



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

ETHICAL COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

**Respectful
Responsive
Caring**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Why ethical communications matter.

It is our privilege that communities trust us to share their stories with us and it is our responsibility to receive and pass those stories on respectfully and authentically, facilitating refugees, asylum seekers, other forcibly displaced and stateless people to be active partners and able to tell their story and shape their wider narrative in whatever way is most appropriate for them.

Within ethical communications, safeguarding the rights and well-being of people forced to flee happens through understanding of power dynamics, being prepared to share the power of editorial decision making and prioritising equitable representation for all people.

These principles, and the broader set of actions that UNHCR will implement to embed these in our working practises, are guidance so that those colleagues creating communications and making editorial decisions can bring their talents, expertise, creativity and knowledge to bear when considering not only how communications materials are received by external audiences, but also whether they are in line with the choices, preferences and expectations of the people at the heart of the stories.

They are also a reflection of our recognition that as communications itself and norms around communications change, our priority is to actively respond to the discussion both on the practices of story gathering and sharing, and on the wider narratives created, and the need for a more ethical lens in both.

When we tell the stories of the people UNHCR is here to help, we are not telling them in a vacuum, we add these stories to the wider communications and media environment as well as political contexts both locally, regionally and globally. For our audiences these stories inform them about a place or situation as much as they deliver our specific communications objectives.

We recognise therefore that our stories – the images and words we use - have power, to create both short- and long-term opinions about people and locations. We do not wish our communications to create the idea that people forced to flee are different or 'other' than those who view their stories, contribute to stereotypes which are hard to shift once they are embedded as 'truth', or present monolithic narratives about any one group of people so that they are seen only in the context of one part of their life experience.

Our commitment instead is to work in partnership with people forced to flee, and communicate our shared humanity across our lived circumstances, however different they may be.

The principles outlined here were created following internal discussions with colleagues from across UNHCR with people who are or have been refugees, a review of both internal materials and externally relevant guidance and research, and a drafting stage, where multiple voices reflecting the many areas of expertise and working practises across UNHCR were taken into account.

UNHCR's principles of ethical communication.



1. UNHCR will prioritise the mental and physical well-being and safety of people forced to flee above all other considerations.

Our communications must adhere to the core humanitarian principle of 'do no harm'.

We offer protection and assistance to people forced to flee, stateless people and others on the basis of their needs and irrespective of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion. We will never knowingly gather or share a piece of communications that we think may cause any harm, whether now or in the future, and we will take safeguarding measures to prevent any unintended harm may be caused by our communications. These decisions will be made in partnership with people forced to flee and stateless people, not on their behalf.

2. We will ensure dignified representations by including people forced to flee and stateless people as our partners in decisions on how to communicate their stories.

We recognise the experience, knowledge and right of people forced to flee and stateless people to define their own narrative, as well as their multiple potential roles as audiences, contributors, spokespeople, and advisors.

3. UNHCR's communications will actively seek to challenge stereotypes by prioritising stories that represent the views of people forced to flee and stateless people.

We recognise that the humanitarian sector has contributed to stereotypes about certain groups of people and locations that have had a negative impact, as well as contributing to a narrative where the world is divided into saviours on the one hand, and beneficiaries on the other.

We create communications to share with the world the situations, issues and conditions which necessitate our work. Within this we will seek to actively displace oversimplification and the perpetuation of single stories about any peoples by telling fuller stories and creating story suites that allow the complexity of a person's life to be revealed.

4. When we work with external partners and prominent supporters, we will prioritise the telling of stories as a shared experience.

This means providing the opportunity for people forced to flee and stateless people to amplify their own stories alongside the experience of the partner or prominent supporter, including those who carry UNHCR honorary titles, when they are advocating for the work of UNHCR and the wider cause.

5. We recognise informed consent to be the keystone in ethical communications.

Consent is not a form, it is a process for participants to exercise their choices, and an ongoing dialogue before, during and after content is created and shared, which takes into account the potential power imbalances between the content gatherer and the contributor.

6. UNHCR will be accountable to these guidelines.

We will communicate to all UNHCR personnel, allies and partners our expectation that in their communications practices they operate within the guidance; joining us to lead, learn and engage with other actors to promote wider participation in and understanding of ethical communication.

Delivering on these principles.

To deliver the practicalities and processes needed to make these principles a reality in our day to day working, we have created and will continue to build comprehensive guidance and a set of working tools. Those will focus on these areas:

Editorial decision making.

Creating working processes that share the power to make editorial decisions about what story is told, how it is told, and who is included in reviewing and agreeing to the final representation is key to ethical working.

Rather than making decisions on behalf of people forced to flee and stateless people, we instead acknowledge that only they are the true experts on how to tell their story, because it is their own personal lived experience, and that they must be able to choose what story is told, how, and when.

We will set processes that support the seeking out, facilitation and inclusion of these choices. These processes will be different depending on the many contexts in which we work, and will take different tools and approaches, but will always prioritise listening to and acting upon the choices of the people with whom we work.

Consent.

Rather than simply ensuring a contributor fills in a form, informed consent is a multi-stage process which happens before, during and after a contributor shares their story. This includes ensuring contributors understand the purpose of the communications project, how their story might be used, who the audiences of the finished communications are likely to be, the fact that they can help decide what story is told and how, that they can say no to anything, at any point in time, and that they can withdraw consent at any point.

We also recognise that scenarios evolve, and contexts change, and as they do, the views of and risks to contributors also evolve and change. We will be respectful of that and regularly reassess our communication products with this in mind, reconsenting where it is possible, and withdrawing content when needs be or when a contributor requests this.

The people who generously share their time, words and images with us have a right to impact how we tell that story, as well as how we plan to use it, and enact their choices within this process.

The process of producing communications materials.

The process of sharing your story is the site of being able to exercise your power in terms of how you are later depicted. From choosing the location in which you sit to share your story, to sharing your creative ideas, to being able to see the final materials in which you appear, these decisions and many more are all part of facilitating a contributor-centred process.

Our ongoing commitment.

We recognise that to consistently deliver these principles, and the more detailed guidelines that will facilitate their use within UNHCR communications, we need to regularly view, amend, make changes and additions and communicate these to our personnel, partners and allies. We commit to making live revisions as and when new circumstances or learnings inform the need, and a regular formal review process of our materials to assess areas of challenge and opportunity.