



Communications is capacity

Plan your communications budget, even when resources are limited

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Preface

For many non-profit organisations, communications often sits at the edge of the work—something done after programmes are implemented, reports are written, or events are completed. Yet communications is not an add-on. It is a core institutional function that connects programmes, strategy, partnerships, and public understanding of the work. When approached this way, it helps build trust, strengthen relationships with communities and funders, and ensure that efforts reach the people they are meant to serve.

Many grassroots organisations in India are doing significant work but face challenges in communicating their impact—often due to limited budgets, small teams, or the absence of structured communication systems. Developed through a partnership between Axis Bank Foundation and India Development Review (IDR), with IDR serving as the knowledge partner, this playbook is part of a series of seven that aims to provide practical, accessible guidance for organisations regardless of size or resources. Together, the playbooks are designed to walk non-profits through the essential building blocks of organisational communications.

This playbook, titled *Plan your communications budget, even when resources are limited*, focuses on budgeting for communications, offering tips on how to prioritise spending even with limited resources.

These playbooks are not meant to be read only once or followed in a strict order. Organisations can return to them at different stages of their communications journey, using them as references while planning campaigns, documenting programmes, or strengthening internal communication systems.

At the end of each playbook, you will find short exercises and reflective prompts designed for teams to discuss together. These are meant to help organisations pause, reflect on their current practices, and consider how communications can better support their mission and goals.

Used together, these playbooks aim to help organisations treat communications not as a separate activity, but as a system that strengthens the work they already do.

Introduction

In the previous playbook, you assessed your organisation's communications readiness. You reflected on where systems are strong, where gaps exist, and which areas may need attention.

The next step is to ensure that your communications priorities are supported by the resources they need.

For many non-profits, particularly those working at the grassroots, communications often falls to the bottom of the priority list. This is understandable, given that resources are limited and delivery timelines are often urgent.

However, effective communication does not require large investments.

Even a modest budget, when planned strategically, can go a long way in helping you build trust, raise funds, and strengthen your organisation's visibility.

This playbook will help you think about how to allocate resources for communications, even with limited budgets. It outlines the key components that typically require investment, provides sample budget templates, and offers practical guidance on prioritising spending to maximise impact for every rupee.

How to use this playbook

This playbook is designed to help you move from communications planning to budgeting for communications activities.

- Read it with the communications lead or relevant team members to understand the different components that typically require budgeting.
- Review your organisation's communications priorities and identify which activities will require resources in the coming financial year.
- Use the sample budget templates to estimate costs and organise communication expenses under clear budget heads.
- Use the 90-day action plan at the end of the playbook to begin integrating communications budgeting into your organisational planning process.

By the end of this section, readers should be able to:

- Understand why planning resources for communications is important.
- Identify the key components that typically require communications budgets.
- Estimate the resources needed for different communications activities.
- Use simple budgeting tools to plan and track communications expenses.

I. Understanding what to budget for

For grassroots non-profits, budgeting for communications is not about hiring an agency or launching large-scale campaigns. It is about making small, strategic choices that align with your goals and capacity, within available resources.

This process of creating a separate communications budget should ideally take place during the annual planning and budgeting cycle for the upcoming financial year.

II. Creating a communications plan

The first step is to create a communications plan that helps you define:

- Your key messages
- Your target audiences
- The channels you will use to reach them
- A timeline of activities

This plan should align with organisational priorities and involve strategy teams to capture the organisation's communication needs for the next financial year and budget for them accordingly.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Before creating a communications budget, ask:

- What are the most important communication goals for the next year?
- Which audiences must we reach more effectively?
- Which communication activities matter most for our mission?

Your answers will help prioritise where resources should be allocated.

III. Resources needed to execute a communications plan

Once you know which activities and materials you need, the next step is to identify and allocate resources for them.

For example, if you decide to create a video on a particular intervention (because your audience is more receptive to visual content and likely to see it on social media), your budget might need to cover:

- A videographer to shoot and edit
- Shooting equipment and editing software
- Travel or logistics costs

Adding such details to your communications plan ensures clarity on what is required.

IV. Create your communications budget

When planning your communications budget, it is useful to break costs into clear heads. Depending on the scale of your non-profit and the resources available, some of these may be met by in-house staff, while others may require engaging consultants or agencies.

People costs

People costs are often the largest but most overlooked part of communications budgets.

For example, an organisation may budget for designing and printing an annual report but not for the time required to write, edit, and compile it. As deadlines approach, staff are asked to complete these tasks alongside their regular responsibilities, often causing delays.

What this may include

- Salaries for communications staff
- Part-time communications roles
- Fees for freelance writers, designers, photographers, or videographers
- Consultant fees for campaigns or reports
- Intern stipends

Content creation

This covers the actual production costs of communications materials. Different formats require different resources. A single video or report often involves multiple contributors and associated costs beyond design, so it is essential to budget for these at the planning stage.

What this may include:

- Writing and editing: articles, blogs, case studies, newsletters, annual reports
- Visual content: photography, videography, reels, animations, illustrations
- Production expenses: equipment hire, editing software, transcription, translation into regional languages
- Field costs linked to content creation: travel, and other logistics

Design and printing

This covers costs for both digital and non-digital communications.

