



The Irish Association of Non Governmental
Development Organisations

**A Guide to
Understanding and
Implementing the
Code of Conduct on
Images & Messages**

Section 1: Introduction

“ The work of Irish Development NGOs is supported by hundreds of thousands of people in Ireland. And those people are becoming more and more vocal about their desire to receive clear and understandable information from the Development NGOs about their activities. This Code is one way in which the members of Dóchas are improving their public communications - it sets out a clear set of principles, values and standards, and invites the public to comment on our adherence to these” Hans Zomer – Director, Dóchas¹.

The images and messages used to portray people, places and situations in the developing world can have an enormous impact on people’s perceptions and attitudes. People have different opinions on what constitutes ‘acceptable’ in relation to images and messages in development and depending on their end use, different people, often within the same organisation, may champion certain images and messages but reject others. Organisations use images and messages for a number of different reasons such as:

- To inform (media/education)
- To sell (marketing/fundraising)
- To convince (advocacy/policy)
- To account for (reporting)

Each of these is legitimate and worthwhile - the Code applies to them all.

Development organisations increasingly recognise the importance of using appropriate images and messages in their communication and in order to support Development NGOs to make informed decisions, Dóchas has revised and updated the Code of Conduct on Images and Messages. The purpose of the Code of Conduct is to provide a framework which organisations can draw on when using images or messages on development-related themes. The Code offers a set of guiding principles that can assist practitioners in their decision-making about their choice of images and messages in their

¹ Dóchas is the the Irish Association of Non-Governmental Development Organisations. It provides a forum for consultation and co-operation between its members and helps them speak with a single voice on development issues.

communications. The Code itself is intended as a 'guide' for everyone working in development organisations to facilitate progress towards 'good' practice in the representation of the people and communities we serve and the situations in which we work.

By signing up to the Code, organisations pledge to increase awareness of the Code and its guiding principles across their organisation. By integrating the Code into the organisation's ongoing planning and training processes, the Code should remain relevant over time as new people, and new organisations, enter the field.

This resource is designed to be used alongside the Code of Conduct in order to assist personnel to apply the spirit of the Code to their day-to-day work. It explains the guiding principles in greater depth, gives practical examples of how to implement the Code and suggests ways in which training around the implementation of the Code could be developed for your organisation's staff.

Images and Messages

Images include any visual representations of people, situations and places whether through photograph, picture, illustration, cartoon or video.

Messages include spoken or written communications, whether captions, headlines, sub headlines, case studies, articles, radio/television interviews, speaking in public fora, advertisements representing people, situations and places.

Images and messages can be communicated through a variety of channels including press, radio, TV, websites, magazines, spoken word, SMS, billboards, posters, brochures, flyers, press statements, interviews, marketing material and internal literature.

The primary stakeholders in relation to the Code include:

- The subjects of the images and messages and their communities & countries
- The public or consumer audience at whom the communications are targeted
- NGO personnel who work in fundraising, development education, communications, advocacy and policy advisory roles
- Senior management and governance personnel in NGOs who agree the organisation's overall policies
- Agencies contracted by NGOs to supply professional services such as copywriters, creative designers, journalists and photographers
- Media decision makers who are responsible for communicating images and messages about the developing world, such as editors, journalists, photographers, picture editors and including contract staff
- Regulatory agencies (e.g. equality, media, charity) where applicable

Section 2: The Guiding Principles explained

The Code is driven by a strong commitment to the following non-negotiable values:

- Respect for the **dignity** of the people concerned
- Belief in the **equality** of all people
- Acceptance of the need to promote **fairness, solidarity and justice**

The following guiding principles underpin the Code:

1. Choose images and related messages based on values of respect, equality, solidarity and justice

Respect: This means that respect for the people who are being pictured or talked about should be maintained at all times; respect for people's privacy and dignity above all.

Equality: When capturing images and communicating messages respect for diversity and a commitment to non-discrimination must be respected at all times.

Solidarity: It is essential to communicate that we work in solidarity with the people in the developing world and that we are not simply giving a hand out. Images and messages should not perpetuate an 'us and them' attitude but instead, foster a sense of our inter-connected common humanity.

