©UNHCR/ Martim Gray Pereira

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
ETHICAL COMMUNICATIONS GUIDELINES

UNHCR's Ethical Communications Guidelines serve as a comprehensive framework aimed at ensuring ethical standards in the communication of stories involving refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless individuals. These guidelines emphasize the importance of ethical communication practices that prioritize the dignity, safety, and agency of the people whose stories are shared.

UNHCR's approach to ethical communications is guided by the following requirements:

- **Authenticity and Agency**: The guidelines underscore the responsibility of UNHCR to authentically and respectfully communicate the experiences of forcibly displaced individuals. It recognizes their intrinsic agency and encourages them to shape their narratives.

- **Core Principles**: The guidelines outline six core principles that guide ethical communication, including prioritizing the well-being of individuals, ensuring dignified representations, challenging stereotypes, and obtaining informed consent. These principles advocate for a collaborative and participatory approach to storytelling.

- **Editorial Decision-Making**: Effective storytelling requires informed editorial decisions that include the voices and choices of displaced individuals. The guidelines encourage flexibility, holistic storytelling, and sensitivity to the context in which stories are shared.

- **Informed Consent**: Consent is highlighted as a process, not merely a formality. The guidelines stress the need for clear communication regarding how stories will be used, potential risks, and the importance of ongoing dialogue with contributors.

- **Production of Communication Materials**: The guidelines provide practical steps for producing content, emphasizing planning, appropriate team selection, and ensuring a supportive environment for contributors during content gathering.

- **Distribution and Storage**: Ethical considerations extend to how stories are stored and shared. Guidelines stress the need for robust privacy protections, accurate image meta data and captions, and clear agreements regarding the use of multimedia materials.

- **Ongoing Commitment**: UNHCR commits to be the primeary accountable subject, training staff, reviewing practices, and holding partners accountable to these ethical standards. Regular assessments will ensure that the guidelines remain relevant and effective in promoting ethical communication.

These guidelines represent a commitment to ethical storytelling that respects the dignity of individuals and fosters a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding forced displacement. The UNHCR aims to create a communications culture that is authentic, accurate, and reflective of the voices of those it serves.

UNHCR's Responsibility

UNHCR is committed to treating the stories of displaced individuals with the utmost care and integrity. We are honored to have the opportunity to share these stories and recognize the importance of doing so in a way that respects the subjects' experiences and perspectives. Ethical communication plays a vital role in fostering understanding and action among audiences.

Core Principles

1. **UNHCR will prioritize the mental and physical well-being and safety of people forced to flee above all other considerations.**
   Our communications must adhere to the core humanitarian principle of "do no harm". We offer protection and assistance to people forced to flee, stateless people, and others based on their needs and irrespective of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.

2. **We will ensure dignified representations by including people forced to flee and stateless people as our partners in decisions on how to communicate their stories.**
   We recognize the experience, knowledge, and right of people forced to flee and stateless people to define their own narrative, as well as their multiple potential roles as audiences, contributors, spokespeople, and advisors.

3. **UNHCR's communications will actively seek to challenge stereotypes by prioritizing stories that represent the views of people forced to flee and stateless people.**
   We create communications to share with the public the situations, issues, and conditions that necessitate our work. Within this framework, we will avoid oversimplification and the perpetuation of single stories about any people by telling fuller stories that allow the complexity of a person's life to be revealed.

4. **When we work with external partners and prominent supporters, we will prioritize the telling of stories as a shared experience.** This means providing the opportunity for people forced to flee and stateless people to amplify their own stories alongside the experience of the partner or prominent supporter.

5. **We recognize informed consent to be the keystone in ethical communications**. Consent is not a form; it is a process for participants to exercise their choices and an ongoing dialogue before, during, and after content is created and shared.

6. **UNHCR will be accountable to these guidelines**. We will communicate to all UNHCR personnel, allies, and partners our expectation that in their communications practices they operate within the guidance, joining us to lead, learn and engage with other actors to promote wider participation in and understanding of ethical communication

Informed Consent

It is of the utmost importance to obtain informed consent for any communications product. Consent should be gathered thoughtfully and respectfully, allowing contributors to understand the implications of sharing their stories. It is crucial to provide them with the time and space to make informed choices about their participation. Consent forms must be translated and made available with guidance.

Production of Communication Materials

Practical steps for creating communication materials that align with ethical standards:

- **Team Preparation**: Assemble diverse teams that understand the ethical implications of storytelling and are sensitive to the cultural contexts of the contributors.

- **Supportive Environment**: Create an environment that makes contributors feel safe and comfortable during the content gathering process.

Distribution and Storage

Robust privacy protections, accurate documentation of contributors' stories, and careful management of how content is used in the public domain are essential. The guidelines aim to prevent past contributors from being put at risk due to the exposure of their stories later on.

