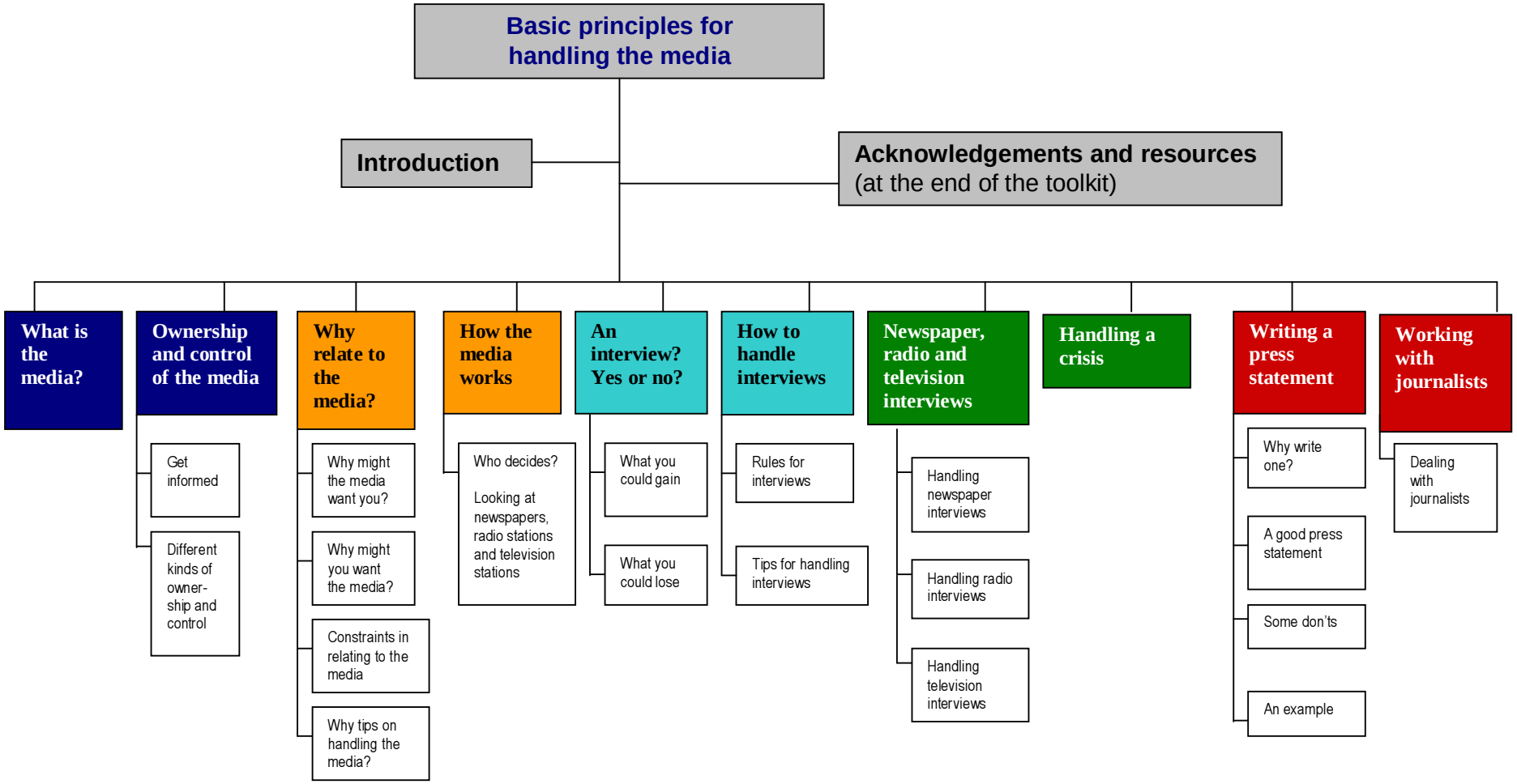
Handling the Media

Overview

We offer this toolkit on handling the media because many organisations are asked to respond to requests for interviews, need to send out press statements, or handle some crisis the media picks upon. We therefore offer organisations that do not have dedicated media liaison people – and even those that do – some tips, tools and ideas on how to handle these situations more effectively. We also look at how to use the media to your benefit.

Each organisation operates in a unique media environment. We hope this toolkit will help your organisation to think about how it handles the media. This should help your organisation, through sending out clear messages to achieve its goals for more justice nationally, regionally and globally.

Site map: Toolkit for handling the media



Introduction

Who will find this site useful?
This site offers valuable tips for organisations that want to know how to handle the media. It will be especially useful for organisations that want to think through issues to do with relating to the mass media, and for people who do interviews with the media. Our focus is on civil society organisations handling the media. So people working for such organisations will hopefully benefit, and their organisational work will be strengthened through using this site.

A brief description of the toolkit
This site offers pointers to understanding how newsrooms work in the mass media. It looks at issues of power and control, and moves on to offering practical guidelines when doing interviews with newspapers, radio or television journalists. We also look at issuing press statements.

On this site you will find information about:

- **What is the media?**
  Here we unpack what we mean when we talk about the media.

- **Ownership and control of the media**
  We look at why it is important for organisations to understand the ownership and control dynamics of the media, and tips on how to get better informed.

- **Why relate to the media?**
  Many organisations do not like to relate to the media because they don't trust it to report on issues from their perspective. But it could be a mistake to isolate your organisation. This section looks at the advantages of relating to the media.

- **How the media works**
  If you are going to handle the media, you need to know how it works. This section looks at newsroom structures in newspapers, radio and television.

- **An interview? Yes or no?**
  Your organisation is approached by the media to do an interview. Do you do it? This section looks at what to think about in making your decision.

- **How to handle interviews**
  Much of how to handle interviews is common sense. But we offer you some general rules for interviews and some general tips for handling them. This includes how to handle a request, through to doing the interview.

- **Newspaper, radio and television interviews**
  In this section, we look specifically at each type of media, and what to think about when handling an interview with each type.

- **Handling a crisis**
  This section looks at what to do when you are misquoted in the media, or the media wants to know about a crisis facing your organisation.

- **Writing a press statement**
  Sometimes your organisation may be asked to issue a press statement on an issue. What makes a good press statement that the media are likely to use?

- **Working with journalists**
  It is worthwhile thinking about how your organisation works with journalists. You need to build positive relationships. Here we offer you some suggestions on how.

What is the media?

What comes to your mind when someone says “the media”?
Did you think of newspapers, television and radio?
Media is a way of communicating, and includes these three commonly called the mass media. Media also includes other things like graffiti, banners, posters, billboards, videos, badges, notices and newsletters. Television and radio are also referred to as the electronic media. But when we talk of the media we are usually talking about mass media, where large numbers of people are included in the communication.

The focus of this toolkit is on how to relate to mass media – newspapers, television and radio programmes that reach large numbers of people.

