Human Interest Stories

Guidelines and Tools for Effective Report Writing

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American Red Cross

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Contents

Preface

Monitoring and evaluation (M&E) are core responsibilities of CRS and American Red Cross program managers and help ensure quality in programming. The *Human Interest Stories* module is one in a series of M&E training and capacity-building modules that the American Red Cross and CRS have agreed to develop collaboratively under their respective Institutional Capacity Building Grants. These modules are designed to respond to field-identified needs for specific guidance and tools that did not appear to be available in existing publications. Although examples in the modules focus on Title II programming, the guidance and tools provided have value beyond the food-security realm.

Our intention in producing the *Human Interest Stories* module is to provide readers with a document that helps them to understand better how human interest stories can be used to enhance or complement current program evaluation tools. As this is a new area for most field practitioners, the manual focuses on the definition of human interest stories, how they can be used, and what needs to be done to identify, document, and disseminate effective stories. The manual also offers step-by-step guidance on the who, what, why, when, where, and how of writing and communicating human interest stories, with specific suggestions for organizing information.

Please send comments on or suggestions for this module to m&efeedback@crs.org.

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Acknowledgements

Acronyms

AIDS   Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome

CRS   Catholic Relief Services

DAP   Development assistance program

DIP   Detailed implementation plan

FAM   Food Aid Management

FFP   USAID's Office of Food For Peace

HIV   Human Immunodeficiency Virus

M&E   Monitoring and evaluation

MYAP   Multi-year assistance program

NGO   Nongovernmental organization

PLWHA   Person living with HIV and AIDS

PVO   Private voluntary organization

SOW   Scope of work

USAID   United States Agency for International Development

Glossary

Anecdote is a short personal account of an incident or event.

Aperture is the opening in the lens that controls how much light hits the camera's image sensor and is one way that a camera regulates exposure.

Artificial light is light from a manmade source and is usually restricted to studio photo lamps and domestic lighting.

Beneficiary is a person who benefits from the private voluntary organization (PVO) program. Direct beneficiaries are those whose involvement in activities leads to improved program results measured via outcome indicators. In this manual, the term beneficiary has been replaced by participant.

Good practice is a technique or methodology that, through experience and research, has proven to reliably lead to a desired result.

Bias is the extent to which a measurement, sampling, or analytic method systematically underestimates or overestimates the true value of an attribute.

Depth of field is a means of describing the area of a photograph that is in focus. A photograph that shows the area close to the camera and things far away all in good focus is said to have a large depth of field.

Development assistance program (DAP) is a Title II program that is approved by USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP) to operate for more than one year (usually between three and five years). The DAP can be funded with a combination of Title II emergency and non-emergency resources or only non-emergency resources over the life of the activity. After FY06, DAPs were replaced by MYAPs (see below).

Human interest story is a type of story that is concerned with the activities of a few identified people. It is told as the "story behind the story" and that it shows the personal story behind a larger story affecting many people.

Lead is the introductory section of a story, particularly in journalism.

Lesson learned is a clear and substantive finding on a specific issue based on data, observations, and evaluation. It illustrates a strategy, technique, principle, process, or activity that should be followed in the future. Lessons learned are well documented (not anecdotal) and backed up by clear qualitative and quantitative evidence.

Multi-year assistance program (MYAP) is a Title II program that is approved by USAID/FFP, to operate for more than one year (usually between three and five years) as of FY06. MYAPs can be funded with a combination of Title II emergency and non-emergency resources or only non-emergency resources over the life of the activity.

Natural light photography is defined as when a photographer uses only available light and does not use an additional external light source. Usually this creates a natural atmosphere in a photograph.

Qualitative data is a general term given to evidence that is text based rather than numeric in representation. These kinds of data result from attempts to capture participants' experiences in their own words, through (semi-structured) interviews, participant observations, and documents that may be analyzed from a variety of perspectives. Qualitative data consist of detailed, in-depth descriptions and analyses of situations, people, events, interactions, and observed behaviors, and direct quotations from people about their experiences, attitudes, beliefs, and thoughts.

Quantitative data are observations that are represented in numerical form. Examples include the number of training workshops conducted, the number of people trained, the number of food-insecure households in a district, and project participants' attitudes about a certain subject. All of these can be expressed as numbers, as amounts, or as degrees. Quantitative data can be analyzed with statistics, both descriptive and inferential. Quantitative data may come from secondary data sources such as facility-based records, formal tests, standardized observation instruments, and project records.

Portrait shot is photography in which a person is the subject of the photo.

Safety net is a system of providing resource transfers to low-income and other vulnerable individuals and populations who are unable to meet basic needs for survival and human dignity. Individuals may be unable to meet these needs due to an external shock, such as a natural disaster or war, or due to socioeconomic circumstances, such as age, illness, disability, or discrimination.

Triangulation is the diversification of perspectives that comes about when a set of issues is investigated by a diverse multidisciplinary team, using multiple tools and techniques, with individuals and groups of people who represent the diversity of the community that is the subject of the investigation.

USAID/Food for Peace (FFP) Title II Program is the provision of Public Law 480 (PL480) that provides food aid and cash resources for overseas programming to address emergencies, alleviate hunger, and promote economic development.

Executive Summary

Purpose of the Module

The primary audience for this module is PVO field practitioners who are responsible for either implementing or managing the story-writing process for both donor and privately-funded projects. Whether the reader is directly engaged (i.e., collecting the data and writing the stories) or managing the process (i.e., overseeing the author), certain steps must be taken to ensure a high quality and accessible final product.

In fiscal year 2003, USAID's Office of Food for Peace (FFP) requested that short narratives of Title II activities and impacts be included as part of annual results reports (Food Aid Management 2006). In response to this request, the Food Aid Management (FAM) project's Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Working Group addressed the need for guidance on how to write clear and consistent human interest stories by developing the *Success and Learning Story Writing Package*. Since this document was produced, private voluntary organizations (PVOs) have been using human interest stories for a variety of purposes, including results reporting, evaluations, and fundraising.

The co-authors of this module have outlined a seven-step process for developing human interest stories, based on their experience using such stories in a final evaluation of a development assistance program (DAP) proposal. The steps are as follows:

⇨ **Step 1: Select the right type of human interest story**

⇨ **Step 2: Determine the story focus**

⇨ **Step 3: Write a scope of work, identify a team, and draft an action plan**

⇨ **Step 4: Select sites and participants**

⇨ **Step 5: Gather the information needed**

⇨ **Step 6: Write the story**

⇨ **Step 7: Share the stories**

Section I provides overall background for human interest stories, including the definition, different types, and why and how they can be used by PVOs. Section II describes each one of the seven steps in detail in terms of:

- Why the step is important for developing human interest stories
- What needs to be done to prepare for and undertake that step
- Who should be responsible for the step
- How the step will be accomplished.

The annexes provide references to cited documents as well as useful examples and tools.

Understanding Human Interest Stories

Learning Objectives

This section aims to clarify readers' understanding of what is meant by human interest stories and to demonstrate why and how such stories can be used.

In the context of private voluntary organization (PVO) projects, human interest stories document the experiences of individuals who are affected by those projects.

> **This section covers how to:**
>
> ✓ Define human interest stories and distinguish among the different types of such stories
>
> ✓ Identify the potential uses of human interest stories
>
> ✓ Use recommended criteria to determine which type of human interest story best fits the program's needs

What Are Human Interest Stories?

Human interest stories are concerned with the activities of a few people. In the context of private voluntary organization (PVO) projects, human interest stories document the experiences of individuals who are affected by those projects. Such stories personalize the successes and challenges and emphasize the human aspect of a PVO's work.

For PVOs, there are two types of human interest stories: the success story and the learning story (Food Aid Management [FAM] 2006). A success story describes what, when, why, where, and how a project has had a positive impact on an individual's life. A learning story, however, focuses on an individual's response to challenges arising out of a project, how these challenges were addressed, and what was learned from the experience.

> **A success story** focuses on a project's positive impact on an individual's life in his or her own words.
>
> **A learning story** focuses on the lessons learned by an individual in the context of positive or negative project experiences.

The distinction is important because the steps for developing each type of story can differ in practice. Consequently, an important first step is choosing which type of story will be more relevant to the selected program. Section II discusses the criteria for selecting story type and implications for data collection and writing.

Why Should PVOs Use Human Interest Stories?

A variety of project documents, such as annual reports, progress reports, and evaluation reports, describe in narrative and numerical form the successes and challenges that have been faced by individuals targeted by the project. Human interest stories provide a unique opportunity to complement other M&E data collection techniques by focusing on individuals' personal reflections. For example, while a final evaluation might focus on overall project successes and challenges in increasing literacy rates among members of a targeted community, a human interest story would complement this information by describing how being able to read and write has had an impact upon an individual's life. Human interest stories focus on the particular in contrast to a more general account of change.

Such stories respond to a growing desire by donors for this kind of information. For example, in 2003, USAID/FFP requested that short narratives of Title II activities and impacts be included as part of annual results reports.

How Can These Stories Be Used?

