



(RE-)BRANDING DEVELOPMENT CO-OPERATION

OECD DEVCOM DISCUSSION NOTE

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INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen the development community stuck in an **identity crisis**, grappling with **new goals, actors and ways of working**. The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have sharpened this crisis. Many development organisations are reviewing their spending priorities; some are undergoing major institutional reforms.

These changes have led several [DevCom](#) member organisations to reflect on their branding and communications strategies. Are we conveying the right image of our work? What feelings do we want to evoke among our audiences and stakeholders? **Do we need a re-brand for the post-COVID era?**

This Discussion Note seeks to support DevCom members in their reflections on branding. It examines three key branding challenges:

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| CHALLENGE #1 | Defining Who We Are: Our Mission & Values |
| CHALLENGE #2 | Choosing Our Look and Feel: Pictures & Logos |
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CHALLENGE #1

Defining Who We Are: Our Mission and Values

Marketing experts agree: a brand is much more than a logo or a look. In fact, our brands need to help [drive the broad, long-term goals](#) of our organisations. Our mission and vision are “[the brain and heart](#)” of our brand. So how do we describe our mission as development organisations? More specifically:

- What features distinguish development co-operation from other policy areas?
- What values do we embody as institutions?
- What [ideas and emotions](#) do we want people to associate with our work?

To help address these questions, let us consider the following statements about development today, all of which are reinforced during the COVID-19 crisis.

- Development work brings **universal value**. Alongside results abroad, it generates many benefits at home, including jobs, health, climate action, peace and stability. Development is no longer just about “aid” and “charity”.
- We are all **interdependent**. All countries have agency, with abilities – and responsibilities – to help make sustainable development happen. Development is no longer about rich benefactors lifting poor victims out of poverty.
- Sustainable development depends on a broad societal **partnership**. Development organisations can catalyse action by others and promote behavioural change, but they have neither the funding nor the power to do it alone.

At the [2019 EDDs](#), DevCom members discussed their narrative choices (see graphic) and identified slogans for “dream campaigns”:

- ✓ *A Shared Future is Our Only Future*
- ✓ *Climate Change Doesn't Stop at the Border*
- ✓ *Be Strong, Be Sustainable*
- ✓ *Make the Impossible Possible*
- ✓ *Together, Invest, Innovate*
- ✓ *Development is Our Legacy*

The *2019 Development Co-operation Report* sets out a vision for development co-operation, describing the many ways it can contribute to a “[fairer, greener, safer tomorrow](#).”



Here is how some DevCom members and partners currently describe themselves and their work:

ORGANISATION	KEY QUOTES FROM MISSION STATEMENTS, LOGOS & LANDING PAGES
Canada - GAC	<i>“Our actions to promote human dignity and a more just, inclusive, sustainable, and safe world.”</i>
European Commission - DG DevCo	<i>“We are the European Commission’s department for International Cooperation and Development. We are in charge of promoting international partnerships across the world with a view to eradicating poverty and fostering sustainable development.”</i>
Finland - Foreign Affairs	<i>“Development policy is an important part of Finland's foreign and security policy. Development cooperation is one means to implement the policy. Development cooperation provides millions of people with a chance for a better life.”</i>
France - AFD	<i>“Towards a world in common” “AFD supports and accelerates the transitions to a fairer and more sustainable world.”</i>
Germany - BMZ	<i>“Freedom and security for all; a life without poverty, fear and environmental destruction – to move a little closer to this goal, that is the aim of Germany's development policy. The guiding principles of Germany's development cooperation will be protecting human rights and fostering the developing countries' sense of ownership and ability to help themselves.”</i>
Ireland - Foreign Affairs	<i>“A Better World is a whole of government policy.... It outlines Ireland’s vision of a more equal, peaceful and sustainable world. It charts a clear way forward to achieve this vision, shaping and protecting our stability, our prosperity, our shared interests and our common future.”</i>
Japan - JICA	<i>“JICA, with its partners, will take the lead in forging bonds of trust across the world, aspiring for a free, peaceful and prosperous world where people can hope for a better future and explore their diverse potentials.”</i>
Mexico - AMEXCID	<i>“Cooperating is sharing the best of Mexico to face global challenges and grow together.”</i>
OFID	<i>“A world where sustainable development, centred on human capacity-building, is a reality for all.”</i>
Sweden - Sida	<i>“The goal is to enable people living in poverty and oppression to improve their lives. We facilitate development that prioritises the most impoverished in the world. Our vision is to safeguard the rights of every individual and their opportunity to live a dignified life.”</i>
United Kingdom - DFID	<i>“DFID leads the UK’s work to end extreme poverty. We are tackling the global challenges of our time including poverty and disease, mass migration, insecurity and conflict. Our work is building a safer, healthier, more prosperous world for people in developing countries and in the UK too.”</i>
United States - USAID	<i>“The purpose of foreign aid is to end the need for its existence” “From the American People”</i>

CHALLENGE #2

Choosing Our Image: Pictures & Logos

With a well-defined identity (Step #1), we can reflect on what visual image we want to project through our logos, the look and feel of our websites and materials, and the pictures we use to present our work on social media.

