



HOW TO WRITE ABOUT
AFRICA
IN 8 STEPS

AN ETHICAL STORYTELLING HANDBOOK



Author: Rebecca Pointer

Research support from: Shamiso Moyo and Veneka Paradza

Editor: Liz Sparg

Artwork: Mxolisi Gumbi

Africa No Filter is a donor collaborative that's working to shift stereotypical and harmful narratives within and about Africa. Through research, grant-making and advocacy our objective is to build the field of narrative change-makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns. The donor collaborative is funded by Ford Foundation, Bloomberg, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Luminare, Open Society Foundations, Comic Relief, the Hilton Foundation and the British Council.

africanofilter.org

info@africanofilter.org

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ABOUT THIS HANDBOOK

Storytelling is the most powerful way for donor and non-governmental organisations to convey their work because stories allow audiences to connect on both intellectual and emotional levels. However, much of the storytelling about development work in Africa is unethical and perpetuates harmful and stereotypical narratives about the continent.

Stories that reinforce stereotypes about Africa often arise from the power dynamics between those who are telling the stories and those about whom stories are being told. This practical guide aims to address some of these issues by providing practical, ethical guidelines for storytellers to share their work on the continent.

Donor agencies, foundations and non-governmental organisations that aim to support and promote Africa's development have a responsibility to tell ethical stories about African countries. Ethics are key to ensuring stories are truthful and not distorted.

Historically, the international development agencies (and sometimes even the African development agencies) have played a fundamentally negative role in depictions of Africa. Development agencies first conceptualised development communication as necessary to show how underdeveloped Africa was, and therefore why Africa needed guidance from them. So, for example, they depicted the least developed and poorest parts of African countries, while not showing the modern advancements African were making. This resulted in an unbalanced view.

In the 1980s, development agencies were responsible for widely sharing decontextualised, distressing images of starving children, to raise funds. Such images have created the misperception that Africans have a "begging bowl" mentality, rather than being self-motivated. Ethical storytelling should undo this sort of damage, and ensure that Africa and Africans are seen as capable of rising to challenges.

This handbook considers the challenges of ethical storytelling and provides practical examples of how difficulties might be overcome. It looks at all the stages of the storytelling process: conceptualising a project, planning, gathering material, producing a draft, gathering feedback on it, and producing a final version before disseminating it.

As part of the process of developing this handbook, we reviewed 36 academic papers and books chapters covering the subject. We also interviewed eight African storytellers, including filmmakers, photographers, radio producers and writers who were researching and producing material about Africa for an international audience or for donor agencies. The data was used to generate these guidelines to help storytellers tell more nuanced and contextualised stories about the continent.

We hope the guidelines on ethical storytelling in this handbook will be shared with all staff and contractors who work in the storytelling arena, so that they understand exactly what they can do to shape and improve the quality of their work. The guidelines should form the basis of conversations between the storytelling project team members at the onset of the project.

WHY ETHICAL STORYTELLING MATTERS

Research has shown that the prevailing stories and frames about Africa focus on poverty, poor leadership, corruption, conflict and disease. These lead to narratives about an Africa that is broken and where its people lack agency and are dependent on outsiders.

“What is lost with this imperialist view is incalculable. The dignity of the people of an entire continent. Serious analysis and comparison of approaches to solving global problems. The ability to learn from one another. The chance to see ourselves as part of a whole, more similar in our humanity than different. And the opportunity for true internationalism.”

- Mamka Anyona, African Arguments

Ethical storytelling means adopting a new approach that consciously tries to move away from harmful, stereotypical narratives. Getting ethical storytelling right means:

- Creating better, more authentic stories that connect people of different backgrounds and disrupt inequitable power relations, such as those around race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality;
- Representing lived experiences more accurately;
- Encouraging mutual respect; and
- Preserving the dignity of those whose story is being told.

More recently, the continent has been highlighted as an emerging destination for investment; with high GDP growth rates (although COVID-19 has had a negative impact), an increase in peaceful elections and stability, a decrease in poverty and the spread of technology. Storytellers need to ensure these positive stories break through and that Africa is presented in a more nuanced and contextualised way that reflects the continent today. Better insights into the continent can lead to better policies within development agencies and more opportunities for African businesses trying to secure investments.

WHAT DOES UNETHICAL STORYTELLING LOOK LIKE?

To illustrate what poor, unethical storytelling looks like, we identified and analysed three stories (see case studies 1–3) that perpetuate stereotypes. We identified the following common problems with the storytelling:

The stories blur the distinctions between individual countries, so that they all fit into a single frame of poverty and suffering.

The stories focus on individual or community “deficits” rather than their agency.

The people or local organisations that are working to tackle the problem lack sufficient voice in the stories.