Human interest stories can be used in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes, as follows:

- To complement existing M&E data collection tools by providing an individual perspective of a PVO's project
- To raise awareness of specific development issues through media campaigns
- To respond to specific donor-driven reporting needs.

For these reasons, it is important to draw up a dissemination plan as part of the process of developing human interest stories (see step 7, below).

Developing Human Interest Stories

Learning Objectives

This section provides detailed guidance on writing human interest stories, from the initial planning to data gathering and writing the final document.

Deciding which type of story is required—one with a focus on success or one on learning—is an important first planning step.

This section covers how to:

✓ Identify the criteria for determining what type of human interest stories are relevant for a program's needs

✓ Define what type of information is necessary to write the story

✓ Outline the steps required to develop a human interest story

✓ Identify criteria for determining the story's subject matter

✓ Develop or modify semi structured interview guides for gathering data

✓ List what actions to take and what to avoid when conducting interviews and taking photographs

✓ Draft high quality human interest stories

✓ Prepare a dissemination plan

Step 1: Select the Right Type of Human Interest Story

Deciding which type of story is required—one with a focus on success or one on learning—is an important first planning step. First, answer the following questions:

- Who is the primary audience?
- What is the purpose of the human interest stories?
- Is it better to highlight success or to highlight learning?

The first question concerns the target audience for the stories. Will the stories be geared towards current or potential donors? Are these donors public or private? Public donors may have a specific format for human interest stories, whereas stories geared towards private donors will need to follow agency guidelines, if they exist.

The second question focuses on how the target audience will use the stories. In other words, will they be part of the ongoing M&E report system or more oriented to agency marketing needs? Will the stories focus on the individuals participating in a current project or on a broader development issue for which the agency is seeking funding?

The third question is related to the first two. It depends on the country office's and the donor's needs. Current donors might want to see the lessons learned, whereas future donors might be more likely to have interest in the successes that have been achieved.

Answers to the above questions will help the organization to develop the dissemination plan (see step 7, below) that is an important part of the process for obtaining the most added-value from the human interest stories.

Step 2: Determine the Story Focus

Be clear at this stage about the story scope and focus to ensure that the final product is useful to those commissioning the story.

Once the decisions are made as to how the human interest stories will be used, the primary audience, and the story type, the next task is to determine the story focus. Be clear at this stage about the story scope and focus to ensure that the final product is useful to those commissioning the story. For example, say the program is a USAID/FFP-funded Multi-Year Assistance Program (MYAP) that is in its third year of project implementation; the programming sectors are health (maternal and child health), agriculture (natural resource management and cash crop marketing), and safety net programming. Based on a discussion of the criteria outlined above, a decision is made to include human interest stories as part of the midterm evaluation (i.e., the purpose) for USAID/FFP (i.e., the primary audience). However, there were a lot of implementation issues in the first project year that have affected progress to date. The decision is made to make story focus be on how the project participants have addressed these challenges, and it will be a learning story. However, the focus needs to be narrower. At a minimum, will the stories include all sectors or just a subset? In other words, should the stories concentrate on health or agriculture activities, or linkages between the two? Should the stories focus on specific project indicators or on individual experiences that were not captured by the indicators? By making these decisions, the story focus will be clearer and the program can move on to the next step.

Step 3: Write a Scope of Work, Identify a Team, and Draft an Action Plan

While human interest stories can be used for evaluation and non-evaluation purposes, many of the planning steps are similar to those taken for an evaluation.

To write effective human interest stories, proper planning is critical. In *Preparing for the Evaluation: Guidelines and Tools for Pre-Evaluation* (2006), the authors outline the steps involved in preparing for an evaluation for a development project or grant. While human interest stories can be used for evaluation and non-evaluation purposes, many of the planning steps are similar to those taken for an evaluation. This module proposes the following planning steps to develop human interest stories:

- Draft a clear scope of work (SOW)
- Identify the staff and consultant(s) to be involved
- Develop a draft action plan.

Draft a clear SOW: Writing the SOW is a time-consuming task that is frequently neglected, but must be built into the planning process for human interest stories. A great deal of guidance already exists on how to write general and evaluation-specific SOWs. Rather than repeat this information, this module simply highlights the specific components of a SOW relevant to human interest stories.

Whether the stories will be written by an internal staff member or a consultant, the SOW should clarify the program's expectations in developing such stories, the deliverables and final product, and the specific responsibilities of the individual managing and implementing the story-writing process.

A good SOW should include the following components:

- A brief overview of the program, project, or development context (if the story will be used to raise awareness of an issue)
- The purpose of the human interest stories (evaluation, fundraising), the type of human interest stories, the target audience, and how the human interest stories fit into the broader evaluation process
- Major issues and questions that the human interest stories should address (proposed focus)
- Suggested data-gathering methodology (e.g., observation, semi-structured interviews)
- Explicit reference to the need for respecting the security, dignity, and self-worth of individuals being interviewed and photographed
- A list of key documents that the country program will provide
- Schedule of deliverables and place of performance
- Suggested technical expertise for the human interest stories writer

- Format for the stories
- A plan for sharing the stories.

Tools & Resources

Resources for Developing Human Interest Stories

The specific SOW components will differ according to the story purpose and the target audience. For example, if the stories are being used as part of a midterm or final evaluation, then the SOW should include the broader evaluation objectives and highlight the ways in which the story authors will fit into this process.[1]

Annex II provides a sample SOW for a human interest story writer as part of a Title II final evaluation. For more detailed information on preparing and finalizing a SOW for program evaluations or technical assistance, refer to McMillan and Willard (2006) and Norem and McCorkle (2006).

Identify the staff and consultant(s) responsible for managing and executing the process: A critical decision to be made at this stage is whether to engage someone from outside the organization to lead and execute the human interest stories process or whether to use an internal staff member. Many factors need to be considered in making this decision, including donor expectations, the country program's experience, and the kind of expertise available in the country and the region. The technical qualifications of the person responsible for the stories will depend on the story purpose and target audience. Ideally, the person who will be responsible will have a balance of skills in program evaluation and photojournalism. The latter may be particularly relevant since the stories should ideally complement—rather than substitute for—other data collection processes.

Develop a draft action plan for executing the process: Once the SOW is finalized and the person(s) identified, the country program should develop an initial action plan for the process. This plan should provide detailed information on the logistics, the estimated number of person-days required for each task, the staff members assigned to the process, and recommendations for site visits and interviewee selection. While the plan may be modified during implementation, it will provide an overall framework for the process and can help to identify potential pitfalls in advance.

A sample action plan appears in table 1, below. Note that some of the previous steps (writing the SOW, identifying the person(s) responsible) are included in this table, in addition to steps that will be addressed in the following sections.

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1 Most final evaluations use the main evaluation SOW as the basis for hiring all team members. If human interest stories are part of a broader final evaluation, it is recommended that the country program develop an individual SOW for the human interest story team member.

Table 1: Sample Action Plan to Develop Human Interest Stories

What?	Why?	Who?	Where?	How much time?
SOW drafted and approved, internal and external persons identified	To clarify expectations and roles and responsibilities of persons involved in the process	Relevant PVO office	Country program	2 days
Draft interview guides for human interest stories provided to country program	To allow for efficient planning and sufficient feedback on the data collection process	Human interest stories writer (internal or external)	Consultant's place of residence or country program	2-3 days
Review of draft interview guides	To ensure that guides are finished prior to field visits	Human interest stories writer, relevant PVO staff, and partner staff	Country program	2 days
Site and participant selection, logistical planning for site visits	To ensure that sites and participants are feasible and are chosen to respond to the purpose and type of stories and target audience	Relevant PVO field office, partners, and human interest stories writer	Country program	1 day
Pretest interview guide	To ensure that the guide and photographs collect the necessary information and are culturally and ethically appropriate	Human interest stories writer, PVO staff member assigned to follow the process, and PVO partner staff	Selected sites	1 day
Data collection for human interest stories	To collect necessary qualitative and quantitative data for the stories	Human interest stories writer, PVO staff member assigned to follow the process, PVO partner staff, and other team members (if part of an evaluation)	Selected sites (the specific number will depend upon the purpose of the stories)	5-7 days
Participatory analysis of results and selection of key stories	To build capacity among PVO and partner staff in understanding the data gathered for writing the human interest stories	Human interest stories writer, PVO and partner staff, and other team members (if part of an evaluation)	Country program	2 days
Draft human interest stories prepared, dissemination plan finalized, and debriefing conducted	To gather feedback on the quality and content of the stories, and on the draft plan for sharing the stories	Human interest stories writer, PVO staff, and partner staff, and other team members donor (if appropriate)	Country program	2 days
Final human interest stories submitted to the country office	Final step in submission	Human interest stories writer	Country program	2 days

Step 4: Select Sites and Participants

Once the SOW has been developed and the responsible person(s) selected, the next step is to select potential sites and interviewees for the human interest stories. Site and participant selection should be a participatory process, conducted with program and partner staff.[2]

What is the best way to identify the most appropriate sites and interviewees—in other words, those who will match the purpose and focus of the stories? Targeting needs to occur at two levels:

- The geographic site, which can include villages, centers, institutions, or partner offices
- With interviewees, who can include program participants, partner or center staff, or non-program individuals and households.

