STORY-OWNING:
REPRESENTATION, POWER, AND THE FUTURE OF HUMANITARIAN NARRATIVES

THE ISSUE

THE CHALLENGE OF HUMANITARIAN COMMUNICATION - BRIDGING PRINCIPLES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

A Mental Health and Psychological Support workshop for elderly refugees at a shelter in Lviv, Ukraine. © Paula Bronstein/HIAS

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools humanitarians have. How else would we be able to close geographic and cultural distances, making it possible for someone sitting in comfort and safety to connect with the suffering of someone they will never meet? But power comes with responsibility, and we must make sure that we tell stories ethically, truthfully, and in ways that protect and empower the people at their heart.

As humanitarians and communicators at HIAS, our first duty is to do no harm. We know that stories build empathy, but can also reinforce harmful power dynamics, strip away dignity, or even endanger the people we aim to support. The future of humanitarian storytelling should, in fact, be more akin to facilitating "story-owning", as we work to shift power back to displaced communities themselves.

THE AGE OF UNFILTERED TESTIMONY

The humanitarian communication field is changing rapidly. As recently as a decade ago, humanitarians and journalists were the primary, and often only, sources of public information in a crisis. But today, people affected by conflict and disasters often have smartphones and internet access, enabling them to broadcast their experiences to global audiences in real-time.

From Ukraine to Gaza, raw and unfiltered testimonies are no longer mediated or carefully edited. These direct accounts are immensely powerful but can also be emotionally overwhelming. For audiences living in safer conditions, access to a potentially constant stream of suffering has not necessarily deepened empathy but has inured them to it. It is no longer enough to look away from the news: the consequences of humanitarian crises are right there on your screen, uninvited, unedited, and often unbearable.

In this shifting environment, it is only natural that we, as humanitarian communicators, do some soul-searching. What is our role now? In this new landscape, are we even needed? And if so, how can we add value when the media is already flooded with stories?

At HIAS, we believe that we do have a role. Instead of gatekeepers, we are context-givers, sense-makers, and, most importantly, allies. Our job is not to replace the voices of people affected by plights, but to uplift them,

responsibly and ethically, while helping wider audiences understand the broader causes of crises, their human consequences, and pathways to action.

HUMANITARIAN PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICE

The idea to write a HIAS Guide to Ethical Storytelling for humanitarians was inspired by this evolving understanding. We envisioned it as a practical tool for communications professionals working with displaced and other crisis-impacted people, grounded in both humanitarian principles and an honest reckoning with the power we hold.

There is no doubt in our minds that ethical storytelling starts with fully informed consent. This is not simply presenting people with a form to sign. It means explaining clearly, in a language the storyteller understands, how their story might be used, where it might appear, and what risks that might entail. Obtaining a signature is not the end of the process, since ethical storytelling also means offering the right to withdraw consent, to request anonymity, and to opt out of having their image published at any time, even if they have agreed to share their story.

Such rigour is necessary because the stakes are high. For example, publishing identifiable details about someone still at risk could expose them to danger; a story that is shortened for editorial reasons could wind up appearing inconsistent with a person's official asylum claim and, however inadvertently, could jeopardize their legal case. These are serious, real concerns, and as such, they demand a high level of vigilance and precision.

Ethics go beyond protection: they also call for a deep respect for the individuals we talk to and for their experiences. Many people we work with have already survived deep violations of their rights, and when we ask them to recount their stories, we are really demanding they be vulnerable in front of us. The least we can do is treat their willingness to share as the profound act of trust that it is.

AVOIDING THE "PERFECT REFUGEE" TRAP

One of the most insidious tendencies in humanitarian storytelling is elevating the so-called "perfect refugee", someone who is considered to be an outstanding example or success story: the highly educated engineer, the rags-to-riches entrepreneur, the Olympic athlete, or the doctor who saves lives in her new community.

There is nothing wrong with celebrating stories of refugee excellence, but when we let them dominate our narratives, they create and reinforce the dangerous idea that only exceptional people are worthy of empathy, support, or a new beginning.

The reality is that most displaced people are ordinary people; it is their circumstances that are extraordinary. Not all of them have big dreams. In fact, many just want safety and stability. Some will thrive in their new communities, while others may struggle to adapt under the weight of trauma, bureaucracy, and exclusion. All of their stories matter.

Our role is to present people as whole human beings, not victims or heroes, but complex individuals with agency and dignity.

SHIFTING THE POWER DYNAMIC

As we go forward in the process of storytelling in the humanitarian field, we need to keep in mind that power dynamics are always present between the organization and the individual.

At HIAS, we are committed to being accountable to the affected populations we serve by acknowledging the inherent power dynamic and using that power responsibly. We start by being transparent about who we are and why we are asking for someone's story. We then make sure it is clear that participation will not lead to financial compensation or preferential treatment.

A positive masculinity workshop for the prevention of gender-based violence in Panama, on the Darien Gap migration route, part of a transnational project by HIAS and Médecins du Monde funded by ECHO. © Nadege Mazars / HIAS

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During the interview, we listen carefully to both verbal and non-verbal cues and respect the storyteller's boundaries. If someone becomes uncomfortable, we pause. If they say no, we stop. Whenever possible, we co-create stories with the individuals involved.

It is important to note that none of this is foolproof. We make mistakes, and when that happens, it is our duty to acknowledge them, learn from them, and do better.

STORYTELLING AS SOLIDARITY

In the past, humanitarian stories were mostly designed to evoke pity and to centre the audience's emotions rather than the storyteller's experience. Now we know that pity is a weak foundation for solidarity. It doesn't inspire meaningful action, only passive compassion.

With ethical storytelling, we are aiming for something deeper, a recognition of shared humanity, the feeling that any of us could be the one seeking refuge, a push to act — to support policies, services, and societies that respect the rights and dignity of all people, regardless of where they're from or what they've been through.

This is not always easy. Donors expect emotional impact, the audience's attention spans are getting shorter and shorter, and media outlets prioritise drama and controversy.

In a world oversaturated with content, humanitarian communication must evolve. We will not engage our audiences by counting on unique access to crises anymore, nor by shouting louder than others, but by listening better.

HIAS Chad staff visit the agricultural project of an economic inclusion programme participant in Begonro, Chad. © Kouakaine Moundi/HIAS

Storytelling must be part of the humanitarian field's reckoning with questions of the practice and ethos of accountability to affected populations. This is all about acknowledging the power dynamic between humanitarian organisations and participants. The stories we tell have the potential to shape perceptions and policies, an enormous responsibility. As such, we need to stay focused but open to change, treating testimonies as a gift. In the end, these stories were never ours to begin with.

HIAS Europe