



Communications is capacity

Craft your organisational
narrative



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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 organisations can use 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 *Craft your organisational narrative*, explains how non-profit organisations can build a compelling narrative around their work while remaining aligned to their core mission.

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 explored how to plan and allocate resources for communications. The next step is to consider how your organisation tells the story of its work and impact.

Storytelling is one of the most powerful tools available to organisations. It turns complex social issues into relatable human experiences that people can understand, remember, and connect with.

For non-profit organisations, storytelling helps bring to life the mission, values, and impact of the work being done. Yet many organisations struggle to tell this story in a way that feels consistent and relatable for both internal and external stakeholders. This may happen because teams juggle multiple communication platforms, rely heavily on programmatic reporting, or lack the time and resources to shape stories that reflect their larger mission.

Often, even if systems and processes for collecting and writing are in place, what is missing is a clear organisational narrative that connects individual stories and gives direction to all communication.

Individual stories alone are not enough. They need to connect to a larger purpose. This is where narrative building becomes important.

If storytelling is about *what* you share as the voices, experiences, and ‘impact’ that bring your work to life, then narrative building is about *why* it matters.

An organisational narrative links stories to a broader mission and ensures that each one reinforces:

- why the organisation exists
- what change it is working towards
- why that work matters

This playbook will help your organisation build a clear and cohesive narrative and identify stories that strengthen how you communicate your impact.

How to use this playbook

This playbook will help your organisation move from telling isolated stories to building a clear organisational narrative.

- Read it with teams from communications, programme, and leadership to reflect on how your organisation currently tells its story.
- Use the narrative framework to identify the core purpose, values, and impact that define your organisation’s narrative.
- Review existing stories from programmes and assess whether they connect clearly to your mission.
- Use the story identification guide at the end to help programme and field teams collect and structure impactful stories.

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

- Understand the difference between storytelling and organisational narrative building
- Identify the core elements that shape a strong organisational narrative
- Recognise meaningful stories from programmes, partnerships, and field experiences
- Frame stories in ways that connect clearly with different audiences

I. Why narratives matter

An organisational narrative is more than a collection of stories. It is the thread that ties all your communications together.

Whether you are writing an annual report, posting on social media, or pitching a proposal to a donor, your narrative ensures that people understand who you are and why your work matters.

A clear narrative helps your organisation:

- **Build trust and recognition:** People remember stories more than statistics.
- **Show purpose and progress:** It connects your day-to-day activities to a larger vision of change.
- **Inspire support:** When stakeholders feel emotionally connected, they are more likely to engage by donating, collaborating, or advocating.
- **Stay consistent:** It gives your team a shared language to communicate impact internally and externally.

A strong narrative ensures that every story reinforces your mission and purpose.

II. Building your organisation's narrative

Your organisation's narrative is the larger story that connects all your individual stories and essentially highlights the purpose of your non-profit.

To build a narrative, it is useful to work with these questions:

- What change are we working towards?
- Who benefits, and how?
- What values drive our work?
- How do we want people to feel when they think about us?

When every story you tell reflects these core messages, your communication becomes more coherent and memorable.

Example

If your narrative is about “restoring dignity through livelihoods,” then whether you share a farmer’s story, a staff reflection, or an annual report—each should reflect that theme of dignity and empowerment.

III. Finding the voice and tone of your organisation

Voice and tone are two essential elements of narrative building that are reflected in the stories that you share. Your voice reflects how you would like your organisation to be perceived—youthful, community-centric, legacy-driven, solutions-oriented, or evidence-based. Your tone brings in emotion adjusting to what the moment calls for, whether it is *hope*, *urgency*, or *credibility*.

The key is to choose one that matches both your message and your audience.

Hope

Use when you want to **inspire belief and optimism**, showing what is possible when change takes root.

- *Best for:* Sharing impact stories, milestones, and transformation

Example

“With access to training and steady work, more women in the community are now shaping their own futures.”

Urgency

Use when you need to **mobilise people to act quickly**.

- *Best for:* Campaigns, fundraising appeals, and crisis response

Example

“Without immediate support, hundreds of families risk losing access to safe drinking water during the monsoon season.”

Credibility

Use when you want to **build expertise and trust and demonstrate accountability**.

- *Best for:* Donor communication, reports, and communication with government stakeholders

Example

“More than 70 percent of participants reported improved access to healthcare after the intervention, validating the programme’s long-term approach.”

IV. Identifying impactful stories within your non-profit organisation

Every programme, report, or conversation holds the potential for a story. The key is recognising which stories best reflect your mission and impact.

