SHIFTING NARRATIVES

FROM AID TO AGENCY



SHIFTING THE POWER

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Comic Relief's Shifting the Power Comms Lab, facilitated and convened in partnership with Impact Works Associates.

Research and insights from Development Engagement Lab.

Funded and supported by Comic Relief, the Foreign Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), and H&S Davidson Trust.

With deep gratitude to the organisations who took part:

- ADD International
- Age International
- Christian Aid
- Comic Relief
- Plan International
- Save the Children
- WaterAid

Report design by Becky Pugh and illustrations by Damien Weighill.

SUPPORTED BY:

DEVELOPMENT ENGAGEMENT LAB

impact works associates

FUNDED BY:

COMIC RELIEF

UK International Development
Partnership | Progress | Prosperity

Reforming International Development

COMMS LAB PARTICIPANTS:

ADD International

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COMIC RELIEF

PLAN INTERNATIONAL
Until we are all equal

Save the Children

WaterAid

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FOREWORD BY SIR LENNY HENRY



Since Comic Relief started back in 1985, I've stood on stages, in fields, in studios and in boardrooms, asking the British public to care about people whose lives look very different from their own. And they have. Time and again, they've shown extraordinary generosity, warmth, and a genuine desire to help.

But over the years, I've also asked myself: are we giving them the full picture? The development sector has often reached for a familiar playbook: images of crisis, stories of need. A framing that, however well-intentioned, can miss the full humanity, skill and leadership of the communities we work alongside.

I think we underestimated the public. We assumed they needed a certain kind of story to feel moved. What this report suggests is that they are ready for something richer.

Seven organisations came together, took a genuine risk, and tested something different. They centred local voices, not just as subjects, but as participants with lived experience, shaping how stories are filmed, told and shared with the world. They told stories of capability, expertise and partnership, and trusted the British public to respond to something more complete, more honest, more human.

And the results? Community-led storytelling didn't just hold its own. In many cases, it outperformed. The British public, it turns out, is more open, curious and ready for this shift than many of us assumed.

I've spent a lot of time thinking about storytelling, in comedy, in drama, in everything I've done. Who tells the story matters. Who holds the camera, who edits, who decides what is seen, that matters too. When those closest to these experiences are not just heard but in control, something shifts. The story becomes more real. The connection deeper. The generosity remains, but not at the expense of dignity.

The communities at the heart of this work have always had something vital to say. This report is about what happens when we create the conditions for them to say it, and when we trust the British public to listen.

I believe they will. I believe they already are.

Read what follows with an open mind. There is a better way of telling stories, one grounded in participation, not portrayal, and it works. Because when we shift the narrative from aid to agency, everybody wins.

Sir Lenny Henry
Co-founder Comic Relief

INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS REPORT?

The *Shifting the Power (StP) Programme* is a ten-year partnership between Comic Relief and the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO), running from 2020 to 2030.

It aims to strengthen and sustain locally-led civil society organisations (CSOs) in Ghana, Zambia and Malawi, while also driving change among funders and shifting the narratives around aid among the British public.

At its heart, the programme challenges the unequal balance of power between donors, CSOs and communities. It models how funding can be fairer, more equitable and locally defined. Instead of distant funders deciding what's best for others, *Shifting the Power* supports civil society and communities directly to define their own priorities, tell their own stories, and lead their own change.

The *Shifting the Power Comms Lab* emerged from this same ambition: to ask how we, as funders and communicators, can change not just what we fund but also how we talk about the organisations and communities that use that funding.



A BOLD EXPERIMENT IN CHANGING THE NARRATIVE

Comic Relief realised that it needed to talk about its funding in a different way. Shifting the Power was a radical new way of funding organisations in Ghana, Zambia and Malawi directly, and its messages needed to fit this spirit. A prevailing narrative in our sector has been that whilst we all want to talk differently, it wouldn't raise any money: in order to get people to donate or engage, you had to still lead with 'need' and the traditional portrayal of people as helpless and in need of saving. But Comic Relief was determined to test this with some actual research.

So in 2023, together with the Development Engagement Lab (DEL) at University College London (UCL) and the University of Birmingham, they commissioned *Shift the Power: What Do the British Public Think?* This groundbreaking audience research explores how people in the UK respond to narratives about aid, agency and locally-led development.

The research revealed that the public is more open to change than many in the sector assume. People respond positively to messages about dignity, partnership and long-term solutions, and are tired of seeing communities portrayed as passive or dependent.

But research alone doesn't shift practice, and Comic Relief didn't want this to just keep these findings to itself or let the report sit on a shelf. That's why Comic Relief worked with Impact Works Associates and DEL to create the *Shifting the Power Comms Lab*, a collaborative, action-learning experiment designed to turn insights into impact.

WHAT IS THE SHIFTING THE POWER COMMS LAB?

The *Comms Lab* brought together seven of the UK's leading international NGOs (including Comic Relief) to test one big question:

> **"Can we communicate about development in ways that truly reflect equality, partnership and local leadership and still connect with and inspire the British public?"**

Each organisation received a small grant, expert coaching and peer learning support to design and test new messages in real-world campaigns, from social media and email fundraising to short films and storytelling pilots.

Over several months, the Lab created a rare space for collaboration and honest reflection. Communications and fundraising teams could experiment with *decolonised* and *locally-led* narratives, compare results and build confidence in new ways of engaging the public.



Image: Comic Relief

WHAT'S IN THIS REPORT?

This report brings together audience insights research with the outcomes of the Comms Lab. Specifically, it includes both the findings from the original audience study in 2023 and updated insights based on recent polls conducted in December 2025, as well as case studies from the international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that participated in the Comms Lab. Each case study tells the story of an organisation that used the research insights to test new approaches to shifting the narrative on development and what it discovered along the way.

Together, they represent the first cross-sector attempt to test locally-led communications at scale and to measure what truly resonates with the UK public.

Here are just a few of the insights you'll find inside:

- Locally-led storytelling can outperform celebrity-fronted content, even in fundraising.
- Audiences want stories of capability and collaboration, not crisis and pity.
- Younger audiences respond more to authentic, community-led voices, while established donors still value familiarity and trust.
- Internal culture change matters: shifting public narratives starts with how teams work and make decisions internally.

You'll also find a set of top tips co-created by the participating organisations, practical guidance for anyone wanting to apply these learnings in their own communications.

WHY IT MATTERS

The *Shifting the Power Comms Lab* is more than a research project. It's part of a wider movement to reimagine how power is shared in funding and in storytelling, and who shapes the global narrative of change. It shows that the UK public is ready for a new conversation - one that recognises equality, agency, and partnership as the foundation of lasting progress.

We hope this report inspires you to experiment, collaborate and help rewrite the story of development, one that truly reflects a world where power and storytelling are shared more equally.

RESEARCH SUMMARY: WHAT DO THE BRITISH PUBLIC REALLY THINK ABOUT LOCAL LEADERSHIP IN DEVELOPMENT?

The *Shifting the Power Comms Lab* was shaped by two waves of nationally representative research conducted with the Development Engagement Lab (DEL), first in 2023 and then retested in December 2025. Together, these studies provide a robust and evolving picture of how British public attitudes towards international development, local leadership and partnership are changing over time, and what this means for how organisations communicate about their work.

The following outlines some of the key research findings across **who** the public thinks should be leading development efforts; **what dimensions of development delivery** do the public most care about; **what messages** most resonate with them; and finally **whose voices** most speak to the British public. Taken together, the research findings get to the heart of how we – as a sector – can communicate about development in ways that truly reflect equality, partnership and local leadership and still connect with and inspire the British public.



Image: ADD International

WHO DO THE PUBLIC THINK SHOULD LEAD DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS?

Across both waves, a consistent pattern emerges: the British public is more open to locally-led approaches to development than is often assumed within the sector. In both 2023 and 2025, when asked who should lead aid efforts, a significant majority of respondents said that either local organisations in low- and middle-income countries are best placed to lead development efforts or that it should be delivered through equal partnerships between UK and local organisations.

Specifically in 2023, 34% said local development organisations should take the lead, with development organisations from countries like the UK playing a supporting role, and 33% said that UK and local development organisations should be equal partners in delivering aid. This trend has largely held strong - in 2025, support for local leadership rose to 37%, while 27% said UK and local development organisations should be equal partners.

In comparison, only a minority felt development organisations from countries like the UK should take the lead (8% in 2023; 11% in 2025). Despite slight shifts across the years, these findings challenge the notion that the public expects UK-based charities to be in control and instead indicate an appetite for shared leadership and collaboration.

Who should take the lead in development?



Question: Which of the following statements comes closest to your view? | Sample size 2025 n=2,084 & 2023 n=2,049 | Data are weighted to be nationally representative | Base: GB adults | Fieldwork by YouGov | Analysis: Development Engagement Lab

WHAT DO THE BRITISH PUBLIC MOST CARE ABOUT?

But what is informing this opinion? The researchers asked the public who they thought performed better across a number of categories. While respondents thought that UK-based development organisations were more accountable, transparent and experienced, a similar percentage said both UK and local organisations shared these qualities. Most notably, 57% said that local organisations were more knowledgeable about what is needed in the local community. A quarter said local organisations were more effective; with another 25% saying that both were equally effective.

To better understand the extent to which the public actually support an approach to development that shifts power, the researchers developed a comparison model of 5 key dimensions of the 'Traditional' model (TM) – i.e. the current model of aid – and of the 'Shift the Power' model (StP) for comparison to try to understand what was most important to the respondents.

