

Constraints and opportunities when communicating results of humanitarian relief

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1. Background

Communication of results is an important aspect of all international cooperation. Humanitarian interventions are, of course, no different. Whereas CISU has a deep and well-maintained understanding of communicating stories from long term projects and activities, communicating stories from humanitarian interventions has so far had very little attention from CISU. With the creation of DERF – Danish Emergency Relief Fund - the focus on results from humanitarian interventions will be strengthened.

Communication on humanitarian interventions holds both massive potential and some important constraints. Potentials are, for example, the communicative advantage of stories with great urgency and human consequences. The constraints are both logistic and ethical. Areas in humanitarian areas are sometimes difficult to reach and people affected by an humanitarian response are by definition more vulnerable.

This thematic visit should give valuable findings for CISU's communications officer, who will be able to give advice on the issue. He will also know more about projects and thus be more precise in communication and advocating. He will also gather stories to be disseminated as cases through CISU's channels.

With regard to cases the focus will be on potentials and challenges regarding results from cash programming as this is a key feature of the DERF funded projects in Lebanon. The cases will be used for communication in Denmark where cash programming presently is being debated.

2. Objective

Explore constraints and opportunities when communicating results of humanitarian relief interventions and produce cases on results deriving from cash programming.

3. Outputs

The thematic visit will lead to the following outputs:

- This report compiling findings and recommendations for use when communicating results of DERF-activities.
- Useful knowledge for future courses.
- Cases on cash programming to be used by CISU.

4. Observations

During the week in Libanon I visited projects funded by DERF through the Danish Organisations GAME and Dansk Folkehjælp.

Game has projects in many parts of Libanon, and I visited the project in Shatila and the opportunity to visit a partner, Basmeh & Zeitooneh.

GAME is seemingly proficient in communication to a wider audience and produce videos and social media products that are widely used and shared.

The two organizations complement each other extremely well when looking at communication aspects. They have some similarities but also, in this context, huge differences. First of all, they share the aspect of a strong presence and connection in Denmark. They also support marginalized people in Denmark and abroad. The connection does, however take different forms. Dansk Folkehjælp is a much older organization and, as the name indicates, has traditionally been more of a charity organization. Game works in areas with lesser privileged youth that are shown their potential through sports and leadership in the community. Another key aspect is that Dansk Folkehjælp is partly supported by fundraising while Game insist on not fundraising.

There is also a difference in their view on communication. While Dansk Folkehjælp can see the potential gains on good communication, it is clearly stated in interviews that they prefer using their professional abilities in their original field of work and let professional communicators do the communication. Game have a strong connection to journalists and communicators but also work on mobilizing youth through campaigns.

Also important for Game is the important work of showing youth their potential. This is not possible while showing them as victims or sufferers. This is very important when framing stories about the projects. And it is important for the work with youth in Denmark that they can see that the youth in other countries are depicted in the same manner.

Regarding to projects supported by DERF, both organizations have aspects that can strengthen constructive reporting. (Constructive journalism and constructive communication use solutions in their storytelling.)

It is important to stress here, that both organizations seemed very aware of the need for protection of sources and consent. Both organizations worked in a highly professional manner.

In this, Game not only support people directly affected by the crisis in Syria. The program does support refugees with cash but there is an effect on the community. In the program refugees are assisted financially if they take part in projects that create opportunities for children and youth in Shatila. These children are disadvantaged and benefit from the work of Game and the direct beneficiaries of the DERF-project.

Similarly Dansk Folkehjælp also engage in community support projects in the communities where they provide unconditional cash. The effect of these projects may seem distant from the direct interventions, but they are important in the communication.

(More on this is the example of communication.)

5. The context of communicating from humanitarian relief operations

Opportunities: In essence, stories from humanitarian relief operations have the ability to capture an audience. This is because an audience responds to stories that seem to have elements of *importance, identification, sensation* or *current*. It is widely believed in among reporters and other storyteller that one or more of those elements will render a story more significant to an audience. (I will in this chapter use a loose translation of the Danish VISA-criteria, Væsentlighed, Identifikation, Sensation, aktualitet, as it is a criteria used in a Danish context.)

