

# FMSI GUIDELINES ON ETHICAL STORYTELLING



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# 1. WHY THIS MANUAL?

**FMSI believes that the dignity and rights of every child must be respected in all circumstances.** Therefore, in its use of images and in the use of words and in communication in general, it is inspired by the principles draws of protection, development, participation, non-discrimination, and superior interest of the child.

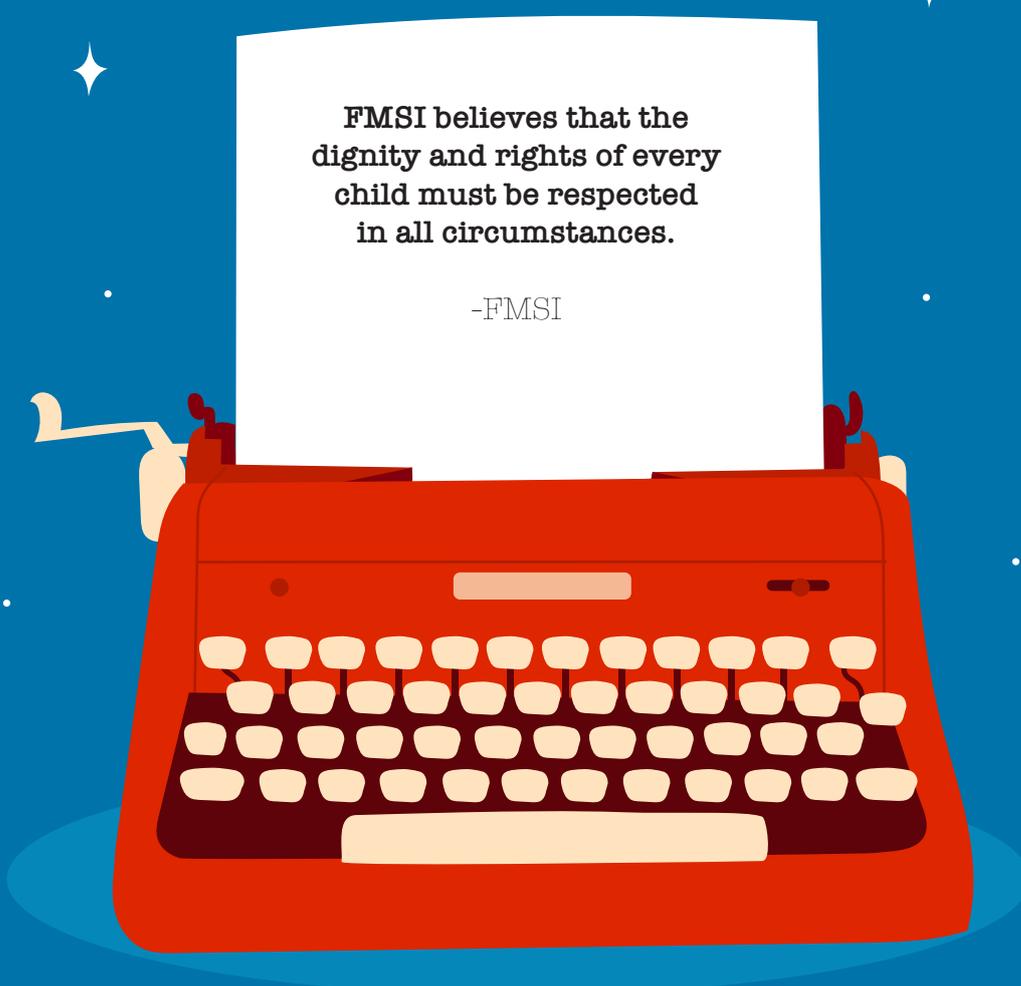
We in FMSI recognize that telling our stories is part of our daily work. Just as project implementation means turning our mission into concrete activities, we communicate to make change happen. A broader public attitude creates an enabling environment for change: capacity building, cooperation, empowerment, and information are part of the same process to support advocacy and change processes taking place locally, nationally, and internationally.

