

Guidelines for Equity in Storytelling

INTRODUCTION

CRS uses stories to share impact, enhance understanding, build relationships and inspire action. These guidelines were created to help staff develop an awareness of what is and what is not equitable in the practice of storytelling, a core competency of the [CRS Vision 2030 Strategy](#). As part of our continuing commitment to equity in storytelling, these guidelines will always be a work in progress—based on our learning in a changing world, as well as the needs of our mission, staff, partners, donors, constituents and the people we serve.

EQUITY IN STORYTELLING

Equity in storytelling is a culture of practice we are cultivating to ensure that our communications uphold and respect the God-given dignity of all people. Catholic teaching and our [guiding principles](#) provide the foundational concepts and ideas behind this work. As we develop content about the people we serve and the work we do, we must first reflect on and carefully consider how and why we are telling stories—especially of those who have experienced hardship, crisis and trauma.

What is equitable content?

Equitable content—written, visual and spoken—upholds human dignity. It is honest, just and fair. It evokes feelings of solidarity and connection; deepens audience understanding of experience and context; highlights shared values; centers people at the heart of an issue; engages the contributor as a partner; promotes and protects the contributor’s own voice and agency, and is procured and promoted with consent, respect and transparency.

What is exploitative content?

Exploitative content uses another person or group for profit or advantage. It evokes feelings of guilt and pity; exaggerates or oversimplifies real challenges; harms or re-traumatizes the contributor; and is procured and promoted without transparency and proper consent.

“We need stories that reveal who we truly are ... the untold heroism of everyday life.” —Pope Francis

GUIDELINES

The following guidelines are intended to be used when planning, procuring, creating and promoting written, visual and spoken content for use in both internal and external communications.

Always seek consent.

Before we procure and promote stories, we need to be clear that people are ready and willing to speak. By engaging the people from whom we gather content as true partners in storytelling, we must confirm that they understand and agree with how their story will be used. We must ensure that participants know that the assistance they receive from CRS and our partners is not dependent on whether or not they share their story with us. Above all, we must inwardly and outwardly adhere to the philosophy of “do no harm.”

Avoid using one-dimensional stories and labels.

When we choose to assign labels—like poor or suffering or disabled—to the protagonists of our stories, we risk telling a story that is one-dimensional. We must ask ourselves if the labels we choose are useful or equitable. We need to give thought to who someone is beyond the crisis or trauma they have experienced—to show interest in the whole person, including their passions, beliefs and who they were before their crisis or trauma. Our commitment to human dignity demands that we seek our similarities rather than magnify only our differences.

*“Stories matter.
Many stories
matter. Stories
have been used to
dispossess and to
malign, but stories
can also be used
to empower and
to humanize.”*

*—Chimamanda
Ngozi Adichie*

Focus on the larger context.

When we focus only on individual hardship, we miss the larger context. We must ask ourselves why we are telling this story—what issues does it bring to life? Why did this situation happen? What is the broader human context, the history? What might happen next? What role does the individual, their community, CRS, our partners, our audiences have in this story?

Search for stories that incorporate dignity, integrity and strength.

Why do we want to interview someone or take her picture? Is it because crisis or survival is the most interesting thing about her? When we focus on suffering only, we overlook an individual’s dignity and agency. Be sure the interview and perspective go beyond the immediate context—be it drought, cyclone or other displacement. Ask about his life before this: What was it like? What was his routine? What gives her hope? Where does she find strength? Ask about the personalities of the children in the family. Avoid focusing only on struggle. Focus also on universal human experiences. People are often eager to let us know that their current crisis is not what defines them. Remember that while urgency can be the impetus for a story, we should never sacrifice equity in storytelling for the sake of urgency.