Where to find stories:

- **From the field:** Day-to-day interactions between your field/programmes staff and community members
- **From the team:** Staff reflections about what has worked, what has not, and what they have learned
- **From participants:** Testimonials or lived experiences of people who have benefitted from your programmes or been part of the activities
- **From partners or donors:** Stories and learnings from collaborations, projects, and programmes can shape stories of learnings and insight

Tips to choose stories that fit your narrative:

- Pick stories that clearly connect to your larger purpose or impact goals.
- Look for change and how someone's situation, belief, or opportunity changed.
- Stories of learning from mistakes can highlight expertise and create resonance within the larger non-profit community.
- Prioritise authenticity over perfection as real voices are more relatable and lend credibility to your efforts.

V. How to frame a story

Even the most powerful story can fall flat if it's not framed well. How you tell a story determines whether people remember it, act on it, or move on.

A strong story has:

- **A clear structure:** Beginning (challenge), middle (response), and end (change).
- **The human angle:** Bring in human faces and experiences that the readers can relate to and connect with emotionally.
- **Clarity of message:** Think of what you would want your audience to take away.
- **Evoking emotion:** It is important to consider what you want the audience to 'feel' or relate to.

Tailor stories to your audience:

- **For CSR donors or funders:** Focus on impact, scale, and stories that can be replicated.
- **For community stakeholders:** Highlight collaboration, inclusion, how your non-profit programme will benefit them, and inspirational stories.
- **Media:** Focus on the human angle, highlight broad social issues, and bring in expert voices.

- **Government stakeholders:** Focus on impact, scale, insights, and learning. Show field presence and expertise.

Always end with a call to action (CTA):

Invite your audience to take the next step. It could be to donate, share, learn more, or join an event.

Example

“Support our work in building safer livelihoods—donate today.”

Telling your story across different formats

Stories can take many forms—from detailed reports to short social media posts. The format you choose depends on your message, your audience, and the emotion you want to evoke. It is important to opt for formats strategically. The same story can take different shapes depending on where it is shared. Some commonly used formats are:

- Annual reports
- Case studies
- Blogs
- Emails
- Social media content
- Videos
- Podcasts

VI. Practicing ethical storytelling

Stories can only build trust if they are told responsibly. Ethical storytelling means respecting the dignity, privacy, and agency of the people whose lives you represent.

Guidelines:

- Always obtain informed consent and explain how the story will be used. This holds for taking photos and shooting videos as well.
- Avoid sensational or ‘victim’ language; show agency and resilience.
- Involve the person or community in reviewing or shaping their story.
- Protect anonymity where needed, especially with sensitive topics.
- Provide context and accuracy.

VII. Build a story collection practice

To tell stories regularly, you need a simple system to gather and store them.

Start with these steps:

- **Create a story collection template:** A short template for programmes and staff, or volunteers to fill out (who, what, where, change observed, quotes).

- **Build habits and incorporate these in your work calendar:** Encourage the team to capture one story per month from the field.
- **Keep a central repository:** This could be a shared drive or folder for stories, photos, and consent forms.
- **Train your team:** Hold short sessions on interviewing, ethics, and writing, taking photos or shooting videos.

Quick recap

A strong organisational narrative connects individual stories to your mission, helping audiences understand the purpose and impact of your work. By defining your core message, voice, and tone, and identifying meaningful stories from programmes and partnerships, you can communicate your work in a more consistent and compelling way.

What can you do next

Get together with your core communications team and do the exercise below.

Exercise

Use the template below to start building a 'good' story. Can be used for the programmes and field staff to populate.

Story Identification Guide

What is the central idea of this story?	
What is it about? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• A field experience• An organisational process or approach that other people should know about• Expertise or research your team has	
Why does this story matter? <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It furthers our mission/vision• It meets donor requirements• It builds brand• Other (please specify)	
What data does it include/can you add to it?	
What clear outcome or change does it show?	
What organisation approach/process/ innovation does it show?	

How does it show that you are credible? Or, what expertise does it show?	
What about it makes it unique to your organisation?	
Who is the intended audience (donor, community, media, or government)?	
What details about the story make it relevant for that audience?	
If the story directly doesn't have the details, what information can you add to make it relevant for your target audience?	
What feeling do you want to leave the audience with—hope, urgency, inspiration, pride, or curiosity?	

<p>Write one sentence to evoke that feeling in your audience.</p>	
<p>Do you have a photo or a quote that can accompany this story?</p>	
<p>Can you verify the information shared in this story?</p>	
<p>What platforms (social media, report, event, or donor meeting) can this story be shared on? List in order of priority.</p>	
<p>Write one sentence to sum up the story.</p>	

Conclusion

A clear, authentic narrative can transform how people understand and connect with your mission and purpose. By identifying meaningful stories, framing them effectively, and communicating them ethically, you build not only visibility but also trust and long-term support for your work.

- See the playbook *Write case studies that show your organisation's impact through stories and data* for tips and prompts for developing case studies.
- See the playbook *Align message, audience, and channel to share multi-stakeholder organisational stories* for planning your social media content.

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