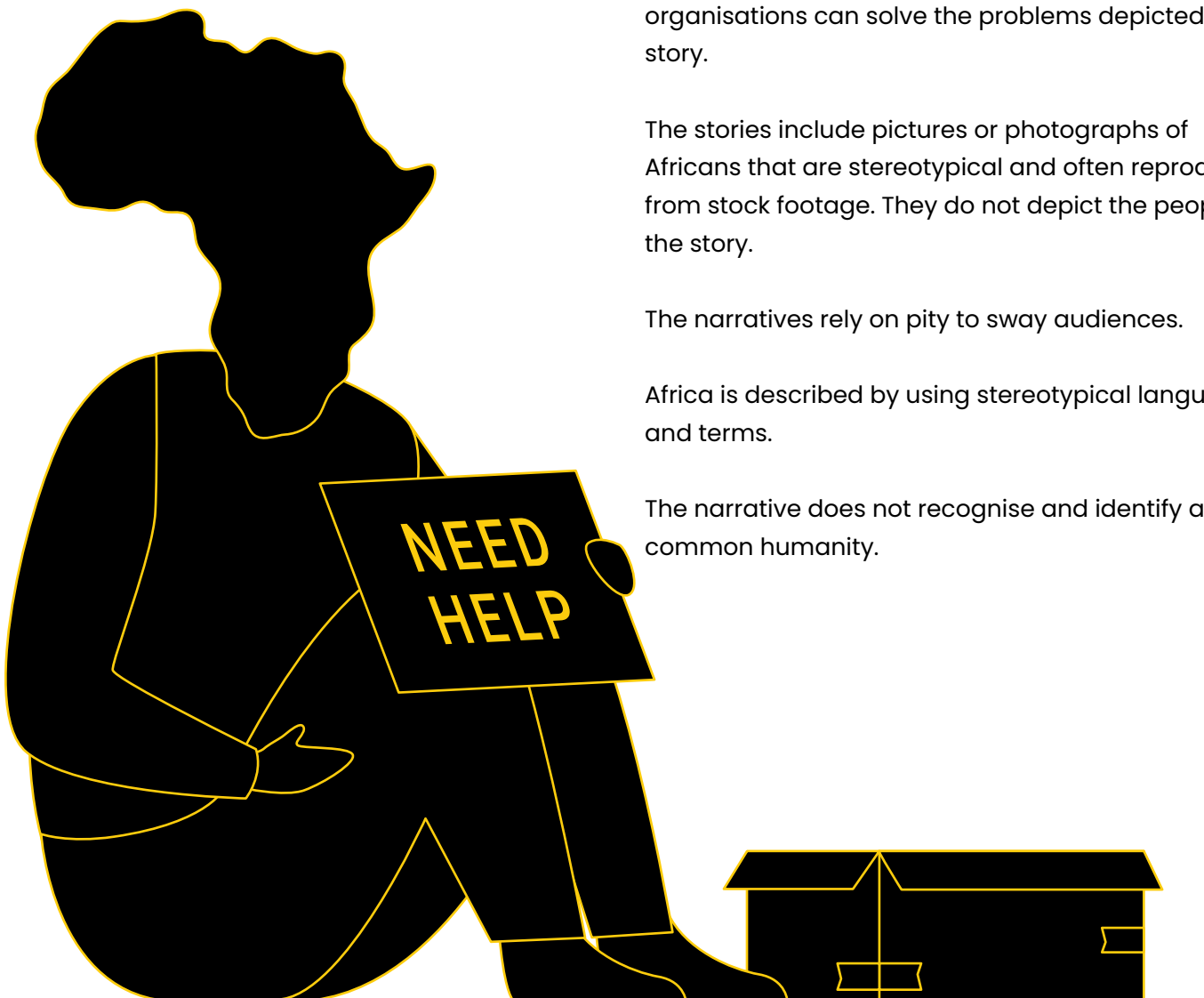
The narratives imply that only development organisations can solve the problems depicted in the story.

The stories include pictures or photographs of Africans that are stereotypical and often reproduced from stock footage. They do not depict the people in the story.

The narratives rely on pity to sway audiences.

Africa is described by using stereotypical language and terms.

The narrative does not recognise and identify a common humanity.



CASE STUDY 1

UNICEF ASKS FOR DONATIONS BECAUSE IT IS “HEROIC”

In a blog post subtitled “Humanitarian heroes take up the call to improve the welfare of others”, UNICEF depicts humanitarian organisations and people who donate to charities as “heroes”. This downplays the role of local heroes who bring about change in their own communities and ignores local people’s own agency. It argues that, without the intervention of humanitarian organisations, action is unfeasible:

Formal charity organisations and established NPOs all contribute in giving back to the community in ways that you and I, as individuals, do not have capacity or means to do. The purpose of the blog post is to raise funds for UNICEF, so it blows the UNICEF trumpet. Even though it mentions “partnering with individuals”, the only other people depicted in the post are in stock images of happy, black, voiceless children.

On the one hand, the article emphasises a common humanity by saying, “Caring is what makes us human”; on the other hand it argues that those who “care” are somehow uniquely heroic when they undertake acts of charity. Thus, the givers are depicted as heroic but not the people in need, acting for themselves.

Furthermore, the article uses sweeping examples to explain and illustrate the problems of South Africans. Unique problems become diluted into generalised “African” problems, like “hygiene and sanitation, health and nutrition, education, and protection of people’s rights”. The meanings underpinning the story signal that Africans are unclean, hungry, uneducated, and unable to act to protect their own rights. The article thus focuses on the communities’ supposed deficits, rather than the assets they can use to change their circumstances.

CASE STUDY 2

WORLD FOOD PROGRAMME DISTRIBUTING FOOD

On 7 February 2021, the World Food Programme (WFP) chief, David Beasley, appeared in a [tweeted video](#), explaining what WFP is doing about food shortages in Tigray, Ethiopia. Throughout the video the camera focuses exclusively on the “white saviour” who has come to deliver food. Despite being presented as an authority on the food shortage, he does not explain why people in Tigray need food aid, nor the source of the conflict. The aim of the video is not to explain what is happening in Tigray, but merely to promote WFP’s work.

The Ethiopians depicted in the video are in the background: we do not see their faces, and they do not speak; they are just manual labour, moving white bags of food aid around. Although the WFP chief briefly mentions that organisations on the ground are delivering food, he does not highlight who these organisations are, how they will reach the neediest people and where the people of Tigray can access food.

Source: Unicef South Africa. 2020. Giving back to the community - a humanitarian response. Blog post, 13 July. <https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/stories/giving-back-community-humanitarian-response>



CASE STUDY 3

ACTIONAID DESCRIBES COMMUNITY ACTION, BUT RELIES ON PITY

In a story on 19 January 2021, ActionAid described court action undertaken by a Zambian community to address problems resulting from mining activity in their area. The **article** initially starts off well, describing the community's solidarity and agency:

Communities in Chingola have been fighting for justice and compensation...