It can be difficult for an audience in one part of the world to attribute *importance* to event in other parts of the world. This is in the strict sense of importance – why is it important to me? Compared to tax-reforms, change in government, or local job loss the importance of projects in another continent may seem insignificant. This is especially true when it comes to stories from global development. It is, however, slightly easier to use that element when communicating about humanitarian relief operations. The operations may play a role in something that may affect us globally; war, climate change, migration etc.

It is another thing entirely when finding *identification* in stories from humanitarian relief operations. In their essence, humanitarian relief operations affect basic human conditions – often survival. It is not difficult for an audience to reflect itself in that. If not the direct human identification then, at very least, the role of a subject in a story; A mother, an orphan, a father, a displaced family. We, as humans, can identify with people in need of humanitarian relief. In traditional journalism and storytelling, a strong personal story when a person we can identify with can explain a complex story to the audience. The personal struggle is thus used to explain a problem or situation of a much larger magnitude.

A humanitarian relief operation always take place in a area affected by something extraordinary. It may be a natural disaster or a conflict. It is always something out of the ordinary and, thus, something that can trigger the sense of *sensation*. It is true that some crisis may be prolonged and eventually seem to be so much of the established order of the landscape we navigate in through our limited channels of information. But this is *sensation* in the sense of a story telling tool. In its very nature it is also dramatic.

Although we often talk about 'hidden disasters' or 'forgotten wars' many areas of conflict or crisis actually do find their way into the newsfeeds because they seem *current* and have a natural development. They are more exposed than, say, more long term issues. This means that they, compared to stories of long term change have a more direct appeal to the sense of topicality.

From this we can gather that stories about humanitarian relief operation, compared to other stories from organizations working with global development, have some strengths and opportunities. This is especially in the areas of identification and topicality. This means that they have a broader appeal and relevance to our audiences if we manage to put them into a current context and let the humans behind the stories come forward.

Constraints in storytelling form humanitarian relief operations.

As stated above, an audience seeks identification in a story. In this, a story with case stories carried by humans and their personal accounts will be powerful. But another essence of humanitarian relief operations is that they operate with people in extremely fragile positions. This sets up certain considerations that have many angles. There may be real or imagined constraints for the source of information. And there may be constraints that may be visible or invisible for the source. This is true for all sources to all stories but the consequences are more severe for a person affected in need of humanitarian relief. Also, information is often lost or badly misinterpreted in areas of humanitarian crisis.

To explain some of the considerations, I have put some into the following box:

	Considerations known to the source	Considerations unknown to the source
Real considerations	"My participation may expose me or my family to a hostile force in the area I have been displaced from"	The source may not know the difference between a research-interview and something to be published.
Considerations based on false assumptions	"My participation in this will affect my access to relief"	The audience of the story may come to false conclusions based on lack of understanding of the context.

There is, of course, many more in each area. This is just to emphasize the many aspects – some of which are hidden or imagined. In this difficult context it is important to stress that responsibility lies with the storyteller. We may be able to hide behind signatures that assure consent or put our trust in the sources’ ability to navigate but the responsibility lies with us. Luckily, there is not much of legal responsibility, but we have a moral responsibility which must not be put aside *because* we are dealing with humanitarian relief that may seem more important than many other things. Rather, the context of humanitarian relief should call us to take an even greater responsibility, as the sources are some of the most vulnerable sources.

6. The way forward

So, how can we use constructive storytelling from Humanitarian Relief Operations? First of all it is important to recognize that the stories from relief operations operate under same ‘rules’ as other stories when capturing an audience. We can not change this but we can adapt in a way where we are still true to our values.

In storytelling and journalism, it is common to use a personal account to personalize a systemic problem or situation. My advice, in this particular context, is to show the systemic problem or situation – and not use a person for this. Instead, we can use the person to show how the situation it affects people. In this it is important to take note of the mentioned aspects for the source. In this, I recommend more use of anonymous sources that cannot be traced. When doing this, we should still remember to portray a person and not a type-casted character. This is essential when portraying people in our communication and it becomes increasingly difficult when anonymity is needed. This sets up difficult conditions for the narrator but the respect for and wish for privacy is highly important in this context.