SOME TERMS THAT FRAME OUR UNDERSTANDING OF EQUITY IN STORYTELLING

agency The capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. By contrast, structures are those factors of influence—such as social class, religion, gender, ethnicity, ability and customs—that determine or limit an agent and their decisions.

allyship The practice of emphasizing social justice, inclusion and human rights by members of an in-group in order to advance the interests of an oppressed or marginalized out-group. Allyship puts into use social justice theories and ideals.

belonging The condition of feeling welcomed and accepted regardless of differences. This occurs when individuals—including marginalized individuals—are brought into the center of our concern and supported through structures of inclusion that recognize and accommodate differences.

colonialism The policy or practice of acquiring full or partial political control over another country, occupying it with settlers and exploiting it economically.

dignity According to Catholic teaching, dignity is God-given and therefore can’t be degraded, given, restored or taken away. Consider phrases such as <helping people realize their human dignity> or <recognizing the dignity of vulnerable people>, and verbs like <reaffirm>, <defend> and <uphold>.

diversity The practice or quality of recognizing the uniqueness of each person as a gift. Diversity embodies the many physical, mental and social differences that make us unique, including gender, age, religion, race, ethnicity, nationality, socioeconomic status, education, language and ability.

empathy The ability to understand, affirm and amplify feelings of another.

equity The practice of fair treatment and enabling access to opportunities and advancement for everyone. Equity differs from equality in that it addresses unbalanced conditions, enabling individuals to fully exercise their gifts and honor their inherent dignity.

gender-neutral language Use gender-neutral language whenever possible. Substitute <labor> for <manpower>; <humanity > for <mankind>.

implicit bias Implied preference or viewpoints that can consciously or subconsciously skew decisions and behavior in favor of or against a race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status or viewpoint.

inclusion The practice of creating environments where all people feel welcomed and that their contributions are valued and leveraged. Within an inclusive context, individuals are able to develop their full potential in community with others, feel respected and have a sense of belonging.

integral human development A term derived from Catholic social teaching, first used by Pope Paul VI and shared by many traditions, integral human development promotes the good of every person and the whole person; it is cultural, economic, political, social and spiritual. Our [IHD Conceptual Framework](#) helps put this into practice, elaborating on the multidimensional assets of all people, as well as the relationships between people and the systems and structures that affect their lives.

privilege A special right, advantage, status or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group of people.

identity A person's own understanding of who they are—their personality, character, affinities, interests, culture, race, ethnicity—and the group they are a part of. Traditionally, how a person is recognized by name, image, voice, address or other personal information that points to their identity. In some cases, this aspect of identity must be protected in storytelling to prevent harm.

respect The practice or quality of demonstrating high regard and appreciation for the differences and similarities in one another while living as one human family and recognizing the inherent dignity of each person.

social cohesion CRS promotes human dignity and integral human development within a social environment that promotes civic engagement, policy reform and improved governance structures in order to ensure the full participation and development of every human being.

structural racism A system in which public policies, institutional practices, cultural representations and other norms work in various ways to perpetuate or reinforce racial inequity.

subsidiarity A principle of Catholic social teaching which recognizes that a central authority should have a subsidiary function, performing only those tasks which cannot be performed at a more local level. In practice as a [CRS guiding principle](#), we believe that vibrant local organizations are best able to drive strong program outcomes and transformational change, and that, to the extent possible, decisions should be made by those closest to the issue at hand.

solidarity A principle of Catholic social teaching, and a [CRS guiding principle](#), which recognizes that we are all part of one human family—whatever our national, racial, religious, economic or ideological differences—and that in an increasingly interconnected world, loving our neighbor has global dimensions.

tokenism The practice of making a perfunctory or symbolic effort to represent or include a specific group, especially by recruiting a small number of people from under-represented groups in order to give the appearance of gender or racial equality within a workforce.

USE WORDS THAT UNITE US

Instead of words that separate us ...	Use words that unite us.
age	avoid referencing a person's age unless it is relevant to the story
battle, boots on the ground, the field	describe a situation based on the factual context, avoiding military-derived, us-them framing
beneficiary, beneficiaries	participant, group member, community member, neighbor, people we serve and work along side
disabled, special needs	people with disabilities
the elderly	older adults
HIV-positive	people with, or living with, HIV. Do not refer to anyone with an illness as a sufferer or victim
mankind, manpower	humanity, all people, labor, workers
minority	people with diverse or under-represented backgrounds
orphan	children who have lost one or both parents
plantation	farm or other term not associated with slavery or servitude
scourge, plague	disease, illness, challenge or other term that does not connote punishment
survivor	describe the specific experience that the person lived through
trafficked girls, trafficked people	girls, people who are trafficked, forced into labor, soldiery
underage marriage	child marriage
victim	describe circumstance specifically and in a way that promotes dignity and affirms self-sufficiency
youth (used as a noun, label)	young people, young men and women, or young adults

For an expanded list of terms, see the CRS Editorial Style Guide in the [Charitable Giving Content Center](#).