Ownership and control of the media

In free market countries, mass media is mainly owned by businesses. In highly government regulated countries, the government often owns and controls large elements of the mass media. Who owns and controls the media varies from country to country. But we all live in times of globalisation. Big international companies own shares in mass media and have influence over what is reported all over the world. The degree of editorial independence from shareholders varies from newspaper to newspaper. But it is worrying when business interests – whether international or national – interfere with what is published and therefore what news you the consumer are offered. The same goes for government interference.

The owners of a newspaper may want to stop an editor from publishing a story that exposes damage to the environment that an oil company is causing because they are worried that the oil company will stop advertising in the newspaper. A healthy sign is when the editor refuses.

A repressive government may detain journalists and editors and shut down newspapers, radio or television stations if they are critical of the government. Journalists have been assassinated for trying to expose corruption.

Interference with editorial control can be an issue for non-profit community media too. If community media is funded, sometimes the funders may want to have some editorial control. You may, for example, have a traditional Catholic funder who does not want a local radio station to have programmes or adverts that promote people using condoms to prevent HIV/AIDS.

Get informed
In strengthening how your organisation relates to the media, your organisation needs to understand the ownership and control power dynamics behind the mass media. You also need to be aware of the approaches they take to dealing with your organisation’s kind of issues. Sometimes it can be very hostile, for example, about issues such as abortion and sex work.

You can:

- Map out what media exist in your community, province, country or region that your organisation should be aware of. Use main headings like:

  Newspapers (daily, weekly). Which are they? Who owns what? What focus does each have? Who is their readership? What kinds of stories do they run? Do they have special sections? How do they relate to your organisation's issues? Which programmes might be interested in your work?

  Radio stations. Which stations are there? Who owns what? What is each one's main orientation and focus? Who are their listeners? How do they relate to your organisation's issues? Which programmes might be interested in your work?

  Television stations. Which stations are there? Who owns them? What kind of stations are they? How do they relate to your organisation's issues? Which programmes might take an interest in your work?

- Identify which media your organisation may need to relate to.
- Understand the editorial policies of those newspapers, radio and television stations. You may not agree with them but this helps you to strategise on how to handle the media.
- Read up on ownership and control of the media in your region, province and country – and the world, if necessary.
- Read business and media sections of newspapers, conference papers, media company annual reports, look for sites on the Internet, using a good search engine.
- Talk with media owners, editors and journalists.
- Talk with non-governmental organisations that deal with freedom of expression and media monitoring.
- Visit web sites of organisations that deal with freedom of expression and media monitoring.
- Talk with people who are involved in public relations.

Strengthen your organisation

Once you have done your homework, get your organisation to do presentations to your members, committee or board members to help them understand what you have discovered. It is wise to be media aware.

Different kinds of ownership and control

Media can be owned and controlled by:

- international corporations
- national corporations
- small companies
- individuals
- government
- community
- non-profit organisations

Our focus in this toolkit is on civil society organisations relating to the mass media.

Understanding vested interests

The media is powerful. They wield so much public opinion influence through stories and interpretation. That is why we have to understand where the mass media stand and the interests they serve so that we can be effective when the media want to talk to us.

Some newspapers have party political allegiances and state them upfront. So, for example, during a national election, it is clear which party they promote. Most media will say that they are unbiased and that they give both sides of the story. Yet we know many cover conflict, for example, in such a way that they mainly give one side of the story and evoke sympathy for that side. We see this in reporting on wars. Mass media can be used to build up massive national sentiment that can deafen the public to other marginalised voices. (Of course, they can also play an anti-war role, if they choose!) “Alternative” non-profit media come in to fill the gap with different perspectives.

We have newspapers, radio and television stations that say they are independent. But they are not always totally independent of advertisers’ financial clout or government pressure, overt or covert.

Why relate to the media?

That you are visiting this toolkit on the Civicus Web site shows that this topic is important to your organisation. And that you understand the power of the mass media. When you respond to the media your organisation takes up potentially great opportunities to raise awareness about your organisation's issues from your perspective.

Why might the media want you?
There are many reasons why the media might want to talk to someone from your organisation. Maybe they:

- Want you for a news item, or for an in-depth feature on an issue that you deal with.
- Want to ask your organisation what is going on in a crisis situation – like assisting political refugees – because your organisation is involved.
- Have picked up on your organisation when following a story, and want to hear your organisation's view on what has happened.
- Have suddenly noticed your organisation because you deal with issues that are hot in the news – like child or women abuse.
- Want an expert opinion that you can offer.
- Want to set up a panel of like- or different-minded people to grapple with an issue.
- Have heard that your organisation has been affected by a crisis, like a scandal, or a disaster like a fire.

Why might you want the media?
There are many reasons why you might want to relate to the media.

- You believe that your organisation has something important to say to a wide audience.
- You want to mobilise the public around something, like a campaign to stop child labour in multinational corporations.
- You are tired of your organisation's voice not being heard even though you are handling burning issues of concern to society.
- You need people to know about your organisation.
- You need to improve your organisation's image.
- You need to keep up a profile in the media.
- You want to get your organisation's issues into the public eye.
- You want to present a particular point of view.
- You want to challenge a particular point of view.
- You want to challenge the way your organisation's issues are covered.
- Good publicity could help you:
  - gain more support to win a cause
  - recruit more members
  - raise funds
  - get donations in services or in kind
  - make it an honour to be a volunteer, or on your board.

Visit our Civicus toolkit *Promoting your organisation* if you want to focus on developing a media strategy.

Constraints in relating to the media
In a perfect world the kinds of issues that our organisations take up would be regarded as more newsworthy than some of the sensational garbage the mass media dumps in newspapers, and on radio and television programmes. But there are many constraints facing our organisations in effectively handling the media. Some media are:

- Antagonistic to our issues.
- Restricted by government censorship.
- Geared for profit and cover stories that will bring in the sales.

Other constraints are:
- Civil society organisations being scared to talk to the media because they don't trust them.
- Organisations not having the skills to handle the media.

It would be worthwhile for your organisation to think through how it wants to handle the media so that you don't lose out on opportunities to promote your organisation and its valuable work.

Why tips on handling the media?
If you grant interviews to the media before thinking about how to handle them, or what context the media is operating in, you could do your organisation more harm than good.

Tips help you to:
- Be prepared for the media, both as individuals and as an organisation.
- Think through your organisation's handling of the media – both with policy and practice.
- Understand how the media work and therefore how to handle them.
- Be better prepared for media interviews in case they come your way.
- Feel more confident in handling the media.
- Decide whether to accept an interview request from the media. See a section later in this toolkit - An interview? Yes or no?

How the media works

Your organisation has decided that it needs to think more consciously about how to handle the media? Where do you start? Well, you have to become familiar with and understand how the media work. Here we give you a broad sense of it.