However, midway through the article, ActionAid implies that the community could not have fought without having "received rights training from ActionAid". It thereby positions local activists as learners who receive education from outside rather than equal partners who share knowledge.

The second part of the article also quotes female activists who speak about their woes, rather than their strengths and activities. While the specific problems do need to be identified, this focus on deficits leaves the audience with feelings of pity for the women and their plight, instead of admiration for the women's actions. Action Aid could have inspired the audience to support these empowered women by showing their assets – strong organising and problem-solving skills.

Source: ActionAid International. 2021. ActionAid Zambia: Mining companies must not be allowed to pollute with impunity. 19 January. <https://actionaid.org/news/2021/actionaid-zambia-mining-companies-must-not-be-allowed-pollute-impunity>

WHAT DOES ETHICAL STORYTELLING LOOK LIKE?

To illustrate what good (ethical) storytelling looks like, we identified and analysed three articles (case studies 4–6) that highlight the successes and agency of the people in the stories. These articles look at what local people are doing in activism, financial grants, or innovation.

THE COMMON THEMES THAT EMERGE OUT OF GOOD, ETHICAL STORYTELLING ARE THAT:

1. The stories highlight the assets that individuals and communities have; Africans are shown as capable and innovative in solving problems.
2. The stories highlight collaboration between Africans.
3. African people and African organisations occupy a central role in the story.
4. The stories do not shy away from discussing the problems, but provide local context, nuance, and specific details such as statistics and place names.
5. The stories do not rely on pity to engage an audience.
6. Rather than treating every African country as if it is one country, the stories name specific countries and places in the story.

“Ethical stories lift up the inherent resourcefulness and power of individuals forced to grapple with those systemic inequities.”

– Provoc team: Erica Priggen-Wright
and Bettina Sferino



CASE STUDY 4

CARE INTERNATIONAL HIGHLIGHTING AFRICAN AGENCY

In a Care International blog, entitled “How community activists in Kenya are working together to end female genital cutting”, the author, Jacky Habib, puts at the centre of the story African voices and organisations involved in the work of ending female circumcision. The story focuses on one Kenyan woman activist, Shinina Shani, who has been working to stop genital cutting. However, Habib also brings in other role-players, naming individuals involved and one of the shelters where work is being done. She then emphasises resources and assets available in the communities where Shinina works.

The article also explains that the scale of the problem is different in different parts of Kenya, so it does not treat the country as a homogenous whole. The story is nuanced and provides various statistics alongside powerful narratives about people who take action.

Furthermore, Habib provides details about the multi-pronged approach that the African role-players have adopted, including providing shelter, counselling and access to education for girls and arranging meetings with parents, elders and chiefs.

The story is ethical and effective because, while it does not shy away from the ongoing problem of genital cutting in Kenya, it also does not show Kenyans as hopeless and in need of white saviours.

Source: Habib, J. 2019. How community activists in Kenya are working together to end female genital cutting. Care International, 6 February. <https://www.care.org/news-and-stories/health/how-community-activists-in-kenya-are-working-together-to-end-female-genital-cutting/>

CASE STUDY 5

AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK PROVIDING GRANTS TO CHAD

In a [press release](#) on 8 January 2021, the African Development Bank (AfDB) announced a new grant to Chad, which would be used to provide education and job skills to women and girls. Because AfDB provided the grant, the article reveals that African financial institutions support African countries; it is not just Western development agencies that can make a difference. The press release explains:

The project will be financed from the Bank's Transition Support Facility and will be implemented over a five-year period by the Chadian Ministry of National Education and Civic Promotion, in coordination with partners involved in the education sector, civil society organisations, and youth organisations. The Chadian government will contribute a non-monetary contribution of \$713,000 towards the program.

The press release therefore shows how the grant fits in with needs on the ground, in terms of the Chadian government's own agenda; working with local schools to boost the integration of girls and facilities for them; and working with local civil society organisations and youth organisations to ensure programme delivery.

The press release emphasises cooperation and collaboration, rather than conflict. This is markedly different from many communications by development organisations, which underscore conflict.

Source: African Development Bank. 2021. Chad: The African Development Bank grants \$11.26 million for women and girls' education. Press release, 8 January. <https://www.afdb.org/en/news-and-events/press-releases/chad-african-development-bank-grants-1126-million-women-and-girls-education-40195>

CASE STUDY 6

KENYAN INNOVATOR DEVELOPING COVID-19 APP

On 4 February 2021, the Open Society Foundation for Eastern Africa [shared an article](#) about a Kenyan innovator, Brian Ndegwa, who had invented the Rona app to give Kenyans access to COVID-19 health information, up-to-date statistics by Kenyan county, a symptoms checklist for users to see if they might have COVID-19, and the possibility of ordering suitable medicine to relieve symptoms.

Because the article highlights African innovation, it addresses negative narratives in a direct way. While the article asks for donations and support, it makes it clear that the funds should flow directly to the app developer and not go to a development agency.

The article shows that Africans are deft at technological innovation and can handle necessary funds without relying solely on development organisations. It emphasises local solutions to local problems.

Source: The Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa. 2021. Kenyan innovator makes a move to curb COVID-19 Spread with Rona App. https://www.osiea.org/covid_19/how-a-meme-inspired-the-creation-of-rona-web-app/

HOW DO WE OVERCOME UNETHICAL STORYTELLING?

