



Dorcias

ETHICAL COMMUNICATION

Guidelines for communication

Document information

This is the final version of the document where all important aspects on ethical communication are covered. Ethical communication will remain a very important subject, and the Corporate Positioning Cluster will keep this subject on their agenda. The Corporate Communications Advisor bears final responsibility for these guidelines and the accompanying policies. Additions or changes are to be anticipated. These guidelines are therefore a working document that can be amended as and when necessary.

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Introduction

Dorcas is engaged in external communication to various stakeholders about project participants, people and communities affected by poverty, crisis and/or exclusion. As Dorcas, we communicate to create awareness, highlight our approach and impact, and engage people in our work. Dorcas is committed to ethical considerations when it engages in external and internal communication. Dorcas recognises people's rights to dignity, privacy and security, and it is committed to inclusivity and empowerment.

The purpose of this manual '**Ethical Communication: guidelines for external communication**' is to explain how ethical considerations should be implemented in all Dorcas' communication. This manual has been developed for all staff representing Dorcas in communication, in particular, external communication: Dorcas Country Offices and International Office staff, as well as partner organisations, journalists, photographers, and volunteers. All of them are further referred to as Dorcas staff.

Framework

This manual is part of a framework where the following Dorcas policies and guidance documents are also relevant:

- ✓ Dorcas Accountability Framework
- ✓ Dorcas Code of Conduct
- ✓ Data Protection Policy
- ✓ Writing guidelines (under revision)
- ✓ Branded Style Guide (under revision)

Core Humanitarian Standards

This manual has considered and incorporated requirements from the following international standards:

Core Humanitarian Standard, indicator 4.7: *“Due care must be exercised when making use of stories and images from affected communities as this can be seen as an invasion of their privacy – and as a breach of confidentiality if their permission is not sought. Fundraising material and photographs taken out of context can often be misleading. They can make the viewer assume that those receiving aid are all needy and helpless and may fail to highlight people’s dignity and their capacity to help themselves. Policies and guidelines relating to external communications should be available to all staff and can help to ensure that these mistakes are not made”* (CHS Alliance, 2015).

1.3 Reading instructions

This manual provides guidance. Although the intention is to provide as many details as possible that apply to a wide variety of situations, please bear in mind that it is impossible to cover every single situation.

This manual is divided into four chapters and additional annexes. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the basic principles of Ethical Communication set up by Paradox Marketing. Chapter 2 explores some important general points that we must apply to ensure our communication is ethical. Chapter 3 gives practical do's and don'ts on how to proceed in the actual communication. Chapter 4 provides a step-by-step approach for obtaining and using materials for external communications. Finally, the annexe provides the Dorcas Consent form for external communications.



Chapter 1: Basic principles of ethical communication

The basis of ethical communication is founded by certain business values, such as being truthful, and responsible with one's words and the resulting actions. Ethical communication defines a framework or set of acceptable communication principles that align with an overarching code of conduct. Note that it does not replace the Dorcac Code of Conduct. Ten basic principles are set for ethical communication, these principles are set up by Paradox Marketing and shared below (Mandelbaum, 2020).

1. Be truthful and honest

Being honest means communicating what is known to be true (only 100 percent the facts) to a listener, with no intent to deceive or present only parts of the truth. It also means being as objective as possible, that is, not tailoring the story based on what the speaker wants the listener to believe. Letting the listener take the data that is objectively presented and believe what they choose to believe is a core goal of ethical communication. Ethical communication should be based on accurate information and facts – in a word, do not lie.

2. Active listening

Hearing someone and listening to them are two different things. For ethical communication to be effective, it is necessary for the recipient to pro-actively listen to the speaker, and to not just hear what they want to hear, or to hear only parts of the conversation. This also means asking questions when any point is not completely understood, for the sake of clarification.

