

# MORE THAN A PICTURE:

## NAVIGATING THE ETHICS OF VISUAL STORYTELLING

### IN HUMANITARIAN FUNDRAISING

#### THE ISSUE

#### THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

#### THE POWER OF THE IMAGE — AND THE RESPONSIBILITY BEHIND IT

There is the saying “A picture is worth a thousand words.” And indeed, images are powerful. Images possess a profound influence on the way we see and understand the world around us. Images can shape public perception, mobilizing support, and – to direct the view towards humanitarian aid – driving fundraising efforts within the humanitarian sector. The core dilemma lies in crafting compelling visual narratives that inspire action without perpetuating stereotypes and clichés, stripping dignity, or compromising our fundamental principles.

This article reflects ADRA’s ongoing commitment to strengthening ethical standards in visual storytelling across its network. It shares reflections, tensions, lessons learned, and current practices with transparency and a spirit of sector-wide dialogue. This is an honest account of our present state, future aspirations, and the significance of this journey. Progress begins with the right question, not with the perfect answer.

#### IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM OF TYPICAL IMAGE USAGE IN THE MEDIA

The typical cliché of hunger in the media is characterized by highly simplified, emotionalizing and often stereotypical depictions. These clichés are reproduced again and again through certain image motifs and narrative patterns and thus characterize the public perception of hunger.

Typical clichés in the media portrayal of hunger:

- Hunger is often portrayed as a distant, foreign problem that occurs in so-called ‘developing countries’, particularly in Africa. Typical are images of apathetic-looking, malnourished infants or young children with bloated bellies, often with flies on their faces, who appear passive and helpless.
- The images usually focus on children, as they are seen as particularly vulnerable and helpless, which they are by fact. But the images emotionalize the problem and thereby also reduce it to a specific group, while other people affected - such as adults or elderly people - are barely visible.

- In other typical images, starving people are often shown as an anonymous mass or group, rarely as individuals with their own story or voice. As a result, the depiction remains depersonalized and abstract.
- Other images show starving people in dusty, barren landscapes or in front of makeshift dwellings and thereby depicting a stereotype again.
- In general, the images are usually chosen in such a way that they serve the cliché of “misery in the distance” and stage hunger as a state of emergency, not as a structural, every day and persistent problem.
- The causes of hunger are rarely presented in a differentiated way. Instead, images of disasters, wars or natural events dominate as triggers, while structural, political, environmental, climate or economic backgrounds are usually ignored.
- Reporting often only takes place on spectacular events such as famines, natural disasters, or wars. Long-term, less visible forms of hunger and malnutrition such as “hidden hunger” are hardly ever addressed.
- Finally, the solution to the problem of hunger is often either misrepresented or ignored. Solutions such as climate-smart agriculture are rarely seen. Positive or nuanced portrayals - of people helping themselves, for example, or of successful aid projects - are rare. Instead, images of suffering and passivity dominate, following the old and outdated news rule that “bad news is good news”.

By using these clichés in images, the media are transporting a wrong core message. These stereotypical depictions narrow the view of the problem of hunger and ignore complex interrelationships. They can lead to hunger being perceived as the “natural” or “unavoidable” fate of certain regions, rather than as a consequence of political, economic and social structures. And rather than a problem, that can be solved.

Focusing on these stereotypical emotional shock images is intended to generate attention and donations in the short term. But in the long term, it can also lead to numbness and indifference and “disaster fatigue.” People are oversaturated with these images and stories and do not even look at them anymore.

## RISKS OF INSENSITIVE COMMUNICATION

Unethical image use carries significant risks. Children could be targeted by abusers, and individuals sharing their stories might face reputational damage or community retribution. Organizations risk damage to their brand if insensitive materials are published.

## CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND UNCONSCIOUS BIAS

Concepts like 'dignity' and 'empowerment' vary across cultures. Unconscious biases significantly impact decision-making, making them challenging to address. Ethical storytelling requires cultural sensitivity and reflection on personal assumptions.

## THE CONSTRUCTIVE, SOLUTION-BASED APPROACH

The way out of this cliché dilemma for the media is constructive journalism. This approach was originally developed by Ulrik Haagerup, founder and CEO of Constructive Institute in Aalborg, Denmark. Constructive journalism, also known as solution-based journalism, is an approach that goes beyond mere problem reporting and specifically looks for solutions, positive examples, and opportunities for action. The aim is not only to highlight grievances, but also to present ways and initiatives that can contribute to overcoming social and other challenges. Constructive journalism aims to inform, inspire and encourage the audience to get involved by reporting in a differentiated, fact-based, and future-orientated way.

"Constructive" and "solution based" can quite rightly be viewed as the core of the work of humanitarian NGOs such as ADRA and others. This enables us as NGOs to provide media with content for this journalistic approach, from facts and information to the all-important "right" and "good" images. The stories we can tell, from emergency aid in disasters to development cooperation, are inherently constructive and solution based.

## AN ONGOING CONVERSATION WITHIN ADRA

The foundation for this are ethical standards. ADRA, as a global network, is actively developing shared



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ethical standards for communications, including visual content. The network's diversity presents challenges in aligning practices across offices and contexts. While some national offices have established robust internal guidelines, others are still developing their capabilities.

## WHERE WE BEGIN: THE PRINCIPLES THAT GUIDE US

ADRA's communications approach is guided by the Core Humanitarian Standard (CHS) commitments: participation, respect, dignity, and accountability. These principles inform our communications approach but can sometimes clash with practical communication needs. Real dilemmas arise, such as balancing urgency with consent, visibility with privacy, and impact with integrity.