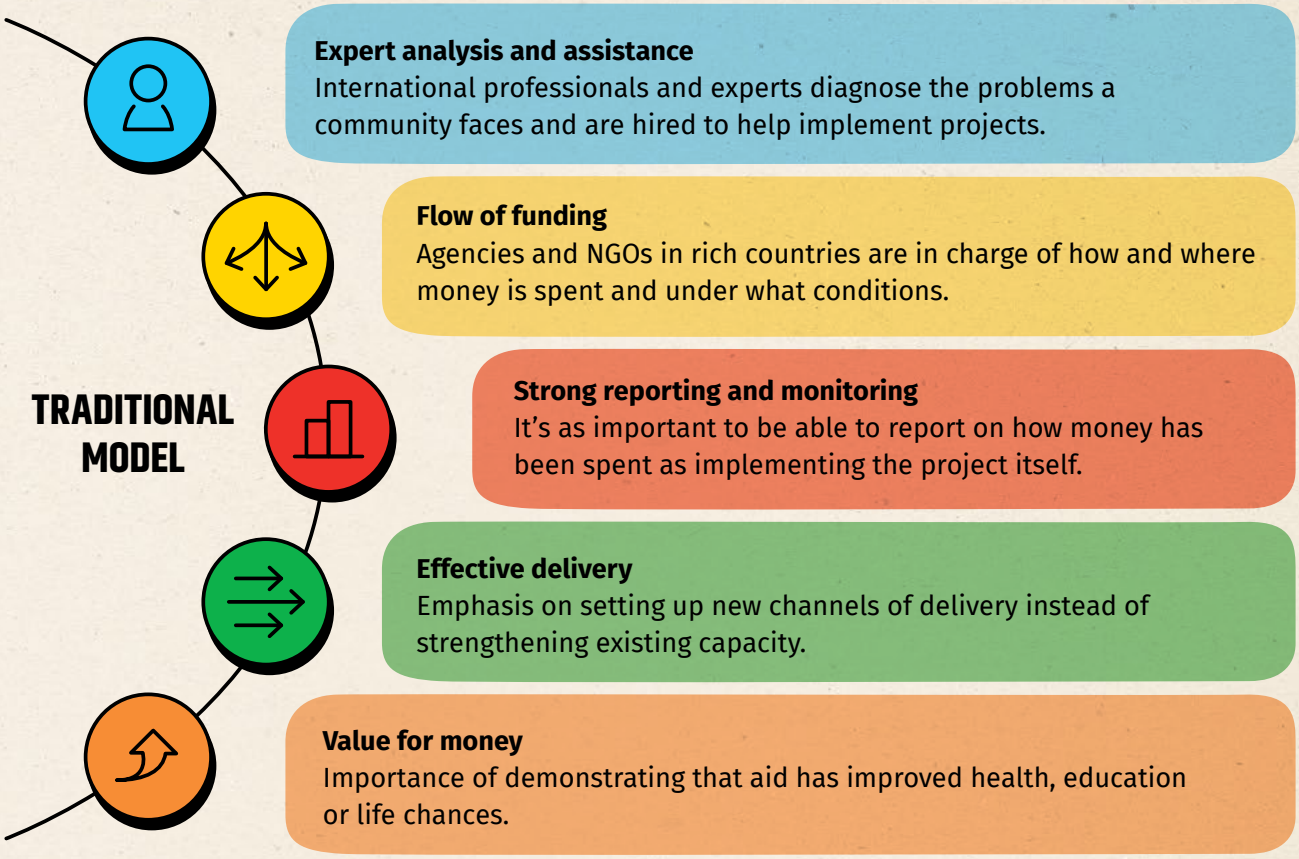
The dimensions that came out as most important to the respondents across the board were (in ranking order):

1. **Value for money** (from the traditional model)
2. **Capacity building** (from the StP model)
3. **Strong reporting and monitoring** (from the traditional model)
4. **Decision-making is locally-led** (from the StP model)

Not only are there components of the Shift the Power model that naturally speak to the British public, but if the development sector is able to create a compelling narrative that demonstrates how the Shift the Power model offers strong value for money, there is the potential to shift the dial even further on public support for development.



Image: Christian Aid


TRADITIONAL MODEL
Expert analysis and assistance
International professionals and experts diagnose the problems a community faces and are hired to help implement projects.
Flow of funding
Agencies and NGOs in rich countries are in charge of how and where money is spent and under what conditions.
Strong reporting and monitoring
It's as important to be able to report on how money has been spent as implementing the project itself.
Effective delivery
Emphasis on setting up new channels of delivery instead of strengthening existing capacity.
Value for money
Importance of demonstrating that aid has improved health, education or life chances.


SHIFT THE POWER MODEL
Decision-making is locally-led
Local organisations decide on priorities and approaches.
Shifting funding
Funding made direct, flexible and long-term. Mobilising local community resources to make local organisations less dependent on external donors.
Capacity building
Local organisations are given the resources, tools and knowledge to lead development work.
System-change
Challenge the traditional top-down development system. Putting local organisations in the lead while international organisations take a supporting role.
Changing narratives
From seeing local organisations as incapable and helpless to capable experts of their own context.



WHAT MESSAGES RESONATE WITH THE PUBLIC?

Importantly, this support is not abstract or ideological. The researchers went one step further to test 54 messages with participants – this included messages covering each aspect of the Shift the Power model, as well as messages designed by the research team drawing on the focus groups and DEL research.

The top five performing messages largely focused on capacity strengthening and self-sufficiency. The #1 ranked message - "We need to empower and uplift local communities in developing countries, so that they become self-sufficient in decision-making and funding development projects" - was followed by a few messages on local leadership and decision making, including #6 – "Local people and organisations in developing countries should determine what the priorities are for their local communities and how aid is spent".

Throughout the research, messages that emphasise long-term impact, capacity building and local expertise consistently perform well. Respondents tend to associate effectiveness with proximity, and that people who live and work in a community are better placed to understand local needs and design appropriate solutions.

This reinforces the finding that audiences respond positively to communications that highlight knowledge, skills and problem-solving at the local level, rather than narratives that centre on distance, dependency, or rescue.

At the same time, the research shows that how these ideas are communicated matters greatly. While the underlying principles of locally-led development are broadly supported, the language used to describe them can either build or weaken engagement. Practical, outcome-focused framing resonates more strongly than abstract discussions of "power", hierarchy or system critique. References to colonial legacies and power turned off audiences who didn't want to engage in the broader political history and consequences of the traditional aid model. In both waves, messages framed around tangible benefits such as sustainability, effectiveness and continuity consistently outperform those that rely on more conceptual or political language. This

suggests that audiences are more persuaded by what locally-led approaches achieve than by debates about how power is defined or redistributed.

The research also offers opportunities to explore what messages resonate with different audience segments. For example, Reform UK voters were more positive (compared to the general population) on the message that "Overseas aid should go directly to local organisations in developing countries that help those in need" (69% compared to 58% in the general population).

Within the online version of this report is an interactive Excel spreadsheet that enables viewers to explore the more or less successful statements for different audiences, grouped by age (generation), gender, region, education, income class, political voting, supporter or opponent of aid spending, donor, and racial attitudes. These insights allow for microtargeted messages but also to see what messages cut across a wide range of groups.

WHOSE VOICE MAKES A DIFFERENCE?

Equally important as understanding what messages resonate with the British public is which messengers can cut through the noise and speak to them.

People place high value on lived experience and practical expertise, particularly when assessing whether aid is likely to be effective. By contrast, trust in distant decision-makers, whether governments, institutions or abstract systems, is lower, especially when audiences feel removed from how decisions are made.

In particular, when the researchers tested 7 different messengers (see visual below) to a control messenger, **only two** messengers performed better than the control. Those were the messengers most connected to the community and the work: **community member** (38% propensity) and **frontline worker** (42%).



ALICE ROBERTS
Volunteer



ADINA CHIBUZO
Community member



ANDREW MITCHELL
Minister



DAVID TENNANT
Actor



LENNY HENRY
Actor



MALALA YOUSAFZAI
Activist



ANNE FRONT
Frontline Worker



This has important implications for communications. It suggests that stories told through local voices can help build credibility and emotional connection, particularly when those voices are positioned as knowledgeable and capable rather than merely as 'beneficiaries'. It also reinforces the importance of avoiding tokenism: audiences are sensitive to authenticity and respond best when local messengers are clearly leading the story, rather than being used to validate decisions made elsewhere.



Image: Comic Relief

At the same time, the research highlights that familiarity remains a factor, particularly among existing supporters. In some contexts, organisational or UK-based voices continue to perform well with warm audiences, largely because they are already trusted. This points to the need for nuance, rather than a single approach that combines local leadership with trusted organisational endorsement where appropriate, rather than treating them as competing frames.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SHIFTING NARRATIVES

Taken together, the findings from 2023 and 2025 suggest that the British public is open to a shift in how international development is understood, away from short-term charity and towards partnership, investment and long-term change. However, this shift is not automatic. It depends on communications that are grounded, practical and outcome-focused, and that reflect a realistic understanding of public concerns and aspirations.

The research does not point to a single "right" message or narrative. Instead, it highlights **a set of principles that can guide effective communication: authenticity, clarity, respect for local expertise, and transparency about impact.** These insights informed the design of the *Shifting the Power Comms Lab*, providing a foundation for organisations to test how different framings perform in practice. The case studies that follow illustrate how these attitudes play out in real-world campaigns, thereby bridging the gap between research and application.

HOW TO READ THIS RESEARCH

This research, accessible via the QR codes at the end of the report, is designed to inform practice, not prescribe a single approach. Included online are data sets outlining the outcomes from message testing, cut across various demographics.

