Questions to ask and tips to consider

1. Who will see this and what am I trying to say to them? What are the different ways people might view this? What will be the impact?

2. Take time to pause and reflect before taking photos or posting information. ‘Think before you Tweet!’

3. Am I representing myself, the sending organisation or the host community?

4. If you are only speaking for yourself mark this with formulations like ‘In Ghana I experienced …’ instead of ‘In Ghana it is …’.

5. Does my host community or sending organisation have a Code of Conduct on this issue?

Check with your host organisation and sending organisation before posting videos, articles on the internet.

Which photographs and comments should I share?

Before posting a picture, consider the potential vulnerability and victimisation of the people shown and have respect for the subject.

If I was the person in the photograph in that situation, would I like my picture to be shared across the internet and with total strangers? Do I have permission to use the photo?

Where can I learn more on this?

www.dochas.ie/code
The Irish Association of NGOs. They have produced a Code on Images and Messages which is an excellent guide for volunteers going overseas.

www.concordeurope.org
The European confederation of development NGOs that adopted the Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages at European level.

www.photovoice.org
A project working with individuals, local communities and partner organisations to create participatory photography programmes with participants in their own contexts.

www.majorityworld.com
An photo agency working with photographers from the Global South, creating visibility, market access, and respect.

www.newint.org
New Internationalist: the world’s leading independent publisher of magazines and books on global social justice and sustainable development.

www.findingframes.org.uk
A UK based report on finding new ways to engage the public in global poverty.

Comhlámh’s Guidelines for the use of Social Media in Volunteering

Going overseas can be a great opportunity to experience and learn about the world! But how can we most effectively raise awareness of our overseas experiences using social media, keeping in mind the impact our information can have on people at home as well as the impact on the people with whom we worked in communities overseas?

The following guidelines outline some of the things we need to consider when using images, messages and social media in our awareness raising activities linked to an overseas experience. These guidelines have been informed by the Dóchas Code of Conduct on Images and Messages www.dochas.ie/code.
The role and responsibility of the volunteer

As a learner and guest in the country to which you are travelling, it is worth considering ‘who are the experts in poverty living’ and what story would they like you to bring back to people at home. You will not know everything about a culture following an experience abroad, but travelling overseas can provide a valuable opportunity to enrich your perspectives and provide the inspiration to raise awareness and inform change-making from your home country.

Do volunteers have a role to play in communicating messages about development? If so, what is this role? Whose perspectives on development are being represented?

Initial observations

- Initial observations of a place can sometimes be inaccurate, focusing on the differences rather than the similarities with our own culture
- The power of hindsight and reflection: observations often change over time and the immediate thoughts when arriving in a country may not be the same after a few weeks or months
- On return, also taking the time to digest the experiences may minimise any negative impact and maximise the opportunity to accurately share experiences with others

Sharing initial reactions immediately can have implications, particularly if they do not represent the wider experience. Wait a few weeks before blogging or posting photos and record your thoughts in a personal journal, giving yourself time to digest the cultural difference that you may be experiencing.

Think carefully before putting private thoughts and photos on the internet. Edit your settings on Facebook to be public or private. Also consider different folders for different audiences: keep one photo album for the work you do and the other for your leisure time. While privacy settings exist on the internet, know that the information you post is permanent. If in doubt, don’t post at all.

Initial observations

The power of social media

People create change, and social media is a powerful communications tool that brings people together, communicating instantaneously from different locations, and even sometimes while on the move. This instantaneous communicative power when translated into action, such as mass movements of people onto the street, or via thousands of signatures on an online petition, means that social change is now possible at a much faster pace than ever before. The opportunity to use social media as a tool for awareness raising and action can have a powerful impact on our own networks and other social media users. Here are some examples of what is possible:

Arab Spring: this was a revolution which highlighted the ability of people in Tunisia, Egypt and Syria to organise political action and document their own struggles and their movement through social media. Outside of these countries, the rest of the world was able to hear their narrative, not relying on official records to know what was happening during this time.

Twestival: (Twitter Festival) uses social media for social good by connecting communities offline on a single day to highlight a great cause and have a fun event. Twestival is the largest global grassroots social media fundraising initiative to date, born out of the idea that if cities were able to collaborate on an international scale but work on a local level, it could have a spectacular impact. www.twestival.com

Avaaz: (meaning ‘voice’ in several European, Middle Eastern and Asian languages) is a global web movement to bring people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere. Avaaz has engaged millions of people to take action on pressing current issues. Actions have included signing petitions, funding media campaigns and direct actions, lobbying governments, organising ‘offline’ protests and events – to ensure that the views and values of the world’s people inform the decisions that affect us all. www.avaaz.org

All Out: is a social media campaign for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people all over the world. The campaign has worked to halt the deportation of a lesbian Ugandan asylum seeker in the UK, organised a flash mob in Germany to protest homophobic and trans violence in Brazil, and organised a flash mob at the Women's World Cup. www.allout.org

Where are the opportunities within social media to raise awareness and reach wide audiences with the messages you want to convey?