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# Anti-racist storytelling principles



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# A brief history of storytelling

## From oral tradition to the written word

When writing first appeared around 3200 BCE in Mesopotamia, and independently in other parts of the world storytelling entered a new phase. Initially—it was mainly used for keeping records and managing trade or taxes. Writing was closely linked to power and authority.

Over time, storytelling and writing came together, giving rise to the idea of the “author” as an individual creator. In many cultures, storytelling was—and still is—a collective and often anonymous tradition. But in Europe, with the rise of copyright laws in the 18th century, authorship became linked with ownership and legal authority over stories.

Human beings have always been storytellers. When spoken language first developed in prehistoric times, stories were shared within communities. These early stories were likely about survival, heroic deeds, and how the world came to be. They helped pass on knowledge across generations. Prehistoric cave paintings found around the world offer glimpses into these early narratives, depicting scenes of hunting, animals, and daily life. These images gave a lasting, visual form to the stories people told.

## Colonialism and the extraction of stories

This shift in power became especially clear in the 19th century with the rise of anthropology and ethnography. Colonial administrators, missionaries, and Western researchers often relied on “native informants” to gather cultural knowledge. These people played crucial roles in creating knowledge and preserving their culture and traditions but were rarely credited as co-authors or experts.

## Storytelling as resistance

In colonized and postcolonial contexts, storytelling has long served as a crucial tool for marginalized communities to reclaim their narratives, resist dominant ideologies, and preserve cultural identity. In many societies storytelling remains a collective and lived practice – a means of sharing history, memory, resistance, and identity across generations.

## Storytelling today

Today, storytelling remains a vital tool for asserting identity, preserving memory, and resisting injustice. It is also a space where inequality is reproduced—especially when stories are told about communities without their participation or consent.

In global development, media, and humanitarian work, too many narratives continue to reflect extractive practices that erase context, simplify complex lives, and strip people of agency.

Recognizing this means acknowledging that storytelling is never neutral. It is shaped by language, perspective, and purpose—and it has real consequences. That is why anti-racist and community-rooted storytelling is essential: not just as a communication practice, but as a commitment to justice.





# ActionAid's role in storytelling

Storytelling is not neutral – it can reinforce inequality or help dismantle it. As editors, curators, and publishers of stories, our role is not merely to transmit narratives but to do so with integrity, sensitivity, and purpose.

We are committed to finding a common purpose between the stories that communities wish to tell and the values that define who we are. This includes stories of resistance, resilience, dignity, and rights. However, we do this while being conscious of the complexities within communities — acknowledging the divisions of gender, religion, ethnicity, language, caste, and other systems of oppression that often fragment collectives.

We continue to use the word “community”, not as a static or homogenous term, but in anticipation of the solidarity and alliances that can emerge through collective action and rights assertion. ActionAid's interventions seek to encourage community-based organisations and social movements we work with to build solidarity structures and alliances amongst all oppressed and exploited groups and sections. Thus, while remaining active listeners to all the stories we hear and witness, we foreground those that resonate with our shared values.

Whether we work in fundraising, policy, communications, digital media, or human resources, we are all storytellers. Each of us holds the power to shape how the world is understood. Every story we share, whether in the form of a campaign, an email, an appeal, or a social media post, contributes to broader narratives about people, communities, and global realities.

The stories we create — through words, images, video, and personal testimony — deeply impact how supporters, the public or decision makers understand people, places, and experiences. They determine who is seen as powerful, who is viewed as capable, and who is considered worthy of empathy.

But too often, especially in global media, humanitarian fundraising, and development work, storytelling has simplified complex lives into “single stories,” flattened cultures into clichés, and portrayed communities through the lens of pity rather than partnership. These narratives often centre the outsider's perspective: the foreign photographer, the journalist, the fundraising agency. They lack nuance or context and can reinforce harmful stereotypes and further marginalise the very people whose lives they claim to highlight.

As storytellers, we hold a shared responsibility to build narratives rooted in respect, equity and partnership — and to remain accountable for the impact of the stories we share.



# ActionAid's principles of anti-racist storytelling

Anti-racist storytelling shatters harmful stereotypes by centring the voices, agency, and experiences of the people whose stories are being told.

Our principles are the fundamental beliefs that guide our behaviour. They provide direction and the underlying foundation for how we work. They are rooted in our feminist practise of dismantling bias, sharing power and collective care.