Key points to keep in mind:

- The findings reflect national public opinion, not just the views of donors or supporters.
- Support for locally-led development is conditional; it is strongest when linked to effectiveness, accountability and long-term impact.
- Public attitudes are not fixed; they are shaped by context, language and lived experience – though findings hold fairly strong between 2023 and 2025, despite significant shifts in the external context on aid funding.
- Different audiences respond to different messengers and framings; there is no one-size-fits-all solution.
- The Comms Lab case studies demonstrate how these insights translate into real-world communications decisions, successes and trade-offs.

Used together, the DEL research and the Comms Lab tests provide a practical evidence base for organisations looking to shift narratives while maintaining trust, credibility and engagement with the British public.

ABOUT THE SHIFTING THE POWER COMMS LAB

Comic Relief didn't want the audience insights to gather virtual dust and not be used by other organisations. Together with Impact Works Associates and DEL, they co-created the *Shifting the Power Comms Lab*s to work with a cohort of other INGOs through a process of exploring, designing, testing and reflecting on how they could use the research as an evidence-base to shift their narratives to better reflect equality, partnership and local leadership, while still engaging and motivating UK audiences.



This lab was transformative. In the relentless pace of communications and fundraising, we rarely get the luxury to pause, question assumptions, trial and test what works and what doesn't. This lab gave us that permission. It created a safe space to experiment alongside colleagues wrestling with the same internal and external pressures we face. What made it truly powerful was the diversity of stakeholders I got to work with: fundraisers, researchers, creative agency reps and most importantly, our brilliant local partners."

Ayesha Farah, Shifting the Power Senior Communications and Advocacy Manager, Comic Relief

Comic Relief's decision to convene, fund and participate in this Comms Lab reflects their ongoing commitment to move away from traditional charity narratives towards an empowerment-led model that centres local communities as the architects of change. With a history spanning decades, Comic Relief recognises that they have not always got this right. Rather than an atonement for past missteps, the Comms Lab represented an opportunity to genuinely walk the talk.

Comic Relief invited seven organisations - Comic Relief, ADD International, Age International, Christian Aid, Plan International UK, Save the Children and WaterAid - to deep dive into the research and design and run a small-scale communications test. These ranged from digital ads and films to social media content and fundraising appeals. Participants worked across teams, bringing together fundraisers, communicators, researchers, creative agencies and local partners to explore how locally-led, dignity-focused storytelling compared with more traditional approaches. Design sessions, regular peer learning sessions and coaching sessions enabled organisations to share progress openly, reflect on early results and adapt their thinking as the Lab evolved.

The case studies that follow bring this learning to life. Each one explores what was tested, what worked, what didn't and what it means for how organisations communicate about development. Taken together, they offer practical insights for anyone looking to shift narratives, build trust with audiences and embed more locally-led approaches into everyday communications.

CASE STUDY

ADD INTERNATIONAL

ADD International (ADD) is a participatory grantmaker (PGM), which means that they fund disability justice advocates directly, and that disabled people have the power to determine who should receive funding and how it should be spent, based on their lived experience.

TESTING THE RESEARCH

ADD tested to see how messaging that aligns with their participatory grant-making approach would resonate with their audiences and perform as a fundraising mechanism.

This test was built on the key message-testing finding which suggests that ***messages about capacity building, self-sufficiency and sustainability*** perform best with the British public. In their appeal, ADD highlighted the expertise of disabled people in leading their own development and the effectiveness of their long term, community integrated approach.

THE TEST

As part of their annual fundraising appeal, ADD launched a campaign focused on a community-based organisation (CBO) run by women with disabilities in Kasese, Uganda, which provides support, skills training and savings and start-up capital to women with disabilities who have been excluded from employment, experienced violence and discrimination, and missed out on school. The stories featured were all framed in the voices of the women involved in the CBO, to help overcome negative stereotypes of people with disabilities.

ADD launched the appeal in August 2025. The test included a print mailing to 2,000 supporters, weekly Electronic Direct Mail (EDM), and social media. They segmented their audience and made two different fundraising asks: a cash ask (a one-off donation) and an upgrade ask (increase your regular gift amount).

The appeal emphasised that increased support is needed more than ever, as disability rights are at risk around the world and organisations led by people with disabilities are facing funding challenges.

Although ADD did not have the file size for an A/B test, they conducted post-donation data capture for online givers to help understand their motivation for giving: personal connection; common sense approach; or aid cuts urgency.

Images: ADD International

VISUALS


"I advocate for other women with disabilities. In advocating for our rights, in amplifying our voices, we are seeing some real positive change. It is working."
JULIET, DISABILITY JUSTICE LEADER, UGANDA.


x2
you could double your gift
JENIPHER, DISABILITY JUSTICE ACTIVIST, UGANDA.
HELP US REACH OUR GOAL IN THE FINAL WEEK.


THANK YOU!
BIIRA, DISABILITY JUSTICE ACTIVIST, UGANDA.
TARGET REACHED
#POWEROFCOMMUNITY


"If given the chance we are positive change makers. As women with disabilities we just want to reach our full potential"
Juliet, leader of Bwera United Women with Disabilities Association, Uganda.
THE POWER OF COMMUNITY.
UGANDA.

THE RESULTS

The appeal's income was low (around £12K against a target of £15-20K), although ADD's annual appeal targets are generally low since the majority of ADD's income comes from regular giving.

On the positive side, the average cash gift was high (£100), and these communications play an important retention role for long-term regular givers. The new upgrade ask resulted in 10 donors increasing their monthly gift. Many of these had had no engagement with ADD for 20-25 years since signing up, so this felt positive and something to build on.

The majority of donors who completed the post-donation survey said a reason for giving was concern over aid cuts meaning increased need for their support. This was secondary messaging in the appeal, and shows their donors are aware of the larger funding landscape.

FINDINGS: WHAT RESONATED WITH THE BRITISH PUBLIC?

ADD found that power-shifting language resonated well with their donors, who largely felt it was in line with how the organisation had been working all along. They heard that their supporters appreciate the "niche" that ADD offers: supporting disability justice in a way that centres lived experience.

The response to the inclusive messaging confirms DEL's conclusion that the public responds to narratives that emphasise *agency, skills and contribution*.

PROCESS LEARNINGS: WHAT SUPPORTED OR LIMITED THE TEST

ADD believes the low income is largely down to the delayed timing of the appeal which was launched in the summer due to capacity issues within the team – as a result the appeal tail is lengthened and donations are still coming in (November 2025). Positively, the campaign included match funding which appealed to donors.

The PGM model does not always lend itself easily to the traditional appeal story, as the campaign is not showing a strong need: the featured CBO had recently received a grant and ADD could not say exactly what the funds would support because it is up to the grantees to decide (rather than the charity). However, the disability advocates' stories were powerful and framed in their own words, highlighting them as powerful agents for change.

CONCLUSION

Inclusive messaging that centres lived experience expertise highly resonates with ADD International's audiences.



What seemed like a big change to us internally - becoming a participatory grant-maker - was not perceived to be such by those who trust us to get on with the work."

Emma Blake, ADD International

These findings support DEL's insight that messages foregrounding *agency, capacity, sustainability and dignity* outperform traditional deficit-based appeals.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The *Shift the Power* research has highlighted that ADD is further ahead than a lot of organisations in their transformational journey.

"The remit for shifting power within communications is an echo of a bigger power shifting that's transforming the entire organisation."

Emma Blake, ADD International

The research has led ADD to think about some of the terminology they use. For example, in some contexts they have shifted from speaking about disability 'activists' to 'advocates', as the research found 'activism' to be a polarising term.

To overcome the challenges of the flexible grant making model in building appeals, ADD plans to think more innovatively about how to share an authentic future vision of need. For example, funding a group for one year in order to gain an understanding of what they would want to do with top-up funding in years two and three.

ADD has found that match funding and partnership appeals work well with their donors - as a small organisation, the external endorsement helps to bring on new donors and sees existing donors share appeals more widely with their networks.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Communications approach:

- **Data Capture:** Develop a *landing page* with a prompt like "I gave because..." to collect supporter insights.
- **Give donors more credit:** The findings show ADD's supporters to be active, engaged citizens who are aware of the aid cuts and funding landscape. They care about the 'way' as well as the 'what' of the work.

Organisational process:

- **Shifting power requires bold and innovative thinking:** As power shifting is core to ADD's transformation, the team had the freedom to try new things and be more radical with the messaging.
- **Alignment within the team:** ADD's small team size made it easier to create direct content, as the same person handles the interview and final product.
- **Inter-organisational Learning**: Participation in the Comms Lab highlighted the value of peer visits, collaboration and shared learning across organisations.

Image: ADD International

CASE STUDY

AGE INTERNATIONAL

TESTING THE RESEARCH

Age International seeks to centre older people in a way that promotes dignity and honours the work of their local partners. They tested new communications to explore **which types of messages connect with their audiences**.

This test was built on the key message-testing finding which suggests that ***messages about capacity building, self-sufficiency and sustainability*** perform best with the British public. Age International set out to test whether portraying older women as *leaders with agency* rather than passive recipients would better align with those preferences.

THE TEST

Age International conducted an A/B test during their International Women's Day campaign and used it as an opportunity to focus on older women's agency.

The messaging was tested using social media ads via Meta (Facebook and Instagram). To measure success, they looked at three key metrics: cost per result (the amount spent putting out the ad compared to the results it yields); engagement (likes, shares and comments); sentiment (whether comments were positive, neutral, or negative).

