



## **Communications is capacity**

Build communications into  
how your organisation works,  
not as an afterthought





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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 the reader through the essential building blocks of organisational communications.

This playbook, titled *Build communications into how your organisation works, not as an afterthought*, explains why communications should be institutionalised within an organisation and how it connects internal alignment with external visibility.

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 and 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

At its core, communications is about trust. Trust underpins every relationship a non-profit organisation depends on. Without it, donors may question impact, communities may disengage, partners may hesitate to collaborate, and even internal teams may feel misaligned.

Every message—be it a mission statement, field story, proposal, or internal update—signals something about credibility and reliability.

**Trust is not built once. It develops over time through communication that is,**

- **Clear**
- **Consistent**
- **Accountable**

When stakeholders understand what the organisation does, why it matters, and how it delivers on its commitments, trust strengthens.

In many non-profit organisations, communications evolves informally. It responds to immediate needs—a report that is due, a partnership announcement, or an event update. This creates activity, but rarely builds a foundation for credibility.

Communications is therefore often treated as support work rather than institutional capacity. Yet it directly shapes:

- How programmes are perceived
- How credibility is assessed
- How sustainable the organisation's work becomes over time

This playbook encourages a more deliberate approach to communications and focuses on clarity, alignment, and practical structures that help organisations treat communications as a core organisational function rather than an afterthought.

**Communications is not only about visibility. It is about building trust, strengthening relationships, and making organisational work understood.**

## How to use this playbook

This playbook is designed to move you from reflection to action.

- Read it through with the core communications team to assess your current communications approach.
- Evaluate your current activities and identify concrete steps you can take to shift from activity-based communications to more intentional, strategic communications.
- Use the planning worksheet and 90-day roadmap to begin strengthening your systems.

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

- Understand why communications is central to organisational credibility and trust.
- Recognise common communication patterns in development organisations.
- Identify the key steps needed to build strategic communications.
- Reflect on practical ways to strengthen communications within their organisation.

## I. Why invest in communications

Every organisation already invests in communications, whether intentionally or not.

Teams routinely:

- Draft proposals and donor reports
- Share programme updates
- Present to partners
- Respond to stakeholder queries
- Write social media posts
- Share community announcements

In many organisations, this work is absorbed into existing roles: a programme officer managing social media alongside fieldwork, a coordinator preparing donor updates after a community visit, or a team member revising a funding proposal late into the evening to ensure the work is accurately represented.

### PAUSE AND REFLECT

Does this sound familiar?

- Programme staff writing donor updates after activities
- Social media managed alongside other responsibilities
- Updates shared only when requested

Your organisation is already doing communications. The next step is to make it more intentional.

Regardless of the organisation's size or structure, communications is almost certainly taking place. The difference lies in how deliberately it is approached.

## Communications across different organisations

Communications needs vary depending on the size, scale, and context of an organisation.

Type of organisation	Communications focus
Small grassroots/community-driven organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communicating regularly with donors</li><li>• Engaging closely with local communities</li></ul>
Organisations working across regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Translating field realities for different audiences</li><li>• Coordinating communication with partners and funders, and internal teams</li></ul>
Mid-sized organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Strengthening coordination across teams</li><li>• Ensuring consistent messaging across programmes</li><li>• Building institutional visibility</li></ul>

When communications lacks structure, it can consume time without strengthening outcomes. When approached deliberately, communications helps build credibility, continuity and trust.

**Communications needs are not the same for every organisation. As organisations grow, communications must move from informal updates to structured and strategic engagement.**

## II. From investing in communications activities to making it strategic

In many organisations, communications functions as a support activity.

Typical examples include:

- Posting on Instagram after an event
- Preparing reports only when donors request them
- Launching campaigns without identifying the audience

However, communications directly shapes how stakeholders understand the organisation's work.

### When communications is strategic

Strategic communications is not about producing more content.