1. We see people as storytellers, not subjects
2. We value community-based expertise
3. We centre lived experience, not imposed narratives
4. We challenge single stories
5. We disrupt dominant narratives
6. We reject emotive, child-centred imagery
7. We connect the personal to the systemic
8. We root stories in the past and present
9. We are accountable to communities and contributors
10. We amplify collective work



# 1

## We see people as storytellers, not subjects

We insist that those whose lives are being represented hold the authorship and authority over how their stories are told, shaping the tone, setting, and imagery. Authorship always belongs to the contributor.





## We value community-based expertise

We collaborate with storytellers, photographers, and creators who share the culture, language and history of the communities they represent—and who understand the context of their lives. This ensures stories are told with integrity and genuine connection.

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# 3

## We centre lived experience, not imposed narratives

Our approach centres the voices, agency, and experiences of the people whose stories are being told. We amplify voices that have been historically silenced or ignored, shaped by their histories, cultures and identities.



## We challenge single stories

People's lives are complex and multifaceted – there is never just one story. We embrace intersectionality to reflect the full, nuanced reality of human experience, including the interconnected experiences of race, gender, class and more.

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# 5

## We disrupt dominant narratives

We use our platforms to challenge narratives rooted in colonial and extractive worldviews that define people by their suffering, erase cultural identity and strip communities of their humanity. We uplift stories of resistance, resilience, and collective action, focusing on agency, dignity, and joy.





# 6

## We reject emotive, child-centred imagery

Showing children alone—especially in distress and without the presence of parents, siblings or friends—reduces them to symbols of suffering. We reject this exploitative practice and do not use images of children to provoke pity or manipulate the emotions of our audiences.



# 7

## We connect the personal to the systemic

Personal experiences and challenges are never isolated—they are shaped by broader systems such as colonialism, patriarchy, and capitalism. By making these connections visible, we challenge narratives that place blame on individuals and encourage critical reflection on the structural forces that shape our world.



# 8

## We root stories in the past and present

Our stories connect who we are with how we've changed over time. The way we talk about the past shapes how we see ourselves today, and as our values and lives change, our spoken, written and visual stories evolve too helping to shape the world around us.



# 9

## We are accountable to communities and contributors

Communities are not mere backdrops, nor are their stories commodities. We engage with contributors throughout the entire story-gathering process—obtaining informed consent, returning content for review, seeking feedback, and ensuring that their representation faithfully reflects their intentions, voices, and lived experiences.





# 10

## We amplify collective work

Our storytelling doesn't centre our own voices. It uplifts the leadership of women's rights organisations, youth-led organisations and social movements. Their work and voices are at the heart of all we share.



# How we work



In a racist society, it's not enough not to be racist, you have to be anti-racist.

**Angela Davis**

Organisational culture comes from what we practise every day. Our practise leads to our culture. That is why it's imperative to practise anti-racism with intention.

Anti-racism requires a conscious decision to pursue it as a goal and way of being. This opens the door to growth and self-awareness.

To be anti-racist means that you may have to sit with discomfort and prioritise courage, compassion, vulnerability and learning over comfort. To be an ally is to take on this struggle as if it is your own.

## As a starting point, please practise the following in your work:

- Stay rooted in our purpose and mission, be respectful, self-aware, and embrace our feminist leadership principles.
- Respect feedback from colleagues working within their own national and local contexts. Colleagues have the right to say 'no' to requests from other countries which make them uncomfortable, without fear of funding being withdrawn.
- Prioritise and protect the interest and well-being of contributors, above the needs of donors or visitors from other countries.
- Use expertise, particularly from women and marginalised groups, drawn from your own national context. Hire photographers and videographers who have shared history, culture and language with contributors.
- Value culture, knowledge and expertise that is not rooted in the Western world.
- Move beyond thinking of storytelling as a communication tool — and embrace it as a practice of solidarity, justice, and co-resistance.

## Safeguarding and informed consent

- We are committed to the safety and dignity of all contributors through rigorous safeguarding and consent processes:
- Identifying information about children and adults at risk is removed or anonymised.
- All data, including images, videos, and testimony, is stored securely in a password-protected system.
- Content is only shared via our internal Stories Hub, where risk is reviewed before wider dissemination.
- Informed consent is essential. It must be ongoing, transparent, and revocable at any time. Content without clear consent will not be used. Individuals must understand their rights, including the right to withdraw consent at any time, without consequence.