The test focused on three specific themes:

- **Power and System Change:** *How can we talk about power and systems change in a way that feels accessible and compelling, without overwhelming people?*
- **Centring Our Partners**: *Would our audiences respond better when Age International is the 'centre' of the story, or when we spotlight our partners?*
- **Older Women as Leaders**: *Do audiences engage when older women are positioned as passive recipients of support, or when they are leaders with agency?*

They created sets of ads for each theme:

- **Version A:** using more traditional or familiar language, and featuring older women as passive beneficiaries
- **Version B:** using more inclusive and empowering wording, and featuring older women as leaders and contributors to their communities

Image: Rajat Agarwal / Age International

The same image was used in each ad to ensure the results reflect a response to the messaging and not the photo. They compared Version A and Version B within each individual ad set to allow them to understand which language resonated most with their audiences.

> *Image caption: Inayado, 70, leads her community in India to adapt to climate change by using traditional rainwater harvesting methods.*

The image



THE MESSAGING

Themes	More traditional messaging	More inclusive messaging
Power and Systems Change	**A** Older women around the world face poverty, violence and humanitarian crises, often overlooked by those in power.	**B** Older women are fighting for their rights in the face of poverty, violence and humanitarian crises.
Centring our Partners	**A** Older women in India are on the frontline of the climate crisis – but they are being left behind.	**B** In India, older women are leading the fight against the climate crisis. It's time they were recognised.
Older Women as Leaders	**A** Older women deserve to be heard. We're calling on the UK Government to ensure older women are included in decisions.	**B** Older women are driving change. HelpAge International and local partner GRAVIS are making sure their voices are heard.

THE RESULTS

The messages showing older women as active leaders led to higher engagement and more positive sentiment, even if it didn't always result in shares.

Theme	Cost Per Result: which ad was more cost effective?	Engagement: which ad had the most likes, shares, and comments	Sentiment: was the reaction positive, neutral or negative?
Power and Systems Change	**Inclusive** messaging	**Inclusive** messaging	**Both** had more negative than positive or neutral comments
Centering Our Partners	**Inclusive** messaging	**Traditional** messaging	The **traditional** messaging generated the most conversation, and also the most criticism.
Older Women as Leaders	**Traditional** messaging	The **inclusive** messaging received more likes and comments, but the traditional messaging was shared more.	The **inclusive** messaging received noticeably more positive comments

These results suggest that even when the framing is more empowering, the topic of power and systemic change leads to a lot of negativity.

The results also indicate the importance of trust and familiarity, as audiences were less likely to like, share and comment on messages that featured a lesser-known partner. Additionally, while people personally approve of empowering messages about older women, some still feel more comfortable sharing more familiar messaging about older women needing support.

FINDINGS: WHAT RESONATED WITH THE BRITISH PUBLIC?

The higher engagement and positive sentiment towards inclusive messaging confirm DEL's conclusion that the public prefers narratives emphasising *agency, skills and contribution*. The results also reflect the finding that discussions of *power and systems change* can polarise audiences if phrased abstractly.

> **"We need to focus on how to communicate the work we are already doing."**

PROCESS LEARNINGS: WHAT SUPPORTED OR LIMITED THE TEST

Choosing clear themes - power, partnership and leadership - enabled targeted learning.

Including the climate crisis in some one of the ads skewed the test as the topic received a larger number of comments (positive and negative), and resulted in limited comparability.

The comms team also found it challenging to reach cold audiences as Age International is a small charity, and trust and recognition were barriers to engagement. Further tests could build familiarity with messages that centre their partners.

In terms of platforms, they found that Facebook/Instagram ads are not ideal for introducing new partners as people only spend a few seconds reading them. However, this platform does work for other test areas.

CONCLUSION

Overall, inclusive messaging that promotes dignity resonated more with Age International's audiences.

These findings clearly support DEL's insight that messages foregrounding *capacity, sustainability and dignity* outperform traditional deficit-based appeals. For Age International, this means continuing to normalise inclusive, partner-led stories while avoiding jargon-heavy discussions of "power" that can alienate neutral audiences.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Age International acknowledges that centering their partners and positioning older women as leaders are challenging topics. Next time, they plan to stick with non-divisive issues when sharing this messaging, rather than introducing another topic like climate change. Sometimes it is just simple tweaks on the wording that is effective, and it is not necessary to conduct a huge overall change in your tone or style.

"We should keep using inclusive messaging because the more we do, the more normal - and shareable - those messages will become."

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Communications approach:

- **Positioning the INGO.** Inclusive messaging communicates that the organisation is working to shift power.
- **Be proud of your partnerships.** If you have committed to highlighting the work of your partners, you may have to leave out the INGO.
  "We've committed to showing our partners: Age International didn't do the work, Gravis did."

Organisational process:

- **Don't be afraid to make mistakes.** Continue to test inclusive messaging and learn as you go.
- **Learn from what others are doing**. Step into that space and be bold.

CASE STUDY

CHRISTIAN AID

TESTING THE RESEARCH

Christian Aid set out to explore **how the messenger affects people's willingness to act**. This experiment tested the finding that ***frontline workers and communities are among the most trusted and motivating messengers.*** Christian Aid wanted to assess whether a local leader could outperform a traditional charity 'expert' voice in encouraging supporter action.

> **We want to carve out space to kind of drive bolder, more participatory approaches."**

THE TEST

Using their "Restore" campaign, Christian Aid conducted an A/B email test with a warm audience of over 45,000 supporters. They sent two versions of an email, identical except for the video content. The emails promoted signing a petition, not fundraising.

- **Donor-centric** Video A featuring a charity 'expert' voice
- **Locally-led** Video B featuring Reverend Jonasi, a local climate advocate

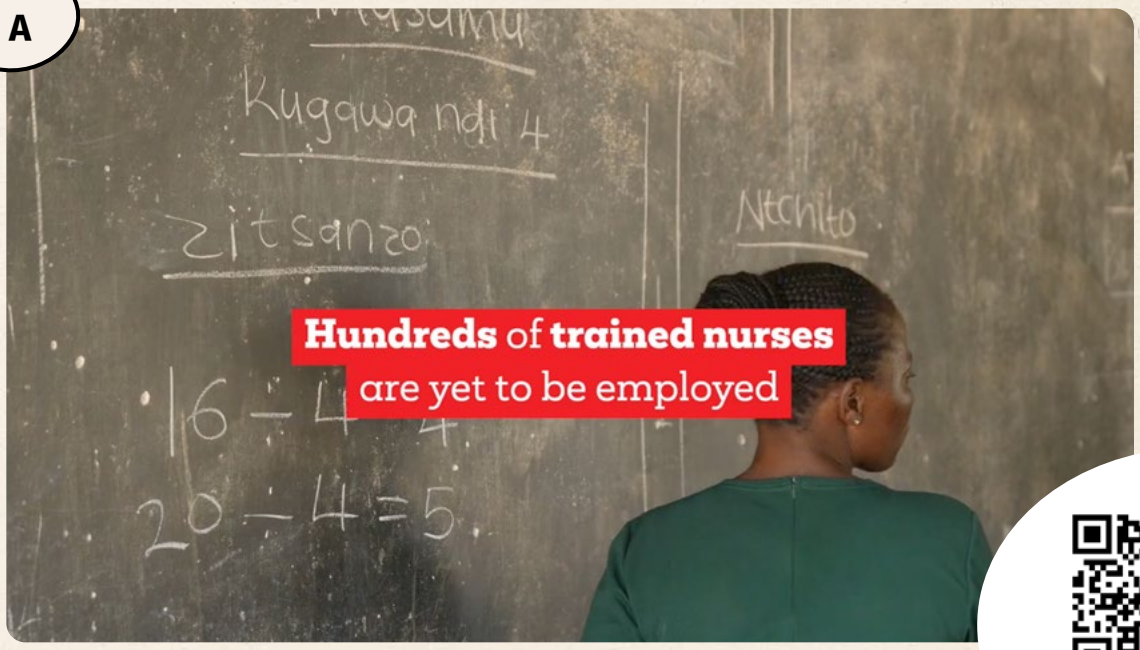
A split test was performed on two dates:

- 10% of the audience were sent Video A
- 10% of the audience were sent Video B
- After 5 hours, the version with the highest click-to-open rate was sent to the remaining audience.

Images: Christian Aid

VISUALS

A



^ *Video A - Donor-centric*
View the video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KPa9DE87fMI

B



^ *Video B - Locally-led*
View the video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jRkcmckVNuc

THE RESULTS

Despite the focus of the test being on signing a petition, it did generate income. Although there was no fundraising request as part of the messaging, the standard 'donate' button featured on the email header.

Test One (18th April 2025)
The best performing email contained locally-led Video B featuring Reverend Jonasi, receiving 50.94% of the clicks. This test generated 1,036 signatures on the petition and £4,785.19 in revenue (including gift aid).

Test Two (7th May 2025)
The best performing email contained donor-centric Video A featuring a charity 'expert' voice, receiving 100% of the clicks. This test generated 1,629 signatures on the petition and £12,918 in revenue (including gift aid).

FINDINGS: WHAT RESONATED WITH THE BRITISH PUBLIC?

The mixed results suggest that authenticity and credibility matter more than messenger type alone. Both videos reflected the DEL insight that audiences value real, grounded stories rooted in local context. The donor-centric version performed slightly better on click-throughs, likely due to existing supporter familiarity, but the locally-led film aligned more closely with DEL's evidence that *local leadership enhances trust and engagement.*

PROCESS LEARNINGS: WHAT SUPPORTED OR LIMITED THE TEST

Running the A/B test through email allowed Christian Aid to control variables and gain clear attribution. However, clicks didn't always equal petition signatures, which is what Christian Aid ultimately wanted with the call to action.

Organisational scheduling around emergency appeals limited flexibility around the launch of the test.