To overcome unethical storytelling, we need to understand what leads to this way of telling a story, and how to develop new practices. Importantly, all staff and contractors involved in the project need to undertake ethical practice throughout the process. This includes:

People who need to undertake ethical practice throughout the process include:

1. The head of the program;
2. The head of communications who commissions the team;
3. Those who develop the questions for story gathering;
4. The story gatherers, e.g. interviewers, photographers, production crew;
5. The local contributors e.g. guides, translators;
6. The interviewees;
7. The post-production team e.g. reviewers, editors; and
8. The final approver.



ON THE NEXT FEW PAGES WE EXPLORE FACTORS THAT UNDERPIN UNETHICAL STORYTELLING AND SUGGEST WAYS TO REMEDY THEM.

1. CHALLENGING UNEQUAL POWER RELATIONS

Most people who work for donor or development agencies are privileged (for example, well educated, middle-class background/lifestyle, white, male, and fluent in European languages). This sets up unequal power relations between development organisations and those they claim to be helping. Such power dynamics are particularly dangerous when privileged people feel entitled to wield power, and when aid recipients feel obliged to those providing aid.

“What I really found problematic in my previous Christian Aid job were the blatant racial issues...They came with money and their underlying assumption was that they have a superior world view and only they can solve the problems.”

RECOGNISING PRIVILEGE


To overcome unequal power relations, those who work in the development sector, especially those who gather stories, need to acknowledge their relative privilege and do a privilege check. A privilege check should help you think through your beliefs, attitudes, empathy and expertise. If you answer the questions honestly, it will help you recognise any prejudice and assumptions you may have.



CHECK YOUR PRIVILEGE

1. How do you feel about the individuals or community you are working with in this project? For example, do you feel sorry for them, do you feel concerned for their well-being, or do you feel inspired by the way they tackle challenges?
2. Do you believe the individuals or community are “broken” and need fixing? If so, what is “broken”, what needs fixing?
3. Have you decided the exact story you want to tell before the project even starts, i.e. have you already drafted an outline or script? If so, who provided input on it?
4. Do you think the individuals and/or community have agency? What kinds of things are they doing to show agency?
5. Do you believe they are dependent on your organisation for survival? What can/can't your organisation provide?
6. Do you have any personal experiences like the ones faced by the individuals or community whose story you are gathering? What are they?
7. Do you think you have the answers to the issues they are facing? Where does your knowledge come from? How is it different/better than their knowledge?

2. ENSURING RESPECTFUL ENGAGEMENTS



A key part of ethical storytelling is gathering the story in an ethical way. Unequal power relations often become obvious when story gatherers do not show respect to the people they are interviewing.

GET TO KNOW PEOPLE

Being respectful involves taking time to get to know your interviewees and their community before you begin to gather the story. Be prepared to share some of your own stories so that interviewees can relate to you as a fellow human being.

“You need to get confidence with the community member so they look at you not as a foreigner, not as someone just collecting information, not as someone coming from far away and not as someone more educated.”

ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS PARTICIPANTS’ NEEDS

Our research respondents highlighted that the way in which development agencies gather stories can be regarded as an “extractive industry”: they gather their stories from communities and individuals without offering anything in

return. Some of the people who share their stories may have very few resources and may face daily hunger. Unless this is acknowledged and addressed in the story gathering process, communities and individuals who share their stories can feel exploited.

HOW TO ACKNOWLEDGE INDIVIDUAL AND/OR COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN THE STORYTELLING PROCESS

1. Provide food or refreshments to interviewees for the duration of the interviews.
2. Provide a transport refund if they have to travel to be interviewed.
3. Identify skills you can transfer to people in the community to empower them, and that might possibly lead to them being able to access work. This can include participatory workshops, during which participants provide you with information and you provide them with skills.
4. Link people to local NGOs that can support them, for example, if the whole community has problems accessing food, link them to feeding schemes.
5. Take time to explain the benefits of other people hearing the story, such as possible policy change, and public service provision.

RESPECT CULTURAL ETIQUETTE

Part of being respectful towards interviewees and their communities is being familiar with and using local cultural etiquette. For example, in some cultures, it is considered rude to turn up empty handed, and a simple token gift is required to show respect.

