

Comic Art:
targeting developed and developing communities/ the use of comics

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WHY COMICS?

The problem of communicating one's messages in an effective way has caused a lot of frustrations to NGO activists. How can people be informed about an issue at a low cost? What would be a good way to deal with sometimes quite sensitive issues? How can, sometimes very complicated new civic information, e.g. human rights, anti-corruption or multi-party elections, be simplified so that also ordinary people can benefit from the information?

These problems can, of course, be approached in many ways. One alternative is the use of comics, which I am going to speak about here. Obviously, in order to give desired results, these comics should be created locally. If comics are culturally incorrect they can easily convey wrong messages.

Comics are often seen as "something for children", and, of course, a big part of the mainstream comics sold today are just that. In this context, however, I am mainly concerned with the use of comics for getting across information to grown-up readers, especially in NGO work.

Comics, in a nutshell, are visual storytelling, where texts and effects are added to bring more meaning to the visual story. Comics can be compared with a film that stops at intervals and what we see in the panels (boxes) of the comics is a still image from the story. What is outside the picture and what has happened between two panels, the reader fills in himself, using his imagination.

DRAMA AND HUMOUR IN A LOCAL SETTING

With comics you can **dramatise** your message. This is the strongest reason for using comics as an information medium. With a dramatic beginning, every reader wants to know how the story ends. In information campaigns it is important that the drama and humour are in the forefront and the information or educational message will come from the interpretation of the story. Nobody likes to be told this is right - that is wrong, but everybody can make up his mind on an issue which has been presented in a drama. Do not underestimate your reader!

Comics attract readers! When people see comics, expectation builds up. Within a lot of text a single picture sticks out, but comics stick out even more. Comics are usually easy to read and interesting also for people with limited reading abilities.

If the comics are made by local artists and writers, the visual world is culturally correct and the meanings of the pictures and events in the story make sense to the reader. If comics from other cultures are used, the setting of the story can often confuse the reader, who cannot relate to the various characters and events in it. Therefore, it is important that the comics are thoroughly rooted in the target group's own surroundings and culture. This is best achieved by using **local creative talent**.

COST-EFFECTIVE AND SIMPLE

Comics give the NGOs inexpensive possibilities to reach people. They can be distributed easily in photocopies, low-tech black and white printing, posters, booklets etc. If the comics are attractive, papers and/or magazines can sometimes publish them free of charge.

Compared to educational videos and films, comics are wonderfully non-technical. Once they are printed and distributed they can be read and perused by the reader almost anytime and anywhere. Comics can be read slowly or fast, all according to the reader's own pace, and the reading is not confined to a specific time and place, as the viewing of a film or video. Although the films and videos might be very attractive, there is very little chance of reflection during viewing.

If you are making an information campaign with instructions, you can, with comics, be technically very specific as you can use both the picture and have supporting text.

GO FOR THE STORY!

The story is the central element in comics. If you have good-looking drawing but the story is not dramatic or has little meaning for the reader, then the whole thing boils down to just good-looking pictures. Drawing talent, albeit important, is not the most crucial factor. People are keen on good stories in a local setting with interesting characters. The drawing does not have to be perfect as you can see from many of the samples I will show.

Readers expect drama and humour from comics and this expectation should be met. People like good stories and humour makes life bearable. Ridicule, however, should be avoided and wittiness preferred.

Comics as a medium is non-aggressive. You can even deal with very sensitive issues, such as sex, love, death, etc., without being realistically as direct as you might be with photographs or videos. Because comics are drawn by hand, the human factor is very much present and the reader knows it is another human being who is behind the story.

TARGET GROUPS

You have to define your communication needs and your target groups very well. Is your target group familiar with the medium of comics? What level of literacy are you facing? Can you use local press free or perhaps negotiate a reasonable price for space? Can you reach your target group with a poster campaign? Is your message suited to become part of an interesting story? Can you fit in comics to support your other communication efforts?

COMICS POWER - the book "Comics with an attitude..."

Comics are very versatile and the medium becomes a strong tool for presenting ideas, issues and new facts.

Comics have a lot of communication power in development and education. When you have something to say, consider using comics! Our book "**Comics with an attitude...**" is meant to show you how this is done in practise. The Internet version of the book is available on the Finnish Foreign Ministry's (Dept. of International Development Cooperation) web-site:

<http://global.finland.fi> and it can also be obtained, free of charge, by organisations and individuals active with global development issues, by e-mailing the Department: kyotilaus@formin.fi

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