Site selection: Choose the sites carefully. The total number of sites selected will depend upon the focus of the stories, the target audience, budgetary considerations, and geographic feasibility.[3] Suggested criteria for choosing sites include the following:

- **Geographic distribution:** Did different sites have vastly different program experiences? Should the sites be dispersed throughout the country or focus on a specific location? How long does it take to travel from one site to another?

- **Site representativeness:[4]** Is the site representative of the experiences of other communities or centers that are involved in the program or areas that have experienced a disaster? Or is the site unusual in any way that makes it of potential interest for a story? A potential example is a rural community that has a low level of adoption of agricultural techniques promoted by the project, but higher levels of agricultural production than other villages. Selecting this site might provide some interesting insights into project participants' experiences with the project.

- **Site relevance to the purpose and focus of the human interest story:** Has the site benefited from a development program or project? If so, for how many years? What types of activities are implemented at the site? How do these activities relate to the overall focus of the human interest stories?

- **Community participation:** Has the community or center been actively engaged in the planning and implementation of the project? Will they participate willingly in the data collection process?

2 If the stories are part of a midterm and final evaluation, site selection and interviewees should be selected in collaboration with other evaluation team members to avoid duplication of efforts and to ensure that the stories fit into the broader evaluation process.

3 In the authors' experience with human interest stories, visiting 5-7 sites in a 10-day period was feasible and provided a good mix of human interest stories for the final evaluation.

4 Representativeness is typically defined as "how accurately the sample represents the entire population (all people with the designated characteristics" (Fortune 1999).

- **Learning or success:** Are there individuals, households, or staff at the site who have demonstrated successes or lessons learned as a result of the project? Among these individuals, do some of them could have potentially interesting stories?

Responses to these questions will help to make initial site selections. For example, if the program decides that most geographic areas in the country have had similar experiences and project activities are fairly uniform across these areas, then the decision may be made to focus on one geographic location and on target sites that are unusual, e.g., sites that have encountered specific difficulties and overcome them. This could be distinct from human interest stories for a program with vastly different geographic locations and different types of activities implemented at each site. In this case, the country program might want to select sites dispersed throughout the country and those that are representative of the experiences of other communities.

Participant targeting: Potential interviewees for human interest stories can include project participants (individuals, households or committee members), non-project households, or PVO and partner staff. Project participants are most often the focus of human interest stories. That said, there are benefits to interviewing local leaders, PVO, and partner staff to:

- Provide background information on the primary subjects, their households, or the project
- Triangulate information
- Describe the experiences of other participants
- Be sensitive to cultural and ethical norms.

In the case of learning stories, in particular, the data collected from PVO staff and partners might be particularly helpful in triangulating information if a specific interviewee does not feel comfortable talking about project challenges.

As is the case with site selection, there is no rule about the total number of interviews per site. This will depend on different factors, such as the number of project participants at the site, the number of available interviewees, and the time available per site.

The following factors should be taken into consideration when selecting potential subjects for the stories:

- **Think about the purpose of the human interest stories.** To help you identify interviewees, make a list of all project participants at a site, how long they have participated in the program, and whether they have succeeded or experienced difficulties associated with the project. This list can be used for final selection.
- **Keep your focus on project-related findings.** For example, if your program is concentrating on success stories, it is important to choose

individuals or households who have experienced success *as a result* of the project.

- **Consider recommendations of community members to target participants**, such as village chiefs, committee leaders, or local project volunteers.
- **Recognize that the stories do not have to be representative of the wider population.** This is fine if the program has decided to develop stories about those with unique experiences.

Finally, while most human interest stories focus on an individual's experience with the project, stories about groups may also be appropriate. For example, if the project has included an element of collective action (e.g., a water users' committee), then it may be useful to interview the committee as a whole.

Step 5: Gather the Information Needed

Ethical considerations for the data collection process: As is the case with assessments and evaluations, consider whether the data collection methods used for human interest stories are likely to cause any physical or emotional harm. Harm may be caused, for example, by the following:[5]

> It is extremely important that those involved in writing human interest stories abide by current professional ethics, standards, and regulations regarding confidentiality, informed consent, and potential risks or harms to participants.

- Violating participants' right to privacy by posing sensitive questions or by gaining access to records which may contain personal data
- Observing the individuals' behavior without their awareness (concealed observation)
- Allowing personal information to be made public that participants would otherwise want kept confidential
- Not observing or respecting certain cultural values, traditions, or taboos valued by the participants.

It is extremely important that those involved in writing human interest stories abide by current professional ethics, standards, and regulations regarding confidentiality, informed consent, and potential risks or harms to participants. In general, the ethical concerns related to data collection for human interest stories are the same as those for any data collection process. Methods for handling these issues include the following:

- Ensure that ethically-based guiding principles are emphasized at all stages in the human interest story writing process
- Obtain informed consent before the interview begins or the photograph is taken, and verify that the subject feels comfortable in denying consent

> **The American Evaluation Association's Guiding Principles for Evaluators** is a useful reference when deciding how ethical considerations should inform human interest story writing. It is available at www.eval.org.

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5   These tips are included in Varkevisser, Pathmanathan, and Brownlee (2003).

- Wait to explore sensitive issues until a good relationship has been established with the subject
- Learn enough about the local culture to ensure you are respecting it during the data collection process.

These ethical considerations should be kept in mind while reading this section and when gathering data in the field.

Data collection for human interest stories—developing interview guides:
While a variety of qualitative data collection techniques can be used for human interest stories, practice has demonstrated that using available secondary information, observation, and interviews are often the most effective and efficient ways to obtain the necessary information. This module will focus on using semi-structured interviews and observation through photography.

Semi-structured interviews serve as the primary data collection technique for human interest stories. In this case, "semi-structured" refers to interviews that are loosely-structured and use open-ended questions. Open-ended questions permit free responses that are recorded in the respondent's own words. As human interest stories seek to capture an individual's personal experiences with the project, semi-structured interviews are well-suited to record these experiences.

Whether the country program has decided to focus on success stories or learning stories, the data collection packet for semi-structured interviews should include these four components:

- A checklist of basic project information
- A semi-structured interview guide for PVO and partner staff on project-specific information
- A semi-structured interview guide for PVO and partner staff on participant-specific information
- A semi-structured interview guide for the subject of the human interest story.

The details of each component are discussed below:

- **Checklist of basic project information** includes the project title, its start and end dates, the location and number of participants, the primary project activities, information on primary partners and the primary donor(s), and the project's financial value. For stories that are being developed for fundraising purposes, the checklist should include facts about the development or emergency situation in the country. This data can be obtained from available secondary sources or through semi-structured interviews of key informants, such as agency staff. The data can also be obtained during the planning phase.
- **A semi-structured interview guide for PVO and partner staff on project-specific information:** The guide should include questions about the general characteristics of the community or site, the type

of project activities implemented at the site, the targeting criteria for participants, and their involvement in the project. If the program is concentrating on success stories, then the guide should include questions on major project accomplishments or achievements. If the program is concentrating on learning stories, then the guide should include questions about challenges and lessons learned. This interview should take place prior to the interview with the human interest story subject.

- **A semi-structured interview guide for PVO and partner staff on participant-specific information:** As the subject of each human interest story will have a unique experience, it is important to collect information on participant or partner staff's project involvement. This guide is used to collect specific information about the participant's life, rather than on the project in general. Questions in the guide should focus on the individual's or household's personal situation (household demographic characteristics, their pre-project condition), the rationale for targeting this individual, and how the staff perceive the project's impact on the interviewee's life. This interview is designed to provide contextual information prior to the participant interview.

- **A semi-structured interview guide for the subject of the human interest story:** The primary goal of this guide is to obtain information about the individual's project experience. The questions should focus on the individual's story, including his or her personal situation; the individual's life prior to the project; his or her decision to participate in the project; and the ways in which the project has had an impact upon the individual's life. As this interview is the primary source of information for the stories, the interviewer's social skills, knowledge of the local context, and rapport with the interviewee will play an important role in ensuring that the appropriate information (relating to the purpose, focus, and type of story) is obtained (see section above).

As there will be multiple human interest story subjects and sites, it is important to tailor the semi-structured interview guide to the specific interviewee. A sample data collection packet is provided in annex II. For more detailed information on data collection techniques and tools, consult the evaluation references listed in annex I.

Ideally, the semi-structured interview guides should be developed by the person responsible for writing the human interest stories, in collaboration with other appropriate project stakeholders. It is important to field-test these guides as part of data collection planning.

Finally, since the data collection techniques for human interest stories are qualitative in nature and involve a small subsample of the target population, there is a chance of bias in the results. Bias can be minimized by combining these interviews with other data collection techniques (such as secondary data or observation) or conducting the interviews simultaneously with other data collection processes for the final evaluation or progress report.

Conducting Interviews

Here are some helpful tips for conducting interviews for human interest stories:

- **Be clear about the purpose of the interview and the study.** Give sufficient information to enable the potential interviewees to judge whether or not they would like to participate.