Justice: Underlying the selection of images and messages, there is a need to always strive towards justice for those being portrayed.

2. Truthfully represent any image or depicted situation both in its immediate and in its wider context so as to improve public understanding of the realities and complexities of development

Every image and story has a background and context. Therefore, it is important to outline the background of each sound bite or image as much as possible so that public perceptions are informed properly of the situation portrayed in them. For example:

- Avoid cropping images as it can often lead to distortion of the truth e.g. cropping a picture of a child from a photo of a mother and child.
- Do not distort an image or message if this leads to a false context being created; ***Remember if your image selection follows good practice but your messaging and communications do not reinforce and complement this, the materials will be just as inappropriate.***
- There is a need to ensure that a 'respect for dignity of people' does not result in a simplistic positive versus negative images debate.

Some positive images used [e.g. the standard smiling child(ren) shot] do not truthfully reflect the complexity and the context of development and the use of 'positive' images can also result in negative associations being made because of existing stereotypes (e.g. if we talk about refugees and use a picture of a smiling black person who's been given asylum it still feeds the stereotypes that all refugees are black).

Guidelines for using images and stories in communication with the public

Strive to select an image that has the following:

- A good caption describing the situation, where the picture is taken, the names of the subjects (first and family names, where and when appropriate).
- Avoid photos where international staff members are named while national staff or local people's names are excluded.
- Include a thorough reference to location. If the details are not complete try to retrieve the missing details from the photographer or writer.
- Consult with subjects, partners and people on the ground when you are producing your communication material.

3. Avoid images and messages that potentially stereotype, sensationalise or discriminate against people, situations or places

What are stereotypes? In brief, stereotypes are ideas held by individuals about members of particular groups, based solely on membership of that group. They are often used in a negative or prejudicial sense and are frequently used to justify certain discriminatory behaviours. More benignly, they may express sometimes-accurate folk wisdom about social reality.

Common stereotypes include a variety of allegations about groups based on age, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, or religious belief, along with profession and social class. Stereotypes can also be based on an individual's characteristics.

The smiling child: the new stereotype?

It is a welcome development that many organisations recognise that they have a responsibility to try and move away from prevailing 'negative' images and messages. However, the tendency to directly replace the image of the 'poor unhappy person' with the 'smiling happy child' does an equal disservice to the context of many situations. It is entirely possible and feasible to convey negative stories and situations accurately while still adhering to the values and principles of the Code of Conduct. As the Code itself notes *'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'*.

While we must accurately represent the extreme levels of distress caused by poverty, we also have a responsibility to uphold the values of human dignity, respect and equality. The Code acknowledges that achieving this balance is not always easy and delivering our messages in the context of fairness, solidarity and justice can be challenging for even the most experienced communications professional. It is important to note that the Code is not a prescriptive check-list of 'correct' and 'incorrect'. Instead, the Code is a set of guiding principles that seeks to create a mindset and ethos within our organisations about how we represent the stories and situations of others.

4. Use images, messages and case studies with the full understanding, participation and permission of the subjects (or subjects' parents/guardian)

Before taking an image or researching a story, it is important to ensure that you have the full informed consent of the subject. Those whose story is told or image is taken must be aware of where and how these will be used. The

Code acknowledges that this may not be possible to obtain in all situations (in large crowds, for example) but, in all cases, the guiding values should be considered and applied. An interesting litmus test would be to step into the shoes of the subject and ask “would I want this image (of me and/or my family) or message to be used as a marketing, fundraising or communications tool for an organisation in another country”?

Guidelines for taking photos and researching stories (applicable to translators, photographers, journalists, media people, staff members and people on field trips)

- Ensure that the translator has read and understands the spirit of the Code and is clear on the potential outputs of their work; although in some cases this may not be feasible.
- On introduction (and where possible & feasible) ask permission to take photos and/or document a person’s story.
- Explain that these photos may be used on TV, mailing, newspaper advertisement, etc. If the person has no frame of reference for these media, be able to produce examples of your organisation’s communications/fundraising output which feature programme participants.
- Ask for the correct names of the subject(s) and locality. Ask subject/translator to spell person’s name and village/locality/camp name to ensure proper spelling.
- Capture an accurate and representative story.
- If there is no translation available, ensure at least names, locality and permission is established.