**Narratives that reinforce stereotypes about developing economies often stem from the power dynamics between those who tell the stories and those who are actors or protagonists of those stories.** And within development and international cooperation and solidarity many perpetuate stereotypical narratives that are not only unethical but also harmful. **If a narrative is unethical, we not only lose the sense of storytelling, but we also risk denying the value of people,**

we eliminate analysis and comparison to solutions to global problems, we eliminate the possibility of learning from each other and authentically transform reality in favor of those in need. FMSI, with this manual, written collaboratively together with the Inter-American Marist Network *Corazón Solidario*, aims to act and be proactive in telling its solidarity projects and initiatives around the world in an ethical manner, ensuring that the narratives are truthful and not distorted.

FMSI wants to be able to create a bias-free environment that encourages empowerment and respects cultural diversity, free from a paternalistic perspective that positions FMSI and its possible allies as an agent of change instead of the local community. **It is essential to shift the axis of attention, no longer a culture of ego, but a culture of echo.**

This Manual represents an evolution of the communication manual contained in the FMSI Procedures Manual (last version approved in 2021) and is part of the new FMSI Communication Plan 2023-2025.



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-FMSI

## 2. STORYTELLING: HOW WE DESCRIBE THE REALITY AND WRITE ABOUT IT

FMSI is committed to communicate and narrate reality in a more authentic way, in a way that connects people from different communities and backgrounds and break down power relations related to race, gender, ethnicity and sexuality; authentically representing lived experiences; encouraging mutual respect and preserving the dignity of individuals' stories.

**An ethical narrative helps in the understanding of facts, the recognition of values and potentials together with the knowledge of communities.** It does not only mean telling stories but transmitting values through storytelling. Stories carry values that whether they are big or small stories deserve to be saved from unethical storytelling.

***“Ethical stories enhance the inherent resourcefulness and power of individuals forced to confront these systemic inequities”***

“How to tell an african story”,  
Africa No Filter

Narratives must take into account the unique and innovative ways in which local people work to find solutions in their communities. Stories must acknowledge local positive values (e.g. individual and community resilience) and the fact that

they are creators of change, not passive recipients. **The description of the realities that we intend to transform together with the community itself must honestly represent their perceptions, attitudes and beliefs, not distort them in order to make our development work looks more indispensable.**

A classical 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. Many stories or posts on social media, often describe beneficiaries as hopeless and in need of “white/western saviours”.

***“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.”***

“How to tell an african story”,  
Africa No Filter

Africa has many powerful women whose stories have either not been written or have been written in a distorted way.

**When describing the reality on which we want to work together with the local community we must represent lived experiences more accurately, having respect for the local actors and putting their effort more at the centre of the story.**

Another common mistake is, for the sake of simplicity, to rely on generalization: when discussing about a problem, like “hygiene and sanitation, health and nutrition, education” we must avoid possible implications that all people are unclean, hungry, uneducated... we must provide a more specific description of the local context, including nuances and specific details such as statistics and place names.

***“The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”***

**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nigerian writer**



# 2.1 HOW WE DESCRIBE THE REALITY AND WRITE ABOUT IT: PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

## DO

- **Give voice** to people or local organisations that are working to tackle the problem.
- **Give space** to describe the communities' assets that people can use to change their situation.
- Local people must be shown as **capable and innovative** in solving problems and creating collaboration between them.
- When working with local CSOs/local activists treat them as **equal partners** who share knowledge (not as learners who receive education from outside).
- **Empowerment:** narrative should inspire the audience to support empowered individuals by showing their assets, without any sense of pity.

## DO NOT

- **Avoid the “Hero” approach:** do not use narratives implying that only development organisations can solve the problems.
- **Do not rely on pity** to sway audiences.
- **Avoid** **paternalism,** sensationalism and stereotyping (including by gender)
- **Do not blur the distinctions between individual Countries,** so that they all fit into a single frame of poverty and suffering.
- **Instead of only describing a health risk behavior** (eg, tobacco use, substance use) or outcome (eg, high school dropout), also consider describing the forces or causes that contribute to that behavior (eg, lack of access to resources, economic stress, educational barriers).

It is important to review the representations of poverty, vulnerability and risk on women, children and youth that are put into play when problematizing the reality on which we are going to project.