- **Obtain consent of the individual or household prior to the interview.** This can be either oral or written consent, based upon the local context. In addition, provide advance notice of the interview and its purpose to give potential interviewees the time to determine whether they would like to participate.

- **Create a supportive environment for the interview.** Think about how best to ensure a setting that encourages dialogue, e.g., in some cases this might mean allowing other people to listen, in other cases the reverse might be true.

- **Try to minimize the "social distance" between the interviewer and the interviewee.** This can include, but not be limited to, wearing culturally appropriate clothing, respecting body language and gender relations in the country, making the interviewee feel at ease, and not appearing to judge the information received.

- **Treat the interview as a conversation, rather than as a formal interview.** The interview guide should be used as an overall framework, allowing for follow-up questions about the individual's personal memories or feelings.

- **Consider the pros and cons of using a tape recorder.** Tape recording may be an enabling or a disturbing factor in the interview. If the interviewee accepts that that the interviewer will not be able to remember everything that is said, the tape recorder can allow the interviewer to participate more actively in the conversation and ensure that important information or quotations are not overlooked. If the interviewee hesitates or refuses, an alternate solution is to take notes.

- **Select a skilled translator.** Accurate translation is essential for obtaining direct quotations and allowing the interviewer to ask follow-on questions.

During the interview, observe the interviewee's physical appearance and the setting in which the interview takes place. These observations are an additional source of information for the stories.

Taking Photographs

The observation method for data collection involves systematically selecting and watching the behavior of the chosen subject(s). Observations can give additional and sometimes more accurate information on individual behavior than interviews. As mentioned above, informal observation can occur during the interview process, as the interviewer observes the subject and his or her surroundings. Photographs are a more formal tool for observation that can be used to complement the data collected via interviews and informal observations.

Although there are technical aspects to ensuring that a photograph is of high-quality, the distinction between a strong and weak photograph is subjective, to some extent. Usually the best photos are those that evoke emotion, are simple, and present the subject in a clear uncluttered way.

Suggested tips for taking photographs of human interest story subjects include:

- **Ask permission to take photos.** Even if the individual has agreed to be interviewed, he or she might not feel comfortable being photographed. It is important to be respectful of cultural and ethical norms, as per the guiding principles agreed on.

- **Create a comfortable atmosphere.** As is the case with the interview, put the subject of the photograph at ease. This can include involving the subject in making decisions as to when and where the photographs will be taken.

- **Look for a good location for the interview.** This decision will involve lighting, context, and comfort.

- **Try to think of a photo that will help to explain, clarify, or strengthen the participant's story.** This should assist in making decisions about the photograph location.

- **Find a neutral background** and note the color combination between the background and the subject's clothing. This will make the photos more balanced.

- **For portrait shots, adjust the settings to a large aperture if using the manual settings on the camera.** In photography, the aperture defines the size of the lens opening, which controls the amount of light reaching the film. For portrait shots, a short or narrow depth-of-field is often used, which is controlled by adjusting the aperture. If using an automatic camera, adjust the settings to portrait, which should automatically control the aperture. Try to focus on the eyes of the subject.

- **For portrait shots, opt for a 50-mm lens (minimum) or 135-mm lens (maximum).** A 50-mm lens corresponds to human eyesight, and therefore does not stray from reality. A longer lens flattens a picture. A 135-mm lens is the maximum for realistic portrayal of human features.
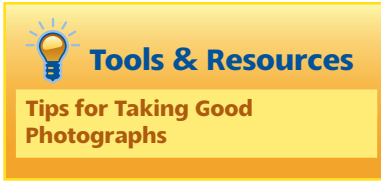
- **Try to use available light instead of a flash.** Where possible, try to use natural light, although flash lighting may be a helpful complement. Ideally, the light source should be from the side, rather than from the front or back, to ensure greater contrast.

- **Provide copies of the photos to the subjects.** Often the individuals being photographed are interested in receiving copies of the photographs. For this reason, be sure to note the contact details of the subjects so that photographs can be sent at a later date.

A former CRS photographer suggests a number of tips for good results when taking photographs.[6] His "big three" tips for good photography are:

- Get close to your subject

- Hold the camera horizontally or vertically

- Use the "rule of thirds"—place the subject in the left/right or top/bottom third of the frame.

See annex III for a full set of photography tips.

The photographs on the next page are examples of strong and weak photographs for human interest stories. See the text box, below, for an explanation of some of the visual elements that makes each photo work or not.

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6   Personal communication with David Snyder and Carolyn Fanelli, Communications and Learning Manager, CRS/Zimbabwe, August, 2007.

What Makes a Strong Photograph for a Human Interest Story? Two Examples

The photographs below were taken of Kecouta, a sesame farmer in southern Senegal. Kecouta was the subject of a human interest story as part of the final evaluation of a USAID Title II-funded sesame-growing project.

Photograph 1a—Weak:

After conducting the interview, the team asked permission to take photographs of Kecouta and his family. Initially, the entire family wished to participate, and a photograph was taken (photograph 1a). However, because Kecouta's story is about his son, in this instance it is better to focus the photograph specifically on these two subjects, rather than on the entire family. This will strengthen the connection between story and picture. Furthermore, the light source in this photograph is from the front, rather than from the side and the scene is cluttered, rather than having a specific composition. For these reasons, the photograph is weak.

Photograph 1b—Strong:

After the interviewers explained their interest in taking a photograph of Kecouta with his newborn son, Kecouta gave permission for the portrait shot (photograph 1b). As the story focus was on Kecouta and his newborn son, this photograph has a direct connection to the story. In addition, the photograph focuses on the father and son as it main subjects and does not include other distractions. From a visual perspective, the photograph location is the main bedroom of the house, which provides a neutral background. Light comes in through an open door, which provides a good contrast on Kecouta's face; a fill-in flash was also used to make the subject stand out more clearly. Finally, using a large aperture and a 50-mm lens captured some of Kecouta's surroundings. All together, these factors make this a strong photograph.

Step 6: Write the Human Interest Story

Follow the basic rules

Introduction: Writing human interest stories requires following many of the basic techniques used in journalism. Human interest stories should address what is known as the "five W's and the H"—who, what, where, when, why, and how. These questions should ideally be answered in the opening paragraph of the story, also known as the lead. Box 1 provides an example of an introduction that contains the five W's and an H. In this example, it is important to note that the introduction includes the "who" (eight-month-old Maimouna and her mother), "what" (child malnutrition), "where" (a recuperative feeding center in Senegal), "when" (September 2005), "why" (Maimouna's severe illness), and "how" (traveling over 100 km to reach the center). This introduction allows the reader to quickly understand the basic story facts and focus.

Box 1: Five W's and an H

"When Maimouna's mother, Dohali, brought her to the recuperative feeding center run by Caritas, in Kolda, Senegal, in September 2005, they had been traveling for four days. The eight-month-old had stopped breastfeeding, yet she continued to vomit what little there was in her stomach. She had been suffering from pneumonia, malaria and parasites for several weeks. But even though she was exhausted, emaciated and sick, Maimouna wasn't ready to give up."

Soft Leads and Anecdotes: In many human interest stories, a soft introduction works best. In addition to providing information on the five W's and the H, the introduction should place the story in a relevant context and background. A variation of a soft lead is the anecdote, which is a brief narrative of an event. Box 2 provides an example of an anecdote as the introduction of a human interest story. In this case, the anecdote tells of a specific incident in the subject's life, while simultaneously addressing the five W's and the H.

Box 2: The Anecdote

As Ba Sinjal and Mariama walked through the street on their way to the food distribution center in the town of Kaur, The Gambia, they drew the same attention that they drew every day. He was a blind man and his daughter was guiding him, both holding one end of his walking stick. However, on this day, they were taking the first steps that would make it possible for Ba to stop begging for food.

Once the "who, what, when, where, why and how" are included in the introduction, human interest stories should describe the project (or event) impact on the individual's life. In particular, the story should focus on the specific problem or challenges confronted by the individual, and the concrete ways in which the project helped the individual and his or her family to overcome or address these challenges.

While the structure and content of human interest stories can vary according to the story purpose, focus, and type, at a minimum stories should include the following information:

- Five W's and the H
- Specific condition or characteristics of the individual prior to participating in the project
- How, why, and when the individual decided to participate in the project
- Specific project activity(ies) in which the individual participated
- Specific positive project impact on the individual's life or challenge and lesson learned from the project
- General project information.

In addition to this general framework, some practical tips for writing human interest stories include the following:

What to Do

- Keep your target audience in mind when writing the story. The tone and focus of a story written for a final evaluation can be different from a story written for an internal PVO document.
- Focus on qualitative information, supported by quantitative data.
- Include direct quotations from interviewees, project and partner staff. Quotations can help to personalize the story.
- If staff are quoted, provide a brief background of their qualifications and experience.
- Include and explain details that will help non-technical readers understand any technical information provided (e.g., "a healthy person's height/weight ratio is 100 percent; anything below 80 percent is considered dangerous").
- Check the story's readability by asking a representative of the intended audience to proofread it.
- Provide context and perspective for the information provided. For example, if the story mentions literacy, compare this with average literacy in the country.
- Focus on the subject's personality, surroundings, and his/her appearance if relevant to the project's impact. For example, if the project specifically focuses on physically disabled groups, the story might provide some information about the individual's disability.