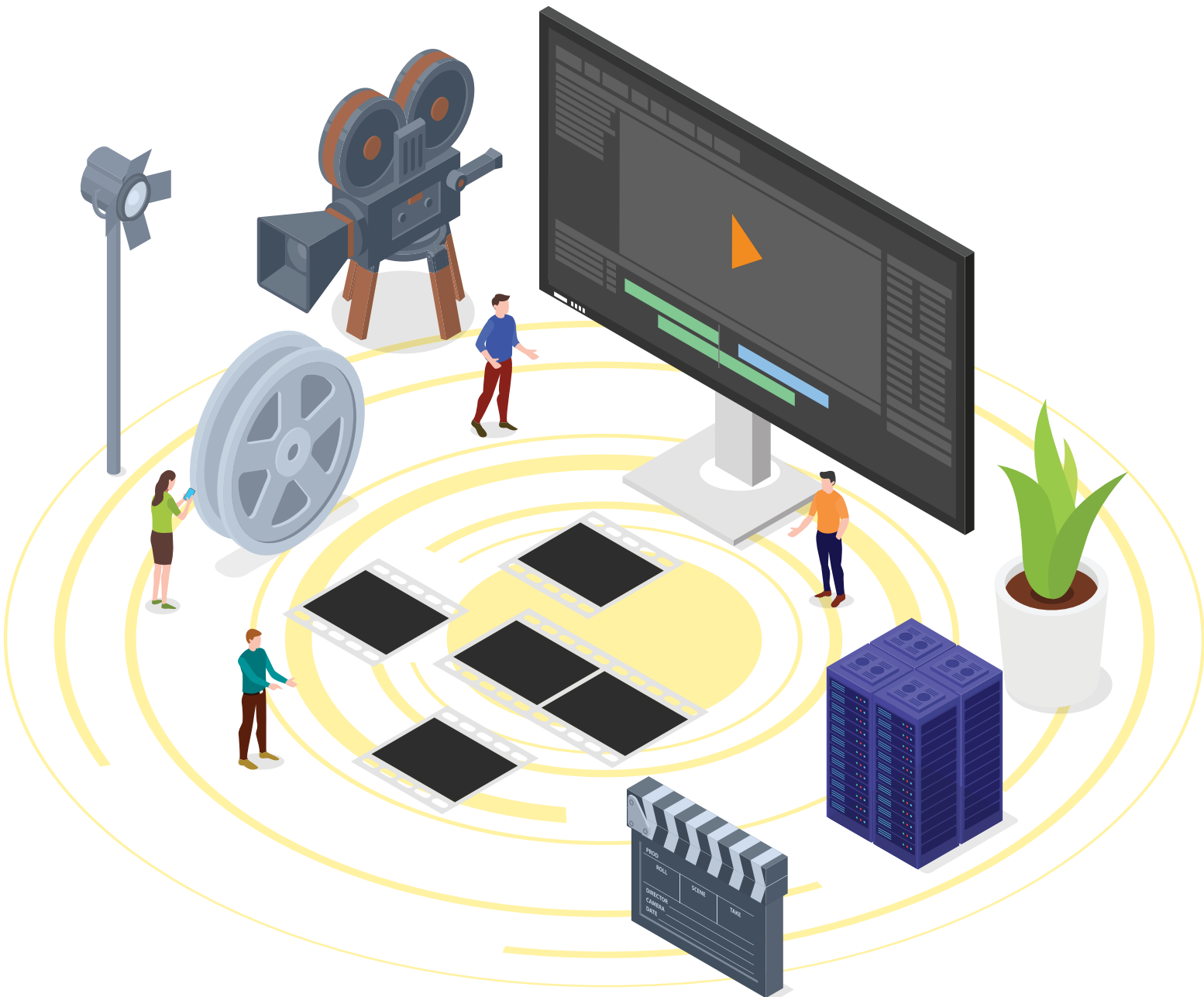
ACKNOWLEDGE AND ADDRESS PARTICIPANTS' EXPECTATIONS

Once you have taken time to explain to interviewees why you are doing the project and how they might benefit, you should also find out from them what kind of impact they want their story to have and see how you can meet their expectations. For example, they might want it to reach a specific audience, such as

a government official, an NGO, or the donor community, and you could therefore arrange an event for that audience.

PROVIDE A TRUE ACCOUNT

Being respectful does not stop at the story-gathering phase. Those working in post-production also need to be respectful of the content gathered. It is disrespectful and unethical for editors to make decisions about what will and will not be included, without concern for what the story gatherers have agreed with interviewees. It is important that the story gatherers and the interviewees have a say in the result. Editors should not change the content to suit the intended audience, if the result is not a true reflection of the information shared.



3. TACKLING IMPLICIT BIAS IN THE HIRING PROCESS

Bias often arises at the beginning of a project, when decision-makers conceptualise the idea for a story, and it carries forward throughout the process. The implicit bias of decision-makers determines factors such as who gets to gather the story, how long is spent in the field, what questions are relevant and what information should be gathered.

Implicit bias may come from decision-makers having preconceived ideas about what is happening in a community and what story is relevant, even though they have never been there. In order to get the story they want, they may script a set of questions for the story gatherers to ask. These questions may contain

assumptions that do not reflect or address the real issues in the community. As one of our respondents explained, these types of questions, especially invasive personal questions, can “tear people apart”.

Many donor and development agencies employ people just like them, with the same biases, to go into the field to capture stories. They often assume that people who are just like them have superior skills, compared to those who live and work in the relevant community. Donor and development agencies will therefore sometimes source a more expensive team of outsiders, whom they prefer to work with, rather than employing local people.

“You find master’s students whose knowledge of Africa is limited to watching TV and reading newspapers...people with that mind set, that bias trying to tell our stories.”

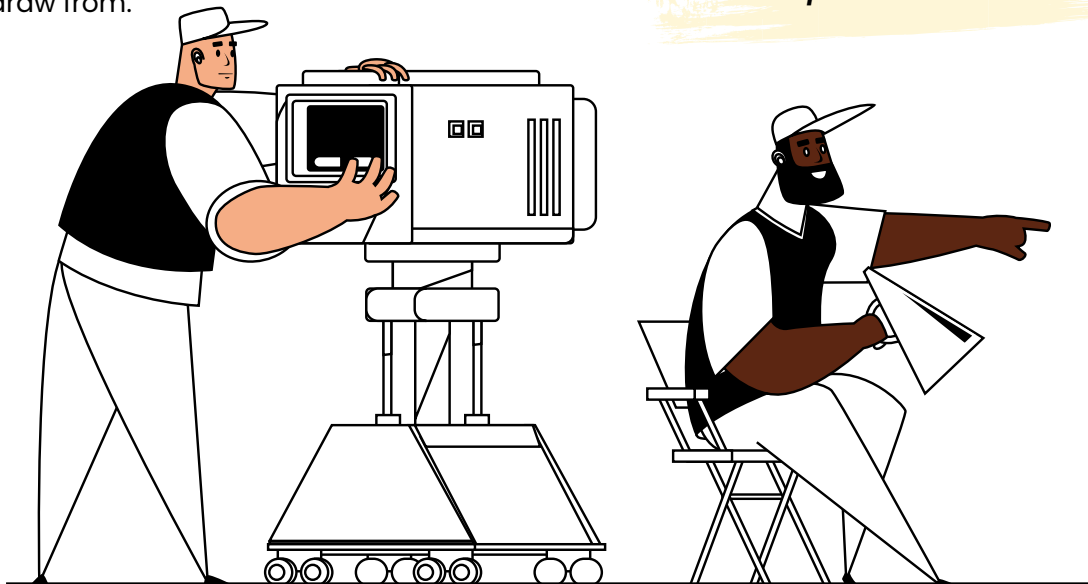


CO-CREATION

An important way to address implicit bias is to involve local people in co-creating the story. Local people should be involved in identifying what stories need to be told, participate in scripting them, participate in the production process (for example, as filmmakers or photographers), translate the stories where necessary, and participate in the post-production process (for example, editing). Local storytellers should also be empowered to tell the story they want to tell, rather than the one they believe the funder requires.

