Telling the #ZeroHunger story
FAO’s Digital Storytelling Guide
Office of Corporate Communication
OCCI
Telling the #ZeroHunger story: FAO’s Digital Storytelling Guide
#ZeroHunger has been FAO’s mandate since the Organization’s creation in 1945. Eradicating hunger permeates all areas of FAO’s work. We promote an integrated approach to tackling poverty, hunger and the sustainable use of natural resources, recognizing that these are all facets of the same challenge. By telling the #ZeroHunger story, we tell the work of FAO’s mandate in one message, a message that is easily understood, relatable and compelling to all of our target audiences.

The #ZeroHunger digital story can be told in different formats: web article, video, Instagram photo stories. Organizations need to evolve traditional storytelling into various formats that are engaging and relevant to today’s world. Storytelling is one part of a larger digital transformation, one that requires a continual evolution to stay competitive, credible, transparent and nimble. By fully adopting new technologies, embracing digital media and deploying strategies that leverage powerful existing and emerging tools and platforms, FAO can further expand its reach and relate the impact of its work.
Our goal: By 2019, FAO is leading the digital conversation about achieving #ZeroHunger.

To achieve this, we need to enhance capacity across FAO to engage and interact with our target audiences (both technical/non-technical) in telling the #ZeroHunger story. Consequently, this guide provides tips on capturing content in sensitive and respectful ways with the end purpose of successfully telling meaningful stories through the human voice on digital channels, including social media. Our new approach to producing “digital first” content promotes the best practices for storytelling, knowledge sharing and engagement across the Organization. The focus on first-person narratives (in a balanced approach with technical content) will make the FAO story more accessible and compelling - especially for younger audiences who are the next generation of supporters and #ZeroHunger advocates.

Tell me a fact and I will learn. Tell me a truth and I will believe. But tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever.
For additional support and advice, contact OCC at: digital@fao.org
Storytelling across multiple media

Storytelling is the oldest form of communicating and sharing knowledge; all of us tell stories and we do it every day. Especially in today’s very competitive digital environment, storytelling remains one of the most powerful ways for brands like FAO’s to connect with the audience, build a relationship with them and highlight some of the most pressing issues of our time.

The story of Laxmi Sunar is a first-person narrative illustrating how climate change and migration are affecting rural women and communities. There was also a long version of the video and this short version for social media.
However, at a time when digital platform consumers are flooded with more information than ever before, how do we make FAO’s voice stand out in the #ZeroHunger arena? How do we create compelling narratives in this complex media landscape? How do we use storytelling to engage with our audience and start a successful conversation? Content is key and FAO stories are best told in ways that reach a variety of audiences in media that best suit them. These can include stories, photos, videos and podcasts. Each medium can give a new angle to the story and provide a depth of information that ensures a rich experience for the intended audience.

Writing style and choice of photos should be tailored to the platform and audience.
The use of new technology, innovation and the power of imagery in emerging channels will allow us to reach new audiences, especially youth and Millennials. A viral YouTube video can reach millions in a few days; a trending story on Facebook is shared hundreds of times in a day; and a unique photograph or infographic on Instagram goes viral in minutes. We must increase our use of data visualization and infographics that can work across both traditional and digital platforms.

We need to increase our use of first-person stories and multimedia and further break away from the institutional voice. We need to think of our stories, images and videos as products where creativity meets art, advertising and advocacy.

And most importantly, we need to think of our audience and platform first.
It is important to think of content as something that you want people to engage with and share with others.

We can leverage our existing audiences on digital platforms by creating content that is well-packaged, understandable, easily shareable and appropriate for the channel. For storytelling materials to be effective, we need to develop a concept first so that we can all work together on the creation and distribution of the piece on our digital platforms that is in concert with our global priorities and key messaging.
Triggering action through visual storytelling

No matter through which medium you tell the story, you need to ask yourself the following questions before conceiving your digital products:

1. **What is the key message?**
   Can you explain the idea behind your product in one simple thought, one sentence? The most successful work conveys one message, one thought and a clear focus that keeps a digital audience’s attention.

*Written stories can help present technical content in a new way, helping people to better understand FAO’s work.*

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2. Who is your audience?
Who are you talking to? Does it speak to Millennials (prevalent audience on digital) or the community of development professionals? Does it speak to the constituencies of your country? Or is it something that a 21-year old in a remote country can identify with? Define and understand your audience and design your products with them in mind.

3. What is the best digital product to convey the key message to identified audience? Is it a short human-interest video? A series of first-person, narrated images that will have national, regional or global appeal? A web story? Once you know your audience, identify which platforms they use most often and design a digital product for that specific channel/platform.