These characteristics can be enhanced, complemented, or replaced by photographs.

- Try to keep the story short and concise. Stories of approximately 500 to 750 words are sufficient to provide the necessary details and keep readers' interest. Some stories can be condensed to one paragraph.

What to Avoid

- Don't overdramatize information in the story, as this may lessen credibility.
- Don't make qualitative judgments about the individual's appearance, character, or experience as this might cause skepticism about the writer's objectivity.
- Don't use unfamiliar acronyms, jargon, or foreign words without explaining what they stand for.
- Don't portray local cultures or knowledge as backward or outdated.
- Don't dehumanize interviewees by using clinical terms such as rehabilitated, when simpler words can be used.

Two examples of human interest stories are provided below, with additional examples in annex II. These stories were written using the above tips. In each story, some aspects vary—such as the paragraph order, the length, and the number of details provided—based on the story focus and the target audience.

Maimouna's Story

A long journey for such a small child

When Maimouna's mother, Dohali, brought her to the recuperative feeding center run by Caritas, Catholic Relief Services' (CRS') partner, in southern Senegal in September 2005, the pair had been traveling for four days. The eight-month-old refused to eat and had stopped breastfeeding, yet she continued to vomit what little there was in her stomach. She had been suffering from pneumonia, malaria, and parasites for several weeks. But even though she was exhausted, emaciated, and sick, Maimouna was not ready to give up.

When Maimouna arrived at the feeding center, Sisters Marie Rose and Valerie measured her. Maimouna only weighed 7.5 lbs., well below the weight of many newborns in the United States and Europe. Even more revealing was her weight/height ratio. A healthy person's ratio is 100 percent, and anything below 80 percent is considered dangerous. Maimouna's ratio was well below 80 percent.

The Sisters cared for Maimouna as they had cared for other severely malnourished children over the years. Preparing a variety of meals using U. S. Agency for International Development (USAID) food commodities, including a wheat-soya blend, lentils, and corn and vegetable oil, the Sisters provided five meals to Maimouna throughout the day and treated her infections with necessary drugs. Three weeks after being admitted to the center, Maimouna was a new little girl. Although she was still very sick, she had gained weight, weighing approximately 9.68 lbs. She was not quite ready to go home, but she was making progress.

As her mother told CRS, "On the day that I arrived here, I thought that Maimouna was going to die. I cried the entire day. Now, Maimouna is better. She no longer vomits all of the time, she has started eating, and she has begun gaining weight. Maimouna has stopped crying." Through years of experience in recuperative feeding centers, CRS and Caritas have also learned from experiences such as Maimouna's: while providing food is necessary to save Maimouna's life, it is not sufficient to ensure that she will not fall ill again. So Caritas works with mothers such as Dohali to teach them how to prepare proper foods, to identify the signs of illness, and to learn more about health, sanitation, and childcare. Dohali has recognized this as an important part of the CRS program: "I have now learned how to prepare the proper foods for my daughter so that she doesn't get sick."

The CRS and Caritas team in Kolda are involved in a project funded by the USAID/Office of Food for Peace program. Activities include agriculture and food distribution for extremely vulnerable populations, including severely malnourished children. In Senegal, CRS is providing food rations to two recuperative feeding centers that serve populations in the Casamance region, which was affected by years of conflict. Based on client numbers to date, by the end of the five-year program, it is estimated that more than 5,000 people will have been served at these CRS-supported facilitates. As a result of former clients' sharing their experiences and what they have learned in their home communities, many others are also expected to benefit.

In these and many other ways, CRS works to improve the health and lives of many thousands of men, women, and children, like Maimouna, in communities all over Africa.

Catholic Relief Services is the official international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Catholic community. The agency provides assistance to people in over 90 countries and territories on the basis of need, not race, creed, or nationality. For more information, please visit www.crs.org.

Lamin's Story

Lift up your head

In 1998, after many years of working and traveling abroad, Lamin started feeling sick. After visiting a local doctor for testing, Lamin learned that he was HIV positive. When he learned of his HIV status, he said, "I was so sad. I wasn't married, I didn't have a child, and people were saying that AIDS kills." Lamin was sure that the illness called AIDS would kill him and take away his dreams of a family. So he hung his head.

But Lamin's doctor at the local clinic in Banjul, The Gambia, would not let him give up. "Lift up your head. You should not be ashamed. There are others who live with the disease and have been living with it for a long time." He explained to Lamin that there was a group called Santa Yallah that supported other Gambians living with HIV/AIDS. Lamin joined the group in 1999, when there were only 10 people. Today, the group provides support to over 500 Gambians, Senegalese, Sierra Leoneans, and Nigerians living with HIV/AIDS.

Santa Yallah is an association that provides care and counseling services to people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHAs) in Banjul, The Gambia. In a country where social stigma surrounding HIV prevents PLWHAs from being fully accepted by society, Santa Yallah serves as a safe haven for its members. The association's name is a clear statement: Santa Yallah means "Thank you, God" in the local language of Wolof, thereby transmitting a message of strength and courage to the community outside its walls.

Since those early years, Lamin has been instrumental in supporting the growth of Santa Yallah. He has not only spoken out about his HIV status, but also raised awareness in the local community about HIV/AIDS, served as the association's president and campaigned for access to anti-retrovirals for the association's members. Santa Yallah now provides a variety of services for PLWHAs and their families, including care and counseling, HIV/AIDS sensitization and awareness, advocacy, nutritional supplementation, home-based care services and skills training. As the association president, Lamin has been a positive and courageous force in the community, stating that "Although we are HIV+, it doesn't mean that our lives are over."

In addition to the psychosocial services provided to Santa Yallah's members, an important part of its program is its nutritional supplementation. Proper diet and nutrition are crucial for PLWHAs, as malnutrition and HIV/AIDS work in tandem. This means that the caloric and nutrient needs of PLWHAs increase as the disease advances. In many cases, PLWHAs are unable to work, reducing the income earned by the family. Therefore, PLWHAs' families not only have higher nutritional needs, but reduced incomes.

Through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)/Office of Food for Peace-funded Development Activity Program, Catholic Relief Services (CRS) provides Santa Yallah with a variety of commodities to support its nutritional program. These include wheat-soya blend, vegetable oil, lentils, and corn, which were specifically chosen to assist Santa Yallah's members in meeting their special nutritional needs. As Lamin explained, "When we receive the food, we share it with our families … the food commodities are good and are appropriate for the diets that our doctors' recommend." The CRS food not only helps Lamin to meet his own nutritional needs, but also helps him to support his family. CRS is providing a food ration to over 40 participants each month and institutional support to Santa Yallah. Based on participant numbers to date, by the end of the five-year program, many others are also expected to benefit.

In these and many other ways, CRS works to meet the needs of PLWHAs and the extremely vulnerable, like Lamin Ceesay, in communities all over Africa.

Catholic Relief Services is the official international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Catholic community. The agency provides assistance to people in over 90 countries and territories on the basis of need, not race, creed, or nationality. For more information, please visit www.crs.org.

Step 7: Share the Stories

Oftentimes a great deal of work goes into producing human interest stories, while relatively little time is spent sharing the finished product. This is unfortunate. Underlying this work is a desire that the stories be useful in some way. Step 7 is about being aware of the need and developing a dissemination plan for the stories.[7]

Developing a Dissemination Plan

As discussed in step 2, above, when choosing a story, one of the key questions concerns identifying the audience. It is vital to develop a dissemination plan that includes how and when human interest stories are to be shared. Good forward planning in this regard will significantly increase the usefulness and impact of the developed stories. This is done by working with primary audiences to plan for disseminating the human interest stories.

A dissemination plan can be as simple or complicated as needed.[8] The dissemination plan serves as a guide to ensure that all appropriate audiences receive the stories on a timely basis relative their needs. The plan can be amended as additional audiences are identified.

Discuss the dissemination plan with the Program Manager and, if one exists, the Communications and Learning Manager in your office to identify possible outlets. Any success or learning story will need to have appropriate approval before it is disseminated, and the person who distributes the story will need to be identified. A list of dissemination ideas are presented below.

Dissemination Avenues for Human Interest Stories and Sound Practices

What to submit: Just plain text and a photo (high-quality, .jpeg file) with a caption can be submitted to newsletters, Web sites, and so on. However, for sharing with donors, partners, or country office staff, follow the agency guidelines (or branding guidelines) to make a banner header with the agency logo, and use this template for all the stories and practices to standardize the product. (For donors, a cover letter with a compliments note from the country director or head of programs is also a good idea.) At the bottom of the page, list previous stories or practices that have been printed and an e-mail address where people can get these other documents. Sometimes the same story or practice can be shared with several different audiences—just keep in

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7 This section is based heavily on the work of Carolyn Fanelli, Communications and Learning Manager, CRS/Zimbabwe.

8 A very comprehensive template for a communicating and reporting plan is provided in Torres et al. (2005).

mind what sort of editing might need to be done to appeal to each audience. For example, within the country office, a specific project will not need to be explained, but it will need to be explained for a headquarters-based or an external audience.