ADRA's values "connected", "courageous", "compassionate" guide practical actions. This includes engaging local partners, ensuring informed consent, and recognizing the courage of contributors in sharing their stories.

## LEARNING IN REAL TIME: REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

Different ADRA offices have navigated ethical questions in campaigns and storytelling, experiencing both successes and learning opportunities. Complex decisions include choosing not to publish a powerful image, questioning a subject's portrayal, and involving local teams or subjects in decision-making. Internal questioning has been invaluable in shaping a more thoughtful approach.

## FUNDRAISING PRESSURES AND AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS

Emotional images raise more money, but at what cost? ADRA aims to engage donors with narratives based

on empowerment rather than pity. If questioned, we educate audiences, including donors, about why some images are no longer used and what a more ethical approach entails.

## ADRA HAS DEVELOPED A SET OF STANDARDS AS “ADRA PROTECTION POLICY”

The ADRA Protection Policy sets out clear and binding standards for the use of images and photos in communications, in particular for the protection of children, women, and other vulnerable groups. The most important principles and guidelines can be summarized as follows:

- **Dignity and respect:** Photos and images of beneficiaries must respect their dignity and rights. The depiction must never be degrading, embarrassing, or stigmatizing. People should not be shown as victims, but as individuals with autonomy and dignity.
- **Protection against abuse:** The policy expressly prohibits any form of depiction that could put children or other vulnerable people in a potentially exploitative, dangerous, or abusive situation. This also includes the use of images that could be misused for sexual or other exploitative purposes.
- **Consent:** The informed consent of the persons depicted must be obtained before photos are taken and published. In the case of children, the consent of their legal guardians is required. The policy emphasizes that consent must be given voluntarily and without pressure.
- **Confidentiality and data protection:** Personal data and identifying characteristics of particularly vulnerable persons may not be published without express consent. This applies in particular to children, survivors of violence or other vulnerable groups.
- **Context and sensitivity:** The selection and use of images must respect cultural, social, and religious contexts. Images must not be taken out of context or used in a way that creates false impressions or reinforces stereotypes.
- **Avoidance of stereotypes:** The policy demands that images must not contribute to the reproduction of clichés or prejudices. The diversity and independence of people should be made visible.

ADRA's Protection Policy and Accountability Report guide the actions, detailing values such as protection, equal treatment, empowerment, transparency, and integrity. ADRA is committed to international standards like CHS. The ADRA Accountability Report 2019 makes it clear that the use of images and photos in communication is characterized by clear ethical principles. ADRA is committed to upholding the dignity and protection of all people depicted and attaches particular importance to transparency, accountability, and inclusion. The portrayal of people should always be respectful, non-discriminatory, and sensitive. The standing rule for ADRA is: None of the people portrayed are to be instrumentalized for the purpose of increasing donations. We want to provide truthful information about our projects and therefore use our own images from the project areas - even if these are sometimes not of perfect quality - instead of using purchased images.

This is based on binding guidelines such as the Protection Policy and other policies on equality and inclusion, which explicitly regulate the protection of children and vulnerable groups. There are also mechanisms for submitting complaints about inappropriate portrayals. Overall, the responsible and respectful use of visual material is a vital component of ADRA's communication and an expression of its comprehensive accountability to all stakeholders.

## CONCLUSION: DOING BETTER TOGETHER

Ethical visual storytelling is about commitment, critical thinking, and a willingness to learn. ADRA approaches this work with humility, recognizing that we do not have all the answers. But as a learning organization, we are constantly developing our standards and guidelines based on experience both within our own organization and in exchange with partner organizations. We invite ongoing discussions with peers in the sector.

### ➤ TENSIONS WE NAVIGATE IN VISUAL COMMUNICATIONS

- Urgency versus Consent
- Visibility versus Privacy
- Impact versus Integrity
- Fundraising needs versus Ethical standards

## ➤ CASE STUDY: GOOD EXAMPLES VERSUS BAD EXAMPLES

Analysis and evaluation: A child eats leftovers surrounded by rubbish and dirt - an image that shows poverty and hunger in a drastic and most of all stereotypical way. It serves Western clichés about poverty in the Global South and promotes a distorted view of the world in which poverty is portrayed as omnipresent, hopeless and passive. The imagery is aimed at strong emotions and seeks to generate compassion rather than inform or enlighten in a differentiated way. Such depictions reduce complex realities of life to a moment of suffering and utilize stereotypical clichés. The picture shows no background, no context and no solutions. It focusses on the moment of shock. It gives no indication of the structural causes of hunger or how help actually works. No people are shown who act independently or work on solutions. This reinforces the image of passive 'recipients' of help.



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Analysis and evaluation: The scene shows a group of people collecting tools and materials for an aid project. The atmosphere is friendly and approachable, everyone seems confident and committed. Wheelbarrows and other tools in the background, indicating that sustainable aid for self-help is being provided here. This image is a positive example of the fight against hunger and poverty because it shows people not as passive recipients of aid, but as active creators of their own future. They are supported to take responsibility and work together to find solutions to their challenges. Their dignity and individuality are respected, they are not reduced to their plight but are portrayed as personalities with the power to act. The picture shows how support works on an equal footing and how helping people to help themselves has a long-term effect. Instead of generating pity, the image encourages and inspires - it stands for modern, respectful and solution-orientated communication in development cooperation. It is constructive and solution-orientated.



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### ADRA-Sources

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