4. How do you want your audience to engage? What should they do? Will the final product trigger compassion and, in some cases, action? Even if your main goal is building awareness and getting information to the public, getting the audience engaged and involved in the conversation is the most effective way to spread the word and the mandate of the Organization on digital channels.

5. How did this project contribute to #ZeroHunger? Does your story demonstrate how the topic at hand is linked to FAO’s larger goal of eradicating hunger? This does not necessarily need to be explicit. It can be shown through the imagery or script, but it should be part of the message that we give.

You should also keep the above questions in mind when defining the strategic scope of video/photo missions (See the Checklist in Annex 1 for more information).

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General guidelines
to follow for effective storytelling

One of our top concerns must be to more decisively bridge the gap between the language of development and the language of every day. While some content must remain technical, mixing both does not always work.

For example to be effective for a wider range of audiences, we need to move away from video scripts or written stories with highly technical, acronym-heavy sentences typical of the world of development and rather focus on developing stories from a human perspective narrated by beneficiaries or the Field workers that are directly involved. Our aim is to make products that depict people beyond statistical representations.

Talking about FAO’s work indirectly through the lens of an individual is very powerful and often better resonates with more general audiences.
The “ideal” story will often be told best through the lens of an individual without additional institutional narration. FAO does not need to be mentioned in the story itself. Enough corporate context will be provided through the branded digital channel (for example, YouTube, Twitter or Facebook accounts) and through the other stories on the digital channel where it is going to be published (for example, country or regional website, press release).

Overwhelmingly, beneficiaries do not control how they are depicted or quoted. We have a responsibility as storytellers to ensure that the real situation of beneficiaries is represented accurately.

The stories should dignify the people represented: not show them as passive agents but as active actors in the change that FAO is making possible through its work. With photographs and videos, FAO must ensure that its images of beneficiaries uphold their right to be treated with respect. While the first criteria must remain respectful treatment of communities and individuals with whom we liaise, it is useful to review the purpose of telling the specific story.
First person narratives with quotes and portraits (with direct gazes into the camera in natural settings) make our work relatable are very useful on digital channels. Stories of ‘a day-in-the-life’ of a subject or sequences that follow an event or programme activity as it occurs (such as the delivery of seeds from manufacturer to recipient), can be more informative and more convincing, precisely because of the strengthened narrative that it offers.
Written stories

For written stories, the below 5-step storytelling framework can come in handy:

1. Introduction
Set the scene and tell your readers everything they need to understand about why what you are about to say is important.

1. Example: Said Touati lives with his 90-year-old mother in Tajerouine, northwestern Tunisia, a dry and remote area on the border with Algeria. It is an agricultural region without any major industries nearby.
2. **Cite the incident**
Describe the challenge or situation. This is a great place to show vulnerability, struggles or failures, setting the stage for the accomplishments you will describe later.

2. **Example:** Despite a university degree in mathematics, Said had been unemployed for 12 years. Besides his degree, he had also learned sheep breeding from his father, but raising sheep requires resources that Said did not have. Though he liked working with livestock, his financial situation was not good enough to begin the breeding on his own.

3. **Raise the stakes**
A series of moments that give weight and context to the incident. This is a great place to get specific and provide details that will make your story more memorable.

3. **Example:** Said Touati lives with his 90-year-old mother in Tajerouine, northwestern Tunisia, a dry and remote area on the border with Algeria. It is an agricultural region without any major industries nearby.

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5. Resolution
This is the opportunity to highlight what makes the story unique.

4. Event
This is where we see the incident come to a head (aka the climax). This is either the answer to the question we asked in the second part or where the protagonist solves his or her dilemma.

4. Example: In 2016, Said was selected along with more than forty other young people to be part of the FAO Rural Youth Mobility project. Through this project, Said learned how to run an organic sheep farm and received a herd of 55 sheep. His cousin also helped by sharing some of his own land with Said so that he could begin his sheep breeding.

5. Example: “I had lost hope due to the unemployment in the region, but the FAO project gave me a chance,” Said reflects. Now Said has the option to earn a living in his own community. Migration no longer feels like the only way out of poverty. “My goal is to hire as many young people as possible in my region,” Said declares.
This video puts a twist on FAO’s work of saving livelihoods. Presenting goats in a modern, western family’s day-to-day life, it demonstrates how something like PPR can be devastating to families. This video got more views than any other FAO video has ever had.

When using **photos and videos** for storytelling, keep the following in mind:

1. Photos and videos without the factual background information, such as date, names and location, cannot be properly edited and successfully distributed on digital channels.
2. **Focus on** photographs/videos that:

- connect the audience to real people and everyday experiences (make it relatable);

- successfully capture (emotionally express) the core elements of the topic and take the viewer on a journey;

- cover a representative range of related people, activities, locations;

- offer varied visual perspectives (close-up with direct gaze into camera) in both horizontal and vertical formats;

- are well-taken technically (properly framed, exposed and processed).