## 2.2 TELLING OUR STORIES?

### A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

In Aleppo, the situation was already extremely difficult: more than a quarter of the population was displaced and a huge number of people were already living in severe economic hardship. Many families were unable to provide basic needs to their children and the elderly were forced, given the circumstances, to live alone. Every day since Feb. 6, 155 Blue Marist volunteers have been working to support those who saw their homes collapse during the earthquake with a hot meal, a bed or clothes. On March 2023, FMSI was on the ground to witness the work done by the Blue Marists volunteers.

**A story to be told in two possible ways:**



**WRONG FORMULATION:** FMSI is on the ground explaining us how the distribution of food parcels works

**Why it is wrong:**

- FMSI is placed as actor of the action, like he's the subject of the story, instead of a witness
- The real agents of change are not even mentioned!

**CORRECT FORMULATION:** The Blue Marist distributing food parcels to the population of Syria.

**Why is it correct:** The subjects of the action are placed as agent of change. We are just telling a story, there's no need to mention what FMSI is doing now. We need to give space to what the Blu Marists are doing.

**Let's put at the center of the story the real protagonists of it.**

# 3. OUR VOCABULARY:

## HOW WE SELECT THE WORDS WE USE

By being as specific as possible when referring to groups or subjects, and using a correct, positive, inclusive lexicon, we contribute to providing clarity and avoids multiple interpretations or misinterpretations. **FMSI is committed to avoid a language that reinforces racial bias and negative stereotypes and perpetuates myths as well as terms considered outdated or pejorative.** Use a lexicon that relies on pity to engage an audience is a common practice of many development agencies, especially when fundraising is involved: individuals and communities assets disappear, countries or continents that are beneficiaries of aid, are often described by using stereotypical language and terms. Western agencies have now abandoned since several years the use of expressions such as “underdeveloped country” which, in addition to using a decidedly pejorative connotation, labelled an economy condemning it to a perennial situation.

**A more subtle mistake is the use of the terms like “vulnerable” and “marginalized”: these terms, that should be avoided if the population’s “vulnerability” or “marginalization” cannot be clearly defined,** have also an additional twofold problem:

- ▶ **We do not place the person at the centre** but rather the diagnosis or physical, mental, or social condition they are experiencing.
- ▶ **We apply a never-ending label to that group or individual** by not even considering the possibility that it might be temporary condition

**When using “people experiencing barriers” instead, we put back the person at the centre.** This expression acknowledges the individual before the condition or disease and aims to define them first as a person. Examples include a “child living with diabetes”, a “child living with asthma”, a “child who uses a wheelchair”, “children in foster care”, and “children and families experiencing food insecurity”. **Many cooperation organizations feel the urge to reinforce the de-evaluative aspect of a certain condition by saying “victim of” or “suffers from” which devalues individuals with disabilities.** When avoiding using emotional descriptors and use neutral words such as “an individual with AIDS” rather than “a person who suffers from AIDS”; “individuals living with mental illnesses” rather than “individuals suffering from mental disorders”, we put the person back at the center and there’s no need to add anything else. We often read “Confined to a wheelchair”: but a wheelchair provides mobility, not restriction! “Walks with crutches” represents independence, whereas “confined to wheelchair-bound” implies a burden.

**Using strengths-based language to acknowledge a person’s assets, rather than deficits, also helps in this matter:** For example, consider terms such as “living with” instead of “suffering from” or “maximize growth” instead of “minimize risk.”