EXAMPLES FROM THE CRS BRAND

Upholding human dignity is central to how we work and to our brand. Following are examples of how we can uphold dignity when we talk about who we are, what we do, and the role of our partners. To read the CRS 2020 Brand Book in its entirety, see the [CRS Brand Assets](#).

We are bold yet humble.

Bold: CRS is poised to build on our successful agricultural programming and transform livelihoods and landscapes on a regional scale. Over the next 10 years, we will expand proven land restoration models to restore 4 million acres of land and help 1 million people overcome poverty—and protect the planet for future generations.

—CRS Go FAR Campaign.

Humble: Seeing eye to eye, working shoulder to shoulder, our global footprint helps us recognize the potential of every human being.

—[Brand Anthem videos](#)

We tell stories about real people, in their own words.

“The farmer is always working and the work is always hard.”

—Silverio Mendez, third-generation farmer in Guatemala, *Wooden Bell*, Early Summer 2019.

We respect the people we serve.

“Within the refugee society, there are engineers, lawyers, dentists, I mean, really highly educated people. And, if they are employed they will pay taxes, they will adapt to the Bulgarian society and, I mean, it’s a benefit for the whole society.”

—Ivan Cheresarov, Caritas Sofia, [Helping Refugees Integrate into Society video](#).

We are all God’s children.

#GivingTuesday is all about coming together—joining with others in generosity—to give from the gratitude for what God has brought us this year. As a community, we bring change to those who need it most.

—CRS digital fundraising campaign

We emphasize the positive.

COVID-19 may test our resolve, but it reminds us of our common humanity and the need to love, support and have faith in one another.

—[32nd Hispanic Heritage Awards video](#).

We are accurate and concise.

Billions of locusts are devouring a swath of farmland across East Africa, resulting in at least 2.5 million people requiring emergency assistance. Locusts are voracious eaters—they can eat their own body weight and travel up to 90 miles daily. A swarm covering one-third of a square mile can eat enough crops per day to feed 35,000 people.

—[Global Emergency Update, March 2021](#).

We avoid jargon.

Staying safe and healthy is something parents all over the world want for their families. But here in Madagascar, half of all children are undernourished. This means they don’t have enough nutritious food to stay healthy.

—[CRS Rice Bowl 2021 video](#).

We are inspiring.

Our Catholic faith calls us. To believe. To be present to one another. To speak the truth. To serve. To lead. At this pivotal time, when millions of God’s children around the world struggle for food and clean water, for dignified work, for their very lives, Catholic Relief Service asks you to join with us to bring about a more just and peaceful world.

—Lead the Way On Hunger campaign

We are results-driven.

Nearly 250 million children around the world are at risk of failing to thrive because of the negative impacts of poverty. Since 2013, more than 1.36 million children and their families worldwide have benefited from early childhood development programs supported by CRS.

We urge people to act.

It is time we challenge our expectations—of ourselves and of all people. It is time we transform the world, because we should and because we can. We ask you to join us.
—CRS Go FAR campaign

We emphasize local partnerships.

“Support from the government alone wouldn’t be adequate for the people. We have been able to accomplish a lot more than we imagined from this collaboration with CRS. The local communities have benefitted a lot from our partnership.”

—Rajan Raj Panta, Mayor of Gorkha, [Building Homes and Communities in Nepal video](#).

We know our audience.

Nikki Gamer: For our Catholic donors, our amazing Catholic partners here in the U.S. They’re listening to this podcast, and they really believe in the mission of CRS and where we’re going. What can they do to be a part of that transformation?

Sean Callahan: The contributions they make—and hopefully they’ll continue to make and see—are really having definite results and we’re committed as an agency to show them the positive-ness of that result. The other thing that I think they need to do is welcome others. I think we need to be able to share this wonderful work that we’re doing, these experiences with others.