Two of our respondents highlighted how they involved communities and individuals in co-creation by sharing equipment with individuals and giving them the technical capacity to use the equipment. These respondents argued that skills transfer helped to address power relations and implicit bias.

When gathering and telling a story, you probably will not know what skills and strengths people in the community have, especially if they are not directly linked to your work. Co-creation will open new insights that will make the story more authentic and empowering. For example, some African women who live in rural areas and do not have financial resources may, nonetheless, be incredibly resourceful in providing food and medicinal care for their families because they may have a vast knowledge of local plants and animals to draw from.



“Communities have lived through their problems and know more about the solutions than outsiders. They may have also developed unique and innovative solutions to problems.”

NETWORKING

To assist in co-creation, you need to find local, skilled people. Co-creators might include skilled locals who can help research stories, translate, conduct interviews, ensure informed consent, facilitate participatory workshops and focus groups, make films and take photos, undertake sound production, record interviews, and undertake post-production work. The search can be quite easy if you simply ask for recommendations from local NGOs or draw on your local partners in the community.

It is important to find a translator that the community or individuals you are working with can trust; for example, use female translators to interview women. Sufficient time and budget must be set aside to ensure accurate translation. There are various ways to find suitable professional translators who understand the community you are working in. Local employment agencies, national broadcasters who broadcast in local languages, and university staff who teach languages are good sources if there is no local NGO working in the community.

“The national broadcast network in Zambia called ZNBC have local language radio programs so we go to them and ask for referrals to professional translators.”

4. ADDRESSING IMPLICIT BIAS IN STORYTELLING

Bias can occur at any stage of the story, leading to unethical storytelling. We discuss the process below.

DURING THE GATHERING PHASE

Another bias exhibited in storytelling is when the subjects of the story are framed as people who are unable to act for themselves; they become “objects” of pity. Such stories tend to focus on the deficits of a particular community or individual. Often this is the starting frame and the resulting story narrative dehumanises the subjects and robs them of their dignity.

“This type of pity is often especially exhibited towards African women, who have become synonymous with poverty and oppression. Their victimhood and disenfranchisement are often highlighted.”

As one of our respondents explained, Africa has many powerful women whose stories have either not been written or have been written in a distorted way.

Once the prejudice is written into the kinds of questions being asked, the story gatherers start looking for “characters” who will fit this narrative, rather than people who are most knowledgeable and active in their communities. The story gatherers find people who will tell the story they want to hear. They often collect a number of stories and then choose the one that they think is most heart-wrenching, focusing only on the pain. They do not document the person’s whole life experience – of which pain is only one part.

“You want to find that character that will reveal to anyone quickly; emotionally it’s very important, as well, you know, what the cause is in choosing the character.”

Ethical stories must take into account the unique and innovative ways that local people work towards solutions in their communities.

The stories should acknowledge individual and community resilience and the fact that they are creators of change, not passive recipients. Stories should represent honestly their perceptions, attitudes and beliefs.

“I remember once we were filming an HIV story and this old woman was looking after orphans. She was very strong and we tried to show her strength, even though she was carrying a heavy load.”

Hiring non-locals can create language barriers between staff/contractors and the subjects of the story. This may also lead to biased, unethical stories, for example, telling the stories of only those who can speak English. If some people in a community do not speak English, telling the stories of those who do may result in a bias towards favouring the voices of relative elites. Quite often, development agencies also do not budget for skilled translators, and the story gatherer may have to rely on and trust a local person who happens to speak both languages but who may not be a skilled translator. Unskilled translators may not understand how to translate information accurately.

It’s important to hire a skilled translator who is appropriate for the context, as translators hold a lot of power in the storytelling process. For example, if you hire a male translator, female interviewees may feel uncomfortable talking to them. Translators may also have prejudices, for example, a male translator may be prejudiced against women, and may change the meaning of translations to suit their own biased agenda.

“In Mozambique, in South Africa and Congo Brazzaville, where I relied on translators, the power shifted to the translator who were all male. I would have preferred a woman but you find that in marginalised communities, women who speak English are not common because they have less access to education.”

DURING THE POST-PRODUCTION PHASE

Ethical problems also arise at post-production stage – once the story has been gathered from the field. It is critical that everyone – including those who edit and produce the story – have discussions throughout the post-production process to deliberate on how people are being portrayed. While ethical discussions can delay the finalisation of a project, they are essential to ensuring an ethical story is disseminated and ultimately a better product.

Language barriers can also lead to unethical post-production if the material is gathered in the local language by a local person, because translation issues can arise. For example, the interviewee may have spoken in a long-winded way, and the translator might sum up what was said in a few words, thus losing nuance that is related to local cultural issues. Such nuance is often important for understanding the context of the information.

The story gatherer should remain involved in the post-production process, as they may need to speak up for their subject and provide context for the producers. One of our respondents indicated

that, if necessary, the story gatherer must fight to ensure that the story remains true to the one told by the interviewee.