3. Speak non-judgmentally

Ethically and concisely communicating means speaking in a non-judgmental manner with every recipient, negating unnecessary conflict, which typically creates a breakdown in communication and causes misunderstandings. Unnecessary conflict is never good for any business, and such conflicts usually result from unethical communications, with judgmental, accusatory, and overly critical comments often being the catalyst for such breakdowns in communication.

4. Speak from your own experience

Bringing your personal experience into a dialogue with business listeners is important, providing backup for your arguments with something more tangible. Such a communication method (experiential communication) paints a complete picture for your audience and helps to prove your points so that the listeners have a better understanding of what is being said.

5. Consider the receiver's preferred communication channel

You risk losing an audience if you use a communication channel that is not preferred by your intended receiver. To effectively communicate with your listeners, use the most preferred communication channel, whether that be face-to-face, email, conference call, phone call, messenger app, etc. Also, when presenting data to a business audience, be aware of the preferred method of presentation for that business, whether it be graphs, slides, PowerPoint presentations, etc. Additionally, since body language is very important, it is often preferred to meet business clients face-to-face.



6. Strive to understand

While it is important to be proactive in listening, it is important for listeners to also strive to fully understand what is being said before responding. While asking for clarification or confirmation of a point is fine, many times questions that listeners pose have already been answered. Listeners should think about what has been said before constructing a reply. Reading “in between the lines” is also an important skill that allows for understanding what isn’t said but was implicitly said or implied.

7. Avoid a negative tone

Ethically communicating assumes the speaker will avoid rudeness, be polite and professional, and have tact. The ethical communicator knows that it’s not only important what you say, but how you say it. Tone is one of the most critical facets of communication. A listener may miss the meaning altogether if the tone is wrong, which can lead to unnecessary confrontations that decrease business productivity.

Controlling one’s tone goes along with self-control, a soft skill that allows one to know how they wish to reply to a terse business message (for instance) versus the most effective manner for replying. Essentially, keeping the tone positive or neutral is best, as the tone of a written message – or of one’s voice – is always picked up by the receiver, and can alter how the message is received and/or understood.

Additionally, while it is acceptable to be honest and open, tact – and professional maturity – means knowing when it is inappropriate to speak up, and when it is crucial to. Tact also means knowing that being completely honest does not equate with being rude or negative – it is possible to be completely honest and open with one’s thoughts and feelings while remaining polite and respectful.

8. Do not interrupt others

Allowing others to speak is important for the creation of a civil, effective working environment. Interrupting others results in misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts and a breakdown in workplace communications, which only hinders corporate progress and creates problems. Interrupting others not only shows a lack of respect but does not allow the listener to fully grasp what is being said, which often results in incorrect assumptions being made.

9. Respect privacy and confidentiality

Most businesses should include a clause in their code of ethics defining what is appropriate when it comes to honouring client and employee confidentiality and privacy. This can have a wide range of implications, including minimising workplace gossip, and mitigating toxic conversations about the private lives of clients and/or personnel.

10. Accept responsibility

As noted before, a core tenant within any ethical communication framework is taking responsibility for the actions that result from one’s words, whether it be good or bad. This includes both short-term and long-term consequences of one’s communications. Owning one’s words reinforces the importance of being conscientious about ethical communication.



Chapter 2: How to communicate ethically

Everyone engaging in external communication should familiarise themselves and act in line with the guidance provided in this manual. Furthermore, these guidelines are also applicable and important for internal communication. All Dorcas staff, employees, consultants, volunteers, partners and others acting on behalf of Dorcas are bound to implement these ethical guidelines in all communication activities. Four keywords highlight the basis of how to communicate ethically: agency, equality, solidarity and humanity. These are further developed in the following nine guidelines. Please note that positive communication is not the same as communicating ethically.

1.1 Communicate with respect and dignity

When communicating, both in word and images, treat everybody with respect, without adverse distinction of any kind at all times. This means, regardless of their age, sex, language, religion, opinion or nationality, race, ethnic or social origin, status, class, caste, sexual orientation, or any other personal characteristics. People, also when affected by crisis, poverty and/or exclusion, must be presented as human beings with their own identity and have their dignity preserved and protected. Be culturally sensitive and be aware that what is respectful and dignified may differ between cultures.