"We learned that authenticity is really powerful. We felt that both videos worked because they were credible. They were confident and grounded."

CONCLUSION

From the data across both test dates, the email from the charity voice was the best performing.

However, the content from both videos was grounded in authenticity and drew directly from real stories and data in Malawi, and a local perspective. Even the donor-centric version was rooted in context-specific information, ensuring relevance and credibility.

These findings partially confirm DEL's research: while locally-led messengers remain powerful, messenger familiarity and issue context can influence results. For Christian Aid, this reinforces DEL's recommendation that locally-led voices should be prioritised but paired with narrative framing that reassures supporters about effectiveness and value for money.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Christian Aid plans to continue to test content via paid social campaigns and regularly test email approaches. This test focused only on a warm audience and did not have any demographic segmentation to enhance its results. Additionally, the two videos weren't like-for-like, so there were multiple variables on that content that they did not test.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

Communications approach:

- **Income generation is often a result of good storytelling and channel specific content.** Powerful storytelling and authentic voices can indirectly support other outcomes, like donations. Christian Aid saw the income generation increase by 514.1% compared to the average for a non-emergency email.
  "That unexpected income generation was a halo effect of the email campaign... We think that it was because we created those two videos that really sought to engage audiences in a very channel specific way, and were largely rooted in the shift to power principles."

- **Both videos ultimately aligned with Shift the Power principles – and that's why both performed well**. The test wasn't about 'right vs. wrong' content, but two strong executions that were shaped by the *Shift the Power* research.

Organisational process:

- **Keep testing as an organisational priority.** This work is necessary in order to understand audience behaviour, especially as attitudes towards development change and audience demographics fluctuate.

Image: Christian Aid

CASE STUDY

COMIC RELIEF

TESTING THE RESEARCH

Comic Relief set out to test **how narratives of local leadership versus traditional charity-led messages impact audience engagement**. This test directly explored the audience insights that ***frontline workers and communities are the most persuasive messengers*** for engaging the British public on development. Comic Relief wanted to understand whether authentic, locally voiced stories could outperform celebrity-led storytelling in driving engagement and donations. Equally important was testing which messaging approach draws audiences in: empowerment-led captions that centre communities as agents of change, or traditional challenge-focused messaging that highlights and the leads with the problems they face.

THE TEST

Comic Relief collaborated with local partners Tilitonse Foundation and SASO in Malawi to produce short films focused on mental health. The A/B testing was conducted with the following variables:

- **Messenger:** Talent voice vs Local voice
- **Captions:** Empowerment-led caption vs Problem-led caption

Comic Relief conducted extensive testing across both qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (paid media, organic social media and email marketing) tests, produced three distinct films, and refined their approach after each phase of learning.

Scan to view the films or visit comicrelief.com/films

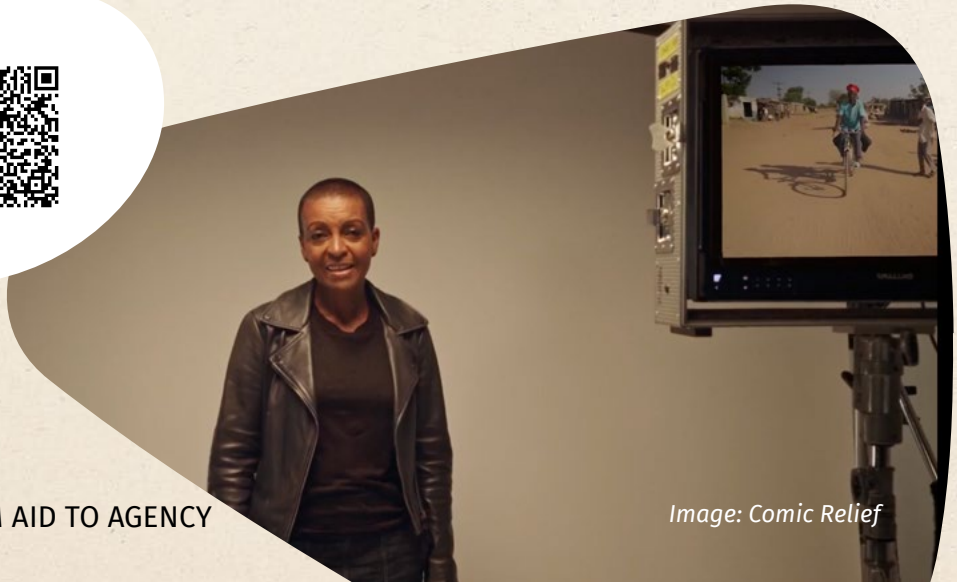


Image: Comic Relief

Phase one: Qualitative Data

Comic Relief conducted four 90-minute online focus groups in June 2025, testing a first cut of the films that tell the stories of three local activists: 'Goodwin', 'Charles', and 'Ms Kawuye'. The focus groups each had 5-6 participants from Gen Z (21-28 y.o); Millennials (29-44 y.o.); Gen X (45-60 y.o.). The sessions used the 'Goodwin' film as the primary stimulus, with exposure to all three films later in each session. This approach allowed Comic Relief to understand initial reactions before comparing responses across different films.

> **"It's not help coming from afar, but a local person that knows that local issue and involves you in the solution would probably be a bit more of a sustainable answer"**
>
> ***Focus group participant***

The qualitative research revealed several interesting insights. The audiences suggested that the subtitles were challenging to follow, and the videos needed a stronger and clearer call to action. However, once audiences grasped the narrative, they recognised that small interventions and minimal support can establish sustainable change, that platforms and approaches for such support already exist within local communities, and that Africa deserves to be viewed afresh. Participants understood that the tools for personal and universal transformation are already present in these communities and often more powerful than outside intervention or top-down models.

The understated, subdued tone of the films, while initially challenging for some viewers, ultimately complemented the content and enhanced impact once the 'shifting the power' narrative was understood. Participants found this approach surprising, refreshing, and potentially very distinctive. It served as an antidote to the emotionally coercive disaster narratives that have fatigued audiences. Key tonal attributes that resonated included **authenticity, hopefulness, humanity, dignity, respect, and inclusiveness**. The films communicated empowerment rather than pity.

The research also demonstrated the campaign's potential to stimulate reappraisal of Comic Relief itself. The strategy showed how Comic Relief engages internationally while remaining relatable, addressing universal challenges like mental health within a global conversation. By presenting international work through a local lens, the campaign navigated latent concerns about power imbalances. It provided helpful transparency by explaining both the how and the why of Comic Relief's work and brought a level of humility that audiences appreciated.

Following the feedback from the focus groups, in the second phase of the testing, Comic Relief secured Adjoa Andoh MBE as the talent messenger to bring recognisability and credibility to the storytelling. The videos were refined with enhanced story arcs to better guide viewers through the message and desired outcomes.

Phase two: Quantitative Testing

Following the qualitative phase, Comic Relief conducted extensive quantitative testing across multiple channels to validate our findings and measure impact at scale. This included:

- Organic social media (LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok)
- Paid social media (Facebook and Instagram): Comic Relief tested the impact of the messenger on audience engagement, comparing two sets of films telling the stories of local activists Goodwin, Charles and Mrs K one set featuring the local voice; the other featuring the talent voice.
- Email marketing: Comic Relief tested which messenger was most effective in motivating campaign supporters to donate. Using Goodwin's story, they sent identical email copy to their warm supporter base with only two variables: Video A featured a local voice as the messenger, while Video B used a talent voice. Each version is linked to its respective film and a unique donation page.



THE RESULTS

Organic Social Media (LinkedIn, Instagram and TikTok)

The organic testing revealed notable platform and messaging variations:

- In terms of platform, LinkedIn consistently delivered the highest engagement rates across all content variations
- The talent-led content generally outperformed local voice versions on TikTok where engagement rates were significantly higher
- Empowerment-led captions performed better than problem-led captions across most platforms
- The talent-led story with empowerment messaging achieved the strongest Instagram performance

LinkedIn's consistently strong performance suggests professional framing resonates there, while shorter, high-energy content works better for Instagram and TikTok. The demographic shifts suggest talent-led content may help reach younger, more diverse audiences, potentially unlocking new donor segments beyond Comic Relief's traditional 65+ female base.

> **"Working on the film was a therapeutic experience that allowed us to shed light on mental health and break the silence in the community and other circles as many mental health related conditions are rarely discussed and acted upon."**
>
> ***Paul Duncan, Executive Director, SASO (Comic Relief Partner)***

Paid Social Media Testing (Meta: Facebook and Instagram)

The local voice-led films displayed multi-generational appeal with a more balanced gender ratio, indicating they successfully reached a wider cross-section of the population, outperforming the talent-led films in demographic diversity.

However the findings were not universal. For example, the talent-led ads delivered marginally better cost-per-click performance and the films leaned heavily towards older female audiences. On the other hand, the local voice-led films demonstrated significantly better audience demographic diversity and achieved much more balanced results with 48% women and a broader age distribution across multiple generations.

Additionally, Charles' local voice video stood out dramatically with 2.5x better hook retention, meaning that people watched more of his story than the others. The film began with a dynamic shot of Charles on a bike, which the agency conducting the paid testing indicated was not surprising as they find that that person-led opening frames, dynamic movement, and relatable storytelling is extremely powerful on social media, and can outperform celebrity-fronted content.

Further, while the talent-led content generated 65% higher post engagement, unfortunately many comments were negative responses to Adjoa's involvement referencing public statements she had made in the past. While Adjoa's involvement increased engagement rates, negative comments suggest careful audience targeting is essential to avoid backlash.

Email Marketing

This test revealed that authentic, local voices consistently resonate more strongly with supporters and drive higher engagement and donation values.