Another aspect is the use of the projects that support the community in storytelling. This will strengthen the constructive elements of the narrative. It is important to stress that this should not take away attention of the hardship experienced by people affected by the humanitarian crisis. It is *not* supposed to make it seem less traumatic or in any way in less need for relief. It is a method of showing a fuller context and progress. This should also come into light in the personal accounts but they have a stronger focus on the individual. These, smaller, stories from the community show a progress that will leave the audience more engaged and willing to participate. Organizations will, naturally, see this as something secondary, but it is important to use.

Another secondary thing is communication. An organization will, perhaps naturally, see communication as something secondary or tertiary to humanitarian relief. And who can blame them? What is the point of telling a story and using resources for this, when it could be used for life-saving? But argument could be used for many supportive and administrative aspects in an organization.

We must work together. It can be difficult to see the effect of a communication activity and it can be difficult to find resources and motivation to do it when so many other things need attention. But the importance of documenting progress and sharing stories compel us to do it. A way forward can be to team up with other grant holders. CISU recognize this difficulty and will work on a shared platform for stories and communication of progress being done through DERF grants.

The importance of constructive communication?

Although we have not yet seen scientific evidence of donor fatigue, we have a clear understanding of how constant negative stories and or crisis affect us and make us less engaged in change. Humans are biologically programmed to notice bad and alarming news more than opportunities and slow progress. It is something that has secured survival. It does, however, also greatly affect our perspective in a negative way. This negative bias lies in all humans and is visible in our news consumption and the way news are generated: There are more negative and alarmist news and we notice them more. The inherent danger of this is, that we do not notice progress, and when we do not notice progress we do not think any progress has been done – which renders work in this area useless. Despite the facts that clearly show impact of the work. The negative news wears on our belief in change.

This must be countered by constructive communication.

When using the term constructive communication, we, at CISU, are inspired by the concept of constructive journalism and the values we use when communicating.

Constructive journalism is a method to counter negative and conflict-based stories. This is important because negative stories does not support the work of engaging the public in creating change. This is not to say that 'negative' aspects have no place in our story-telling. We, as promoters of change, certainly do acknowledge that negative aspects exist and take place – if not we would not need to promote change. And we certainly know that indignation can spark change. But we also know that know that negativity and hopelessness can stifle change and leave the audience with less engagement than before. Therefore, we recommend methods from constructive journalism when communicating our stories. Instead of negative stories and conflict-orientated focus, constructive journalism is based on reporting solution-focused news. Constructive journalism is meant to give stories more context and give the audience more knowledge. Enlighten the audience, is another way to describe it. By giving more background and also reporting progress, the audience can create a realistic view of the world. More importantly, constructive journalism offers solutions instead of only reporting the issues.

More on constructive journalism: An aim for constructive journalism is to avoid a negativity bias. Therefore, instead of solely reporting on conflicts and problems, constructive journalism aims to gain a more comprehensive portrayal of the issues at hand. It aims to expose core causes of problems but also to report on emerging ideas and developments to shift society towards more impartial and sustainable paths. Constructive journalism aims express how change is possible and highlights the role each member of society may play to foster it. Additionally, it strives to strengthen the ethics code of journalism by avoiding the distortion of information in order to provide a more real portrayal of the world. Constructive Journalism attempts to create an engaging narrative that is factually correct without exaggerating numbers or realities.

Also important is, that the journalist or reporter does not reflect his or her opinion and also does not render or implement what those solutions are, but tries to inform the society of what solutions there might be. As an organization, we of course also have values and opinions but we should separate them from facts in our stories. Facts are (according to theories that distinguish between communication that is supposed to *move* an opinion and communication that is supposed to *strengthen* an opinion, where facts strengthen and emotions strengthen) some of the most powerful tools when trying to change an opinion in an audience. In this regard it is extremely important to present facts in a fair manner. Although we may have a

strong emphasis on a message we want to convey, we cannot afford to lose credibility by promoting this unfairly. These, and other thoughts, are widely shared at courses and workshops in CISU. Please reach out if you want to know more.