1.2 Use communication as a tool for empowerment

Communication has the potential to be transformative or contribute to change. This can be done by listening to people and not merely using them. Also, let people participate in decisions regarding the communication. If they see themselves portrayed with respect and with their capacities, this may serve as recognition and boost self-esteem. It is important to give people the opportunity to provide their own account. Also children, the elderly and people living with disabilities should be given the opportunity to speak for themselves.

1.3 Communicate accurately

People have the right to be accurately represented through both words and images. Dorcas' portrayal of each person must not be manipulated or sensationalised in any way, but should provide a balanced depiction of a person's life and circumstances.

1.4 Minimise the risk of harm

Be aware that with external communication, you can put both people and Dorcas at risk in ways that are difficult to anticipate. Dorcas needs to analyse and minimise risks. For this purpose, a short section that considers risk analysis is included in the staff part of the consent form. Below two (non-exhaustive) examples are given of what could go wrong if Dorcas staff fail to sufficiently consider risks. These examples also clearly illustrate that "merely signing a consent form" does not eliminate all risks and that an attitude of alertness is required.

- 1. A story, video and/or photos can be read and viewed by anyone. Consider the consequences of sharing for the person(s) concerned on various local levels.**

Example: A Dorcas staff member uses an interview and picture of a family in external communication. The staff member has asked permission to create and use these materials, and a consent form has been signed. The story focuses on a mother and the traumatic experiences of the family. These include that the only daughter is a survivor of sexual assault. The story is accompanied by a picture of



the household and published online. A community member accesses this and shares about it in the community. The community starts to treat the daughter and the family differently after they learn about what happened. The Dorcas staff member had not realised the possibility that the information would become common knowledge in the community. The mother and daughter would not have agreed with this being published if they had realised it could become common knowledge within the community.

2. Always check before making content who signed consent

Example: A photographer hired by Dorcas shoots pictures of a household for general communication purposes. The photographer has asked permission to create and use these photos and a consent form has been signed. One of the best pictures is a close-up of what she thinks is the generously smiling young daughter of the household. The picture appears in Dorcas' communication on social media, and an angry reaction comes in. It turns out that the girl was, in fact, the daughter of a neighbouring family. This household is not part of Dorcas' project, although they might like to be. They were not consulted about the picture and feel that Dorcas is taking advantage of them by portraying the girl on social media without supporting the household. They actively spread this in the community.

1.7 Ensure informed consent

Obtain consent before you prepare an external communication, before you take a photograph, video or record a person's story. This should be informed consent, in other words, the person asked for consent needs to be informed about what will be created and how it will be used. The person creating the communication material is responsible for ensuring that a consent form has been arranged and signed. In a crisis situation, verbal consent is required but written consent is not mandatory. Please inform the receiver of the content that only verbal consent was given.

1.8 Consider if there are country-specific guidelines for communication

For some countries where Dorcas works, extra specific guidelines may exist to guarantee the safety of Dorcas' work and all people involved in it. **These are supplementary to these general guidelines, but they may sometimes also contradict them. The country-specific guidelines always overrule the general guidelines!** These country specific guidelines will be added to these guidelines. Note that safety is of utmost important and is a key reason to deviate from the guidelines.

1.9 Comply with this guideline or explain

A certain situation might require you to deviate from the guidelines suggested in the step-by-step approach. Deviations from these guidelines must be explained in the consent form. Please elaborate extensively on why a deviation was needed and add contact details in case there are further questions.



Chapter 3: Do's and Don'ts in communication

In the previous chapters, an overview of ethical communication was given. But how do you implement these guidelines into actually retrieving and presenting the content ethically. Examples and ideas are presented to help you gain a picture as to when something is or is not ethical.