It is about aligning communication with organisational goals and using it deliberately to build trust and influence action.

When communications is aligned with organisational goals:

- Donors understand the value you bring and continue their support.
- Communities know how and why to engage.
- Policymakers recognise credibility.
- Staff align around shared priorities

**Without structure, communications becomes reactive. With structure, it becomes a multiplier.**

### III. Treating communications as a core organisational function

Treating communications as organisational capacity means recognising it as a core function, not a final step.

This means:

- Communications is included in programme design and budgets.
- Stakeholders are identified deliberately.
- Messaging reflects organisational priorities.

Instead of focusing only on outputs—such as posts or reports—organisations begin by asking clearer questions:

- **What** problem are we addressing?
- **Who** needs to act or shift?
- **What** action are we seeking?
- **What** change are we aiming for?
- **How** will we know if it worked?

This approach moves communications beyond tasks such as:

- social media posts
- annual reports
- campaign announcements

Instead, it connects communication to organisational goals and measurable outcomes. Importantly, this shift does not require larger budgets. It requires structure and clarity.

### IV. Steps towards strategic communication

For many small and growing organisations, strategic communications does not mean expanding teams or producing more content.

It means:

- clarifying purpose
- strengthening systems
- aligning communication with organisational priorities

The steps below provide a practical approach.

#### **Step 1: Define the role of communications**

In many organisations, communications evolves as a support function responding to requests. This creates activity but not direction.

Instead, organisations should define what communications is responsible for.

Possible roles include:

- Supporting fundraising
- Increasing programme participation
- Strengthening institutional credibility
- Influencing policy conversations
- Improving internal alignment

## **Step 2: Integrate communications into early planning**

Communications is often introduced after programmes are designed. At that stage, its role is limited to promoting activities or documenting what has been done. This keeps communications reactive and limits its impact.

To function strategically, communications needs to be involved earlier—when priorities are being defined, programmes are being shaped, and key budgetary decisions are being made.

Early integration allows teams to:

- clarify the purpose of an initiative
- identify priority stakeholders
- shape clear messaging

It also ensures that communications resources—such as design, documentation, or outreach—are budgeted in advance.

## **Step 3: Map your stakeholders**

Strategic communications begins with identifying the stakeholders most important to your mission.

### **External stakeholders**

1. **Donors:** Funders receive dozens of proposals. The ones that stand out are clear, concise, and confident. When your reports, decks, and stories align with and reinforce your core message, donors trust you more—and are more likely to fund you again.

**When it comes to fundraising, strategic communications improves conversion (winning funding), retention (getting renewed), and positioning (being recognised as a leader).**

2. **Policymakers and media:** Policymakers rely on clear, actionable briefs. If your work is invisible or vague, it won't influence change. Similarly, the media picks up stories that are timely, simple, and relatable.

**If your organisation is media-ready (with insights, reflection, research, data, as well as quotes that are easy to understand), your reach grows.**

3. **Communities:** People engage more when they feel included, respected, and informed. Communications tools such as audio stories, infographics, and WhatsApp videos remain just tools unless organisations know how to tailor them to community needs, and therefore attract participation instead of pushing it.

**Tools such as WhatsApp videos or infographics work best when tailored to community needs and contexts.**

4. **General public:** The public forms opinions based on what they see and hear. Shaping narratives early helps avoid misinformation and builds broader support.

**Clear communication helps avoid misinformation and builds wider support.**

### Internal stakeholders

Internal communication ensures that the organisation’s people, leadership, and decision-makers are aligned, informed, and confident. Strong internal communication is the foundation for external credibility.

1. **Team (staff across roles):** When staff understand the *why* behind the organisation’s work, they communicate it more confidently and consistently. Clear internal messaging ensures that everyone—from leadership to field staff—describes the organisation’s mission, priorities, and impact in the same way.

