

# Communicating the SDGs? Mind your business!



When analyzing Eastern European's reactions to the refugee crisis Ivan Krastev rightly pointed to a *compassion deficit*[1], quoting statistics that showed that the citizens of the Czech Republic were against allocating any public resources to help the refugees and Slovakia's Prime Minister saying that 95% of the people arriving to Europe are not 'real' refugees and in any case Slovakia could only receive Christians into the country. In Romania, President Iohannis embarrassed himself by first saying that under no circumstance will Romania receive more than 1700 refugees, just to realize later that he will have to bend to the quota voted by the European leaders in Brussels and receive a bit over 6000 people. Still in Romania, after World Vision launched a fundraising campaign for the refugee children, under the slogan 'They have no fault, but they are the most affected', cynical comments flooded their social media channels: 'Why don't you help the poor Romanian children? Poverty in Romania is rampant and all you can think is how to help a group of future killers', 'Their only fault is that they have stupid parents', 'These kids are dangerous. They are taught to kill from very early ages. Help Romanian children instead'.

How, in this context, can we expect to successfully communicate the **Sustainable Development Goals** in the Eastern European countries? UK observers deplore that less than 4% of the British citizens knew about the MDGs in 2013 and call for better communication strategies to be created for the SDGs. If this is the case in one of the countries who invented the notion of 'international development' from the ashes of the colonialism ideology, how much bigger the need is in a country like Romania, Bulgaria or Hungary (to name just a few) where the majority of the people believe that they still need to be helped to overcome their own poverty and where events from the developing countries are very rarely reported by the media?

Here are four simple ideas:

## **Mind your messenger.**

The agreement on a new global plan to fight poverty is an important step, but similar plans have been presented and have failed in the past. Many in the post-development circles show that after 60 years of 'development' and trillions spent, poverty is still a shameful reality of the human race, at a time when we would have all the resources to truly eradicate it, as the supporters of the development business have been trumpeting all along the way. Development is growingly contested as a useful technology and many call for its demise. 'Development is dead' or it should be killed as soon as possible, say thinkers like Wolfgang Sachs, Gustavo Esteva, Dambisa Moyo, James Ferguson, Serge Latouche and many others. In Eastern Europe not many will remember the

Millennium Development Goals and still fewer will be able to say if they were a success or a failure, but many believe that our own development is our first priority and a promise that was not delivered on. Additionally, racism is rampant, with many people believing that other nations do not develop simply because they are too lazy to do so. Cynicism is also on the rise as shown by the recent refugee crisis.

Who, in this context, is the right messenger for promoting the SDGs? CEOs of big NGOs or inter-governmental organizations (many of them perceived as indulging in luxury and totally disconnected from the 'normal' people), high profile public officials, diplomatic staff will in no way be the best people to communicate that. The people who should carry the message should be perceived as genuine and legitimate: those who can talk about poverty from their own efforts to help poor people or those who know poverty in and out because they live in it. Compelling story-telling techniques rather than sophisticated advertising techniques should be used. The story of the people who fight poverty or the story of the people experiencing poverty should be documented, told and disseminated instead of advertising vague messages about how the world should fight poverty. The costs would probably be in the same range, with far better results that can also have indirect results, such as reducing the mental space for racism and cynicism.

### **Mind your language**

The development business is infested by technical jargon, many 'isms' that combine into long and abstract sentences that are incomprehensible for the non-expert audiences, i.e. the majority of the population. Mass murders are transformed in 'abuses', wars become 'tensions', 'incidents' or 'crisis', starving children and adults become 'people who live on 1.25 USD / day', the millions who run from torture are actually facing 'escalations'. In terms of actions, what we do is to 'condemn', 'regret', 'deplore', express 'concern', ask for resolutions and make recommendations on top of other thousands of recommendations and resolutions never heeded by anyone. Jargon can never produce the empathy which is needed for the global solidarity movement that is implied by the SDGs, but it can surely create the kind of misunderstandings that lead to prejudice and narrow-mindedness. The messages should therefore be 'tested' with their end users and not only in the large creative agencies or communications departments of the institutions and the organizations meant to lead the 'awareness' campaign. In general, the civil society should consider fighting the 'discursive' war that waters down the big tragedies of our world in a way that allows for starvation in a time of lavish affluence. Fighting under-development is the word of the day, but why not fighting the over-development that creates and perpetuates under-development? Fighting poverty can easily turn into fighting the poor, if the ways of the opulent are not considered.

### **Mind your business**

In the Eastern European countries the talk about the predicament of the developing countries is constantly opposed to 'our own poverty'. In Romania and other EU Member States the failure of the state administrations to integrate the Roma populations created unprecedented levels of racism. Many still use the term 'crow' to refer to the Roma citizens, as they use the term 'monkey' to refer to non-white persons. Before 1989 the non-aligned movement included the Eastern European countries in a global movement where under-development was hotly debated, although ideologically blamed on the Western countries. In those years the Romanian 'Scînteia' (the main newspaper) had a whole page on international affairs and very often the articles reflected the situation of the developing countries, global meetings, Romania's positions in the international summits, etc. After 1989 the 'free' but resource-depleted mass media stopped reporting from the developing countries which totally disappeared from the public discourse. For the regular Romanian, Romania is probably one of the poorest country in the world and statistics showing that Romania scores in the first 70 countries in the world in the Human Development Index are not convincing. And still, the voices who want us to first address 'our own poverty' before any talk about global development are frequently dismissed by development professionals as a proof of degrading and outdated selfishness that should be quickly marginalized. This can result only in frustration on both ends, while a middle way, that of speaking of co-development and the global inter-dependencies do exist, although it would require us

to go the extra mile for identifying those areas where these inter-dependencies could be explored and harnessed.

### **Mind the compassion deficit**

Krastev is doing us a big favor when coining the metaphor of the 'compassion deficit', as he gives us a crucial insight into how our SDGs communication campaigns should be framed. People in the 'new' EU Member States were eager to join the EU for the prosperity promise. A promise about how prosperity would be shared with themselves and not about how they would be expected to share with the 'others'. Living at the margins of the most developed club of nations, not far from the shiny comforts of some of the most industrialized countries in the world, the Eastern European citizens feel that they are the unluckiest people in the world. History had wickedly conspired to keep them away from progress. Any comparisons with those who are even unluckier is taken as a bad joke. Blinded with the sparkly luxuries they can almost touch across a border that does not even exist any longer, Eastern Europeans feel that they suffered enough and now they 'deserve' to be as developed as anyone can dream. In the EU 'new' Member States any SDG 'awareness campaigns' needs to take this complex aspirations into account and probably build on them, instead of dismissing them. Smart communicators will want to talk about common interests, before they speak about any 'duty' or moral obligation to help those in need.

[1] Ivan Krastev, Easter Europe's Compassion Deficit, available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/09/opinion/eastern-europes-compassion-deficit-refugees-migrants.html?_r=0).

-----  
**Mirela Oprea** has earned a PhD in international development from the University of Bologna and she is a Senior Liaison Manager at World Vision Middle East and Eastern Europe. She writes a blog at [www.mirelaoprea.com](http://www.mirelaoprea.com).