

How to Engage with Media Persons and Communicators?

A Primer for Civil Society Organizations

Initiative of Centre for Strategic Communication (Vikas Samvad)



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About Vikas Samvad

Vikas Samvad is a practising Social Development (Nutrition Agriculture and Food Security), Capacity Building, Research & Documentation and Communication Organisation.

It seeks to provide support to and network with the Civil Society Organisations for Storytelling and Strategic Communication. The intent is to widen the civic space towards creating stronger social and public good.

Self learning and action manuals are prepared under the agis of Strategic Communication Centre (Vikas Samvad) capacitation programme for civil society organizations.

If any organization/group feels the requirement of capacity building support, please reach out to us at office@vssmp.org /0755 4252789

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The Context

- ✿ Civil Society Organisations [CSOs] do not create issues or agenda by themselves. Rather, they strive to present the agenda/issues in the right perspective through their experiences, outlook and analysis with a motive to bring aspired constructive change. This work is of crucial assistance to the communicators because the outlook and experience of the CSOs are different and comparatively more socially realistic than those of the state or other persuasive institutions.
- ✿ The objective of this handbook/primer is to encourage the representatives/functionaries of the CSOs to undertake regular dialogues with communicators and media organisations and to inform them about some basic preparations for this communication.
- ✿ As CSOs, they are working for social change and betterment in the society. While fulfilling this role, on one hand we get to know the problems faced by the people and on the other we also become aware of the reality of implementation of the government schemes and programmes.
- ✿ CSOs also become aware as to how the neglected sections of society manage their lives in the situation of poverty and privation. And they also become the witness to several examples of strong survival instincts among people.
- ✿ As social activists, they are always in the process of learning. If we have indeed understood the society, then we would know that no behaviour, theory or experience is permanent. They keep on changing. Now, it is also clear that if the society can investigate into the reasons of its problems, then it can also find solutions to them.
- ✿ Truly, CSOs are very close to the reality of the society and to make the government and other institutions aware of those realities, it is very important that we engage strongly with the media-communicators.
- ✿ Both the CSOs and the media fulfil the responsibility of safeguarding the democratic and civic values. Thus, to conserve the space for civic initiative and civic values, it is of crucial importance that these two units get deeply connected with each other.

Understanding Media Persons and Communicators?

- ✿ It is very important to expand the discussion and dialogue on whatever we get to know, learn and understand as civic society organisations. For this discussion and dialogue, the most important channel is the media.
- ✿ Media includes Newspapers, Magazines, Television Channels, YouTube Channels, Websites, Portals and so on.
- ✿ If we further expand, then social media can also be included in the list. But in the context of mass communication, we would focus on the first part of the media system.
- ✿ No doubt, the media and the CSOs help each other in the processes of social change and are linked to each other in that context.
- ✿ People working for the media, whom we would refer to as the Communicators include journalists, writers and analysts, are always on the lookout for new information, knowledge and stories related to the society. This is their main work. Do remember that the work of the media is to bring the stories, analysis and debates related to all aspects of the society before the government, researchers and different sections of the society.
- ✿ It is not that these communicators just present a story one day and their work is over. They need new stories, new subjects and new aspects to a subject every day and every hour. It is a very difficult work. If CSOs forge a strong relationship with the communicators and media workers, then the social topics can get a big base and a strong platform.

Why Is It Necessary to Engage with Media Persons & Communicators?

- ☀ This is necessary so that CSOs could present the ground reality of communities/society before the larger society.
- ☀ To inform the government, academic experts, middle class, people's representatives and policy makers and make them aware about the experiences and lessons of working with the society.
- ☀ To build confidence that problems can be solved collectively.
- ☀ Also, it is necessary to develop the understanding of larger society towards the role of CSOs. It is only with candid relation with media-communicators that CSOs can build real outlook/script of their own role and place the same before the larger society.