**When teams share a common understanding of the organisation’s purpose, communication becomes more consistent and credible across programmes and locations**

2. **Leadership and board:** Leadership and board members often represent the organisation in public forums, donor meetings, and partnerships. Clear internal communication ensures they have accurate updates, shared language, and key messages to speak confidently about the organisation’s work.

**Regular internal updates help leadership make informed decisions and represent the organisation clearly to external stakeholders.**

3. **Programme teams:** Programme teams generate insights, lessons, and evidence from the field. When these insights are documented and shared internally, they help strengthen strategy, improve programme design, and ensure that learning is not lost.

**Capturing and sharing field insights helps organisations learn from experience and improve future programmes.**

#### **Step 4: Identify the change you want to drive and the stakeholders who can help drive it**

Before developing messages or selecting channels, the organisation should be clear about what shift it is trying to influence. This may include:

- Increasing awareness
- Strengthening trust among donors
- Encouraging participation in a programme
- Influencing a policy decision
- Shifting behaviour within a community

Once the desired change is defined, the next question becomes: *Who can make this happen?*

Not every stakeholder plays the same role. Some must act directly. Others influence decisions.

For example:

- If the goal is increased programme participation, community members may need to act.
- If the goal is policy change, decision-makers and influencers become critical.
- If the goal is sustained funding, donors and partners must be prioritised.

Choosing your audience is therefore linked to the change you want to achieve. Focus on the individuals or groups whose behaviour, support, or influence is most necessary for progress.

#### **Step 5: Align messaging with organisational priorities**

Once the intended change and priority stakeholders are clear, messaging must be aligned accordingly.

In many organisations, communications describes activities—what was done, where, and when. Strategic communications goes a step further. It explains why the work matters, how it connects to the organisation's broader mission, and what outcome it is contributing to.

Aligned messaging ensures that:

- Programmes reinforce institutional goals.
- Different teams communicate consistently.
- Stakeholders receive a coherent narrative.
- The organisation builds a recognisable identity over time.

For example, if strengthening community trust is a priority, messaging should reflect transparency, responsiveness, and accountability. If influencing policy is a goal, messaging should demonstrate evidence, impact, and credibility.

When messaging aligns with organisational priorities, communications becomes cumulative rather than fragmented. Each message builds on the previous one, which strengthens institutional voice and supports long-term positioning.

## **Step 6: Build simple systems and processes**

In many organisations, communications often depends on one person's initiative. When that person is unavailable or exits the organisation, ensuring consistency becomes a challenge. This becomes a systems issue.

Building communications as a strategic function requires a few basic structures that support clarity and continuity.

These may include:

- A shared document outlining core messages
- A simple content or activity calendar
- Clear approval processes
- Regular internal updates to staff
- A basic tracker for communications outputs and outcomes

These systems do not need to be complex. They need to be consistent.

Simple processes reduce duplication, improve coordination between teams, and ensure that messaging remains aligned even as activities evolve.

When systems are in place, communications becomes embedded in how the organisation operates rather than being dependent on individual memory or urgency.

## **Step 7: Measure impact, not just activity**

It is quite common to track communications to evaluate the communications function in an organisation. These include the number of posts shared, reports published, events organised, or media mentions secured. While these are useful indicators of effort, they do not by themselves show impact.

To build communications as a strategic function, organisations must connect communication efforts to organisational outcomes, such as:

- Changes in donor retention or repeat engagement
- Increases in programme participation linked to outreach
- Improvements in stakeholder trust or perception
- Evidence of policy influence or public response

When impact is tracked alongside activity, communications becomes accountable, more focused, and better positioned to demonstrate its contribution to organisational performance.

## Step 8: Review and strengthen

Strategic communications requires regular reflection. Organisations can review progress through quarterly discussions, asking:

- Which communication efforts drove engagement?
- Where did responses remain limited?
- What should change next quarter?

## VII. Common communication pitfalls

As communications evolves within organisations, certain patterns tend to emerge that can quietly limit its effectiveness. These patterns are rarely intentional. The table below outlines common pitfalls and how they typically show up in practice.