Different situations & circumstances:

It is understood that it is not always possible to get people’s permission particularly in public spaces, crowd scenes and conflict situations for example. In private spaces, such as someone’s own home it is essential that permission is established, whilst always remaining sensitive to different cultural contexts.

When consent is not needed	When to obtain verbal consent	When written consent is encouraged
<p>Non-recognisable individuals in public (faces and all other identifying features are obscured)</p> <p>Public figures in public (e.g. celebrities campaign launches).</p> <p>Crowds in public (e.g. an audience at outdoor concert, demonstrations) or war and war-like situations where it could mean more harm for the photographer and/or the photographed person to ask than just take the picture.</p>	<p>All individuals in all settings when possible</p> <p>Parents, guardians, or teachers of children.</p> <p>Directors/Managers of clinics or other service programmes.</p>	<p>Recognisable providers and clients in clinical settings</p> <p>Recognisable or non-recognisable individuals in any setting where personal, private information is exposed in the photo or documented in the corresponding caption, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Health status (e.g. HIV-positive persons, persons living with AIDS/STIs, abortion history, TB, diarrhoea, disease, etc.) • Health behaviour (e.g. sex workers, sexual orientation, alcohol and drug use, contraceptive use) • Victims (e.g. survivors of Gender Based Violence (GBV), rape, exploitation or abuse) • Criminal behaviour (e.g. perpetrator of GBV or violence, etc.)

A note on consent: It is important to note that gaining consent does not automatically equate with compliance of the Code. Gaining consent and/or identifying people in an image are just some of the many tools by which the Code can be implemented. For example, it is possible to gain consent for an image, identify the person/people in the image and not be compliant with the Code. **The Code is about much more than consent and names** and the Code should be considered and applied before an image is captured or message conveyed, not retrospectively. The Code's guiding principles should act as the main reference point for all decisions.

5. Ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves

Where possible, ask the people to tell their own story; the story-collector's impression or perception of the situation does not necessarily represent the truth. In publications, stories should, where possible, be told in the first person. This gives people a real voice and opportunity to tell their own story. Telling someone's story for them is disempowering and shifts the balance of power to the storyteller. This should, when feasible, be avoided.

6. Establish and record whether the subjects wish to be named or identifiable and always act accordingly

It may often be the case that the people in the photos or story do not wish to be named or identified for security reasons. This should be respected at all times. It is also important to consider whether or not it is appropriate to identify children, especially if they are conveying a sensitive story (gender based violence, for example). While respecting the dignity of those relaying their stories, the protection of vulnerable people should also be considered.

Tips for Obtaining Informed Consent

Cultural Sensitivity: Keep in mind that how you approach individuals and communities creates a relationship that can have a lasting impact on field staff and future travellers. Before travelling to another culture, talk to your colleagues or consult a guidebook to learn about the views of that culture towards photography and the issues you are interested in documenting. Find out if photography is generally considered rude or offensive. Show extreme care and sensitivity when photographing taboo practices or stigmatised populations. Some issues are sensitive in most societies (e.g. abortion, prostitution). At the very least, obtain verbal consent to take and use a photo for non-commercial purposes.

Verbal Consent: When possible, establish a relationship before you start taking photos. When you approach photo subjects in the field, briefly introduce yourself, be courteous, and explain the purpose of your visit or the reason you want to take photos. In clinical contexts, speak with the clinical director before you begin photographing health workers or clients.

e.g. *“I am taking photos for [name of organisation], an NGO working to improve health in [your country]. Do I have your permission to take your photo for use in educational media and in our publications?”*

- If you don't speak the same language, communicate with your body language. At the very least, smile, nod, and point to your camera before shooting. If you sense any reluctance, confusion, or disdain, refrain from taking the photo. Respect a person's right to refuse to be photographed.
- If you are travelling with someone who speaks the local language, ask him or her to translate your request for verbal consent.
- Identify an adult who can give you verbal consent on behalf of children.

