Plan approach and it is a subjective decision based on organisational values. It is not to stand in judgement over others or to accuse them of behaving with callous greed. We understand that money saves lives, and that weighing up the possible trade-off between protecting dignity versus saving lives is impossible as they are incommensurable.

One could argue that the Plan approach is the ‘nice’ approach, the politically correct approach, or perhaps the easy but ineffective approach. Some may feel that the reality is much harsher than Plan portrays, others that the reality of individual givers is as valid as the reality of those who receive aid, and that if we want donors’ money we have to meet them where they are. Is there a risk that agencies present images in a paternalistic manner that infantilises survivors of emergencies by taking it upon themselves to protect their dignity, while hiding the reality of crisis and conflict? For the international humanitarian system, the use of images and messaging can pose challenges and opportunities at the same time, creating a tension that is lived out on a day-to-day basis for NGOs, international organisations and donors alike.

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This article is written in a personal capacity and does not necessarily represent the views of Plan International Ireland.

1. See Forced Migration Review’s photo policy www.fmreview.org/photo-policy
2. www.dochas.ie/images-and-messages