### 3.1 SOME PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

#### FROM

**Disability**

**“Poor”**

**“Disabled“, “handicapped“,  
“differently abled“**

**“suffering from”**

**“mental health disorders“**

**“vulnerable“**

**“victim of“, “suffers from”**

**“empowered”**

**“prostitutes“**

**“Child prostitution”**

**“White Slave Trade”**

#### TO

**Accessibility**

**people with disabilities“**

**“people with disabilities“**

**“living with”**

**“mental health issues/conditions/  
illnesses“**

**“in vulnerable conditions“**

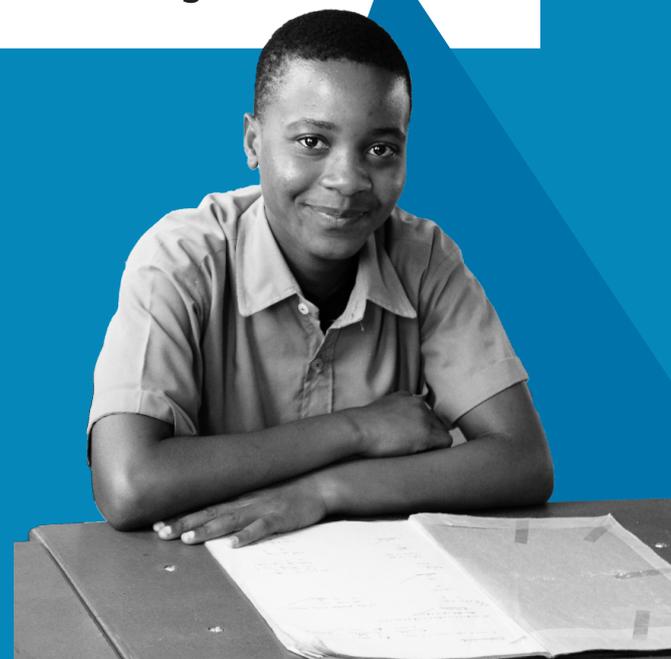
**“with“, “living with”**

**External organizations/actors do  
not empower people, people do it  
themselves**

**“prostituted women“**

**“Commercial sexual exploitation of  
children”**

**“Human trafficking”**



## 4. PICTURES AND VIDEOS

There are so many humanitarian organisations working for developing countries that strong competition has been created, so much so that, in the case of fundraising, strong communication is needed to attract the user's attention. In this case, photography plays a key role and becomes the predominant means of communication. For this reason, the images that are usually used must stand out from the crowd and strike the user as much as possible, so that they do not go unnoticed.

Many development agencies are sharing decontextualised, distressing images of starving children, to raise funds. **Ethical pictures and videos imply adopting a new approach that consciously tries to move away from harmful, stereotypical images, preserving the dignity of those whose story is being told and encouraging mutual respect.** Unethical images are often used with regard to the populations portrayed, particularly those in Africa, depriving these individuals of their dignity and their lives. The Foundation abides by the following rules in the use of images of children and youth:

- **The publication of images must always be related to institutional activities** and must not establish a commercial exploitation of the child's image or harm the child's dignity;
- **Publication is allowed in non-harmful circumstances**, and when the image is random, not intended to polarize the child and its recognizability;
- **The publication of an image must ensure anonymity** and non-recognition of the child in a situation harmful to the child;
- **The images must represent the child as a subject capable of being the protagonist of his own destiny** and not as a passive recipient of an action; they must not feed stereotypes and must not allow scandals or pietistic communications.

If images of a person are published, the Foundation shall request a declaration of authorisation to use the images; in the case of minors, the declaration shall be signed by their parents. FMSI will use a "deep consent" taking more time with interviewees to explain in detail the reason of this picture/video. Reminding them about their rights 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.

As an organisation we should know what content to create and not commercialise the life of an individual in need. We should know how to highlight their work, how, even with endless difficulties, they achieve their life goals. **FMSI or other organisations are the supporters that helps those populations in difficulty, they are part of the story, but they are not the protagonists.**



# 4.1 HOW TO TAKE PICTURES AND VIDEOS: DO AND DO NOT

## DO

- Respect cultural etiquettes and **always ask for permission before taking a picture**
- **Use a “deep consent”** taking more time with interviewees to explain in detail the reason of this picture/video. Remind them about their rights 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.
- **Give space to people and organizations on the ground:** they are a big part of the story and they should have enough space
- **Do not overstress poverty conditions:** are children wearing ragged clothing really necessary to tell the story?
- **Give value to the protagonist in the story**
- **involve local people in co-creating the story** (for example, as filmmakers or photographers)

## DO NOT

- During interviews, be very **cautious about pressure:** if an interviewee seems reluctant to provide more information, the story gatherer should move on to other questions.
- **Do not include stock footage,** pictures or photographs that are stereotypical and harmful to the image and the person.
- Editors should **not change the content** to suit the intended audience, if the result is not a true reflection of the information shared.
- **Do not make the organisation the centre of everything**
- In doing pictures/videos, **do not promote only organisation’s work,** but also show what is happening in the context of the project/initiative



# TEXTS USED

## TO CREATE THIS MANUAL

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