The media revolve around news of two kinds – hard news stories and soft news stories. Hard news stories cover events happening right now. They are usually about serious things like a massacre, uncovering an international drug syndicate, or exposure of a top international company's corruption.

Soft news stories often follow the hard news stories. They have a focus that shows how the hard news has affected people. Perhaps a successful AIDS vaccine has been discovered – the hard news story. The story that follows up and tells the story of how they discovered it would be soft news.
Other soft news stories could be to do with humorous events, educational stories, stories about a successful woman's co-operative, for example.

Who decides?
It helps to understand the staffing structure at newspapers, radio and television stations, if you are going to relate to the media.

Newspapers
Let's look at the editorial staff of a large national daily newspaper.

The editor has overall responsibility for the newspaper's policy and content. The editor also takes final responsibility for the newspaper being accurate and good. Assistant editors assist her or him.

The *news editor* takes responsibility for what news gets into the newspaper. The news editor also allocates stories to the different *journalists*, and meets daily with the journalists to plan and get report-backs on how stories are going.

The *chief sub-editor* makes sure that the newspaper looks good, and is attractive to its readers.

Below the chief sub-editor come the *sub-editors*. They read the stories that the journalists bring in, and edit them. They make sure that the story has an interesting angle (focus) that will grab readers' attention. They also make sure that the spelling and grammar is correct. Sub-editors may also assist with the layout of certain pages of the newspaper and work on headlines, along with specialist editors.

A big newspaper will have various *specialist editors* who are responsible for different aspects of the newspaper. They could include development, finance, entertainment, politics, a particular continent, and health. This is who the *journalis*t submits his or her story to. You get different levels of seniority of journalists, depending on their experience, talent with writing, and expertise.

Photographers go out with journalists on their stories, and they hand their photographs over to the photo editor.

On a big newspaper, journalists do not have the final say on how their stories will turn out. They cannot even control what the headline of their story says. In fact, journalists (especially juniors) do not even have control over whether their story gets into the newspaper. If the editors do not like it for whatever reason, then they can 'spike' it. This means it will land in the rubbish bin.

Journalists must meet their newspapers' deadlines. Newspapers also have press deadlines which are when the newspaper is laid out with photographs and all news and articles are sent to the printers. Journalists work under enormous pressure.

It helps to understand life on a newspaper or other media, so that when you are relating to journalists, you understand the pressure they work under.

Radio stations

Let's think of a large national radio station. At the head of a radio station's staffing structure is the radio's *manager*. Then you get different *departments*, including departments like news, sport, music and marketing. It is the *news department* that is most likely to contact you, whether for hard or soft news, so we will look at the structure for the editorial staff of that department.

You get the *executive producer* who has overall responsibility for news broadcasts and stories that need to be followed up. *Editors* are responsible for particular programmes, like a morning news programme. The editor decides what will be broadcast. It is his or her task to make sure that the programmes are of a good quality. Then you get the different *journalists* who bring in the stories, having gone out with their notebooks and tape recorders. Back at the radio station you have the technical staff who check that things like sound are of a good quality.

Television stations

At a big television station you would find the person responsible overall for news being the head of news. The *head of news* makes sure that news is gathered. She or he will check on production operations.

The *chief executive producer* assists the head of news in some ways. She or he also makes sure that the news is accurate and balanced.

The *home desk* receives news coming in, and decides what stories to go ahead with. The home desk will also tell *journalists* which stories to cover. The planning desk is responsible for planning ahead – like what stories should be followed up on and how.

There are *different editors* who check that events are covered. The *executive producer* is responsible for what goes into the news bulletins.

The *studio director* is responsible for what goes on in the recording studio, for example, with cameras, lights and sound. The journalists go out and get their stories, along with the *cameraperson*. When the television journalist goes out for a story she or he will gather information, write notes and choose people to interview. The cameraperson gets the necessary visuals, including perhaps some on-site filming of the journalist telling part of the story.

The *newsroom staff*, together with the journalist, gets the stories ready for broadcasting. They would edit film footage and mix sound, for example.

An interview? Yes or no?

Civil society organisations and the work they do usually get overshadowed by sensational news reporting.

We have to strategise about how to promote our organisations using the media. If you want to go into more depth with this then visit the Civicus toolkit *Promoting your Organisation* where we look at media strategies.

What you could gain
Let's look at what you could gain from agreeing to do an interview for the mass media.

- Thousands of new people would find out that your organisation exists, what you stand for, and what you do.
- It is a chance to mainstream your issues. Very often, civil society organisations operate quietly in the background when instead the world should know what they are doing to bring about positive change.
- You get a chance to influence people's opinions, feelings and actions.
- For a short time investment you have potentially big rewards.

What you could lose
Let's look at what you can lose from doing an interview:

- If you are not prepared and not sure of your facts you could do your organisation more harm than good. See our earlier section called Get informed about the media.
- If the journalist or producer is bringing you in to set you up in some negative way then it could be bad news. This is why you need to understand vested interests and also know more about the programme or newspaper requesting an interview.

How to handle interviews

Let us say that your organisation helps indigenous people fight to get back their ancestral land which was taken away during colonialism and sold to settler farmers. One particular community has just had their land given back to them after a long and hard battle. This is clearly newsworthy – partly because there is controversy. And this means there are different voices to be heard. Those dispossessed for so long, farmers who were forced to sell the land so that the government could return it to the original landowners, government voices, human rights organisation voices, and more. The mass media is vigorously pursuing this story as it "has legs". This means they are likely to get more than one story out of it over days or weeks.

This is one success story amongst other struggles that your organisation is engaged in. You are approached for an interview on this story. Your organisation is not used to handling the media, and has no policies on doing interviews.

- Would you do it?
- If yes, why?
- If no, why?
- If you went ahead with it, how would you handle it?
- What main messages would you want to get across?
- How would you handle the organisational part?

Rules for interviews
There are some rules that apply to interviews for newspapers, radio, and television. The general rules are:

Deadlines

- The mass media operates around strict deadlines.
- Respect the deadline. If you don't, you may lose your opportunity to be heard.
- A morning newspaper has a late evening deadline whereas an afternoon paper has an early morning deadline. A daily newspaper operates under different deadlines to a weekly newspaper. Television and radio interviews, unless live broadcasts, need to be done several hours before the programme is aired or screened. Breaking news in the electronic media usually needs to be in an hour before the programme.
- Ask what the deadline is for the article or programme that you are being interviewed for.
- Journalists also work on features – sometimes over a few weeks, for investigative pieces, months even. But in this time their story focus may change several times. This means although you were interviewed, your quote may not fit in with the final story and gets dropped from it. If this happens to you don't be disappointed or angry. Certainly do not phone to complain. It is simply the way things go sometimes.
- If you think you were dropped because you may have said something that put the journalist off interviewing you, then reflect on it and try to learn lessons from it. You may need to make a casual call and fish around a bit – unless the direct approach is better.
- If you think you were dropped for political reasons, then do try and find out in a constructive way. It is part of the learning and strategising for your organisation.