What this may include:

- Graphic design for reports, presentations, social media templates, and campaign creatives
- Layout and typesetting for publications
- Printing of reports, brochures, banners, standees, posters

Digital tools and platforms

These are the systems that enable communication and outreach.

What this can include:

- Website costs: domain, hosting, maintenance, and occasional redesign
- Subscriptions: Canva Pro, email marketing tools (such as Mailchimp and Zoho), social media management tools, analytics software
- Data management and CRM tools used for donor lists, mailing lists, or lead tracking

Outreach, promotion, and public relations

Creating communication materials is only one part of the process. Organisations must also ensure their work reaches the intended audiences.

What this may include:

- Paid promotion: boosting social media posts, running small ad campaigns on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Google, or LinkedIn
- Lead generation: using digital tools to reach the target audience through social media, and costs associated with collecting and managing donor, volunteer, or partner leads
- Public relations: hiring a PR consultant or agency for media outreach, press releases, or campaign amplification (depending on budget and media engagement needs)
- Events and launches: venue and associated logistics

Capacity building

Investing in staff skills helps organisations build long-term communications capacity. Over time, this reduces dependence on external vendors.

What this may include:

- Training workshops for staff on writing, social media, photography, or basic design
- Online courses and certifications
- Specialised learning and development opportunities like part-time courses for the staff

Branding and standardisation

Clear branding strengthens recognition and consistency, especially when multiple staff members or partners are producing content.

What this may include:

- Development of brand guidelines
- Creation of standard templates for reports, presentations, social media, and emailers
- One-time hiring of a branding agency or consultant

V. Sample budget templates

The following templates are designed to help your team plan, allocate, and monitor communication-related expenses. Each tab represents a different layer of your communications work. This includes the overall plan and the outlay for specific projects or campaigns within that plan. Together, they provide a clear picture of where your funds are going, when they are being used, and how they support your communication goals.

Please access the sample budget templates* [here](#).

**The figures used in these templates are indicative and should not be interpreted as prescriptive benchmarks. They are intended solely to demonstrate how budgets may be structured across the categories outlined above. Organisations are advised to adapt these templates based on their own approved budget allocations and internal guidelines.*

1. Overall communications budget

- This sheet provides a consolidated view of all communication and marketing expenses across teams and campaigns. It helps you align your spending with the organisation's annual communication strategy and track allocations under key budget heads such as staff, production, outreach, and tools.
- The budget sheet presents annual costs broken down by month and quarter, and also outlines potential one-time expenses the communications team may incur based on its activities.

Purpose: To understand the total investment in communications across the organisation and ensure that individual projects stay within the broader budget envelope.

2. Annual report budget

- This sheet breaks down the budget (a fictitious allotted amount) for producing and promoting one flagship report during an assumed financial year. It includes staff time, production costs, and outreach activities, with peak spending expected during the months of report creation and dissemination.
- The allocation head in the sheet highlights that not all staff members may participate in this activity; their time is accounted for, and costs are calculated accordingly.

Purpose: To help you plan and monitor the complete cost of developing, designing, and promoting key publications.

3. Social media campaign budget

- This sheet tracks a campaign (with an allotted fictitious amount) that covers staff time and production expenses for a specific social media initiative. Most of the spending occurs in two particular months, when campaign activity peaks.
- The allocation head in the sheet highlights that not all staff members may participate in this activity; their time is accounted for, and costs are calculated accordingly.

Purpose: To monitor campaign-specific resource use and spending, and to evaluate the cost-effectiveness of your outreach efforts.

These templates are useful for giving your communication planning a practical, trackable process. They make it easier to see how resources are being distributed, identify high-cost periods, and make informed decisions about where to focus your efforts for maximum impact.

What you can do next

Use the table below to move from planning to implementation and create a 90-day action plan. Use the templates.

Exercise

Use the table below to move from planning to implementation and create a 90-day action plan.

Action	Key activity	Ownership contributors	Output	Timeline
Identify priorities and communications needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review key organisational goals, strategy, and priorities Hold short consultations with programme, leadership, and fundraising teams Review existing communications plan and see what's working and what's not Identify priority audience and key messages 	Communications lead (with fundraising, programmes, leadership, and strategy teams)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> List of organisational communication priorities Draft list of key audiences and communication goals 	Day 1–30
Develop a communications plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop key messages for the target audience Identify appropriate channels for each audience Create a timeline of communication activities Identify priority projects Identify the resource requirements for each Allocate budgets under each head (for 	Communications lead (with other relevant teams)	Draft communication plan Prioritised list of communications needs with resource needs	Day 31–60

	example, people costs, design and printing, etc.)			
Build and review the communications budget	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a budget sheet (can use the sample templates) based on estimates • Review draft budget with finance and leadership teams • Create a final budget 	Communications lead (with finance and leadership teams)	The draft communications budget, which can be integrated within the org budget	Day 61–90

Conclusion

Budgeting for communications does not necessarily mean spending lakhs. However, it means planning for it intentionally, no matter how small your budget is. Think of communications as an institutional investment and not an expense.

- See the playbook *Build communications into how your organisation works, not as an afterthought* on building communications as a core function in your organisation.
- Take the communications readiness assessment in the playbook *Assess strengths, understand gaps, and prioritise your organisation's communications* to understand where your organisation stands on communications

**KNOWLEDGE
PARTNER**

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