



Ethical content gathering guidelines

HelpAge International

HelpAge

International

Contents

1. Introduction	3
2. Values and principles	3
3. Informed consent	3
Exceptions	4
4. Ethical storytelling	5
Avoiding the “saviour narrative”	6
Common stereotypes to avoid	6
Sexual and gender-based violence	7
Depicting deceased persons	7
Compensation and reimbursement	7
5. Ethical use of content	8
Using HelpAge’s content	8
Using third-party content	8
6. Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct	8
Best practice - ICRC Code of Conduct	9
Annex	9
Useful links	9

1. Introduction

At HelpAge International, we are committed to gathering and sharing content in a way that respects the dignity, rights, and voices of older people. These guidelines ensure that all staff, volunteers, partners, and third-party content creators follow responsible and respectful practices when collecting and using stories, photos, and videos.

By adhering to these principles, we promote accurate representation, avoid harmful stereotypes, and prioritise the dignity and respect of those we work with.

2. Values and principles

These guidelines are based on key values and ethical principles that ensure responsible and respectful content gathering:

- **Dignity and respect** – Older people must be portrayed with dignity, recognising their value and contributions to society.
- **Empowerment** – Content should highlight older people as active participants and contributors, not just as recipients of aid. Wherever possible, we should share back how their stories are used, helping them feel heard, valued, and part of the process.
- **Accountability and transparency** – We are responsible for how we collect and use content, ensuring honesty and clarity in our processes. This includes letting people know how their stories, quotes, or images are used and sharing the outcomes when appropriate.
- **Do no harm** – The wellbeing and safety of older people must always come first, avoiding any risk of harm or exploitation.
- **Informed consent** – Consent must be freely given through meaningful dialogue, with participants fully understanding how their stories and images will be used.
- **Accuracy and context** – Content must be truthful and free from misrepresentation or distortion.
- **Avoiding stereotypes** – Older people should not be depicted through negative stereotypes; instead, their diversity, resilience, and contributions should be highlighted.
- **Local content gatherers** – We prioritise local content gatherers and creators. This helps support authentic representation, build local capacity, and promote fairer content practices.

By following these principles, we ensure that older people's voices are represented ethically and respectfully in all our communications.

3. Informed consent

Informed consent is a fundamental part of ethical content gathering. It ensures that older people or any other contributors fully understand their participation and the use of their content. The process should be transparent, respectful, and centred on the individual's autonomy.

- **Meaningful dialogue** – Consent should be obtained through genuine, two-way communication, where older people are encouraged to ask questions and express any concerns.
- **Clear explanation** – The purpose of gathering the content, how it will be used, and who will see it should be clearly explained in simple, accessible language.
- **Voluntary participation** – Participation must be freely chosen, with no pressure or coercion. Older people should feel comfortable declining or withdrawing at any point without fear of negative consequences.
- **Right to withdraw** – Participants must be informed that they can withdraw their consent at any time, even after content has been gathered.
- **Multiple opportunities to decline** – Ensure that older people have multiple opportunities to express any concerns or withdraw from participation during the process.

- **Language and accessibility** – Communication should be in a language and format that the older person understands. Interpreters or support should be provided if needed.
- **Evidence of consent** – Consent should be documented through signed forms, recorded verbal consent, or consent apps.
- **Consent for persons in the care of others** – Consent must be obtained from their carer and, when appropriate, directly from the individual in a suitable manner.
- **Consent for children** – Should children feature in any of the content – e.g. for an intergenerational shoot - consent must be obtained from a parent or carer and, when appropriate, directly from the child in an age-appropriate manner.

This process ensures that people are fully informed, empowered to make decisions, and protected throughout the content gathering process.

HelpAge has **consent forms** available in multiple languages to facilitate the process.

Exceptions

In urgent or emergency situations - such as a natural disaster or armed conflict - there may be no safe or practical way to obtain consent amid chaos or immediate danger. The urgency of the crisis leaves no time for consent, and individuals may be unable to engage due to distress or injury. However, capturing the situation remains crucial due to **overriding public interest** in raising awareness and mobilising support. To uphold ethical principles, ensure content is not exploitative and individuals are portrayed with dignity and in the context. If possible, seek retrospective consent if a story is later used.

In group settings or public spaces, it may not always be possible to obtain individual consent. If that is not achievable, explain to the group that you will be taking photos or filming and why. Then ask anyone who objects to being photographed or recorded to let you know.

When standard consent procedures are not possible, follow this order of preference:

- **Preferred:** Signed consent forms
- **Alternative:** Verbal consent captured on video or audio
- **If not possible:** Clearly document why consent could not be obtained.



Even in humanitarian crises, images of older people should convey dignity. Credit: Agora / HelpAge International

4. Ethical storytelling

Content gathering must prioritise the dignity and wellbeing of older people, ensuring their stories are represented respectfully and authentically. It's essential to portray older people in a way that highlights their agency and strength, avoiding harmful stereotypes.