- Nurture the relationship you have with the journalist and offer to help them in whatever way you can. This could come in handy when you are implementing your own organisation's media strategy.
- Each interviewer has an angle. This is a journalist's term for their focus for the story or programme. In the case of the indigenous people returning to the land, the media may want to interview you to find out about the conflict between the indigenous people and the settler farmers.

Newsworthiness
Generally you are being asked for an interview so that you can *add* something that is newsworthy or of interest to readers, listeners or viewers.

The media will be after something that is:
- news
- presenting a new perspective
- important
- interesting
- relevant to readers', viewers' or listeners' lives

Bear the profile of the readers, listeners or viewers in mind at all times so that you relate your issue to their lives. You can suggest a new angle for the story – journalists often appreciate this.

Tips for handling interviews
Many civil society organisations promote democratic practices and the collective decision-making that goes with it. So if a member of your organisation is asked to grant an interview your organisation may say they want to discuss it first. This is particularly true of organisations that do not have media liaison structures or policies in place.

Perhaps your organisation wants to decide whether the person who has been invited for the interview is the most appropriate, or even wants to do it. Maybe they think the Chairperson should do it. But a journalist does not have much time – maybe not even as long as 30 minutes – to get an answer from you. So your organisation – unless it decides it does not want to do any interviewing – may have to strike a balance between its internal processes and meeting the needs of a journalist and his or her deadlines.

Think about what kind of interviewees you have been most impressed and influenced by. Make a list starting *I have been most impressed by interviewees who…*

Your list probably includes personality traits and approaches that include:
- sincerity
- honesty
- humility
- integrity
- warmth
- energy
- enthusiasm
- genuine passion for the topic
- offer useful and convincing information

- appeared to know what they were talking about
- shared people's real experiences
- spoke in everyday language.

Now make a list of the interviewees you have been least impressed by. Start your list by writing *I have been least impressed by interviewees who…*

Are these some of the points that came up for you?

- overbearing
- arrogant
- rude
- argumentative
- made their point at all costs – even if it meant cutting into another panellist's response
- poorly informed
- spoke too softly
- spoke too loudly
- lacked confidence
- spoke in an abstract academic way
- used lots of jargon.

Before the interview

There is a lot to think about before doing your interview, once it's all on. You may not always have time to do intensive preparation beforehand, especially if it is an urgent request. But do as much as you can. The investment is worth it.

Background media knowledge

- It helps if you have a general awareness of ownership, control, and general orientation of the newspaper, radio or television station. (We offer you information about this earlier in this toolkit.)
- Are there Web sites you could visit to get a quick sense of this?
- Remember that each journalist's editor has the final say!

Handling the request

When the journalist calls to ask you for an interview:

- Deal with him or her professionally.
- Thank him or her for inviting you to be interviewed.
- Try to find out how they found out about your organisation.
- Try to find out why they have chosen your organisation to interview.
- Try to find out why they have chosen you in particular to interview.
- Find out which section of the newspaper, or which programme it is for.
- Ask them what the main focus for the story or programme is.

- You may have to ask them if you can call them back soon to let them know about the interview. Your organisation may require you to report requests for interviews and get a mandate to do it. Your organisation may want to consider whether there is a person more suited to do the interview. Or they may want to come up with some ideas that could enrich the interview, or – most importantly – to clarify the organisation's main messages. But you must call back in five to ten minutes (not longer than 30 minutes) or you could lose the opportunity. The journalist will be looking for other people to interview in the meantime and you could easily lose out. The media operates on their deadlines not yours.
- Only refuse an interview if you think it will do the organisation more harm than good.
- If you do refuse, do it with a plausible reason. Ask if there is any other way in which you can help, like providing statistics, background reading or other sources.

Prepare for your interview
Even if you only have a short time, prepare for your interview.

Anticipate questions
- Anticipate some of the questions. Make a list of them. Brainstorm with other people in your organisation, asking them what questions they think that particular journalist is likely to ask.
- Know what your organisation's answers are to a journalist's basic questions. These are who, what, where, when, why and how?
- Have relevant statistics at hand, if appropriate.

Be clear about your key message
- Brainstorm what your organisation's key message is so that you get it across clearly during the interview.
- Try not to have more than three messages otherwise you will lose impact. One key message is great – people will remember it.
- In the case of the indigenous people getting their land back, your *key message* could be: This is a victory and we celebrate it…*follow up message* and we hope for more… there are still six thousand people from twenty communities who are fighting for their right to return to their ancestral land…*final follow up message* contact our organisation if you want to help the campaign for this.
- Write your key message/s down as a memo to yourself.
- You should be able to write each one down as a heading.
- If we go back to the previous example the headings could be:
  1) Victory!
  2) People are still struggling to get land back
  3) Join our campaign – here are our contact details.
- You may not be asked to state your messages directly during the interview because the questions have not led to them. But you have to make sure that you get those messages across in an appropriate way at some point during the interview. If you are clear about your messages, have practised them, and have anticipated questions, you will do be able to do it! Be confident that you can.

Be clear about your audience

- Who will your audience be? What are their interests and how can you tune your issue into them? Perspectives? Experience? Opinions? Age? Race? Sex? Rural? Urban? Class? Go to the *audience analysis* tool in the Civicus toolkit *Writing Effectively and Powerfully* if you want to think through this in detail.
- You could have quite a mixed audience, in which case your message needs to appeal as widely as possible. Try to appeal to the audience at a personal level.

Touch your audience's heart

- If your audience is hostile to your organisation and its aims, what approach can you adopt to win them over? Maybe you need to collect some statistics or think of examples that you can use to highlight the value of your cause?
- People are attracted by human interest stories.
- Think of how you can reach for people's compassion.
- How can you inspire your audience to want to support your cause?

During the interview

- Don't panic. Take deep breaths in and slowly out to help calm yourself.
- A bit of nervousness in the beginning is normal. It is better than being over confident.
- You are there to add a particular perspective, to tell a side of the story, to give an expert opinion – to add value in some way. Knowing this should help you feel confident and valued.
- Do not say "no comment" to a question. It will seem as if you are trying to hide something. Rather respond to the question in the best possible way you can. Your audience may be quick to mistrust.
- Give accurate information only.
- Offer powerful statistics. Tell them in a way that people can visualise for themselves. *For example: every third woman in this country has a physically abusive partner.* It is easy for people to remember, and pass on this statistic.
- Be approachable.
- Think before you speak. Once your words are spoken you cannot take them back. But think quickly!
- Listen carefully to the question, and then answer it.
- Anyone can tell when someone is avoiding a question. It is not good to be seen as evasive.
- It is irritating when an interviewee doesn't answer the question. You need your audience on your side.
- Sometimes it works well to respond to a question by saying: "That's a question I have also been thinking about..." Or "I am glad you asked me that question because…" It affirms the journalist and is good for positive chemistry between you.
- Try not to be defensive about critical questions. Embrace each question, reflect on it quickly and respond. You have more time for this process during a print media interview than during a radio or TV interview.
- Make sure that your organisation's name gets at least one mention during the interview. More if possible – but do not overdo it.