Basic Preparations

- ✿ As CSOs, we say that we are committed to the betterment and change in the society. For this, it is very important that we are well informed and educated about our issues/subjects.
- ✿ When you discuss a subject with the media, you should know what different questions might be asked of you; what evidence could be sought. We should be well prepared in advance for this.
- ✿ To build and sustain credible relations with the communicators/media, we must imbibe within the members of the organisation the habit to study and to update information and knowledge. Almost every day new information, research and policies are unfolding across the issues/subjects we are working on. Old information might not always be fully helpful.
- ✿ We should be ready with updated information on schemes, Acts, budget and ground situation pertaining to our subject of work and keep updating it regularly.
- ✿ There should be regular discussion on various aspects and dimensions of the policies and the ground situation of our subject with the team, so that all team members remain updated on the subject.
- ✿ For example, if a communicator/media worker asks you – ‘Are the Anganwadi Centres functioning regularly?’ ‘Is nutritious food being served regularly there?’ ‘In the current drought situation, what is the condition of nutrition and health of the children?’ ‘Do you have a few examples and stories to share?’ If we are in a position to render informed answers to these and such queries immediately or well in time, it means that we are ready to work with the media effectively.
- ✿ We should also have database of statistics/information/facts related to our work subject and these should be regularly updated too.
- ✿ It is equally important to refine the writing skills and communication related competencies of the team members.

Be Clear About Objectives, Targets and Values!

- ☀ CSOs play their role with a particular objective and pursue some basic values.
- ☀ While engaging with the media, it is very important that the organisations demonstrate these values and objectives/targets /dreams with extreme clarity.
- ☀ Never should any message be shared without proper background and context.

Know the Subject and Its Different Dimensions?

Know the scientific definitions related to your subject

Media representatives/communicators always want to understand the definition/basic concept of a subject. Thus, we should know all the correct words and concepts related to our subject. In our engagement with the communicators/media, we have to repeatedly clarify the definitions and concepts related to our subject. Basically, only the definitions that are scientific and based on theoretical outlook should be used in such communications.

Know the dimensions related to the subject

Whether we are working on the right to education for children, for gender equality, eradication of malnutrition and hunger or solutions to problems related to agriculture – every subject has four dimensions – social, political, economic and policy-based. The understanding of the organisation and its members on these four dimensions should be very clear.

Nature of the Media Persons/Communicators

- ☀ To connect properly with media and communicators, it is important that we have knowledge about their work, working style and the attitude/character of the organisations. In the media set-up, the person looking for and writing news (reporter) is different, the sub-editor who basically edits the news is different and what space and placement of the news will take is decided by another person (news editor/editor).
- ☀ They work to understand and present Answers, so they will come to you with Questions. Be prepared with multidimensional understanding and facts about your subject.
- ☀ In the daily newspapers, the communicators/journalists have to submit their news every day. Normally, they gather the facts and information for the news during daytime and write/compose their news/story in evening hours. In such situations, it is often possible that they might seek some clarification or extra information late in the evening. It is thus important that you should have the latest information/data related to your subject at hand .
- ☀ When we work with the media-communicators on issues, we have to remember that they require very clear and factual information. Too expansive details are of no use to them; thus, it is important to communicate the points with clarity and precision.
- ☀ Even if there is no issue to share with them, it is always advisable to be in regular social touch with the media representatives. If you see a good piece of news by them, you should appreciate it. This will make the media-communicators feel that the news/material of people's concern is indeed read.
- ☀ The news/stories published by the media hold accountability as per different laws of the country. It is therefore important to remember and ensure that as civil society members, we do not communicate any wrong information.

The Basic Formula

Clarity: Whatever we want to say or convey – it should be very clear. The meaning of our statements/details should be very clear. For this, internal communication of the organisation is very important.

Five Ws and One H

To have effective engagement with communicators and media, the social workers also have to ready with 'Five Ws and One H'

1. **What?** – What is the topic/issue/problem (Topic/Subject)
2. **Why?** – Why is it so? Why did this happen? (Reason)
3. **Where?** - Where did this happen? (Place/Geography)
4. **Who?** - With whom did this happen? Who/what impacts this? (Group)
5. **When?** - When did this happen? (Timeline)
6. **How?** - How did this happen? (Process)

After having clear understanding on these 6 elements, it is important to ask – SO WHAT?

We should keep verifying our subjects on these six points.

Who is at the Centre of Engagement with Media-communicators?

When we engage on some topic with the media-communicators, it should be very clear as to who we are talking about? Is it the viewpoint of the organisation/social worker or it is about the community/society? When we are speaking about the community, we should also have evidence of what we are saying.