- **Accurate representation** – Ensure that content accurately reflects the truth and context of older people's stories, directly quoting their own words where possible.
- **Avoiding stereotypes** – Content should authentically portray older people's lived experiences, highlighting their resilience, contributions, and diversity, without ignoring the challenges they face or portraying them as passive recipients of aid.
- **Diversity** – Aim to show a range of ages among older people, and maintain gender balance to reflect the diversity of experiences.
- **Addressing power imbalances** – Be mindful of the power dynamics at play during content gathering and ensure older people are depicted as empowered agents of change.
- **Image selection** – Choose images that truthfully reflect the stories being told, avoiding unrelated or composite images that could mislead.
- **Captions and privacy** – Be cautious about disclosing identifying information, especially in sensitive contexts, to protect older people's privacy. Names and locations can be anonymised when necessary.
- **Digital manipulation** – Do not alter images in ways that could change or misrepresent their original meaning or context.

This approach ensures that older people's voices are honoured, their dignity maintained, and their stories presented with integrity.



We should focus on older people's personality and agency, not just their circumstances. Credit: Haitham Matouk / HelpAge International

Avoiding the “saviour narrative”

The “saviour narrative” is a broad concept that can appear in content when older people are depicted as helpless or dependent on others for basic needs, often presented through visuals of volunteers or aid workers offering assistance. This narrative can undermine the agency of older people, positioning them as passive recipients of development or humanitarian aid rather than active participants in shaping their own lives and communities.

We encourage images that show HelpAge staff actively supporting older people, as these are essential in highlighting our work and impact. However, we must avoid content that portrays older people as mere objects of charity or care. Content should elevate the voices of older people, showing them as equal individuals, rather than simply receiving aid from others.



When receiving humanitarian aid, older people should be portrayed as equals. Credit: Usman Ghani / HelpAge International

Common stereotypes to avoid

1. **The helpless and dependent** – Portraying older people as inherently weak, incapable, and fully dependent on others, rather than acknowledging their strengths, agency and capacity to contribute.
2. **The passive aid recipient** – Showing an older person only as someone receiving charity. This reinforces dependence and shifts focus onto the helper rather than the older person.
3. **The hands close-up** – Using images of older people’s hands instead of full portraits, reduces older people to a symbol of ageing rather than showing them as whole individuals. The image can reinforce stereotypes of passivity, vulnerability or dependency and focus on ageing as physical decline.
4. **The wise and all-knowing elder** – Presenting older people as universally wise or noble, which can be just as limiting as negative stereotypes by denying them complexity.
5. **The ageless overachiever** – Showing older people doing extreme activities (e.g., bungee jumping or skydiving) to highlight that they’re “still young at heart” can reinforce unrealistic expectations. This implies that older people must perform exceptional physical feats to have value or challenge ageing norms, rather than respecting and celebrating the diversity of realistic, everyday experiences of ageing.

6. **The eternal grandparent** – Defining older people exclusively by their role as grandparents overlooks the fact that not all older people have grandchildren, and reduces their diverse identities, ambitions, and contributions solely to family caregiving roles. This stereotype ignores the rich variety of older people's lives, experiences, and relationships beyond family contexts.
7. **The tech-averse** – Portraying older people as universally uncomfortable or incompetent with technology can perpetuate ageist assumptions, ignoring the wide range of digital skills and engagement among older people.
8. **The lonely and isolated** – Depicting older people as inherently isolated or lonely fails to acknowledge the variety of social interactions, networks, and meaningful relationships many older people maintain.

Sexual and gender-based violence

Sexual and gender-based violence is a deeply sensitive issue, and our approach to content gathering must prioritise the safety and dignity of those affected. When documenting experiences, the well-being of survivors must come first.

- Ensure all questions are respectful, free from judgement, and culturally appropriate.
- Survivors should have full control over their participation and must be able to pause or stop at any time.
- If an interview causes distress, be prepared to pause, stop, or signpost to mental health support if necessary.
- Children who are survivors of sexual violence, children born from sexual violence, and individuals accused of sexual violence or exploitation must never be identifiable in HelpAge communications.
- If a survivor of sexual and gender-based violence is being interviewed but does not want to be photographed, work with them to explore other ways they could be portrayed – e.g. taking a photograph from behind or at a distance. If they are still reluctant, then respect their wishes.

Before gathering content on this topic, always seek guidance from relevant colleagues, such as a Safeguarding Adviser or a Project Officer who has been working with the survivor. In some cases, a trusted community member, such as a social worker or advocate, may also provide support, provided they have the survivor's trust and understand safeguarding principles.

Depicting deceased persons

HelpAge is committed to treating deceased persons and their loved ones with dignity and respect. Images or videos showing human remains should be avoided in all external communications. If discussing forensic activities, these should be represented without showing human remains – for example, through audiovisual material on training or repatriation events.