Also consider sharing the list of dissemination opportunities below with partners that may have stories or practices to share. Of course, it should go without saying that stories and practices can be written up in collaboration with partners as well.

> **Follow these links to view four published CRS stories:**
> http://crs.org/zimbabwe/mpilo-clinic/
> http://crs.org/zimbabwe/goats-education/
> http://crs.org/zimbabwe/nzeve-youth/
> http://crs.org/zimbabwe/mavambo-trust/

Where to Share the Story or Practice

Internal audience

Share them with:

- **Country program staff**—Send them over e-mail, post them on bulletin boards, or present them at a learning event. This motivates more stories and practices to be documented and shared, facilitates internal information-sharing, and also gives kudos to the particular project(s) involved.
- **Region**—Link to the Regional Information Officer and appropriate technical advisor through the country director or head of programs
- **Headquarters**—Link to the communications staff, fundraising, marketing, web unit, and share with appropriate technical advisors through the country director or head of programs
- **Community**—Post on an appropriate agency community of practice knowledge space
- **Other arenas**—Look for other arenas where the story may be usefully posted.

Partners

Use e-mail, handouts at meetings, or the mail to share these stories and practices. If partners have a newsletter, let them know they can use the story and practice in their newsletter. If the success story is about a community, make sure to share it with that community too.

External

Donors: Donors often have their own global, regional, or thematic newsletters, and it benefits the donor's country mission to feature its project. Liaise with program manager at the mission, and, if there is one, the communications staff. For example:

- Norad and Sida have a Regional HIV/AIDS Team for Africa that publishes *Eyes on AIDS*: http://www.sida.se/sida/jsp/sida.jsp?d=427&a=1407&language=en_US.

- USAID has *Global Health News*, a bimonthly e-newsletter that provides subscribers with the latest news, developments, speeches, and resources from USAID's Bureau for Global Health: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/home/News/enewsletter/index.html.

- USAID also publishes *The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief* newsletter, a monthly update on the U.S. commitment to turn the tide against global HIV/AIDS from the Office of the U.S. Global AIDS Coordinator: http://www.pepfar.gov/press/newsletters/2008/99463.htm.

- USAID also has a "Telling Our Story" section on its Web site: http://www.usaid.gov/stories/index.html.

There are also in-country donor newsletters that may be interested in the story. For example, in Zimbabwe, DFID has a newsletter for its Protracted Relief Program.

United Nations: In some countries, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) publishes a monthly humanitarian update that includes one human interest story per issue. The report is combined with the reports from other countries for a regional version, which is posted on ReliefWeb.

The UN may host working groups on specific topics, and these are also a place to share stories and practices.

Other: In Zimbabwe, C-SAFE (Consortium for the Southern Africa Food Security Emergency), involving CARE, CRS, and World Vision, has both a Web site and a newsletter.

Check with your funding agency to see if they are working with other consortia that have newsletters.

Colleagues in Your Technical Area: There are many e-newsletters, e-forums, Web sites, and practitioner-focused journals that may be interested in publishing your story or practice.

Health

- Health and Development e-forums: Join an appropriate e-forum and post about the story or practice at: http://www.healthdev.org/cms/index.asp.

Children

- Better Care Network: Share lessons learned as well as publications at http://www.crin.org/bcn/.

- Viva Network forums: Share lessons learned as well as publications at: http://www.viva.org/?page_id=35.

- *Early Childhood Matters:* This journal looks at specific issues regarding the development of young children, from a psychosocial perspective in particular. It is published twice a year by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The journal articles are about 2,500 words. In addition, every issue has a theme. See http://www.bernardvanleer.org/publications and browse by series.

- *ChildrenFIRST*: This bimonthly journal is published in South Africa and focuses on issues affecting children and their care providers. Many articles are written by practitioners, and the tone is nonacademic. To view past issues, go to: http://www.childrenfirst.org.za/shownews?mode=cats&setref=1827.

HIV/AIDS

- HIV/AIDS Impact on Education Clearinghouse: Submit short lessons learned articles or publications at: http://hivaidsclearinghouse.unesco.org.

- *ICB HIV/AIDS and Nutrition Newsletter*: To submit photos and stories related to HIV/AIDS, Nutrition, and Health, contact Colette Powers at cpowers@worldvision.org.

Arts and development

- Art'ishake: For arts and development stories, go to: http://www.art4development.net/artishake.html.

Agriculture:

- *LEISA Magazine* (Low External Input and Sustainable Agriculture) http://www.leisa.info/index.php?url=index.tpl.

General

- Development Gateway communities: http://topics.developmentgateway.org/.

- *Monday Developments* is the biweekly newsletter of InterAction (the American Council for Voluntary International Action). It includes timely and relevant information on cutting-edge trends in development, global advocacy efforts, resources, and NGO news. For detailed writers' guidelines and an editorial calendar, go to: http://www.interaction.org/monday/guideline.html.

There are also academic journals that focus on rigorously-researched articles, but also sometimes accept case studies or shorter, practitioner-focused pieces.

For example, *Child Abuse Review* recently called for case studies. These can present opportunities for presenting sound practices in case study form.

Finally, if the article is posted online, or a more substantial publication is published, there are several ways to broaden its audience:

- *Youth InfoNet e-newsletter*: The focus is on youth reproductive health and HIV prevention.
  Go to: http://www.infoforhealth.org/youthwg/pubs/IYWGpubs.shtml.
  Send submissions to: youthwg@fhi.org.

- **Eldis** accepts research reports, working papers, discussion papers, conference papers, statistics, case studies, and policy briefings. It has a Web site and an e-newsletter. Go to: http://www.eldis.org.

- **CRINMAIL** accepts events and publications. It has a Web site and an e-newsletter. Go to: http://www.crin.org/.

- **Communications Initiative** has summaries of resources for communication practitioners, including publications and multimedia that support the use of communication as a tool for development.
  Go to: http://www.comminit.com/africa/soul-beat-subscribe.html.
  To include your material on this list, contact Deborah Heimann at dheimann@comminit.com.

- **AskSource**:
  http://www.ids.ac.uk/sourcesearch/cf/add/addresource.cfm.

- In southern Africa, hard copies of publications can be sent to the
  SAfAIDS resource centre at: http://www.safaids.net.

Annex I
References and Further Readings

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Annex II
Resources for Developing Human Interest Stories

A. Sample Scope of Work for a Human Interest Story Writer

I. Purpose

The purpose of this scope of work is to describe the responsibilities for a writer to develop human interest stories as part of a final evaluation of a private voluntary organization (PVO) United States Agency for International Development/Food for Peace (USAID/FFP)-funded Multi-Year Assistance Program (MYAP).

II. Goals and Objectives of the Human Interest Stories

The overall goals of the final evaluation are to assess the progress made toward meeting specific MYAP objectives, to evaluate the impact of the project's strategies and methodologies on food security of targeted populations, and to review the efficiency and success of the organizational structures and systems in place for the project.

The overarching final evaluation objectives are to:

1. Measure the achievement of project goals and strategic objectives (impact)
2. Identify the major lessons learned
3. Examine how well the project met the needs of different groups (disaggregated according to gender, age, and socio-economic status)
4. Determine the effectiveness of project organization and processes
5. Indicate potential project sustainability.

The human interest stories consultant will work within these overarching objectives.

The specific objectives are to:

- Collect data (i.e., interviews, photographs) on individuals who are being served by the Title II MYAP. In particular, data should be collected on the characteristics of the interviewees and the ways in which the project positively or negatively affected interviewees, and good practices, lessons learned, and unintended effects. Ensure that the successes and lessons learned captured in the stories are consistent with the data collected and findings of other final evaluation team members. Identify subjects whose stories illustrate final evaluation findings.

- Analyze the information and record it in individual human interest stories.

- Develop a dissemination plan for the stories that are written.

Working closely with PVO staff, partner staff, and the final evaluation team, the consultant will identify individual examples of how the identified project successes, challenges, strengths, and weaknesses that have impacted individual lives. The work will be undertaken in a manner that shows respect for the security, dignity, and self-worth of those people whose stories are being gathered, as per the American Evaluation Association *Guiding Principles for Evaluators.*[9]

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9   Available at: www.eval.org.

III. Proposed Methodology

The final evaluation will use a participatory process involving project participants at all levels— community, partners, and PVO staff—in evaluation design, information gathering, analysis, conclusions, and recommendations.

The first step is the **planning phase**. The human interest stories consultant will work with the PVO staff and final evaluation team to: clarify the human interest stories' objectives, refine the evaluation tools (i.e., checklists and semi-structured interview guides), identify appropriate sites and interviewees, and plan logistical arrangements.

The data collection techniques for the human interest stories should focus on available secondary sources, observation (photographs), and interviews. Existing information sources include, but are not limited to, the following documents: the MYAP proposal document and relevant progress reports, the midterm evaluation, the annual survey, and the commodity status reports. It is expected that the consultant will need to conduct semi-structured interviews and photography sessions with targeted interviewees to complement the existing data.