What Is the Objective of Engaging with the Media-communicators?

While working as a civil society organisation, we should not be prioritising our own identity or publicity. The community and its issues should always have the precedence. When there is a discussion/report on a change or an initiative, the organisation or the social worker would be naturally mentioned. But the appearance of the name of organisation/social worker certainly should not be the biggest expectation.

Moving Ahead of Programmes/Events

It is a tendency of the Civil Society Organisations to invite the media representatives only when they are organising some workshop or convention. They define media advocacy as the publishing of the news of these events. But, in reality, the engagement of the Civil Society Organisations with the media should be beyond this pattern. When the media is invited only intermittently on occasion of an event, it gives rise to questions on the credibility of the organisation that it is only limited to organising events. It is always better to connect the media-communicators with the process, planning and review of an initiative. It is not imperative that one should meet media representatives only when there is an issue or problem to discuss.

Information Pack on Subject/Issue

Prepare an information pack on the subject of your work. This should include the topic, the problem, the solution, its impact; the facts and figures related to the topic; the past and present policies/plans related to the topic, community-level case studies and opinion/views of representatives of the community. This information pack should be renewed once every two or three months.

Do we know what we want to convey?

When we connect with the media, we should repeatedly make it clear as to what we want to convey. Do we want to talk about a problem, or we want to share details of an achievement? Can we tell the gist of our story in a sentence?

Photographs and Videos

It is an established fact that photographs and videos can relate with any story more effectively. CSOs should make use of these as much as possible while presenting their subjects/stories. It is also important to build the capacity of team members regarding photo and video documentation.

Be with Facts, Truth and Core Values

It is a fundamental thing to be True, Factual and Value- based. Never try to extrapolate any situation or the problem. If you have strong evidences, they will speak by themselves. CSOs must keep facts at the center of their action and messaging.

The Strategy

- ☀ As a civil society organisation, on one hand we aim for change in social behaviour and on the other we also expect a positive change in the policies and attitude of the government. Therefore, it is crucial that we present the aims and objectives of our organisation very clearly. None of our agenda should be hidden. Media representatives-communicators have the ability to sniff out such hidden agenda. Transparency is the key!
- ☀ When we want to develop a sustainable and credible relation with media or communicators, then we have to be very transparent about the functioning, resources and work style of the organisation. If someone questions about the organisation, its work or resources, the query should be answered in a positive manner.
- ☀ If we give some information to media representatives/communicators, it does not mean that it will be immediately used. We should not create pressure in this regard.
- ☀ To establish what we are saying/sharing, we should have facts/figures and credible information. If we are talking about the community, quoting a statement/version of a representative/member of the community would be very useful.
- ☀ It is important to identify different aspects and dimensions of our subject, so that we do not end up repeating the same things again and again. It is important to know and understand the changes and the newer situations from new viewpoints.

The Process

- ☀ To know and keep knowing the subject in-depth. Regular discussion within the team of the organisation with respect to the various dimensions and newer aspects of the subject needs to be kept up.
- ☀ To portray the facts, figures, information and community-level stories on the subject in a proper way.
- ☀ To practice conveying our points in brief and in a clear manner. Try to find out whether you can convey your points in five minutes and five pages or one minute and one page instead of 10 minutes and 10 pages. This is a matter of iterative practice.
- ☀ To have an updated contact list of the local media representative in the organisation. Similarly, an updated contact list of the state and national level communicators and media representatives should be handily available.
- ☀ There should be consistent efforts for communication with the media and the capacity building needed for this.

Ways for Effective Engagement with the Media

- ✿ Regularly preparing study reports on the work subject/issue and releasing them.
- ✿ Capacity building of organisation members in news, feature, article, blog writing as well as in photography and videography.
- ✿ Publishing field experiences and articles/stories based on outcome of the work on the website of the organisation.
- ✿ Constantly sharing activities, stories and outcomes of the organisations on social media.
- ✿ Preparing fact sheets on the work done and releasing them periodically.
- ✿ Continuity is crucial. Just don't wait for an event to initiate communication. Holding regular discussion sessions with media representatives and writers.