- The local voice-led film outperformed the talent-led version in terms of generating more donations and with a higher click-through-rate

Together, we proved that the fears holding us back - that authentic storytelling won't land, that dignity-led narratives won't raise money - are exactly that: fears, not facts. The public is tired of outdated portrayals. Our partners across the globe are offended by it. It's time we caught up, trusted our audiences, and let go of tactics that no longer serve anyone."

Ayesha Farah, Shifting the Power Senior Communications and Advocacy Manager



Images: Comic Relief

FINDINGS: WHAT RESONATED WITH THE BRITISH PUBLIC?

The results echo DEL's evidence that audiences respond most positively to *locally-led, authentic and empowering narratives*. Across social and email channels, the locally voiced films achieved higher demographic diversity and stronger donation results, reinforcing the DEL insight that community storytellers can outperform celebrity figures when they convey agency and self-sufficiency. However, celebrity-fronted content performed better across more entertainment-led channels like TikTok.

PROCESS LEARNINGS: WHAT SUPPORTED OR LIMITED THE TEST

The focus-group feedback and collaboration with Malawian partners improved accessibility and narrative clarity. Creating space for iterative review across teams helped refine subtitles, story arc and call-to-action framing.

CONCLUSION



Taken as a whole, the results show that narratives of local leadership out-perform traditional charity-led messages. People are more likely to engage when they see communities actively driving change, not being positioned as passive recipients.

Overall, the findings confirm the DEL research that *frontline workers and community members* are powerful messengers for locally-led development. They also extend that insight by showing that talent involvement can still add value if used to endorse rather than dominate. For Comic Relief, this means prioritising locally-led voices in future campaigns, while using celebrity talent strategically to reinforce credibility rather than drive the story.

Participating in the Comms Lab process allowed Comic Relief to challenge themselves and others to tell stories differently, centre local communities authentically and build trust with both existing supporters and new audiences.

> **"We felt the films would have more impact if community members and leaders who had experienced mental health challenges reflected on their journey and told it from their perspective. That is the power that we wanted to unleash by allowing individuals to tell their stories to people very much like them with similar contexts, experiences and struggles."**
>
> ***Kondwani Matupa, Communications Lead, Tilitonse Foundation (Comic Relief Partner)***





WHAT'S NEXT?

Comic Relief plans to use the learnings from the Comms Lab in future campaigns and wider storytelling, in terms of how they work, the language that they use, and the framing of the stories.

- Lead with stronger hooks: Opening frames should feature people, movement, and immediately relatable narratives.
- Don't rely solely on talent as a messenger: Talent should enhance credibility rather than serve as the primary draw.
- Tailor assets by platform and audience: It's more effective to take different creative approaches for different audience segments rather than a one-size-fits-all approach.
- Utilise different assets to target: Use shorter assets to build interest, then direct to longer-form content that validates and drives action. The test found that local voice videos appealed to a wider audience demographic, which can be used to unlock new audiences to the donation pool. This should be treated with different user journeys vs traditional donors.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Communications approach:

- **Authenticity and strong creative hooks are key:** While talent messengers can add credibility and improve certain metrics, the storytelling matters more.
- **Engaging with local partners:** Ethical collaboration ensures authentic voices are centered and harm is not reproduced.
- **Universal themes:** Focusing on issues such as mental health helps to break down 'us vs. them' mentalities and foster global empathy.
- **Audiences are increasingly fatigued by poverty and crisis-driven narratives.** They are seeking stories that offer hope, agency and solutions

Organisational process:

- **De-risk innovation and create space for experimentation**: Frame progressive communications as low-risk through internal buy-in and structured testing of messaging, formats and audience engagement strategies.
- **Trustee engagement**: Proactively engage trustees early to secure support for new approaches.
- **Align values with processes across the organisation:** The tests have proved helpful across departments, particularly legal, safeguarding and fundraising. For example, the legal team used the process as an opportunity to test informed consent and how it is gathered, via video medium.

Images: Comic Relief

CASE STUDY

PLAN INTERNATIONAL

TESTING THE RESEARCH

Plan International set out to understand **how the messenger affects audience engagement.** This test examined the insight that ***programme participants and frontline workers are the most effective messengers*** for communicating locally-led development. Plan International aimed to test whether audiences respond more positively to messages from programme participants or local staff.

Plan International aimed to test whether audiences respond more positively to messages from programme participants or local staff.

THE TEST

Plan International conducted an A/B test as part of their Child Sponsorship product. They launched two new sets of ads on Meta (Facebook and Instagram) to run alongside an existing control ad to test the impact of the messenger.

They identified two case studies to test the messenger:

- **Version A - Programme Participant:** Len Sokha, a 10 year old sponsored child from Cambodia
- **Version B - Staff Member:** Ousa, 27, a former sponsored child who was now a member of staff in Cambodia

For each set, Plan International created a series of static and video formats for the audience to build awareness of the issue, consider solutions and take action by sponsoring a child. Each case study had a corresponding landing page to ensure consistent storytelling.

Images: Plan International

VISUALS

A





^ *Version A - Programme Participant*

B





^ *Version B - Staff Member*



^ *Version A - Programme Participant*



^ *Version B - Staff Member*

THE RESULTS

For overall engagement metrics, Version A featuring the programme participant was the better performing storyteller, generating the highest click-through rate and number of sponsors in the A/B test.

In terms of audience, Plan International found the parents and grandparents audience watched the videos centering Len Sokha (Version A - programme participant) for longer or all the way through. However, audiences with an education interest engaged more with the videos centering Ousa (Version B - staff member). Overall, Version B performed slightly better for video view rates.

“Discussing the best way to approach the test together added real benefit.”

Images: Plan International

FINDINGS: WHAT RESONATED WITH THE BRITISH PUBLIC?

Results align with DEL's finding that messages showing *community-level agency*, in this case Len Sokha's story, generate stronger action outcomes. Meanwhile, engagement with Ousa's staff story indicates that highlighting *local expertise and continuity* also appeals to audiences valuing competence and sustainability.

PROCESS LEARNINGS: WHAT SUPPORTED OR LIMITED THE TEST

Integrating the experiment into existing sponsorship materials made participation feasible and encouraged collaboration across fundraising and brand teams. However, external crises reduced visibility during the test period.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the ads featuring the programme participants produced better recruitment volumes, while the ads featuring the frontline worker produced better engagement metrics.

The test supports the DEL conclusion that both *community and frontline worker voices* can effectively communicate locally-led development, provided the storytelling emphasises capacity, continuity and trust. For Plan International, this means balancing emotional resonance (from participants) with reassurance of professionalism (from staff) to meet the British public's dual preference for *human connection and value for money.*

WHAT'S NEXT?

If Plan International were to run another test, the Fundraising and Communications teams would try and take a more radical approach to produce more conclusive results.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Communications approach:

- **Be radical in your testing.** A more ambitious approach to the test will produce more conclusive results. Organisations will need to factor in ensuring suitable content is available when developing their tests.
- **Integrate the test into existing plans.** Consider whether the test needs to be a stand-alone project or whether it could be embedded into work that is already underway.

Organisational process:

- **Formalise collaboration between fundraising and communications.** Having conversations and a clear brief to ensure alignment between your goals leads to a more effective campaign.
- **Involve the right people at the right stages.** While creating the space to shape the test with senior management, bring in the campaign managers who will run the test to ensure that everyone is on board.

CASE STUDY

SAVE THE CHILDREN

TESTING THE RESEARCH

Save the Children set out to test **whether more inclusive and locally-led messaging can meet the organisation's fundraising objectives.** This test was built on the insight that the public respond favourably to **messages about INGOs working in equal partnership with local expertise,** perceiving this to represent a more effective, and therefore potentially better value for money route to a desired outcome.

THE TEST

Save the Children aimed to understand whether this inclusive, locally-led framing could be employed within a simple performance ad format, and whether such an ad could achieve strong fundraising results, in direct comparison to a more traditional, donor-centric ad.

In order to explicitly test the impact of a more locally-led vs a donor-centric message, Save the Children ran three A/B tests controlling all variables except the ad copy: ad format (static social ad), imagery assets (images of a local health worker helping a young child), subject matter, channel (Facebook paid advertising), and audience (Save the Children's default mass market audience) were all unchanged, whilst the sole variable - the messaging - changed as follows:

- **Version A - Locally-led:** the headline *"Her skills. Your support. Save lives."* highlights the local health worker's expertise and role in combination with the supporters', with supporting ad copy focused on the named local health worker and their role.

- **Version B - Donor-centric:** the headline, *"Your support saves lives"* solely heroes the donor, with ad copy focused on the healthcare outcome and the donor's role.

They ran a suite of three A/B tests each using a different image but on the same infant healthcare theme, with the same control copy and test copy, for a duration of six weeks. Running a range of tests optimised against the Meta algorithm in terms of reaching the highest possible audience despite the small scale of the test, as well as providing some additional learning around the type of image that worked best for each message, whilst still allowing Save the Children to isolate the effect of the messaging variation within each test.

All images and copy used across the test adhered to Save the Children's image guidelines and how the content was gathered aligned to their robust ethical storytelling standards.