Stay away from Colonialism and Orientalism/Africanism

Ensure that content is not linked to colonialism (modalities projecting the non-west as static, regressive and “different” in specific and simplistic ways). Examples of colonialism are simplification, classifications and stereotypes, infantilisation, spatial metaphors and surveillance.

Another thing to absolutely avoid is Orientalism and Africanism (assuming and promoting “difference” between “us”/West and “them”/non-West, usually with subtle exaggeration to enhance “distance”). Examples are binary oppositions of “self”/“us”/“the West” and “others”/“them”/“the East”/“Orient”/“non-West”/“Africa”, idealisation and romanticisation (feminisation). Do not create stories where contradictions such as superior vs inferior, rational vs irrational, order vs disorder, safe vs dangerous, civilised/Christian vs naked/child/pagan are present.

Focus on

Represent project participants respectfully. Do not exploit people’s suffering for your own gain (donations, attention). Portray people in a dignified manner by not merely showing their needs but also their potential, talents and strength. In this way, you avoid generalisations, and you can help debunk stereotypes such as poor children in dirty rags who are fed because of a “white saviour’s” generosity.

When portraying people, focus on commonalities, situations and emotions that resonate with your audience. Evoke connectedness and solidarity by pointing out the equality of all. Refrain from evoking pity, as this will create a sense of inequality.

Always present the content transparently. Be realistic in the content and don’t create expectations with the participant. Always communicate positively, but remember that not all positive communication is considered to be ethical.

Don'ts listed in a short overview

Regardless of culture, portraying people with respect and dignity implies certain **don'ts** for Dorcas:

- ✓ Do not portray power imbalance.
- ✓ Be aware of stereotyping.
- ✓ Do not highlight differences (in all sorts of ways).
- ✓ Do not portray people who are crying.
- ✓ Do not portray people who are under the influence of substances (e.g., alcohol, drugs).
- ✓ Do not portray people who are (partially) undressed.
- ✓ Do not portray people who pose in a degrading manner or in a way that others may easily interpret as having sexual connotations.
- ✓ Do not portray people in a situation that is intentionally sad or pathetic (e.g., displaying children with flies on their eyes).



Dorcas is not against visualising vulnerability, for example displaying disability or hardship. This can be done respectfully to allow people to feel comfortable and dignified. Dorcas does not seek to visualise the full extent of vulnerability at all costs.

Tips for photography

- ✓ Dorcas' work is central to the photography. We show that we are decisive and take action.
- ✓ Pictures of people actually involved in one of Dorcas' projects are used (project participants, aid workers, partners etc.). This gives Dorcas' work a face and makes the communication personal.
- ✓ Photos are preferably close-ups of people or situations. The photographs should clearly show the action without too many distractions. This is where personal attention comes in. We look people in the eye.
- ✓ The photos should not be too formal. We prefer to show informal situations.
- ✓ The photographs should not be too posed, but should express transparency and sincerity. They should show that Dorcas is reliable and does what it says.
- ✓ Care should be taken that the photos are always sufficiently illuminated.



Chapter 4: Creating and using communication materials step-by-step

This chapter provides a step-by-step approach regarding the process of obtaining and using materials for external communications. These steps are:

1. Inform;
2. Ask permission;
3. Create and use materials;
4. Ask approval.

Having considered the general principles of ethical communication in the previous chapter, this chapter uses a step-by-step approach to provide more detailed guidance.

Step 1 is informing people about which communication materials are needed, for what purpose and how they will be used. This is a precondition to taking Step 2, asking for (informed) consent. The Dorcas consent form (Annex 1) plays an important role in these first two steps. Step 3 concerns the actual creation of communication materials, and Step 4 describes their storage and use.

STEP 1: Inform people about the type, purpose and use of the to be produced communication materials

Establishing what you need and how this will be used helps you to come home with the required material. It also helps to inform the people who will figure in the communication materials so that they can give informed consent.