# Our understanding of racism

Racism is a structural force that is sustained through political systems and institutions. As UNESCO's Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice states that 'Racism includes racist ideologies, prejudiced attitudes, structural arrangements and institutional practices resulting in racial inequality'.

'Race' is not a valid biological entity. This means that any claim that humans can be sub-divided into 'races' has no foundation in fact. And yet, the idea is uncritically accepted as reality by many. Social and political processes create and circulate the false idea that 'race' is real. Indeed, there is a long history of categorizing people into different groups, a process that can create 'racial' divisions and hierarchies within populations.

European colonialism has been powerful in the invention of racial hierarchies that designate the idea of 'white' as superior. Such forces of racialization have been actively used to dispossess people, occupy lands, extract and control resources, and devalue lives, languages and cultures. Such racial hierarchies endure today and can be understood as the structural basis for racism against 'non-white' people the world over.

We recognise that racism takes different forms in different contexts. The concept of 'racialization' has been put forward to capture the different social and political processes through which the idea of racial difference – and therefore the workings of racism – take on meaning.

This extract was taken from the SETA PROJECT:  
"Towards a global framework for anti-racist education." <https://projetoseta.org.br/en/blog-en/>

For instance, racialization can occur when distinctions and hierarchies are made not only in relation to how people look (skin colour, facial features, etc.), but also in terms of things like religion, cultural practices, and language. This means that discrimination such as Islamophobia, casteism, anti-Blackness, xenophobia, anti-Indigeneity, and anti-Semitism, for example, are all forms of racism.

There will often be different forms of racism that interact with each other in any given context. This is because there are often multiple kinds of structural forces at play: ethnonationalism, Indigenous dispossession, neocolonialism, anti-Black violence, and so on. For example, the structures of ethnonationalism can and do create discrimination against minority groups within a country whose population as a whole has also been oppressed through European colonialism, as can be seen across Africa, Latin America and Asia. In Brazil, for instance, there is systematic discrimination against Indigenous and Black populations.

Furthermore, racism does not act alone. It intersects with other systems of domination – classism, patriarchy, ableism, and so on. Discrimination thrives in an environment where people are materially and physically insecure. The fight against racial discrimination is therefore also a fight for solidarity against poverty, alienation and inequality.

## A note on casteism

Caste in South Asia functions as a hierarchical system of social stratification that closely parallels racism in its exclusionary and discriminatory practices. Like racism, caste operates through birth-based segregation, economic oppression, and systemic violence, enforcing endogamy and restricting access to resources for marginalized groups.

While it has roots in ancient philosophical texts, caste has been deeply embedded in the social fabric of the subcontinent for over two thousand years, cutting across religious boundaries. The 1930 Census conducted by the British colonial government in India enumerated caste through self-declaration and revealed that caste was reported by well over 80% of Muslims, by Sikhs and to a lesser extent by Christians.

Despite legal bans, there is significant evidence of the continuing relevance of caste values, structures and practices across all South Asian countries, and among the global South Asian diaspora.



# The global storytelling team

The global team are a diverse and passionate group of people who are committed to pioneering anti-racist storytelling across their work and the wider federation.

We know that to be anti-racist takes consistent willpower and intention and can be challenging on a personal and professional level, particularly when working to dismantle policies or practises.

Many of the team have lived experience of racism and of the many challenges involved in carrying out this work at a national level.



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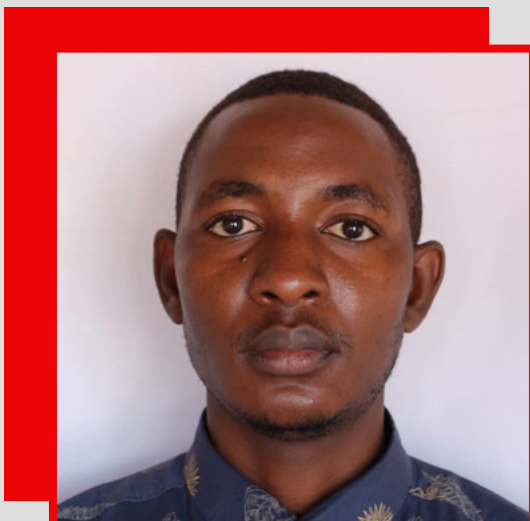
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