Written Consent: Obtaining written consent is not practical in all circumstances. Furthermore, written documents may have little or no meaning to people who speak a different language, people of low literacy, and people who live in cultures where photography or publications are not common. However, if it is your organisation's policy to obtain written consent, consider these tips.

- Prepare your consent forms ahead of time in the local language of the area you will be visiting.
- If you are unable to prepare written consent forms in the local language, orally translate the consent form to your photo subjects. Use an interpreter if necessary.
- For low literate subjects, ask the subject to make a mark on the consent form. If the person does not want to or cannot use a writing tool, obtain verbal permission. Have the consent witnessed by a literate witness who can sign or countersign the document and confirm that the form was read to the subject.

7. Conform to the highest standards in relation to human rights and protection of vulnerable people

As a photographer, editor, or graphic designer, you should take steps beyond informed consent to protect the privacy of human photo subjects when they are portrayed in vulnerable situations. For example:

- Use a model in a clinical setting, rather than an actual patient, and obtain a written release from the model.
- Photographing and using photos of vulnerable populations requires extreme care and sensitivity. To protect the identity of individuals who may be put at risk of reprisal, violence, or rejection in their communities as a result of telling their story, it may be necessary to leave out detailed personal information. In such cases, use false names or no names for subjects in high-risk situations. Use the UN Children's and Women's rights conventions as the legal base for your position on altering photo content to protect subjects.
- When necessary, alter photo content to protect subjects.

Children in images & messages:

As children are often the most frequently portrayed subjects, there is a need to consider the particular situation of children and young people. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) should be referred to at all times in situations relating to children.

Article 17 of the CRC notes that **“State parties recognize the important function performed by the mass-media and shall ensure that the child has access to information and material from a diversity of national and international sources, especially those aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health”**

When applying the Code in relation to children, the following should be considered:

- Foster children's and young people's participation by enabling them to express their views freely and impart information and ideas of all kinds.
- Engage with children and young people in order to learn from them.
- Where possible, inform people about the positive actions taken by children and young people at local, national and global levels.
- Avoid creating vulnerability where it does not exist (for example, images looking down on children).

These guidelines can also be applied to other vulnerable groups such as women (in certain situations), those affected by HIV & AIDS and those living with a disability.

Section 3: Implementation and Training

3(a) Implementation

By signing the Code of Conduct, your organisation has agreed to:

- Make the existence of the Code known to the public, all partners, suppliers and contractors.
- Provide a feedback mechanism for the public to comment on your organisations application of the Code.
- Communicate your organisation's commitment to the Code in all public communications.
- Ensure that senior management takes responsibility for implementing and adhering to the Code.
- Assess your organisation's adherence to the guiding principles of Code on an annual basis.
- Train staff on the use of images and messages.
- Share your implementation experience with other signatory organisation.
- Report to Dóchas annually on your implementation of the Code.

3(b) Training

It is the responsibility of each individual organisation to ensure that its staff is adequately trained and cognisant on the Code and its underlying guiding principles.

As a signatory organisation to the Code, it is important to ensure that the Code is internalised by the whole organisation. While buy-in at the senior management level is important, the Code will only be successful if *everyone* is involved in its implementation. Therefore, it is critical that all staff members are aware of the Code; understand its underlying values and principles and most importantly, are aware of how the Code impacts on their day-to-day work.

As organisations differ, it is important to consider how best to communicate the Code in the context of your own organisational activities and

requirements. It is also important to take account of where your organisation is in terms of the Code – for example, what is the general level of awareness about the Code, how is the Code perceived? Knowing this information will enable you to tailor your training programme to ensure maximum relevance for all staff members.

The roll-out of training in your organisation could take a number of different forms. It is up to each individual organisation to select the method of training and information sharing that suits them best. Some examples include workshops, seminars, talks, interactive forums, and discussion/notice boards.

It is also important to note that the Code's principles should be implemented throughout *all* activities of your organisation and this should be reflected in the content of the training.