Images: Save the Children

VISUALS

A



^ *Version A - Locally-led*

B



^ *Version B - Donor-centric*

THE RESULTS

Whilst small in scale, the test revealed some interesting differences in ad performance that have prompted discussion at Save the Children. Looking across the three tests:

- The locally-led ads reached a bigger audience, with 41% higher impressions, meaning it was deemed more relevant by the Meta algorithm
- They also achieved a higher quality of response, outperforming the donor-centric ads on two key metrics, total cash raised and average regular gift amount
- At the same time, the donor-centric messaging appeared to resonate with more people, achieving a high click through rate and conversion rate, and generating more single gifts

- the number of regular gifts achieved was equal across the locally-led and donor-centric suites of ads (at four each), however the most successful individual ad in terms of generating regular gifts was donor-centric (achieving two regular gifts)

- all the ads tested performed at or above benchmarks for 'successful' fundraising ads

Whilst the volumes of impressions and responses were too low to be considered a fully robust test, it is noteworthy that from a fundraising perspective, locally-led messaging not only 'held its own' against the more traditional, donor-centric approach, but actually achieved a higher quality of donation, and a stronger expected return on investment (based on expected future income generated via the higher value regular gifts).

FINDINGS: WHAT RESONATED WITH THE BRITISH PUBLIC?

Save the Children found that hero-ing local agency and expertise led to higher quality donations. Although the limited scale of this test means the results can't be taken as 'proof' of any hypothesis or robust validation of a new approach, the test results mirror DEL's findings that audiences respond favourably to the idea of *shared responsibility* between a donor audience and local actors, built on *local agency and expertise*. The findings can contribute to a growing body of evidence that this kind of messaging and approach is <u>not</u> antithetical to fundraising excellence.

PROCESS LEARNINGS: WHAT SUPPORTED OR LIMITED THE TEST

The A/B structure and effort taken to control variables in the tests provided a sound baseline for comparison, and the volume of impressions were enough to draw statistically significant conclusions on performance, against benchmarks for comparable campaigns. However, the low total spend and therefore overall response volume reduces the robustness of the findings, particularly the ability to draw conclusions around lower frequency behaviours like regular gift sign up. Conclusions will therefore be taken as indicative, providing thought-starters for further tests and contributing to a growing evidence base.

CONCLUSION

Across the three tests, all the locally-led ads performed at or above Save the Children's benchmarks for fundraising, with each execution outperforming its donor-led counterpart on at least one key metric (number or value of single or regular gifts).

"Our biggest hope for this test was to provide some evidence that it's not a major risk to experiment with more 'decolonised', progressive, or locally-led ads – and we did!"

Lucia Patel, Insight Lead, Save the Children

These findings reinforce the DEL research showing that *capacity- and sustainability-focused narratives* align with British public preferences for authenticity and tangible results. For Save the Children, this validates that locally-led stories are not at odds with fundraising; rather, they can build deeper trust and engagement over time.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Within Save the Children's marketing and creative teams, the test prompted useful discussion and opened up new avenues for future tests, for example, the desire to explore more around the potential to achieve higher quality donations via a locally-led messaging approach, and whether this can come alongside high engagement and volume of action, or if there's a trade-off to be better understood and worked around. There were other useful learnings around the combination of imagery and messaging that can be built on in further tests.

The team found that embedding new ways of working requires clear alignment and shared understanding across departments. Continuing to build confidence and capacity at all levels will help ensure that locally-led storytelling becomes a consistent part of future fundraising campaigns.

Learnings from this test, and ongoing learning from the Shifting the Power Comms Lab and DEL, will also feed into ongoing brand platform, communications, and messaging strategies at Save the Children, via integration with our ethical storytelling commitments and practices.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Communications approach:

- **Locally-led stories are not at odds with fundraising**; rather, they can build deeper trust and engagement over time.

Organisational process:

- **Fuelling curiosity and inspiring creativity.** For Save the Children, participating in this pilot cultivated curiosity in what new, more equitable models of INGO storytelling might look like, and an enthusiasm for further experimentation.
- **Reducing internal barriers and shifting fundraiser perceptions.** The ability of the 'experimental' ads to hold their own and deliver strong return on investment has succeeded in reducing the perceived financial risk of undertaking these kinds of tests and trying new fundraising approaches.
- **To scale this approach, internal alignment is necessary.** Within the organisation it is key to establish a small number of shared goals, backed by resource commitments from across departments, that draw on evidence that public engagement and income-generating goals can be compatible with evolving towards a more equitable, 'power shifted' aid system and storytelling approach.
- **Cross sector collaboration can accelerate this by helping build the evidence base faster and reducing the risks for individual INGOs.** There is much to be gained from sharing insights and learnings between communications strategists working on the future of aid narratives.

CASE STUDY

WATERAID

TESTING THE RESEARCH

WaterAid set out to understand **how the messenger impacts audience engagement.** This test examined the insight that ***frontline workers and communities are the most persuasive messengers*** for engaging the British public. WaterAid aimed to explore whether a young local leader could outperform a charity staff messenger across warm and cold audiences.

> **For us, it's key to spotlight and put front and centre the voices of people most affected by the water and the climate crisis."**

THE TEST

WaterAid ran an A/B test with a video around their campaign Water Can't Wait, calling on people to sign an open letter written by 18 young leaders from across over 10 countries, united by a shared commitment to tackling the water-climate crisis.

- **Video A - Donor-centric:** a video in Tim Ingram's name (white, British, male), Head of Advocacy at WaterAid.
- **Video B - Locally-led:** a video in Barkat Saïda Matazaky's name (Black, Malagasy, female), a young leader and one of the authors of the open letter.

To ensure a valid A/B test, the script and post-editing of the videos were exactly the same.

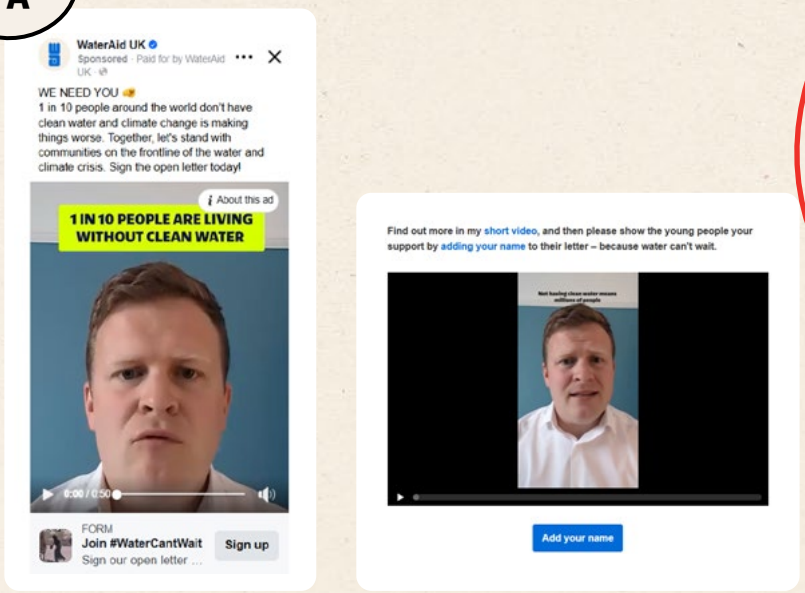
They ran the test across three platforms: organic social media (warm and cold audiences); email to WaterAid's existing supporter base (84k+ people – warm audiences); and Meta (Facebook and Instagram) paid ads (cold and warm audiences).

Images: WaterAid

VISUALS

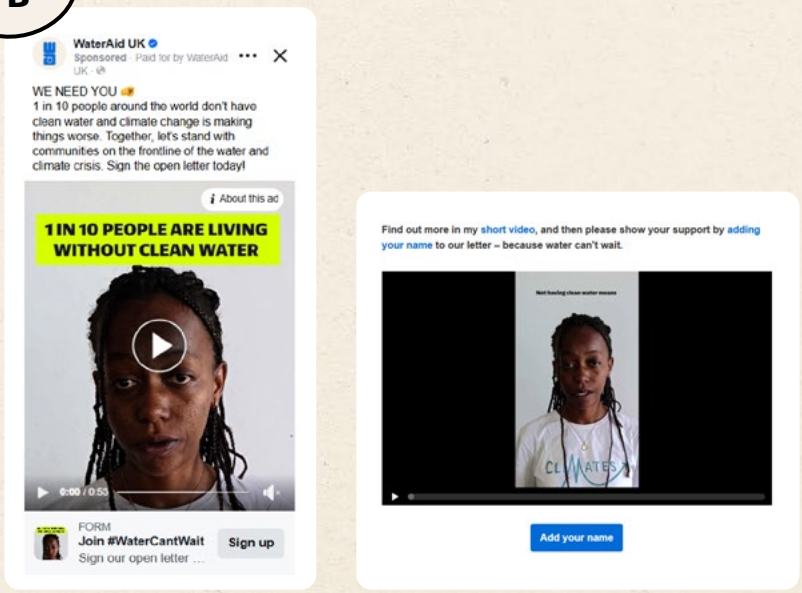
WaterAid set out to understand how the messenger impacts audience engagement.

A



^ *Video A - Donor-centric*
View Video A at https://www.facebook.com/reel/1078731564106375

B



^ *Video B - Locally-led*
View Video B at https://www.facebook.com/reel/2423307348004574

THE RESULTS

These results were taken after the test was live for 4 weeks:

Social media: Locally-led Video B with the young leader came out on top across all metrics for their organic audience in terms of reach, average watch time, number of engagements, shares and saves.

Emails: Donor-centric Video A with the charity voice resonated more strongly with WaterAid's warm supporter base, with the charity voice generating 1,366 signatures (54%) to the young leader's 1,174 signatures (46%).

Digital paid ads: Locally-led Video B came out on top for most metrics across their audience. Interestingly, the young leader's video performed better with a female audience, with 60% of females taking action as opposed to 40% of males. Meanwhile, the video with the charity voice seemed to have a more even gender split of 52% female to 48% male.

Maintaining identical scripts ensured message integrity and allowed for valid comparison.