There are some photos that we cannot use on digital channels.

- A subject that is smoking or drinking alcohol

- Highly visible brand names

- Gruesome images (e.g. butchered animals, etc.)

- Images that appear like animal cruelty (e.g. tied up animals, etc.)

- Group photos of workshops or seminars

- Sensitive photos: children crying or starving, women breastfeeding (other scenarios in which you yourself would not want to be photographed)

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You should provide **complete caption information** with your photos and videos.

**This includes:**
- The date on which the images were taken or when the video was produced
- The names and ages of the principal subjects
- Descriptions of the subject(s) (mother? health worker? relative? teacher?)
- What they are doing and their relation to each other (not always self-evident)
- The specific location (Region/Country/City/Neighborhood)
- Any FAO programme or other relation and how this is impacting the lives of the depicted subjects or their communities
- Technical keywords/themes clearly indicated
- Tagging by SDG if applicable/desired
- Project title and code
Editorial Subject Releases for advocacy and journalistic uses should be obtained whenever possible. The vast majority of photographs and videos for digital engagement are documentary: people going about their lives in specific, real situations. Their images can be used only if the photo or video representation is fair and there is no commercial endorsement.

Inappropriate use of documentary images includes:

- Misrepresentation of the subject’s identity or circumstances
- Use in a false or fictional context
- Unauthorized use in a commercial context

In any case, Editorial Subject Releases should be obtained by FAO in the following situations:

- If the use of a photograph/video puts a beneficiary at potential risk of harm but the subject is aware of and wishes to assume this risk
- If the subject of the photograph or video is a minor (under 18 years old)

Legal constraints apply to the use of documentary photographs (permission form) and videos (permission form), protecting subjects against false or commercial use of their image without their consent.

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It is important to remember that videos can amplify your message and reach a wider audience if they are shared on social media. For this, you need to keep in mind the length and formatting of the video.

**For videos:** we need to ensure that the content can be converted into 1-minute square versions for social media similar to [https://youtu.be/l8acRNm3s2Y](https://youtu.be/l8acRNm3s2Y) or [https://youtu.be/o99huxCfadg](https://youtu.be/o99huxCfadg).

If you foresee promotion on social media, it is important to add it as another “product” to the list of expected outputs that caters specifically to that medium/audience.
For photographs: We need quotes from the beneficiaries (first person narrative) to bring their photo stories to life. Although we cannot manipulate their real situations, when possible, we should capture “happy” photos (images of people smiling are more inspiring and always have better results on digital channels). If their lives have improved (e.g. because their livelihoods have been protected, there might be moments in which these “happy” photos are natural). They are important!

Examples of close up/positive photos:


It is important to think of content as something that you want people to engage with and share with others.

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When in the **field**, it is useful to take shots of generic landscapes, people at work in groups, as these images can be used on various channels, including on digital to give more detailed explanations on issues related to FAO’s mandate.

https://www.instagram.com/p/BST3iruDQFQ/
To change that reality through **content manipulation**, even with the best of intentions, is to imply a different reality or to misrepresent the real situation. While digital manipulation offers limitless opportunities to ‘fix’, ‘improve’ or ‘enhance’ image content - all highly subjective judgements aimed at making the image more ‘effective’ - these changes have ethical and legal implications that also affect FAO’s credibility.

The following are **examples of manipulation** that occur but cannot be accepted by an organization such as FAO:

- Misrepresenting facts to suit the story
- Removing an object in the background in a historical image
- Inserting clouds into a cloudless sky
- Removing an NGO logo from an item in the photo
- Removing a commercial brand logo from a beneficiary’s T-shirt
- Removing dirt from a beneficiary’s face
- Whitening a person’s eyes and teeth

In all of the above examples, the intention was to increase the impact of the images. However, the criteria ultimately comes down to **removing elements that might distract from an FAO focus** and making beneficiaries (or their environments) presumably more ‘appealing’.

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A guiding question in the process of telling the story is: If she/he were my wife, husband, child, relative, friend how would I want her/him portrayed?

Asking this question eliminates the tendency to treat subjects in our stories as objects who are there to accommodate our advocacy or strategic needs, rather than as subjects who are in our care and deserve to be represented fairly.

The goal is to represent who a particular beneficiary really is and what her or his real circumstances are.