Some things to consider when designing your Code training

- Consider conducting a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) in advance of training programme design.
- Try to use images and messages from your own organisation in your training programme – this will make the Code and its application more tangible for participants.
- Consider who should be trained and in what order?
- Consider who will deliver the training? (internal or external facilitator)
- What form will the training take?
- When will the training take place?
- Where will the training take place? (on or off site)

Key messages for training programmes

- Adherence to the Code is *EVERYONE's* responsibility. There are no "Code police"!
- The Code is not a function of just the communication unit in your organisation – it is cross-cutting, affecting all levels and functions of the organisation.

- There are no right or wrong answers. The Code expresses a set of values and guiding principles. Opinions will differ between individuals so it is important to remember to always adhere to the '*spirit of the Code*'. The Code is there to assist you in your decision making when considering what images and messages to use.

Suggested training objectives

- To develop understanding around how/why attitudes can be influenced by images/messages and how images/messages are frequently constructed/manipulated to elicit a particular response.
- To explore the significance of Images and Messages on a personal level, and within the context of the Code of Conduct (with particular reference to your own organisation's work).
- To understand the significance and practical application of the Guiding Principles of the Code of Conduct on Images and Messages.

Note: These suggested objectives should be adapted to meet your own organisational requirements with regard to the Code.

Suggested outline of training content

- Introduction
- What do we understand by images and messages?
- What examples exist within the organisation and what purpose are they used for?
- Case study work on the guiding principles
- A southern perspective on images and messages
- How does the organisation manage the potential diversity of opinion concerning images and messages
- How will the organisation know when it is achieving good practice around use of images and messages?

- Action monitoring & evaluation planning around the organisational self audit tool
- Course evaluation

Ongoing training

Following the roll-out of training, it is important to ensure that all staff have access to opportunities to continue exploring and debating the Code and its implications for them and the organisation.

Ongoing discussion and debate could be facilitated through regular updates and the creation of a forum at which staff members feel comfortable about openly discussing and debating the Code. The organisation may also want to consider forming a mediation group – with wide representation from the whole organisation – to consider instances where employees are unsure of the Code's application. Terms of reference for this group could be developed and distributed to all staff.

It is also suggested that organisations could consider incorporating training on the Code into their induction programme for new employees. This would ensure that from the onset, all staff would have a basic understanding of the Code and approach their work with it in mind. This could then be followed up with more in-depth training.

Mechanisms for reviewing materials

As part of the roll-out of training in your organisation, it is also important to consider mechanisms by which images and messages can be discussed and reviewed on an on-going basis. Depending on your own requirements, a review group with a representative from each department could be established. They could be responsible for raising internal awareness of the Code, facilitate ongoing discussion on implementation of the Code and also, act as an advisor in the cases of differing opinions.

Feedback

As a signatory to the Code, your organisation has also committed to establish procedures which will facilitate public feedback on the Code. To raise public awareness of the Code and communicate your organisation's commitment, it is suggested that the following statement appears on your website and relevant publications "*([name of organisation] has signed the Code of conduct on images and messages. Please send your feedback to [Code@yourorganisation.net])*

Promoting the Code internally

To promote the Code effectively within your organisation, there are a number of organisation-specific issues to consider. These should be devised and agreed on internally.

Some things to consider:

- Seminars and refresher courses
- Building Code training into induction programmes for new employees
- Developing mechanisms for consulting with partners
- Database of images which are logged and labelled correctly
- Information on the Code on organisational website
- Encourage staff to contribute to annual review of the Code's implementation
- Training for contractors such as photographers, designers & reporters.
- Wide distribution of the Code, the guide and any other relevant supporting materials.

Office Environment

Another important element of the Code of Conduct is your own organisation's environment. Does your office space espouse the guiding principles of the Code – the decoration, images on the walls, etc.

Last-minute checklist for practitioners

Before making a final decision on the use of an image or message, consideration of the following questions may be useful:

- Does the use of the planned image and/or message fit with the core values of respect for the dignity of others?
- If used would those people directly affected by this image and/or message feel that it is a fair and true representation?
- Have all the subjects of the image and/or message agreed to this application of their image/story?
- Would the use of this image and/or message cause offence or hurt?
- Might the use of this image and/or message contribute to cultural or racial stereotyping of people, places and situations?

These questions are not mutually exclusive and the checklist is intended to prompt further reflection about practical choices and alternatives.

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