—CRS 75th Anniversary Behind the Story podcast series

CHECKLIST FOR PLANNING AND COLLECTING CONTENT

Without timely planning and collection, production of equitable content is not possible. How we collect content is integral to equity in storytelling. Well before content is written, produced, published or promoted, consider the context and circumstances of how the story is gathered. Especially when content collection is arranged or implemented by others—CRS staff, freelancers or local partners—we must ask them, and ourselves, the following questions in advance:

- How can we champion our mission in a way that is truly authentic, inclusive and diverse? Are we including authentic voices and diverse storytellers? Are we looking for stories that incorporate dignity, integrity and strength? Have we considered what is driving the story, what specific action the story is intended to drive—donations, advocacy or understanding?
- Do we have permission from the participant to speak to them, record their image and voice, tell their story? Was this arranged in advance or will it be arranged by local CRS staff via [CRS Release Guidelines](#)? Will it be presented in a way that the participant understands and can ask questions about in their own language?
- Do we thoroughly inform people that they have choices in the process of storytelling? Have we given people the option to say “No” if they’re not comfortable answering a question? Have we established trust and respect? Have we made ourselves aware of local customs for greeting, and asked local colleagues and partners for guidance on social expectations and how to represent ourselves and our partners? Is “do no harm” at the forefront of our thinking?
- Are we able to be fully present and truly listen? Have we acknowledged that time is a luxury in many contexts and that what is most important is the dignity of the person and supporting CRS relationships where we work? A short conversation that allows for full responses can be more fruitful and respectful than a long interview that mechanically runs through a list of questions. Always remember, we are there to listen.
- Does our demeanor demonstrate humility, curiosity and respect?
- Are we willing to receive what a person says, rather than drive the interview with our own perceptions or assumptions? Are we ready to abandon a list of questions in order to follow up on information discovered or stories revealed during the interview?
- Do we recognize boundaries? Have we familiarized ourselves fully with the context of the situation? Are we prepared to promote the agency of the person interviewed?

- Have we accommodated requests for privacy or accompaniment of the participant's choosing during the interview? If there is no privacy, have we edited our questions so as not to put the interviewee in a difficult situation, either during the interview or after we leave?
- Have we considered the need for protection of identity, especially for stories about people in danger, with medical conditions or who are minors?
- Do we recognize our own privilege in direct relation to the story being told? If we are hot, hungry, tired, drained, homesick, please remember that we will be going home, and eating and drinking and traveling in comfort at some point. The interviewee does not typically have the same luxury. In the age of COVID, have we considered our vaccination status relative to those we are interviewing?
- Is there a reason this story should not be published? Be sure to have guidance on the approval of story content and be prepared to abandon plans to use a story if it is determined to "do harm," or that it does not to contribute to the common good.
- Have we ensured in advance a comfortable setting relevant to the context and an accurate translation of the person's words? Are we able to ask appropriate follow-up questions in keeping with a good, immediate translation? Please familiarize yourself with both setting and translation aspects well in advance with the country program or partner to ensure interviewee needs are anticipated and accommodated.
- When feasible, have we considered the possibility of sharing content from the interview, especially photos, with the participant for their feedback, use or potential follow-up? Even if this is not possible, have we asked ourselves: Would the participant feel good about how their story is told? Have we adequately protected and promoted the interviewee's own voice and agency?

"An ally will amplify our voice without trying to be our voice; share our story without owning our story." —Sophie Otiende

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Our understanding and practice of Equity in Storytelling is ever-growing. For continued learning, see the following resources:

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| ■ Fratelli Tutti, the third encyclical of Pope Francis | ■ REDI: Respect, Equity, Diversity and Inclusion and CRS |
| ■ Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love—A Pastoral Letter Against Racism | ■ CRS Freelance Photographer Kit |
| ■ CRS Guiding Principles | ■ CRS 2020 Brand Book |
| ■ CRS Vision 2030 Strategy: In Their Own Hands | ■ CRS 2020 Editorial Style Guide |
| ■ Establishing a Culture of Race Equity | ■ CRS Release Guidelines |
| | ■ National Center on Disability and Journalism Style Guide |