- If your organisation deals with technical and complex issues, make sure you explain these in everyday words and images. Paint a word picture or give an example that everyone can understand.

After the interview

- Relax and treat yourself to something special. You will know what works best for you.
- Try to get feedback at some point from the journalist.
- Ask for constructive feedback from your organisation's members, staff, your friends and family.

Newspaper, radio and TV interviews

In this section we take a look at doing interviews with different media. But please also see our section earlier on *how to handle an interview*. It offers general rules and tips.

Handling newspaper interviews
One of the great things about doing newspaper interviews is that they are not "live" like much of radio and television is. This takes the pressure off you a bit. And it gives you a chance to think a bit more before you answer, and to also explain your answers in more depth, if requested.

Before the interview
Before you do the interview, find out:

- Which newspaper the journalist is from.
- What kind of story she or he is writing – is it hard news or an in-depth feature, or a profile, for example?
- Ask what angle the journalist is taking on the story.
- Ask which section of the newspaper the story will go into.
- Ask what the deadline is.
- Find out whether the interview will be over the telephone or in person. In person interviews are much better all round – you get a chance to chat with the journalist a bit and get to know them.
- Try and set up an interview time that will give you enough chance to prepare.
- If you need to, say you will call back soon and confirm whether you will do the interview. This will depend on your organisation's policy.
- If you have the go ahead, prepare your main messages for the topic.
- Be prepared for and able to answer the journalist's basic what, when, where, who, why and how questions.
- You may be able to help the journalist with some background information before the interview – often journalists are very appreciative of this.
- Think of and suggest some interesting photo opportunities for your organisation – a story with a photo is much more interesting for readers.

During the interview

- Be friendly, professional and relaxed.
- Most newspaper stories are fairly short – unless they are features. So it is important to respond to the questions clearly and concisely. The more you say the more will be edited out. And unlike with live radio or television, you have little or no say as to how your story is printed.
- Do not elaborate on a question unless the journalist asks you to or unless you can make a new powerful point by doing so.
- If you can't answer the question, say so. Offer to find out the information and get back to the journalist. And once the interview is over, track down the information and get it across to him or her straightaway. If you can't get the information, let them know.
- If you trust the journalist you may want to share background information to help him or her understand the context of the story. "Background" means that she or he should not use it in the story at all. You may want to share some information that the journalist can use but you want him or her to disguise the source. This is called talking "off the record". "On the record" means that the journalist can use what you have told them and quote you. A note of caution –

some media liaison people would warn you that nothing is background or off the record for journalists who are pressurised by their editors to deliver a hot story. It is best to develop a trusting relationship with a journalist of integrity before you give background or talk off the record. Of course, you will be the best judge in your particular situation.
- Suggest photograph possibilities if the journalist is carrying a camera or a photographer has come along.
- You may even have some good file photographs that could complement the story.
- Offer the journalist publicity material from your organisation.

After the interview
- Look out for the article when it is published, make copies.
- Stick one copy on your notice board.
- Ask members of your organisation for feedback on the article so that you can all learn how to strengthen handling the media.
- Keep the article to use in an organisational publication, like your annual report, if it can be used as good publicity.
- Thank the journalist for taking an interest in your organisation and its issues.

Handling radio interviews
The great thing about radio is that people listen to you. They are not distracted by how you look or what you are wearing – or other visual distractions. You can be more relaxed and focus on your interviewer without having to worry about the cameras that can be distracting in television interviews.

Please also see our section earlier on How to handle an interview for general rules and tips on interviews.

During the time over which the interview is being set up, you may get telephone calls from a radio journalist and also the programme producer. This could be their way of working out if you are the ideal person to be interviewed. Do not feel bad if they end up not interviewing you. They may have changed the angle of their programme. But if you think they may have dropped you because of something you said or did – you may decide it is worth finding out so you can learn from your mistakes. Work out a diplomatic way of asking about it.

When the request comes
- If you do get a call asking for an interview, try to buy a little bit of time – even if it is just five or fifteen minutes. You can use this time to consult with other members of your organisation and to prepare. See our section earlier *Prepare for your interview*.
- Make sure you have the name of the radio journalist or programme producer, radio station, and a telephone number to call them back.
- Ask if it is to be a live broadcast or whether it will be taped.
- Ask if it is going to be a panel discussion. If it is, ask who else has been invited along.
- Bear in mind any policy your organisation has about relating to the media.

- Find out obvious things like:
  - What programme is the interview for?
  - What time will the programme be aired – and who mainly listens in at that time?
  - How long will you be needed?
  - Who will interview you?
  - Where you must go for the interview. If you have to go to the recording studio, get clear directions on how to get there. Work out your route, mode of transport, and anticipated time it will take to get there. Give yourself extra time in case there is a traffic jam.
  - Or will they come to you and tape it? Maybe it will be conducted in the middle of a mass protest that your organisation is planning so that the journalist captures some interesting background vibe? Or perhaps over the telephone? Whichever way, you need to know.
- Try to avoid being interviewed using a cellular or mobile phone. The line can break up quite easily, and background sound can be distracting.
- Have a clear understanding of the radio station's listener profile. The very basics would be age, race, sex, political orientation, and attitude to your organisation's issues. The language you use to communicate with youth, for example, may be different to another audience.

Going for it!

- Have cards that you have written your key messages on including some key statistics in case you want to refer to them.
- Don't rustle papers or move around in your chair – stay relaxed and focussed.
- Make sure that you get your key message/s over to the listeners.
- Make your points and give your responses thoughtfully and quickly.
- If you are being interviewed in your office or home, make sure your telephone is off the hook, and that there are no distractions.
- Distractions could include background voices, television or music on, shouting, machine noises, amongst others.
- Vary how you speak to keep it interesting – if you talk in one tone your viewers may doze off.
- Use your tone to emphasise a point.
- Even though the viewers cannot see you, your personality carries across in radio – so be charming, sincere, friendly and warm!
- If it is in the studio, be nice and early for the interview. This will:
  - Make the producers and journalist feel relaxed and appreciative.
  - Make them respect you for respecting their work and the deadline stresses of it.
  - Help integrate you into the radio studio environment.
  - Allow some briefing time from the programme producer and journalist.
  - Maybe make them want to interview you again since they know you are reliable.
- Try to get a good rapport going with the radio journalist.
- Let your passion for your organisation's cause come through and touch the listeners.
- Remember that radio interviews are generally short so you have to make your main points quickly and effectively.
- Speak clearly.