The second step of the human interest stories process will consist of the **fieldwork phase**, whereby information is collected in select sites throughout the country. In this phase, communities, partners, and targeted participants should be informed about the fieldwork purpose. The human interest stories consultant and other team members will act as facilitators in this process.

The third step is the **analysis and interpretation of the results phase**. The consultant will provide detailed written and visual (photographs) information on the interviewees, their experiences with the project, and illustrations of good practices and lessons learned that the project has identified. The draft stories and photographs will be presented to key PVO and donor staff and other stakeholders for validation and interpretation. The final draft will be provided to the PVO once the comments are reviewed and any necessary revisions are made.

Next is the **communications phase** where the emphasis is on communicating the human interest stories that were developed. The consultant will prepare a dissemination plan for sharing the human interest stories with the primary audience.

IV. Deliverables

The following items constitute the primary deliverables for the human interest stories consultant:

- Preliminary work plan, logistics plan, and detailed work schedule
- Draft and final checklists of data required and semi-structured interview guides for each sector
- Draft human interest stories and photographs
- Presentation of additional findings to PVO and partner staff
- Final human interest stories and photographs
- Dissemination plan to share the human interest stories.

V. Human Interest Stories Writer Qualifications

The human interest stories writer should have the following qualifications:

- An advanced degree and/or demonstrated experience in photography, journalism, or a related field
- Experience in PVO projects and evaluations, preferably in West Africa
- Demonstrated ability to effectively work in a team
- Demonstrated ability to prepare and present findings to groups
- Proven report writing skills
- Demonstrated functional capacity in both English and French required, with local language capacity desirable.

VI. Deliverables and Schedule

The final evaluation will be completed within four weeks. The proposed deliverables and schedule required for the successful completion of this scope of work are as follows:

Proposed Time in 2009	Activity	Location	Approximate Time
October 15	Background documents sent to consultant	Home country	
October 19	Initial action plan developed and draft checklists and semi-structured interview guides provided to PVO		2 days
October 23	Arrival in-country		
October 23-26	Review of scope of work, finalization of interview guides, selection of sites, and initial participant targeting	PVO office	2-3 days
October 26-31	Data collected at select sites throughout the country	Specific sites throughout the country	7 days
November 2	Participatory analysis of results with key stakeholders	PVO office	3-4 days
November 2-3	Human interest stories and photograph preparation	PVO office	2-3 days
November 5	Draft human interest stories, photographs, and dissemination plan for presentation to final evaluation team leader and other key stakeholders		

VII. Place of Performance

The place of performance will be the place of residence for document review and the finalization of the evaluation report (see deliverables and timeframe). The place of performance will be the country program for the data collection, analysis of findings, drafting, and presentation of the final human interest stories and photographs.

VIII. Key Working Relationships

Internal: PVO country representative and the management teams, respective PVO program managers, PVO administration and finance staff.

External: Key partner staff, governmental authorities, interviewees, USAID Mission staff, staff of international PVO partners.

IX. Contractual Relationship *[to be added]*

X. Contact Persons *[to be added]*

B. Sample Data Collection Packet for Human Interest Stories: Checklist and Semi-Structured Interview Guides

I. Checklist for Basic Project Information

Project name:_____

Donor name: _____

Project title: _____

Project start and end dates:_____

Total number of participants (direct and indirect):_____

Project location (communities, districts, regions, country):_____
_____

Food aid commodities used, how used, and amounts: _____
_____

Names (first names and surnames) of all individuals who contributed information for this story:
_____
_____
_____

Contact people (name, email address, and phone number of whom to contact if a question arises regarding information on this form):
_____
_____
_____

Reference documents (e.g., annual reports, related journal articles) – title, date, and location:
_____
_____
_____

Are local partners or other organizations involved? (Be sure to spell out acronyms.) List the partner names and locations.
_____
_____
_____

II. Semi-Structured Interview Guide on Project-Specific Information

Note to interviewer: These questions should be posed to CRS staff responsible for the project.

1. What are the project's strategic objectives and intermediate results?

2. Which of the strategic objectives does the human interest stories address?

3. What outputs or activities did the project undertake to achieve the strategic objective in question at this site?

4. What are the local socio-economic conditions at this site? For example:

   ▫ *For an agricultural project:* Is food security a problem in this area? If so, what type of food insecurity (chronic, seasonal, or transitory)? Who are the populations most affected? What types of crops are grown?

   ▫ *For health or safety net:* What are the most prevalent diseases in this community (HIV, malaria, typhoid)? Who are the affected populations? Are there health centers?

   ▫ *For education:* What are the literacy rates in this area? Is there a school at the site? If not, is a school nearby? How many children attend the primary school?

   ▫ *For microfinance:* Is a village bank or other lending institution located in this community? If not, how do households typically obtain access to credit?

5. What is the name and location of the site? (Community names, division, and so on)

6. What, in your opinion, are the major challenges that had to be overcome in relation to implementing this strategic objective? (Please relate them in terms of the results framework).

7. What lessons have you learned about the project? How have they changed the project's implementation? Are these lessons learned being applied at this project site?

8. What are the good practices of this project? Have they changed the project's implementation? Are these good practices being applied at this project site?

9. How will the good practices described here be made sustainable?

III. Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Participant-Specific Information

CRS/Partner Questions:

1. Who are the primary participants of the project at this site? (children, chronically ill, poor farm households, school-aged children, single mothers, and so on)?

2. Over the life of the project, how many direct participants are expected to benefit from the project at this site? How many indirect participants are expected to benefit?

3. What criteria were used to target this community or center? What criteria were used to choose specific participants at this site?

4. What are the household's primary livelihood strategies in this area?

5. In your opinion, what are the major challenges that participants at this site had to overcome to carry out the project activities?

6. In your opinion, what lessons have participants learned from the project? How have these lessons learned changed the way in which the project is implemented at this site?

7. In your opinion, what are the potential good practices developed at this site?
    (Note: Although good practices are carefully documented successful intervention techniques, the respondent's opinion about potential good practices is useful.)

    The questions below pertain to the specific subjects of the human interest stories:

8. What do you remember about the first time that you met this particular participant? In other words, what were your first impressions of this individual, including his/her actions, behavior or appearance?

9. When you first met this individual, did you inform him/her about the project? If so, did you encourage him/her to participate in the project? If not, how did he/she become involved in the project?

10. In your opinion, has this participant been an active participant in the project? If so, can you explain the ways in which he/she has participated?

11. In your opinion, how has the project affected this participant's life? For example, has the participant's nutritional status or income level improved? Has the participant used the information from trainings to improve his or her agricultural production or marketing?

IV. Semi-Structured Interview Guide for Human Interest Story Subjects

Note to interviewer: This guide is for interviewing the subjects of the human interest stories, focusing primarily on successes (rather than lessons learned). Prior to and during the interview, you should note any observations about the individual and his or her surroundings.

1. a. Could you please tell me your name and age?
    b. How long have you lived in this community? If you were born elsewhere, where you were born?
    c. Does your family live with you? If so, would you mind sharing the names of those family members you live with and their relationship to you?
    d. What is your primary occupation? What is your secondary occupation?

2. a. How long have you or your family participated in a CRS project?
    b. If more than one family member participates in the project, who is the primary participant in the project?

3. You've been participating in the project for ___ years now. Can you tell me a bit about why you first decided to participate in the project? Was there something unusual or unique about the day you decided to participate in the project?

4. What project-related activities have you or your family been involved in? For example, have you participated in trainings, attended meetings, or received inputs?

5. Can you tell me a bit about your life before the project?

    More specific questions might be the following:

    For a safety net project: Would you mind telling me how you came to have this disability? How has this disability affected you and your family? Have you been able to work with your disability? Has your family been able to work? Have you been able to meet your food, health and education needs?

    For a health project: Would you mind telling me how your child became sick? Was he/she sick prior to coming to the center? Prior to coming here, how did you treat him or her? Were you able to work or did you need to care for your child full-time? Have you been able to care for your other children?

    For an agricultural project: Would you mind telling me about your agricultural production prior to participation in the project? In other words, what crops did you produce? How many plots of land did you own? Did you use agricultural inputs? Was your agricultural production sufficient to meet your family's food needs? In general, how much (crop) did you produce? Do you remember what price you received when you sold it?

6. How has the project affected your life? In other words, what changes have you experienced as a result of the project? (This is an open-ended question and can be positive or negative.)

Interviewer: The follow-on questions will depend on the interviewee's answers to question 6, above. They can be directly related to specific project indicators, or related to other aspects in the individual's life that might not necessarily be captured by project indicators.

7. As a result of these changes, are there things you are doing that you couldn't do before? If so, what are they?

8. How do these changes make you feel?

9. You have mentioned a variety of things that have happened in your life as a result of the project. In your opinion, what is the most significant change in your life as a result of the project?

10. How do you think that your life would have been different if you hadn't participated in the project?

11. How would you suggest that the project be improved?

C. Human Interest Stories: Two Sample Stories

Ba Sinjal's Story

His pride made it hard for him to beg

As Ba Sinjal and Mariama walked through the street that day on their way to the food distribution center in Kaur, The Gambia, they drew the same attention as always. He was a blind man and his daughter was guiding him, both holding one end of his walking stick. On this day, they were taking the first steps that would make it possible for Ba to stop begging for food.