Another respondent suggested that the whole team should discuss ethical matters and agree on how they will be handled with reference to the ethics already agreed with interviewees. But the team must also be alive to stereotypical portrayals that emerge from the raw footage. For example, in a Zambian project he had filmed various shots to set the scene, which were not interviews. He had taken footage of children playing, but the children were wearing ragged clothing, so the post-production team debated and decided it was unethical to use the footage because it fell into stereotypes about poverty. The respondent said that after the ethics discussion with the post-production team he paid even more attention to ethics when he went to film in poor communities.

“I think most of the times we overlook the social [and] cultural issues within a particular case...or you know their cultural traditional issues and I think it’s important to actually align content in that regard.”

We can’t use this. They look too poor.



5. USING ETHICAL GUIDELINES AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMED CONSENT CORRECTLY

“Photographs are a landmine where people don’t actually ask for consent, they just go around clicking everywhere and before you know the photograph is taken, and it misrepresents people. For example, when you see me dirty at 10 in the morning with torn clothes, maybe I’m coming from the garden, so I don’t have to wear my best clothes to go there; so it’s a lie to say I’m poor.”

Many development organisations do not even consider getting informed consent and have no ethical guidelines for staff and contractors to follow. A lack of understanding of the implications of poor storytelling practices makes the story gathering process extractive and transactional.

Informed consent means getting “deep consent”; interviewees have a deep understanding of how their information will be used, who will have access to it, and what the impact on them will be. Failures in informed consent occur because people may not understand the language you use to get consent, or they may not understand the full implications of giving consent. For example, if the subjects do not understand that their story will be widely distributed, they may be unprepared for any stigma that might result, based on illnesses they have, their gender and sexuality, their religion or their nationality.

“Although you explain sometimes people don’t understand...once they sign they feel like they must answer whatever you ask.”

Several of our respondents pointed out that it is difficult to get informed consent when the story gatherers and interviewees do not speak the same language or literacy levels are low. It is also difficult to get informed consent when, for example, consent forms contain western assumptions and legalistic ideas that are

not familiar in some cultures. Even if staff or contractors are from the same country and speak the same language, differences can exist, for example, between urban cultures and rural cultures.

“Trying to reconcile Western concepts within African settings is a major challenge...if I am Shona and I don’t understand some of these nuances, can you imagine when Western researchers come in who do not understand the language and context.”

CONSENT FORMS

If used properly, consent forms are one of the most important tools to ensure ethical storytelling practices. While many organisations know that these forms are a key tool, they often treat the forms superficially in the field.

“You have to explain, make sure that they understand, not just read the information like you are reading some poem.”

Informed consent, or “deep consent” takes more time and involves having a dialogue with interviewees to explain in detail what they are signing. A good consent form will outline:

1. What rights apply, including:
 - the right to refuse to participate without repercussions;
 - the right to remain anonymous;
 - the right to stop the interview at any time if they do not feel comfortable;
 - the right to withdraw consent at a later date; and the right to review the final product before it is circulated.
2. Why information is being collected, including:
 - how the story will be used;
 - the various formats in which the material will be used; and
 - the impact sharing the story will have

(this can include positive impact, including tackling stigma or contributing to policy/legal processes).

3. The dangers of sharing the story, including:
 - how you will protect the interviewee from harm/support them; and
 - who will have access to the material.

Story gatherers must be very cautious about using their power to manipulate or to apply undue pressure on someone to participate in the interviews. Story gatherers also need to respect interviewees' rights to decide exactly how much they reveal. If an interviewee seems reluctant to provide more information, the story gatherer should move on to other questions.

"A person should make an informed choice on whether to reveal everything, so tell the person they have the right to choose when it's enough."

Lack of knowledge about cultural practices can hinder ethical practices, for example, one of our respondents explained that in many communities where they worked, it was culturally inappropriate to use the word "no". Therefore, interviewees, rather than being explicit, would find ways to avoid questions, especially if they were inappropriate or invasive. In this situation, it is important to ensure that interviewees clearly said "yes", rather than assuming agreement if they did not say "no".

You can only use this photo in your book. You can't share it anywhere else.



“It’s interesting the way people find ways to deflect dehumanising questions. They make humour out of it or they don’t tell the full truth.”

If an interview situation may put people in danger, you have a duty to make sure they understand the dangers – even if this is not in the consent form. For example, as one respondent explained to us, some people may be excited about the possibility of being in a film and may not consider the danger. Dangers could include local elites disagreeing with the interviewee and therefore “punishing” them in some way, or the interviewee could face stigma. Furthermore, if people want or need anonymity or confidentiality, story gatherers and the organisations they work for have a duty to protect this. A further agreement confirming anonymity may have to be developed and signed by both parties. It also means being careful about who you share the material with.

Even at post-production stage, consent can be an issue. Once the material has been handed over to a client, they might not respect the confidentiality clauses and ethics that you agree with the people interviewed. Informed consent should be ongoing if material is used a long time after the initial story gathering process. One of our respondents explained how he had made a video of an AIDS patient, without masking the individual, on condition that it would not be widely shared. However, his client then ignored the agreed consent and circulated it, so that the man’s HIV status was revealed in public.

In another situation, one of the respondents explained that, if time has passed, they always go back to the person who was photographed because their consent may not still hold. For example, a man had previously given consent for him and his whole family to be photographed, but when the organisation went back to him, he

had had a difficult divorce that left him feeling angry and bitter, and he no longer wanted to share the photographs.

RETURNING TO THE FIELD

As part of informed consent, it is important to return to communities/individuals to seek approval for your proposed final product. One of our respondents said that people often find it empowering to see themselves and have a final say in the product. Giving the communities/individuals a final say means being willing to further edit the material if anyone is uncomfortable with how they have been portrayed.

“If you’re scared to show the story to your subjects then you’ve not been truthful...so it is important to have that openness to show people the material. I also make copies of the final product to send to them so they can share with others.”