- Respond in a focused way. Try not to use more words than you need to and don't go off at a tangent unless your new point adds value and depth.
- Try to bring in the human interest angle in your interview.
- Show, don't tell. This is a journalistic rule that works well in most communication. It means paint a picture for your reader or listener rather than tell them what to think.

> *Tell is:* the community waited for eighty years before their land was returned to them. *Show is:* Karabu was a newborn baby when her parents were forced off their ancestral land. Now, at eighty-eight she returns for the first time since then, crippled with arthritis. Her five grandchildren, dressed in their smartest clothes, take turns helping her to walk.

Different radio situations

By far the best way to be interviewed is face-to-face with the radio journalist. This is because it gives you (hopefully) a chance to chat a bit before the programme and build up rapport. There are different radio interviewing situations, including:

- *Being interviewed in the studio.* You will come across things that may be new to you. There is all the radio technology like recording studios, microphones, headphones, and the red light goes on when the programme is being aired. You will also come across the production crew who are all part of putting the show on air.
- *Being interviewed over the telephone.* There are obvious disadvantages to this. You might have a bad line, there might be disturbing background noises, you may be less focussed than in a studio. You cannot have eye contact with the journalist, and building a rapport is more difficult.
- *Being interviewed at an event, in your office, or somewhere else* with the journalist using a tape recorder. Once again the problem of distraction and noise come up. You have to put more effort into focusing on the interview only.
- *Being part of a panel interview* either in the studio or over the telephone.
- *Being the expert* on a radio show where people call in to ask questions. Think of the talk radio shows that you listen to, and start building up a sense of what you do and do not like when the experts come on the show. It is important to be relaxed, welcoming and friendly. And to respond to the question directly. Have a piece of paper handy so that you can write down callers' names and therefore respond to them personally by name.

Please also see our sections in this toolkit *Go with the flow*, *Your message*, and *Beginnings and endings* from the section on tips for handling television interviews.

Handling television interviews

If your organisation has decided in principle that you will accept invitations to be interviewed for television, then it is worthwhile watching interviews on television more analytically. Notice what works well and what doesn't. Get familiar with the different styles and approaches of interviewers. Notice when an interviewee looks and sounds good, and when they don't. Start to think about how you would respond in different circumstances.

Have a look at *General tips for handling interviews* in this toolkit.

What is special about television interviews?
First of all the viewers see you! If you don't manage to make your interview interesting, they will stay focused on what you are wearing, your body language, and how you look – instead of what you say.

Clothes
Choose clothes that will not startle viewers. Generally close stripes, dots, squares and fine designs with bright colours dazzle. Your task is to be comfortable and relaxed – with an awareness of the viewers' needs and expectations. So:

- Wear clothes that fit you comfortably.
- Wear clothes that do not make a noise when you move.
- Think about whether it is important to conform with clothes styles, or whether you can make an important statement by, for example, wearing indigenous styles.
- Now is not the time to experiment with styles – hair or clothes – that you are unsure of.
- Wear comfortable shoes.
- Sit down in front of a mirror in the clothes you have chosen to wear some time before you go. Is this how you are comfortable with the viewers seeing you? Yes? Great! Do you need another opinion? Yes? Get one or more!

Style
Think of the programme you are being interviewed on. If it is a trendy teenage programme, then a western suit and tie will probably make you look like an old-fashioned "fuddy-duddy". If it is a serious news commentary programme, it maybe wise to dress fairly formally. Bear in mind that the time of the interview, unless it is live, will not necessarily be the time of the day or night that the programme is screened.

Accessories
Don't wear sunglasses unless you have to for medical or disability reasons. Viewers would prefer to be able to see your eyes. People read personality through eyes. Light-sensitive glasses can create the same problem.

Try not to look cluttered – come across neat and simple visually. You want people to take you seriously and concentrate on what you have to say not how you dress.

It would be unwise to wear jewellery that clangs and chinks every time you make a point as your viewers will get distracted. You will have lost your opportunity to get your messages across to them. You would not want your viewers' lasting impression to be that your jewellery did the talking!

Body language and facial expressions
You use body language to convey non-verbal messages. Viewers will pick up and interpret these messages that you send out with your body language. If you sit slouched down in the chair, you will present a negative image of yourself. Viewers may even think you are bored. If you keep moving from side to side you may seem anxious and uncomfortable. Viewers would wonder why. Are you telling the truth, they may wonder?

Your facial expressions tell a story of their own to the viewers. They will watch your every frown, smile, nod, eye movements. This is why you have to be sincere, be yourself, be vibrant. You are really on a show.

Your voice

- Say your words in a clear confident way.
- Vary how you speak to keep it interesting – if you talk in one tone your viewers may doze off.
- Use your tone to emphasise a point.

Relaxed, confident and conversational

Try to come across relaxed and confident – but not arrogant. Have eye contact with your interviewer, and other panellists, if there. Ignore the cameras – now is not the time to wave to the family and friends back home! Other tips:

- Answer questions in an engaging sincere way.
- If you are asked hostile questions, never become defensive or argumentative. Just respond to them in a calm and positive way. People want honesty.
- Be friendly and project yourself in a positive way.
- Use everyday language.

  Version one: *in terms of how we have reacted to this diabolical matter we have conferred and decided to desist from buying products from Jib Job Jab*.

  Version two – everyday language: *we are boycotting Jib Job Jab products.*
- Use examples from everyday life that viewers can relate to.
- Use a personal approach, like *"how would you feel if you were forced to watch your parents being evicted from their land …"*
- Don't fidget in your seat – even if you feel like it. Let your hands link loosely together in your lap, or rest neatly on the table if there is one. Don't fiddle with a pen, or anything else.
- Try to reduce wild hand movements if you are a person who "talks" with your hands. A few hand movements that express what you are saying are fine and can help to make a point powerfully. But a windmill of hand or other body movements will distract your viewers.

Go with the flow

- Expect the unexpected – the interviewer may not go into lengthy formal greetings because of the limited time there is available. She or he might go straight into a question. Follow the cue and offer a quick greeting, and respond to the question.
- No matter how the interview goes – even if the questions get aggressive, stay calm and respond sincerely.
- If the interviewer interrupts you, do not take offence. But if they interrupt one of your key messages, do try to find a way to come back and finish it. With this kind of interview you have to think on your feet, and try to make logical links to getting your key message across. That is why you are there.