Ongoing Commitment

UNHCR commits to regular training for staff and partners on these guidelines, ensuring that ethical communication practices are consistently applied. The organization intends to conduct periodic reviews to assess adherence to the guidelines, learn from experiences, and make necessary updates.

Methodology for conducting a consent process

This checklist is designed to ensure clarity and thoroughness in gathering consent from contributors. It is divided into three main phases:

Before Consent Gathering

- Prepare and translate consent forms, ensuring signed copies are left with contributors.

- Compile a list of available services for contributors with specific needs.

- Familiarize yourself with local procedures regarding allegations of sexual exploitation and abuse.

- Collect contact information for UNHCR staff and allocate time for informed consent discussions.

- Engage with the operation teams and secure a knowledgeable translator.

During Consent Gathering

- Prioritize discussion and reflection on informed consent in a comfortable setting.

- Clearly explain the purpose and risks of the content to contributors.

- Identify any special needs and ensure expert staff are present if necessary.

- Allow time for questions, assist in documenting consent, and provide copies of signed forms along with UNHCR contact details.

After Consent and Content Gathering

- Reconfirm consent post-gathering and share initial content when possible.

- Capture anonymity preferences in metadata and upload consent forms to Refugees Media.

- When possible review content with contributors before publication, proactively renew consent, and remind them of their right to withdraw consent at any time.

Production of Communications Materials

This checklist for producing communications materials focuses on effective planning, content gathering, and post-production processes to ensure ethical and sensitive engagement with contributors.

Planning

- Assemble a team with appropriate language skills and cultural knowledge for effective interviewing.

- Ensure external vendors comply with UNHCR's Code of Conduct and Ethical Communications Guidelines.

- Identify relevant local staff to assist in content gathering and consider the team's characteristics (gender, ethnicity, age, etc.) to positively impact contributor interactions.

Before Content Gathering

- Ensure the content gathering team is familiar with and implements the guidelines.

- Designate a specific person responsible for the consent process, ideally someone local who speaks the language.

- Investigate contributors' personal circumstances and preferences regarding content gathering.

- Compile a list of local services available for refugees and forcibly displaced individuals.

During Content Gathering

- Facilitate clear communication and respect contributors' choices.

- Be mindful of potential trauma and avoid retraumatizing contributors, especially children.

- Identify how UNHCR can assist contributors using the local services list.

- Create a supportive environment that prioritizes contributor comfort and input during interviews.

Production and Distribution

- Use appropriate language in communications.

- Share content with contributors for their feedback and approval.

- Obtain necessary clearances from country operations and relevant bureaus.

- Prioritize self-care for team members by recognizing emotional health and seeking help if needed.

- Reflect on the adherence to guidelines during story gathering, evaluating successes and areas for improvement.

Distribution and Storage

This checklist for the distribution and storage of collected stories emphasize the ethical management of personal narratives, ensuring respect for contributors' privacy and the appropriate use of their stories over time.

- **Ethical Considerations**: It is crucial to consider the long-term impact of sharing stories, ensuring that they are used only as intended and that contributors' sensitive data is protected.

- **Background Information**: Privacy and preferences of contributors are paramount. Materials should include robust captions embedded in metadata, and all written materials should reference accompanying multimedia.

- **Image Captions**: Accurate captions enhance understanding and empathy. They should include the contributor's name (or pseudonym), location, and context of the image. Access to sensitive data should be restricted.

- **Image Credits**: Proper credits must be given for images sourced from agencies or individuals, following the format ©UNHCR/name of photographer.

- **Stock Imagery**: When purchasing stock imagery, ensure agreements cover usage terms, source credibility, and proper licensing while capturing necessary caption and consent details.

- **Sharing with Third Parties**: Stories shared externally should include restrictions, proper captions, and clear usage conditions to ensure respectful handling.

- **Image Manipulation**: Any alterations to images must be carefully considered, and must maintain the narrative integrity of the content.

- **Composite Stories**: A "composite story" is one where several people's experiences are combined and presented as if they were the experience of one person. This is unethical because it's not an accurate representation. It also changes the stories of the original contributors. .

- **Story Retirement**: Stories and images will only be shared for five years, post which they require approval for reuse to maintain authenticity and relevance.

- **Risk Assessment**: Stories that could endanger contributors due to changing political or social climates must be removed from circulation.

- **Secure Storage**: Unused images, footage, or stories from content gathering must be securely stored, with the same ethical guidelines applying if they are later used.

Conclusion

The UNHCR Ethical Communications Guidelines are not just a set of rules; they represent a commitment to ethical storytelling that respects the dignity and rights of individuals affected by displacement. By prioritizing ethical communications, UNHCR seeks to foster understanding, empathy, and action in support of those whose lives have been profoundly impacted by conflict, persecution, and displacement. These guidelines not only enhance the credibility of UNHCR but also contribute to building a more compassionate and informed global community.