Type of materials

The three types of communication materials most created and used by Dorcas for external communication are:

1. Photos;
2. Video material;
3. Stories or written text.

Purposes

Within Dorcas, communication materials are mainly created for the following purposes:

1. Awareness raising;
2. Fundraising;
3. For general stock material.

This last category includes content that is not created or used for a specific campaign or goal. It is material that gives a general idea of Dorcas' work and impact. When this material is created, its specific use is not yet known. Once created, the visual material is uploaded in the Dorcas Mediabase, which functions as a stock for future use. For example, pictures taken to function as general stock material can be used in the Dorcas Annual Report. Note that only pictures approved by the Country Director may be uploaded in Dorcas Mediabase.

Use of material

Communication materials are usually published by Dorcas in the following form:

1. Online via the website (Dorcas.org and Dorcas.nl);
2. Online via social media (Facebook, Instagram, et cetera);



3. In a magazine, brochure, letter or flyer;
4. In a report to people and/or organisations that have donated or are considering doing so;
5. Via television.

Informing people to enable informed consent

Dorcas' general principles about ethical external communication mention the importance of informed consent. The person creating the communication materials is responsible for ensuring that a consent form has been signed. The person should also ensure that the main person(s) appearing in the materials understand what they consent to. They should be informed about the type of material to be created, its purpose(s) and use, so that they know what they are saying yes or no to. The correct order is always: First, discuss and explain your activities, make sure this is understood and then ask for consent. To make this easy, the consent form (Annex 1) includes an overview of what people need to be informed about.

STEP 2: Ask permission

It is good practice to ask people's permission before you use their story or a photo or video in which they figure in external communication. This section describes how to do this and how to deal with specific situations, for example when children figure in external communication.

General use of the Dorcas consent form

The person creating the communication material is responsible for ensuring that a consent form has been signed. The person is responsible for the following:

- ✓ Ensuring that it is informed consent;
- ✓ Ensuring that the person expected to figure in the external communication material has a free choice to say yes or no. There should be no adverse implications if the person decides not to participate;
- ✓ Ensuring that the Dorcas consent form is completed and signed by the person if she or he decides to participate. The consent form should mention the type, purpose and use of the materials that are created.

Informed consent and children

- ✓ A specific target group that figures in Dorcas external communication is children.
- ✓ When children are the primary subject of external communication, both the child and the parent or caregiver need to provide informed consent.
- ✓ It is important to consider what is a culturally relevant understanding of childhood. As a rule of thumb, parents or caregivers should always be informed and provide consent when the child concerned is **15 years or younger**. But when the child is older, it should also be considered.
- ✓ Parents or caregivers should always be asked for consent if the child concerned has a mental disability that limits her or his understanding of the purpose of the external communication and the consequences of providing consent.
- ✓ If children are informed prior to asking for their consent, then this should be done in a child-friendly way that is appropriate for their age, using understandable language.
- ✓ If parents and or caregivers are living with a mental disability themselves or are influenced by substance abuse (alcohol, drugs, etc.), they may not fully oversee the consequences of providing informed consent. In such cases, it is recommended that their child does not



feature in Dorcas external communication. However, should this be necessary for sponsorship communication, it might be the case that a local child protection department holds legal guardianship over the child. Then, besides the child, this department should be asked for informed consent.

Informed consent and prisoners

In some contexts, Dorcas works with (ex-)prisoners. The following recommendations apply:

- ✓ Photos can only be taken with the approval of the prison administration.
- ✓ Photos should, in principle, ensure a prisoner is not recognisable. For example, a picture could show a Dorcas staff member and the prisoner(s) concerned from the rear.
- ✓ Photos should not display underage prisoners, and they should not be asked for consent.

Informed consent and side-characters

When creating external communication, people may figure in stories, videos and/or pictures that are not the primary subject. For example, a story may be about a woman, and accompanying pictures display her with her children. Or a story about the impact of drought has pictures showing a local street scene with some people in the background. Or, in another alternative, a picture displays a group of people. Informed consent also needs to be obtained from such “side characters” in case the person can be identified and one of the following conditions applies:

- ✓ The disclosed personal information is of a sensitive nature;
- ✓ The situation described can possibly cause damage to their privacy, dignity, safety and/or reputation;
- ✓ Where otherwise required by applicable law.