Your message

- If you feel you have not been able to get your key message over clearly, do look out for opportunities to respond to a question and then link your key message to it.
- Quite often at the end of an interview, the interviewer asks what final thought you would like to leave your viewers with. Make the most of this opportunity to quickly state your message in a powerful and convincing way that reaches the hearts and minds of viewers. Prepare for this beforehand, and know it by heart.
- Practice your key message/s before the interview and in front of a mirror if you can – it is not just what you say but also how you say it that leaves the lasting impression.
- Interviews are often quick and so you have to make your point, convey your message, in a quick and powerful way. Sometimes interviews are taped and edited later so if you have answered in a long-winded way the chances are you will be edited. There is no going back!

Beginnings and endings

Beginnings to an interview are critical because if you don't grab a viewer's interest from the outset, they may change channels. Make what you are saying very real, through telling an anecdote, giving an example, or a statistic that they will remember. This is your way of engaging the viewer. Endings are also important with viewers who watch until the end. You have a good chance that your last key message, if it is striking, interesting, informative and powerful, will be remembered.

When you are interviewed on television you are in the limelight. Make the most of this for your organisation. Be at your best, most lively, most convincing. It can be distracting to the viewers if you look down to consult notes you have brought with. Rather practice well beforehand, and have your main messages and relevant statistics well memorised.

Handling the different television situations

- At the television studio you may be asked to put make-up on. You can say no. But you could also ask for just a bit of make-up. Make-up can help disguise the sweating the hot lights make almost inevitable.
- If you do generally use make up, it is worth putting it on yourself before you get to the studio. You don't want the make-up artist to make you look like someone even you don't know!
- Be prepared for the technology of lights, cameras and microphones, and be co-operative and friendly when you are being prepared for the interview. This will also help you to relax.
- When the broadcast is live, no editing can be done. So you have more control over what goes out to viewers. But it also means you have to come across clearly, convincingly and concisely.
- Being in the television studio (or anywhere else) for a recorded interview removes the pressure and anxiety of being "live". But be careful you do not relax too much and talk for longer in a less concise way. The editors have a chance to edit – so they may cut out what you really wanted them to keep in!

- Being in an out-of-the-studio situation offers more interesting background visuals for the viewers. It also means they can be more easily distracted from what you are saying or doing. You have to be clear and concise, and capture their imagination.
- If the interview is happening in your office, do make sure that you set it up in the way that you want the world of viewers to see it! Wash up your dirty coffee cups well in advance of the television crew arriving!
- When you are part of a panel discussion you have even less time to get your main points across. You have to concentrate very carefully – especially if it is a controversial panel – and think on your feet. Even if things get heated, do not become argumentative. Just stay relaxed, and respond clearly and logically to points, giving real examples if possible. Aggressive panellists may not win viewers' sympathy. But that does not mean you should be passive – think of your own way to come across as confident and convincing.
- Towards the end of a panel interview the interviewer often gives each panellist a chance to make a summary point. Practice your key point before the interview – it should be the main message you want to leave viewers with. But obviously you have to be flexible – the unexpected may come out of the panel discussion and you may need to reshape what you want to say. It should be strong.
- Sometimes TV stations use a studio in a small room with just one camera facing you – this is common when they want to call in another opinion on an issue. It could also be a panel discussion where the panellists are in different parts of the country, or the world. When you are in this situation, you *must* look directly into the camera as if it is your interviewer. You need to act a bit – be expressive, smile, engage, nod – you are facing the viewers directly, unlike in other TV interview situations.
- You may find yourself in a spontaneous situation – where you are not expecting to be interviewed. Maybe there is a crisis that your organisation is helping to manage, and you walk out of your office into television cameras and microphones. What will viewers think if you run away? Stand firm, take a deep breath, and respond. If it is a humanitarian crisis, like dealing with refugees, then appeal to your viewers' humanity and sense of justice.

Handling a crisis

We all dread a crisis happening in our organisation – it is extremely stressful and very draining. But crises both big and small do happen. Whatever happens, do not panic.

In this section we offer some ideas on how to handle crises.

- When there is a crisis it is far better to have the media sympathetic to you than antagonistic. This is an obvious reason for developing and maintaining a positive relationship with the media.
- Ask yourselves: "what is the worst thing that could happen?"
- Journalists do sometimes misquote – often through not taking careful notes. Being misquoted is terribly frustrating. If someone from your organisation has been misquoted, take a deep breath. Do not panic or act in a knee jerk way. Assess the extent of damage the misquote is likely to cause. If it is minor, call the journalist and point it out to him or her, and explain the problem it is likely to cause. If the misquote is serious and likely to cause damage to your organisation's reputation, then take it up further and pressurise the newspaper to correct their mistake. This means calling the journalist, saying what the misquote was, explaining its implications, and asking what action can be taken. The journalist should take it up with the editor or news editor. Of course journalists do not like to admit they were wrong. Nor do their newspapers because it damages their reputation. You can have a problem proving you were misquoted it can be your word against theirs. So you could be in for a long battle. But if the misquote is serious enough, pressurise editors for a retraction (taking back what was written), or an apology (you can prove they made a big mistake, like saying your board chairperson has resigned when he or she has not).
- And if there is a crisis in your organisation? What if your chairperson has stolen money and the media picks up on it? Never say "no comment". People will think you have something to hide. If you really do not think it wise to comment, say something like *our organisation is taking this matter seriously and will issue a press release…* Then stick to your promise. You could explain what process is being followed. If it has legal implications, say you cannot comment on the outcome as you do not want to prejudice it, and you will be letting the law take its course. The journalist will probably want you to stick your neck out and ask probing questions. But if you do comment further, it could have serious consequences, depending on the nature of the crisis.
- Return journalists' calls, and plan carefully what you will say to them. If you do not return calls, they will probably try to dig elsewhere to get their story.
- However big or small your organisation, you need to know who to refer the media to if they want to get a comment from your organisation. If it is a serious crisis, then your most senior leadership person should handle the media, and that person must do so consistently. But if your organisation has a media spokesperson, make sure you keep them in the loop at all times.
- Your organisation will not sound good if you have different members of your organisation contradicting each other.
- Have a standard organisational process for handling the media. Don't suddenly rush around trying to establish this when a journalist calls.
- Be polite and helpful – even when you don't feel like it.

- Offer factual information if you can.
- Let the journalist know that you understand the deadline pressure she or he is under.
- Treat the journalist as a professional.
- Don't treat the journalist with suspicion. It is their job to report accurately and this means they sometimes have to ask difficult, sometimes challenging questions.
- Don't be hostile or evasive towards the media. You will probably come off worse. You need the media on your side. Nurture relationships with journalists you can trust.
- If your organisation is in a crisis, communicate necessary information to your constituency – like your members, board members, staff, and funders. They should not find out about the crisis from the media. Work out what are the best ways to communicate with each group. For example, through letters or phone calls, or an emergency meeting.