FINDINGS: WHAT RESONATED WITH THE BRITISH PUBLIC?

Consistent with DEL's research, the locally-led video featuring Barkat Saïda Matazaky performed better across most social and paid channels, especially with younger and female audiences. This indicates that audiences respond to authentic, peer-to-peer voices when introduced through relatable storytelling and action-oriented framing. However, the donor-centric video performed better with WaterAid's warm email audience, echoing DEL's insight that familiarity and trust still influence response among existing supporters.

PROCESS LEARNINGS: WHAT SUPPORTED OR LIMITED THE TEST

Maintaining identical scripts ensured message integrity and allowed for valid comparison.

For the email tests to warmer audiences, trust and familiarity may have affected the outcomes as they would have received emails from Tim Ingram (the donor voice) before. Future tests should control for messenger recognition.

CONCLUSION

Frontline workers and communities they work with are the best messengers to communicate 'Shift the Power' approaches to colder audiences, while the donor voice resonated more strongly with WaterAid's warm audience of subscribed supporters.

The results strongly support the DEL finding that locally-led messengers are effective at motivating new and younger audiences, while established charity voices still hold sway with existing supporters. This highlights a dual-messenger approach using community voices for reach and inspiration, and organisational spokespeople for reassurance and conversion.

WHAT'S NEXT?

The genders and ages of the messengers may also have affected the level of engagement, so in the next test WaterAid plans to test email videos and sign offs against their usual internal signees, and also test similar genders to reduce the variables.

The supporters' age may be a factor in how they respond to the messenger. The social media campaign was targeted at 18-44 years, and WaterAid found that younger audiences responded better to Video B in Barkat Saïda Matazaky's name, a young leader/author. They plan to extend the paid advertising test to older cold audiences.

Although WaterAid's mailing list covers all ages, a large part of their supporter base falls in the 55+ age group, and the locally-led video was not successful for warm emails. They plan to continue to test how they personalise and communicate with different segments of supporters and audiences.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Communications approach:

- **General considerations on representation.** Supporters' age and gender may be a factor in how they respond to the messenger.

Organisational process:

- **Organisation-wide goals.** Set shared goals across teams to influence public attitudes: while the organisation is very keen internally on ensuring representation, the public might be in a different place.
- **Promote internal sharing and learning** to build capacity and alignment. Collaboration between the content team and other stakeholders is key to align representation policies and fundraising goals.

> **"What we need to reflect on is the channels we use, who are on those channels, and probably do a little bit of an education piece with our current supporters... [We also need to] look carefully at who will be the next generation of supporters, and how they will receive this type of communication."**

TEN TOP TIPS FOR SHIFTING NARRATIVES

Are you interested in shifting your narrative to reflect a more locally-led and decolonised approach? The seven INGOs that participated in the Comms Lab offer their key recommendations for organisations to get started:



COMMUNICATIONS APPROACH

1 TRUST YOUR SUPPORTERS

They're ready for fresh, progressive narratives. Don't underestimate their appetite for inclusive, authentic storytelling.

2 CONNECT WITH LIVED EXPERIENCE

To deepen engagement, choose themes that relate to people's everyday realities, like mental health or the power of community.

3 KEEP IT SIMPLE AND CONSISTENT

Don't overcomplicate. Focus on one clear message and consistently communicate it across channels. Simplicity supports repetition and learning.

4 SEGMENT YOUR AUDIENCES

Create well-defined audience segments. Understand variation in response and use appropriate channels for each group.

5 INVOLVE PARTNERS MEANINGFULLY

Centre local voices and frontline partners from the start. This builds authenticity and strengthens the message.

ORGANISATIONAL PROCESS

6 UNDERSTAND INTERNAL CULTURE

Map out your organisation: who are your blockers and your champions? Build internal momentum around shared goals, particularly with communications and fundraising.

7 COLLABORATE EARLY AND OFTEN

Work hand in hand across functions, critically building collaboration between communications, fundraising and other relevant colleagues from the start. Co-create goals and reduce internal blockers through shared ownership.

8 START SMALL, TEST OFTEN

Think of it as a series of small experiments, not one big campaign. Iterate, learn and build over time. The quality of engagement can be higher even with lower initial donations.

9 BACK IT WITH EVIDENCE

Use clear controls and metrics – impressions, engagement, donations – and tailor reporting to what persuades different internal teams.

10 BE BOLD AND KEEP SHARING

Each test is an opportunity to learn and engage with audiences. Share learning across organisations, stay connected, and build a culture of courage and collaboration.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Across the Comms Lab, a clear set of learnings has emerged about how UK audiences respond to locally-led communications - and what this means for engagement, fundraising and organisational culture. Taken together, the findings point to a significant shift: **authentic, hopeful, dignity-focused storytelling that centres local leadership not only strengthens public trust, but can also support strong fundraising outcomes.**



UK AUDIENCES VALUE AUTHENTICITY, DIGNITY AND LOCAL LEADERSHIP

A consistent pattern across the findings shows that messengers rooted in local expertise - frontline workers, community leaders and people with lived experience - build stronger trust and emotional connection than traditional charity-led narratives.

- Comic Relief, Plan, WaterAid and Save the Children all found that frontline or community voices often outperformed donor-centred or HQ-led content, especially among new, younger and more diverse audiences
- Where traditional donor or organisational voices did perform better (e.g. WaterAid and Christian Aid warm audiences), this was linked to *existing familiarity*, rather than a rejection of locally-led perspectives
- Celebrity or talent involvement can add value when used to *endorse* rather than dominate (e.g. Comic Relief)
- ADD International, Age International and Comic Relief found that language emphasising *agency, skills, contribution and dignity* outperformed traditional deficit-based appeals

Overall, audiences responded positively to peer-to-peer, relatable stories, especially when they emphasised agency, problem-solving, and shared challenges such as mental health. There is a warm reception for narratives that reinforce humanity, partnership and dignity instead of crisis-driven or deficit-based framing.

LOCALLY-LED STORYTELLING IS COMPATIBLE WITH, AND CAN ENHANCE, FUNDRAISING OUTCOMES

Throughout the tests, the concern (often used as an argument to maintain the current approach) that inclusive, partnership-based messages might undermine fundraising strategies did not hold. Most organisations reported test results equal to or better than their benchmarks.

- Save the Children found that locally-led ads reached wider audiences and generated higher-quality gifts, suggesting stronger long-term fundraising potential
- Plan and Comic Relief saw that stories showing community agency and frontline professionalism drive both emotional resonance and confidence in impact
- ADD International and Age International found that their audiences appreciated inclusive, dignity-driven messaging and felt it aligned with the organisation's values

The findings show that dignity-led, capacity-focused narratives can fundraise effectively, particularly when paired with clear calls to action and reassurance about impact. This reflects broader DEL research showing that UK audiences increasingly value effectiveness, continuity and sustainability - and see these more clearly in stories led by local actors.



Image: ADD International

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WIDER DEVELOPMENT NARRATIVE

The Lab's findings support a wider shift across the development sector away from dependency-based frames and towards partnership, justice and shared humanity. By showing that UK audiences respond positively to stories of agency and collaboration, this work helps redefine what "international development" looks and feels like to the public. It suggests that organisations can be braver: centring dignity, shared problem-solving and mutual benefit in their storytelling can strengthen both trust and engagement.

INTERNAL CULTURE CHANGE IS ESSENTIAL FOR INNOVATION

All of the organisations participating in the Comms Lab shared that successful experimentation required teams working in sync and having confidence to try new things:

- A culture of "permission to experiment" is key
- Building shared objectives between teams allows innovation to feel safe
- Storytelling aligned with organisational values strengthens internal confidence and external consistency
- Collaboration between the fundraising and communications teams was critical

Shifting external narratives requires parallel internal shifts: greater cross-team partnership, greater trust in local voices, and greater willingness to test and learn.

CONCLUSION

These findings challenge a long-held assumption that ethical storytelling and effective fundraising pull in opposite directions. The evidence now shows they can reinforce one another.

"Can we communicate about development in ways that truly reflect equality, partnership and local leadership and still connect with and inspire the British public?"

Taken together, the Shifting the Power Comms Lab results and DEL insights point towards a resounding **YES:**

- Locally-led narratives are not just ethically stronger; they are strategically effective
- Different audiences may need different messengers, but authenticity throughout is vital
- Fundraising excellence and inclusive storytelling can reinforce one another, not compete

ARE YOU READY TO SHIFT YOUR NARRATIVE?

We hope that the research, case studies, and insights from the Shifting the Power Comms Lab can unlock, provoke and inspire conversations about how you can try out new communications approaches in your organisations, both internally and externally. We encourage you to be bold and brave, and adopt an experimental mindset. When testing out a new approach, you will not know whether it will be successful or effective, but whatever happens, you will learn more about your organisation and what works with your audience. You can then use this learning in your next test. For more information or support, please feel free to reach out to:

- **Comic Relief:** fundinginfo@comicrelief.com
- **Development Engagement Lab:** jennifer.hudson@ucl.ac.uk and d.e.hudson@bham.ac.uk
- **Impact Works Associates:** matt@impact-works.co.uk



WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO BE BOLD AND BRAVE, AND ADOPT AN EXPERIMENTAL MINDSET.

ANNEXES

The full 'Shift the Power: What Do The British Public Think' audience insights (2023 and 2025) are available via the links below. This research was commissioned by Comic Relief and carried out by the Development Engagement Lab.

Scan to view

ANNEXE 1

or visit
comicrelief.com/insights2023

Scan to view

ANNEXE 2

or visit
comicrelief.com/insights2025



Image: Comic Relief