Common pitfall	What it can look like	Why it matters	What to do instead
Using jargon instead of clear language	Describing programmes using technical, donor-heavy, or sector-specific terminology that external audiences struggle to understand  Example: “Capacity building for sustainable community resilience through participatory frameworks.”	Stakeholders may not fully grasp the organisation’s work or value.	Use simple, direct language that different audiences can understand and repeat.  Example: “Training community leaders to improve local disaster preparedness.”
Not knowing your target audiences	Putting out programme or event details and stories of impact on social media or in your newsletter in an attempt to reach “everybody”	Trying to reach everybody often means you don’t reach anybody. Communicating without target audiences often dilutes what you are trying to say.	Identify the key audience for a particular piece of communications. Think about what they like, respond to, or want to learn, and tailor your messaging to them. And, if you reach more people than intended, it’s always a win.

Unstructured storytelling	Sharing isolated beneficiary stories or images without consent, context, follow-up, or connection to broader impact, with numbers being the sole focus	Doing so may be extractive, undermine dignity, or fail to demonstrate real change.	Use storytelling intentionally—ensure consent, provide context, show progression, and connect stories to measurable outcomes.
Communicating only when required	Sending donor reports only at deadlines or updating partners only when prompted	Engagement becomes transactional rather than relationship-based.	Maintain steady communication rhythms beyond reporting requirements.
Inconsistent messaging across teams	Different staff members describe priorities, impact, or focus areas differently	Inconsistency weakens credibility and creates confusion.	Agree on and circulate core organisational message.

### Quick recap

Strategic communication is not about producing more content. It is about aligning communication with organisational goals, strengthening relationships with stakeholders, and ensuring that organisational work is clearly understood.

## What you can do next

Strengthening communications does not begin with a large strategy document. It begins with a small number of deliberate decisions.

The commitments below are practical starting points. They build gradually—from clarifying language, to improving coordination, to strengthening measurement.

1. Agree internally on 3–5 core messages  
Clarify how the organisation consistently describes its purpose, work, and impact. Shared language reduces confusion and supports credibility.
2. Identify one priority partnership or audience relationship  
Select a stakeholder group that would benefit from more intentional and structured communication.

3. Standardise how programme outcomes are translated into updates  
Develop a simple format that converts results into clear, accessible communication for different audiences.
4. Review how stories are currently shared  
Strengthen practices around consent, context, dignity, and follow-up so that storytelling reflects both impact and responsibility.
5. Map existing skills within the team  
Identify available strengths in writing, design, digital tools, or storytelling, and note where support may be needed.
6. Review the current communications budget  
Consider whether modest reallocations of time or funds could improve coordination, quality, or consistency.
7. Establish a simple communication rhythm aligned to priorities  
Replace ad-hoc updates with a basic, realistic flow of communication linked to organisational goals.
8. Define 2–3 indicators of contribution  
Identify signs that communications is strengthening engagement, trust, or continuity—such as donor retention, participation, or stakeholder responsiveness.

**Exercise**

Select two or three commitments that can be realistically carried for the next 90 days. Use the planning table below to outline what will be done, who will lead it, what resources are required, and how progress will be reviewed

**90-Day Communications Planning Table**

Use the table below to translate your selected commitments into action. Focus on one priority at a time. Keep it realistic.

Commitment	Who is responsible	Resources required	Timeline	Output

## Conclusion

Strong communication is not about glossy brochures or viral videos. It is about showing up clearly, consistently, and with integrity and doing this with a structure in place. It helps you build trust, raise funds, engage communities, and amplify your mission.

- Take the readiness communications survey in the playbook *Assess strengths, understand gaps* to understand where your organisation stands on communication.
- Create a budget for your communications function using tips and templates in the playbook *Plan your communications budget, even when resources are limited*.









**KNOWLEDGE  
PARTNER**

India Development Review (IDR)

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