Writing a press statement

Why write one?
Amongst other reasons, you may want to write a press statement to:

- Respond quickly to an issue, offering your organisation's perspective.
- Get the media interested in writing a story about a particular issue.
- Clear up confusion.
- Give information.

A good press statement
To get your press statement used, it has to be good. It has to be newsworthy to the media. The better written a press statement, the more likely it is to be used.

A good press statement:

- Is newsworthy.
- Has an attention gripping headline and first paragraph.
- Includes all the necessary facts about the situation or issue – your standard *what, why, who, when, where and how* – but not necessarily all explained in the first paragraph.
- Is short and direct (one page or less if possible).
- Includes powerful statistics, if possible.
- Is so well written it could be used almost directly as is.
- Is accurate
- Gives your organisation's views on the issue.
- Gives information about what action your organisation intends taking around the issue.
- Is addressed to a particular person. And is followed up with a personal phone call.
- Invites the media to contact your organisation for further information.
- Gives a contact person and their telephone number.
- Gets distributed effectively – and don't forget about international media.

Some don'ts
Do not send off a press statement if:

- It does not have all the necessary information for the media to be able to write a story or publish it.
- It does not have the correct facts.
- It is based on rumour.
- It is ambiguous.
- The media will not be able to get hold of your organisation's media contact person.
- It has not been checked for accuracy, spelling, and grammar

An example
Here is an example of a press statement. It would be written on a letterhead that clearly shows all of the organisation's contact details. It would also clearly state whom the press statement is addressed to. The organisation would have sent out an earlier press release to encourage the media to cover the event.

PRESS RELEASE

Date: 29 July 2003
Issuing organisation: the Land Restitution Group (LRG)

After an eighty-year struggle, the indigenous people of Karayno today set foot back on their ancestral land in Nahola. This time to stay. The Land Restitution Group (LRG) celebrates this victory. "It is about time land rights were implemented," said chairperson of the LRG, Joyo Mele. "The indigenous people have suffered for many generations spiritually and economically."

"It makes me angry that our land was taken away from us for all those years," says eighty year-old Karabu Koyoi.

She was a newborn baby when the land was taken away during colonialism and her parents were dumped on barren land a hundred kilometres away. "But I want to make peace with the settler farmers who have now had to give this land back to us. They are not our enemies".

The people of Karayno are not the only community whose land was removed by force during the colonial era. More struggles over land can be expected and soon, says the LRG.

….ends

For more information, interviews or photographs please contact Joyo Mele of the LRG at the contact details listed on this statement. For after hours calls, call Joyo on 198 94568. The LRG can provide the media with both historic and current photographs.

Working with journalists

The work of journalists is to seek out "the truth" in the public interest, to report in a balanced and accurate way, and to promote a well-informed society.
But different people hold different views about "the truth" around an issue. And each person has his or her own perspective on an event or issue. A mining company will have a different story to tell than a mining union when there is a mining disaster and miners are killed and maimed.

That is why often journalists have to interview people who will have different perspectives on a story – so that a bigger picture can be shown. This is why journalists sometimes come across asking what seem to be hostile and challenging questions. In some ways, we should celebrate this if it helps to promote an open and democratic world.

The mass media are known for their sensationalism – they publish the kinds of stories that will attract people to buy newspapers, listen to the radio or watch TV. So, very often newspapers don't focus on the kinds of development and justice issues that civil society organises around. Partly it is our fault for not being skilled enough at presenting our issues creatively and attractively enough to grab mass media attention. Civil society organisations have a role to play here – learning how to build and nurture healthy relationships with the media. Look out for journalists you can trust and who write in your field of work.

Background, off the record and on the record
Be very aware that when you talk with a journalist, they have the editor's pressure to return with a juicy story. Be very strategic with what you say. There are some basics to know when talking with a journalist.

If you trust the journalist you may want to share background information to help him or her understand the context of the story. "Background" means that she or he should not use it in the story at all. You may want to share some information that the journalist can use but you want him or her to disguise the source. This is called talking "off the record". "On the record" means that the journalist can use what you have told them and quote you. A note of caution – some media liaison people would warn you that nothing is background or off the record for journalists who are pressurised by their editors to deliver a hot story. It is best to develop a trusting relationship with a journalist of integrity before you give background or talk off the record. Of course, you will be the best judge in your particular situation.

Dealing with journalists
Some organisations work under repressive and antagonistic conditions. But remember:

- Journalists are people doing a vital job – try to relate to them as professionals who are doing this.
- Some people hold a negative stereotype about journalists – saying they will do anything to get a story, which they sensationalise, and so on. It will not help you in handling the media if you talk down about journalists. Seek out journalists that you believe have integrity.
- Work with journalists, not against them.

- Understand and empathise with journalists' working conditions, including pressure from editors and sub-editors, the need to deliver a story, and the media's unforgiving deadlines.
- Be reliable.
- Build and nurture relationships with journalists. It is great to become one of the organisations the media turns to for valuable comment and reliable background information. This helps you to mainstream your issues.
- You can ask journalists to fax you the story before it is published. But tell them this is to check accuracy and not to interfere with content and style.
- Help journalists do their job by alerting them to events or trends that your organisation, because of its unique work knows about.
- Invite journalists over for public events – even if it is not to write a story about your organisation. It helps to build relationships.
- The more you build relationships with journalists the better informed they become about your organisation and its issues. This means in future they are (a) likely to take more of an interest in covering your organisation and its issues, and (b) more likely to do it accurately.

Good Luck!

Acknowledgements and resources

We used the following resources in developing this toolkit. We acknowledge the authors' valuable work and recommend them to you:

Action Notes number 7: Dealing with the Press, by the Human Awareness Programme. South Africa

Basic Journalism by Gwen Ansell. Published by M&G Books, South Africa (2002) www.mg.co.za

Building Organisations Using Media, by the Human Awareness Programme. South Africa

Dynamics of Public Relations and Journalism – a practical guide for media studies, by Annette Clear and Linda Weideman. Published by Juta & Co, Ltd. South Africa (1997)

How to Talk to the Media – make the most of every media opportunity in press, radio and television, by Judith Byrne. Published by the How to Books Ltd. United Kingdom (2000)

We would also like to thank *Martha Molete* who has extensive experience in media liaison, for her help in sharing ideas for a section of this toolkit.

CIVICUS: World Alliance for Citizen Participation is an international alliance established in 1993 to nurture the foundation, growth and protection of citizen action throughout the world, especially in areas where participatory democracy and citizens' freedom of association are threatened. CIVICUS envisions a worldwide community of informed, inspired, committed citizens in confronting the challenges facing humanity.

These CIVICUS Toolkits have been produced to assist civil society organisations build their capacity and achieve their goals. The topics range from budgeting, strategic planning and dealing with the media, to developing a financial strategy and writing an effective funding proposal. All are available on-line, in MS-Word and PDF format at www.civicus.org and on CD-ROM.

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