Compensation and reimbursement

HelpAge does not typically pay individuals or communities for participating in content gathering. However, we recognise the need to manage expectations transparently. Contributors may ask how they or their community might benefit, and content gatherers should be prepared to respond honestly.

Refreshments can be offered as a courtesy, particularly during long interviews or when gathering content in hot or remote locations.

If a contributor's time commitment exceeds half a day, compensation on a '**loss of income**' basis can be considered. This should be:

- Agreed with local HelpAge staff and partners.
- Fair, discreet, and culturally appropriate.
- Based on typical daily earnings.

In some cases, a **donation** to a community initiative can be more suitable and should be planned in advance. For example, providing rice or other culturally appropriate food items may be appropriate and valued by contributors and their communities.

5. Ethical use of content

Using HelpAge's content

HelpAge has a comprehensive **content library** containing images, videos, and stories that align with our ethical storytelling principles.

When using content from this library:

- Do not take content out of its original context or use it in a way that changes its intended message.
- Do not alter quotes or visuals in a way that could misrepresent individuals or their stories.
- Adhere to any attribution and credit specified for each piece of content.

Where possible, prioritise using existing HelpAge content before sourcing third-party materials.

Using third-party content

HelpAge permits the use of third-party content, including images, videos, stories, and data, as long as it upholds our values.

Most photos on the internet are copyrighted and cannot be used freely or only under certain conditions. Secure permission unless the content is in the public domain or falls under fair use. Confirm that the provider has the right to share it.

When searching for non-HelpAge imagery, look for images on stock websites which offer photos under permissive licensing arrangements (such as Shutterstock).

Accurately credit sources and disclose any modifications. Verify information to prevent misinformation. Ensure quotes are correctly attributed and that individuals are not misrepresented by country or context.

6. Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct

HelpAge International's **Global Safeguarding Policy** and **Code of Conduct** ensure that our work upholds dignity, prevents harm, and aligns with ethical standards.

All content gatherers **must sign** the Safeguarding Policy and Code of Conduct before engaging in any activities.

Key principles include:

- A zero-tolerance approach to abuse and harm.
- Mandatory reporting of safeguarding concerns.
- A survivor-centred approach to case management.
- Adherence to international safeguarding standards.
- Embedding safeguarding in governance, recruitment, programming, partnerships, media, and data privacy.

Best practice - ICRC Code of Conduct

Our approach aligns with internationally recognised humanitarian principles, including the [ICRC Code of Conduct](#) for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief.

1. The humanitarian imperative comes first.
2. Aid is given regardless of the race, creed or nationality of the recipients and without adverse distinction of any kind.
3. Aid priorities are calculated on the basis of need alone.
4. Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint. We shall endeavour not to act as instruments of government foreign policy.
5. We shall respect culture and custom.
6. We shall attempt to build disaster response on local capacities.
7. Ways shall be found to involve programme beneficiaries in the management of relief aid.
8. Relief aid must strive to reduce future vulnerabilities to disaster as well as meeting basic needs.
9. We hold ourselves accountable to both those we seek to assist and to those from whom we accept resources.
10. In our information, publicity and advertising activities, we shall recognize disaster victims as dignified human beings, not hopeless objects.

Annex

Useful links

Key policies and resources to support ethical content gathering at HelpAge International.

HelpAge website:

- [Safeguarding Policy](#) - Outlines our commitment to protecting the dignity, rights, and safety of older people.
- [Code of Conduct](#) - Defines the ethical standards and responsibilities expected of all staff and partners when engaging with older people.

Additional resources (Available upon request if the content gatherer does not have direct access):

- [Case study and interviewing guidelines](#) - Best practices for collecting personal stories from older people.
- [Gathering content in an emergency](#) - Guidance on collecting content from older people during emergency responses.
- [Emergency interview questions](#) - A set of questions for gathering case studies during crises.
- [Consent forms](#) - Available in multiple languages.
- [HelpAge content library](#) - Our library for photos, videos, and case studies. Request an account to get access.

HelpAge International is a global network of organisations promoting the right of all older people to lead dignified, healthy and secure lives.

Ethical content gathering guidelines

Published by HelpAge International

PO Box 78840
London SE1P 6QR
United Kingdom

Tel +44 (0)20 7278 7778

info@helpage.org

www.helpage.org

Registered charity no. 288180



Written by Vitaliy Konovalov, with inputs from Susanna Flood and Jemma Stovell.

Generative AI (ChatGPT) was used to support the drafting and editing of this publication.

Front page photo by Ganesh Bista / HelpAge International

Copyright © HelpAge International 2025
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License,
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0>

Any parts of this publication may be reproduced without permission for non-profit and educational purposes. Please clearly credit HelpAge International and send us a copy or link.