Members of the community/interviewees should give consent for the reasons you propose for sharing their story. For example, stories could be shared to raise funds for the community, or to reach local government, policymakers, journalists, or solidarity organisations and individuals who can share action. Your story should communicate clearly to the audience what they should do as a result of engaging with it.



6. UNDERSTANDING THE LOCAL CONTEXT



Unethical storytelling practices can occur when story gatherers enter a community without knowing the circumstances. In many instances, the only way to access communities is to get permission from local elites; however, they may be concerned with protecting their own interests, and therefore may block access to the more vulnerable community members. Some story gatherers are not aware of these dynamics, and may, for example, take local leaders with them when they go into the community and then defer to those local leaders. Furthermore, because of the power of local (or even national) elites, story gatherers can put communities in danger.

“...after a public consultation conducted by the Ministry of Agriculture those peasants that had voiced out against the program...some of them were jailed...”

In a situation where the story aims to tell a story about conflict within a community, gathering the information can stir up tensions even more. Community conflict might include who has access to land, houses or services, or it might involve stigma against some people because of illness, gender, sexuality, religion or ethnicity. Drawing attention to these issues in a community may put people at risk and could also lead to psychological trauma. One filmmaker explained that they try to capture

people’s emotions in the films they make because that is often what resonates most with audiences. However, several of our respondents spoke about how invasive and unethical it can be to trawl through people’s trauma. This is particularly problematic if you have nothing to offer the person in the way of support.

“...you know things that trigger emotion but you’ve got nothing that you can do to help a person who spent a lot of time sharing their piece of life...they tell us their stories on life and we don’t have the capacity to deal with their emotions or ours.”

PROVIDING SUPPORT

It is absolutely essential to provide support to someone who tells you a painful or emotional story, for example, if they have experienced violence and stigma. At the first stage of story gathering, you must show empathy and understanding, and provide a sympathetic ear. However, you should also go beyond this and ensure the person has access to ongoing counselling. To access suitable counselling, you should look for relevant NGOs that can identify a suitable counsellor or social worker.

“Maybe you can upset somebody psychologically or you can risk their security by what they are telling you...put other processes in place to support that individual otherwise you could just undermine their lives and stability just to collect a story.”

7. INVESTING TIME IN YOUR PROJECTS

It takes time to build relationships with communities. Factors that have an impact on the time available to spend on story gathering include financial constraints, flying in international teams and securing permissions to work.

Many problems that result in poor and unethical storytelling can be addressed by proper scheduling and allocating enough time. Without proper planning and scheduling, the story gathering process can be rushed, at the expense of taking time to (1) explain the work to interviewees, (2) secure informed consent, (3) build rapport with interviewees, and (4) ensure adequate translation.



At post-production stage, poor time planning can lead to rushed and sloppy editing, which has ethical implications. All our respondents agreed that once the final product is ready, the product should be taken back to the community or interviewees to gain their approval, but they all also indicated that time pressures often prevented them from doing so. By spending more time with a community, you will get to know them better and see them in a different light. This will allow you to tell a different story, which will not repeat the same old stereotypes.

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Thorough planning and scheduling are essential to achieving ethical practice. A well-designed planning process should build in time for:

1. Working with local people to conceptualise the story (this may include building in additional time for meetings, emails and scripting);
2. Finding the right (local) people who understand the different tasks;
3. Discussing ethical guidelines with the whole production team, including local contractors;
4. Getting the required permission from national and/or local leaders to work in the area;
5. Ensuring adequate time for the full story gathering process:
 - to build rapport and get informed consent;
 - to chat informally to people in an area and choose who to interview;
 - to hold participatory action research workshops or focus group discussions;
 - to transfer skills, to involve the community in co-creation;
 - to allow interviewees to feel relaxed and unrushed in the interviews;
 - to gather scenic shots for cutaways; and
 - to allow translation to take place when needed.
- 6 Allocating adequate time for the post-production or writing process:
 - to involve the subjects/interviewees (if possible);
 - to translate material as needed;
 - to discuss the ethical content of a story;
 - to edit carefully;
 - to share drafts and get feedback; and
 - to go back to the community, share the semi-final product and get approval.

8. INVESTING IN YOUR PEOPLE

Organisations should make a long-term commitment to pursuing ethical storytelling by investing in their communications team and providing the right kind of training. This can include ethics training, as well as counselling training, to support vulnerable people in a caring way during the story gathering process. One of our respondents recommended a course in oral storytelling:

“I did a course in oral history. Those skills are very powerful. I think they should be taught to more people so that people can have skills to take stories responsibly.”





Ethical storytelling is achievable. This handbook has outlined the key steps, which are:

1. Challenging unequal power relations;
2. Ensuring respectful engagements;
3. Tackling implicit bias in the hiring process;
4. Addressing implicit bias in storytelling;
5. Using ethical guidelines and understanding informed consent correctly;
6. Understanding the local context;
7. Investing time in your projects; and
8. Investing in your people.

Development agencies need to put more effort into ensuring that ethical storytelling happens. This includes investing in budget allocations, time, relationships and individuals.

Ethics is about respecting the subjects of your story and creating stories that empower them. Contractual agreements are essential but not enough. Storytellers need to be genuinely concerned about the issues affecting communities, what individuals in those communities have to say, and how the issues and the people are portrayed.

Making a commitment to ethical storytelling requires ongoing reflection on the story gathering and telling processes, to consider how you might grow and improve your ethical approach.

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Africa No Filter aims to shift harmful narratives about Africa. We support the development of nuanced and contemporary stories that shift existing, stereotypical narratives within and about Africa. Through research, grant making and advocacy we aim to build the field of narrative change makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns. ANF's goal over time is to leave an empowered narrative change ecosystem and an informed community of storytellers who work more deliberately to change harmful narratives within and about Africa.

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