Two weeks' earlier, Ba's friend, the local tailor, had explained to him that there was a community-based program funded by Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and implemented through its local partner, Gambian Association for Food and Nutrition Assistance (GAFNA), that provided food assistance to disabled people in the community.

Ba had been blind for 15 years. Although his hands were strong after years of working in the field, the rest of his body was thin and emaciated, and his eyes were cloudy with cataracts. After losing his eyesight, Ba was forced to beg in the local market, as his family did not have the means to support him. In The Gambia, there are few social services or governmental programs to support the aged, handicapped, or mentally ill. In these cases, only the family can provide for such individuals. In a country where more than 60 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, this is a substantial burden on the household.

A few months after he was admitted in the program, Ba started to become more independent. People noticed that Ba was no longer begging when receiving CRS food. Community members started asking, "Where is Ba?" With CRS food, Ba was able to spend more time with his family. At the start, he didn't recognize the staff who were managing the program. As time went on, when he heard their voices in the street, he would call them by name and ask them about the project.

CRS and its partners in Kaur, The Gambia, are involved in a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Project activities include agriculture, food relief, and training in a variety of communities and health centers throughout the country. Community management committees provide monthly dry food rations of wheat soya blend, corn, lentils, and vegetable oil to the most vulnerable in the community, including those who are chronically ill or physically and mentally handicapped, and moderately to severely malnourished children. CRS is providing food commodities to approximately 10 community management committees throughout The Gambia. In the case of Kaur, the center provides a monthly food ration to over 600 participants over a 6-month period. Based on participant numbers to date, by the end of the 5-year program, it is estimated that more than 10,000 people will have received food commodities. As most participants also share the food with their family, many others are also expected to benefit.

In these and many other ways, CRS works to meet the needs of the most vulnerable, like Ba Sinjal, in communities all over Africa.

Catholic Relief Services is the official international humanitarian agency of the U.S. Catholic community. The agency provides assistance to people in 94 countries and territories on the basis of need, not race, creed or nationality. For more information, please visit www.catholicrelief.org.

Yai Saiye Panneh's Story

A little knowledge can go a long way

Before Yai Saiye joined the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) program in The Gambia in sesame production and marketing, she was only able to read and write a bit of Arabic. At her family farm in the village of Fas in the North Bank Division of The Gambia, surrounded by her children and grandchildren, Yai explains: "When I wanted to write a letter to a friend, I had to call someone to write my story. Now, thanks to the (CRS) literacy training, I am able to write my own letters, and I have some privacy." As a proud woman with a sense of authority, gentle eyes, and an easy smile, asking others for help wasn't easy.

Equally important, Yai Saiye is now able to calculate how much she is owed by traders for her sesame production. Although Yai Saiye and her family have been producing sesame for more than 20 years, for most of this time, they earned little money from their sesame harvest. Last year, she noticed that the price that a local trader was offering seemed a bit low for her 13.5 kilos (29.7 lbs). She was able to calculate the price herself per kilogram and noticed that she was owed more money.

Such skills have enabled Yai Saiye to increase her income from sesame production, an off-cycle cash crop in The Gambia that provides a much-needed income boost to subsistence production of rice, millet, and sorghum. In 2004, Yai Saiye earned over 3,000 Dalasis (approximately $120) from her sesame sales. While this appears small by U.S. standards, such extra income is crucial in The Gambia, where the per capita income is less than $350 per year. Yai Saiye has used this income to buy food for her family and to send several of her children and grandchildren to school.

The CRS agriculture program manager responsible for the sesame promotion program, Baboucar, remembers first hearing of Yai Saiye. "I had always heard about Yai Saiye and her leadership. She is very well-respected in the community and in her farmers' association, the National Association of Women Farmers (NAWFA). In fact, Yai Saiye was elected as a former secretariat member for the organization. Thanks to the adult literacy classes offered through the program, she was qualified for the position."

While the CRS sesame production and marketing program helps women farmers in The Gambia to increase their incomes from the production and sale of sesame, the adult literacy and capacity-building components of the program provide equally important—if sometimes less tangible—benefits. By allowing women to achieve basic literacy skills, the program not only enables women to participate more fully in the market, but to engage in other activities that would not have been possible. Including a literacy component for women was identified as a key need by women farmers and by CRS staff.

CRS and its partners in Fas, The Gambia, are involved in a project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) called the Development Activity Program. Activities in the Development Activity Program include agriculture, food relief, and training in a variety of communities and health centers throughout the country. CRS, through its local partner (NAWFA) and a network of local sesame-growers associations, support sesame farmers with adult literacy classes and production and marketing training to increase their incomes from sesame production and sales. CRS and NAWFA reach an estimated 20,000 sesame farmers throughout The Gambia. From the information-sharing among beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries and the increased enrollment of children in school, many others are also expected to benefit.

In these and many other ways, CRS works to meet the needs of poor literate farmers, like Yai Saiye Panneh, in communities all over Africa.

Aida Bayo's Story

Severely malnourished children get a second chance

Aida Bayo's big eyes stand out in stark contrast to her small face and body. Unlike her lively older sister, Ami, and her fussy younger sister, Zeinabou, Aida sits in the corner and observes the activity of her household compound in Kaur, a town located in the North Bank Division of The Gambia.

Although Aida seems quiet for a typical three-year-old, her condition has greatly improved over the course of the past few weeks. Only one month ago, Aida was sick with a fever, cough, malaria, and pneumonia. She had stopped eating and had become severely malnourished. When Aida's mother Maimouna took her to the pharmacist in Kaur, they told her that Aida needed immediate help. Maimouna didn't know where else to turn. Based upon her pharmacist's advice, she visited the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) supported health clinic in Kaur, where she had heard that there was a program for severely malnourished children.

The head nurse at the health clinic in Kaur, Baboucar, remembers Aida's case. "Aida was very sick and thin, and well below the criteria for normal weight. We enrolled her in the program at once." After receiving a dry ration of wheat soya-blend, corn, lentils and oil, Aida's condition is improving. As her mother said, "Aida is doing much better. She has started eating again, and she really likes the wheat soya-blend. The food also helps us to save our money for other expenses, such as health fees and other foods for Zeinabou and Ami."

But Aida, unlike so many other children, was lucky. At the health center in Kaur, the program supports 20 to 25 beneficiaries each month, 75 percent of whom are severely malnourished children. According to Baboucar, "There is already a waiting list of 10 children for the program. Even though they're malnourished, we can't help them all. So we have to wait until children like Aida are better (reaching a normal weight for her height), before we can admit them into the program." At the same time, Albert Bas, the CRS project manager in charge of the Safety Net Program, admits that this assistance is necessary but not sufficient to assist children such as Aida. "What these children need is training in health practices, in addition to nutritional supplementation." CRS has tried to address this issue by providing food security training for the local health center staff who are responsible for caring for children such as Aida.

For the Bayos, however, the benefits of the CRS-supported food distribution program are clear. While they agree that training is important, when Aida was sick, they didn't have many other options. "If we hadn't received the food, we would have had to call on God to help us heal our daughter."

Annex III
Tips for Taking Good Photographs[10]

The "big three":

☑ Get close to your subject.

☑ Remember that you can also hold the camera vertically.

☑ Use the rule of thirds—place your subject in the left or right, or top or bottom third of the frame.

Other tips:

☑ Remember to take photos from different angles (looking up or down at your subject, or from the side) rather than just straight on.

☑ Tilt the camera about 20 degrees to add visual interest.

☑ Use both the foreground and background of your photo. For example, your subject could be in the foreground, with the water pump that the local organization and CRS built in the background.

☑ If your subject does not want to be identified, focus on a relevant object in the foreground and place the people in the background (the people will appear blurry and out-of-focus).

☑ For an interesting picture, ask the subject to hold a relevant object in front of them, such as an antiretroviral pill container, medicine card, birth certificate, and so on.

☑ Use scenery to frame your subject(s), such as doorways and tree branches.

☑ Take photos that incorporate your organization's logo.

☑ Photos should tell a story, while also making people interested in learning more about the subject pictured.

☑ Use photos to demonstrate what is going on at a project; for example, people gardening, pumping water, etc.

☑ Also take some photos that establish the context of the scene – a child's shoes, water pails, school books, and so on.

☑ The best times to take photos are during the first two hours of daylight and the two hours before sunset.

☑ The middle of the day is the hardest time to take a good photo because the light is overhead and your subjects' faces will be in shadow. To address this situation, use the flash to light up people's faces. Most new cameras will do this automatically. Another option is to bring people inside and place them in light that is coming through a window.

☑ Use the "fine" setting on your camera; it is better to take fewer, high-quality images than lots of low-quality images.

☑ Do not use the date-stamp.

☑ Make sure to always preserve original digital images on your computer. If you need to reduce the photo quality or size for any reason, make a copy of it and resize the copy rather than altering the original.

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10 As recommended by David Snyder to Carolyn Fanelli, Communications and Learning Manager, CRS/Zimbabwe. Personal communication with Carolyn Fanelli, August, 2007.