Got a story to tell? Contact digital@fao.org.
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Annex 1:
Photo/Video Mission
Preparedness Checklist

Questions to ask before and while undergoing a video/photo/storytelling mission:

- What is the primary purpose of the mission?
- What is the main message you want to convey with these stories?
- Who will be the audience for the products of this mission?
- What should the audience feel/do after seeing this product?
- Who is shooting on behalf of FAO?
- Should you be using release forms for your subjects?

- Have you prepared the list of metadata that we need about each subject:
  
  - Date of photo/video/story
  - Names and ages of the principal subjects
  - Descriptions of the subject(s)
  - Activity: what they are doing
  - Relation to one another
  - Quote by the beneficiary, contextualizing the image
  - Location (Region/Country/City/Neighborhood)
  - Technical keywords/themes clearly indicated
  - Tagging by SDG if applicable/desired
  - Project/Programme title and code

- Can products be cut for social media channels?
- Did you keep the product true to the real situation?
Annex 2: Web writing tips

Web writing has a different style than writing for reports or technical documents. Web audiences tend to like clear, direct text that can be read quickly and understood in that moment.

Here are some tips to keep in mind:

1. **Don’t use too many acronyms.**
Try to avoid them when possible, but if it is necessary, always spell out acronyms the first time you use them. After that, use only the acronym in the following sentences.

   e.g.  European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) has been a long-time supporter of FAO’s work. EBRD funds many projects that promote better livelihoods.

2. **Unless you plan on using the acronym later, don’t write it in.**
   e.g.  If you write, World Bank Group (WBG), but then refer to it as World Bank in the rest of the article, you don’t need the (WBG)

3. **Avoid passive voice.** Sentences are clearer and easier to understand when written in the active voice. Passive voice is also very typical of bureaucratic writing, something we try to avoid in web writing.

   e.g.  **Passive Voice:** This project was implemented in the latter half of 2017. (by whom?)
   **Active Voice:** FAO implemented this project in the latter half of 2017.
4. Avoid nominalization (i.e. using the noun form of a verb). Better to say it directly. Nominalization is also very common in report/bureaucratic writing.

   e.g. Instead of: FAO implemented this project for the promotion of rural employment opportunities.

   Try: FAO implemented this project to promote rural employment opportunities.

5. When possible, avoid very institutional words (e.g. framework, synergy, governance, cross-sectoral). Web writing is supposed to appeal to a broad audience. These words are not really used in everyday, non-institutional writing.

6. Don’t distract the reader with too many unnecessary details or numbers. Each sentence should serve one main purpose. If the details are very important to a story, don’t try to fit them all into one thought. They should have their own sentence and should support the overall story. Remember: this is not a report where all inputs need to be stated!

   e.g. Instead of: From mid-march 2015 until the end of February 2017, FAO’s World Bank-funded technical cooperation project of 15 people (5 women and 10 men) assisted 825 people (400 men, 425 women of which 200 were under the age of 18) to restart their fishing livelihoods by providing them with 827 high-quality nets that weighed a total of 570kg.

   Try: From March 2015 to February 2017, FAO’s technical cooperation project assisted 825 people to restart their fishing livelihoods by providing them with high-quality nets.

7. However, don’t be vague. You shouldn’t leave a reader wondering, why?

   e.g. Shanta’s life changed because of this new knowledge.

   Make sure that a sentence like this has context. Who is Shanta? What new knowledge? How did it change her life?

8. Avoid redundancy. You don’t need to say the same thing twice in one sentence.

   e.g. Each year, FAO issues its flagship State of Food & Agriculture yearly report.
e.g. The three young participants in the programme made up this youth group.

9. Be concise. If the word does not serve a purpose in the sentence, cut it out. It makes text easier to read and makes the words that are there more powerful.

  e.g. John, Paul and Mark are just three of the young participants who make up the group of 75 men and women, dubbed the “rural champions” who were selected to become agents of change in their communities.

10. When possible, show don’t tell. It is always best to describe how something was achieved, not just the fact that it was achieved.

  e.g. Instead of: FAO helped 500 people to improve their incomes in the fisheries sector.

  Try: By distributing cold boxes and training people in using state-of-the-art nets, FAO has helped 500 people increase their incomes from fishing.

11. Explain technical terms or words very specific to your field of expertise. Don’t assume that your readers will know what they mean.

  e.g. Vermi-composting, the practice of using worms to decompose organic waste, is a very effective technique in conditioning soils.

12. Remember: Edit your work. The rule of thumb is to spend more time on editing than writing. And by editing your own work, you will catch some of these habits and learn to recognize them easily.

13. Check other resources

  o For the official spelling of country names, refer to the Names Of Countries (NOCs) database.

  o For other information such as what to capitalize, what spelling to use, how to write out numbers etc., refer to FAO’s Style Guide.

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