Ethical Communications Workshop with Dr. Eilish Dillon

15 November 2021

Dr. Eilish Dillon was commissioned by Dóchas to carry out a review and research into the Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages and into the wider area of ethical communications in the Irish international development sector. This research is now complete and the full report is available on the Dóchas website.

On 15 November Dr. Dillon presented an overview of her research at a Dóchas workshop attended by members and other stakeholders including Irish Aid and members of Conchord, the European Association of National Platforms. The workshop was attended by over 50 people from various speciality areas including communications, advocacy, fundraising, development education and public engagement. The video of the workshop is available to view above.

Following Dr. Dillon's presentation, the attendees were broken up into groups, where they discussed their initial reactions to the research, the challenges they saw it posing and how we can move this topic forward. Some of the groups feedback is presented in the video, and below is a list of key comments and issues raised through the discussion;

- The idea of more education and training for all practitioners on the topic of ethical communications is really important.
- A resource portal would be great. It should be accessible and kept up to date
- One key resource area should be on Direct Response Television (DRTV) campaigning. This area of communications/fundraising was referred to multiple times as the most problematic area. A guide around its use would be of great benefit
- There is a challenge when there is a humanitarian crisis and there is a tension around the demand of getting the message out and maintain the dignity of those affected.
- The is a lot of "clicktivism" around at the moment. But from a comms perspective we always need to be looking for ways into our messages for the public.
- There were no surprises in Eilish's presentation but it's great to have the issues around ethical communications underpinned by research.
- The timing of this research is right – Eilish's research complements research being carried out in the Worldview project.
- We must include fundraising staff in the process of moving forward with updating the Code of Conduct.
- It is so important not to sanitise people's stories and to tell people's stories how they would like them to be told in all of our communications.
- Technology has provided an opportunity to allow people to tell their own stories directly and to choose what audiences they want to address.
- As part of this process we need to establish a way to benchmark/monitor the Code, especially if we are to go the route of peer monitoring as the report suggests.

- Previously, an annual workshop on the Code took place, which was useful. It would be good to re-establish this going forward.
- It might be a good idea to run comms campaigns that are separate to fundraising campaigns – more investigative journalism pieces.
- There is a lot of potential to get creative in telling stories.
- Telling stories of long-term impact works well… documenting stories year on year is impactful – it shows people progress from start to finish.
- Making the link with GCE - and giving people (audiences) the means / context to understand more sophisticated messages / taking them on a journey.
- This can also help us, internally, make a link between programme work and comms / fundraising: how we approach our storytelling should mirror how we approach our programming (same values, opportunities for beneficiary communities to give feedback / register complaints, etc.).
- Related to this, the need to build capacity internally on GCE - all staff should do GCE training.
- There is an ongoing difficulty of representing poverty / illustrating the need INGOs are trying to meet, whilst also showing and centring people's agency and dignity - and the importance of ensuring that poverty is not the only story we tell. More stories of change and progress, told over time would be great.
- We need to see best practices being employed across all of the membership. We need to keep motivating people to do this.
- Monitoring is of vital importance. This can be done through the culture of an organisation but needs to come from leadership.
- It is important to make the message relatable. Have to find the balance between getting the message out but also respecting the dignity of those we are trying to help.
- It is upsetting to hear that our messaging may be causing racism. Wonder how many members are actually falling short in this area.
- It will be important when a task group is set up to have representation from the global south included, not just diverse groups here in Ireland. The messaging coming from us has an impact on those in the global south.
- This is all really important but we have to be sure we are not talking to ourselves in doing it.
- We have to be accurate and not distort the truth, we have to be able to communicate in a way that will resonate with the general population.
- Only showing dignified images is not a journalistic approach – they strive to bear witness. We have to strike a balance between bearing witness and keeping dignity of those we are portraying.

Dr. Dillon's Response

At the end of the workshop Dr. Dillon had the opportunity to respond to the issues emerging from the group discussions. She made the following points;

- 61 people responding to this is not a bad representation for a piece of research like this reflecting the sector.
- A lot of people talked about examples of good practice but this piece of research did not aim to highlight individual organisational practices, good or bad, it was to look at sector wide activities.
- It is interesting to see even here today that people have different perspectives on what constitutes ethical comms and what the priorities should be.
- The current code doesn't go into the complex challenges that need to be addressed within sector comms.

- I absolutely agree that representation from the global south must be part of any group going forward.
- This research focuses on what organisations can do as a sector to improve ethical communications.
- Hopefully people will be inspired to read the report and take forward the recommendations. This is a really important subject, I know there are many, but hopefully people will take this on.