What if there is no consent?

If people have not given consent to use materials already created, then these must be deleted and not published. For materials created before 1 July 2021, it is not always possible to determine whether informed consent has been obtained. These materials can, however, still be used.

STEP 3: Create and use materials

After the relevant people have been informed and consent has been obtained from them, communication materials will be created and used. This section starts with some general guidance and subsequently addresses privacy-specific information and names, specific guidance regarding pictures, the right to be forgotten, the use of social media and sharing external communication materials with external individuals and organisations.

General

When materials are created and used for external communications, the general principles provided in Chapters 1 and 2 continue to apply. Country-specific guidance remains relevant, risk considerations still play a role, and accurate communication, for example using the right picture with the right project, should be provided.

Privacy-sensitive information and names

Dorcas staff creating and using materials need to avoid sharing very specific, privacy-sensitive information. For example, Dorcas shall never share information about a person’s place of residence. Any other information that could be used to locate an individual (particularly children) should not be



published either. If names are used in external communication, Dorcas lets people choose whether they want to be referred to by their first name or with a fictional name.

Sharing on social media

Dorcas' communication materials are often shared on social media, and privacy considerations are also relevant here.

Sharing with other individuals or organisations

Individuals or organisations can request the use of Dorcas' resources, such as photographs. Dorcas will require these parties to sign a "processing agreement" in such cases. This should include at least the limitations on the objectives and duration for which the materials concerned can be used. These limitations should be in line with the consent given by the persons who figure in the materials.

The right to be forgotten

People have a right that Dorcas communicates about them in accordance with the consent they provided. In addition, people who figure in our communications also have a right to be forgotten. If they approach Dorcas and claim this right, then that must be respected and appropriate action taken. The "Data Protection Policy" should also be considered in this regard.

Specific guidance regarding pictures

Dorcas saves its pictures for which consent has been given in a picture bank, the so-called Dorcas Mediabase. When pictures are used, follow the principle of providing an accompanying text that credits the photographer, for example: "Photo by [name photographer]". If the photographer is unknown or would prefer not to be mentioned, the organisation name can be used, such as "Photo by [name local partner Dorcas Albania]".

STEP 4: Ask approval

After the material has been produced, the (digital) result can sometimes be shown directly to the person portrayed. This cannot always be done. But where possible, involve the person in the result and ask for their consent. You should always share the final materials with the Country Office, so they can show them to the beneficiaries when asked.



Sources

CHS Alliance. (2015). CHS Guidance Notes.

Mandelbaum, A. (2020, October 23). *Paradox Marketing*. Retrieved from ETHICAL COMMUNICATION:
THE BASIC PRINCIPLES:

[Direct link to article](#)



ANNEX 1: Consent form

Direct link to folder [5. Consent and release forms](#)

Consent form

This form is meant for you to give permission to Dorcas Aid International (“Dorcas”) to use your (or your child’s) footage. You are not obliged to sign it. You should only sign it if you are willing to participate in our campaigns and contribute to our mission for those in need.

Hereby the undersigned,

- 1) allows Dorcas to use and share all materials (story, photographs and video’s) in order to accomplish its mission locally as well as internationally.
- 2) confirms to understand that these materials might appear in online and offline campaigns, websites, publications, newsletters, reports, media channels, et cetera.
- 3) hands over all the rights of the materials to Dorcas.

Name portrayed person : _____ M F

Age : _____ (Younger than 18? A parent or caregiver should sign!)

Name parent/caregiver : _____ (Only if applicable)

Do you wish to stay No, I allow Dorcas to use my (or my child’s) first name.

anonymous? Yes, I want Dorcas to use this pseudonym: _____

Date : ____-____-____

Signature : _____

Which Dorcas or PO colleague can we reach in case of questions?

Name : _____

Contact details : _____