For development organisations, this is not an easy task. The “product” we are “selling” is harder to define and depict than, for example, a fizzy drink. Is our branding goal to promote values like global solidarity? To portray trustworthy and effective institutions? To improve the image of a whole nation? It may not be possible to achieve such diverse goals with one brand.

Development Pictures and Videos

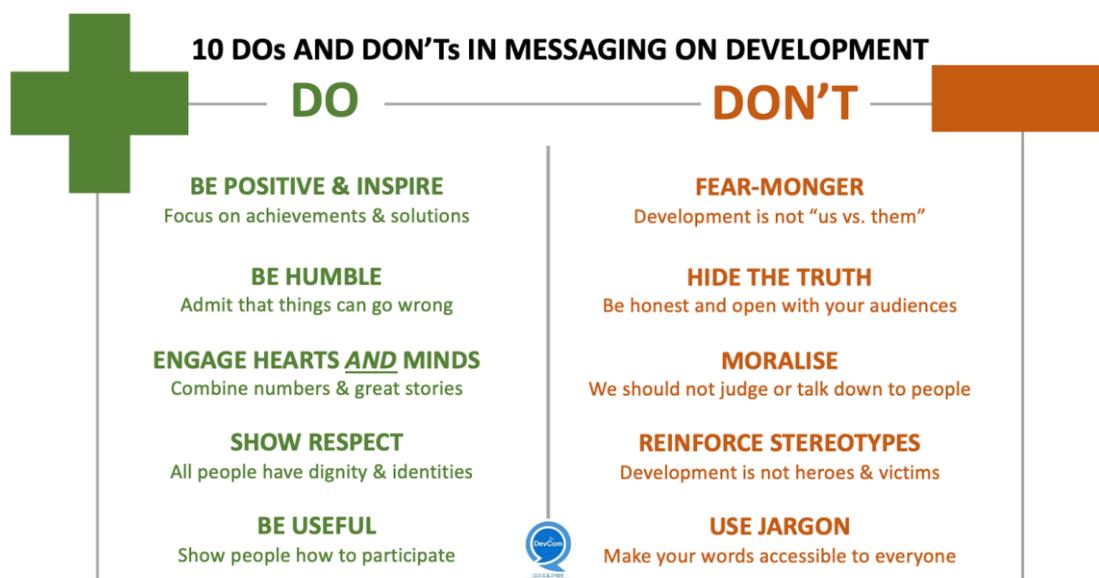
As development organisations rethink their narratives, they also need to rethink the images they use to describe their work, particularly when these images depict people.

Development organisations are often criticised for using “[poverty porn](#)” or “[white saviour](#)” narratives, depicting Western leaders or celebrities as “heroes” and citizens of partner countries as helpless “victims”. Such images provoke emotions and may lead some audiences to support development work or donate to charities. However, they can also:

- ↓ Perpetuate negative stereotypes, or even [demean and de-humanise](#) people.
- ↓ Reinforce notions of “them and us”, rather than shared humanity and global goals.
- ↓ Create the impression that decades of aid have not achieved anything.

Narratives are hard to shift. In recent research (not yet published), the [Development Engagement Lab](#) finds that, while UK citizens agree that development images are too negative, they also think charities should continue using them for fundraising.

In calling for more positive narratives, [Radiaid](#) proposes [questions to consider](#) when using images of people. Meanwhile, DevCom’s *10 Do’s and Don’ts in Talking Development* can also be applied to the use of images.



Development Logos

As the [face of our organizations](#), logos are crucial in making a good first impression. Leading writers on branding (see Annex) say that a good logo is:

- ✓ **Distinctive.** Audiences should understand it in 2 seconds and remember it for a long time.
- ✓ **Appealing.** It should convey a positive and accurate impression about our mission and values.
- ✓ **Versatile.** It needs to work at any size and in all formats.
- ✓ **Unique.** It should set your brand apart from others.
- ✓ **Timeless.** You definitely do *not* want to change it again in 2 years.

There has been little research on whether different development logos meet the above criteria. On [this webpage](#), USAID explains the diverse components of its logo and the strategic rationale behind its branding. Yet, while this 2018 [study on USAID branding in Bangladesh](#) finds some positive effects, it also concludes that surprisingly few respondents understood the meaning of the USAID brand.

The following table illustrates some of the choices that DevCom members and partners have made about their logos.

Many development organisations choose blue, which conveys competence and security , and is associated with intelligence and trust.			
			
Many development organisations use globes to remind people of their global mission.			
			
			
Some organisations add more colour and emotive elements to their logos.			
			
Several countries have created “national aid brands” that are not tied directly to specific institutions.			
			
Ministries and many national agencies use national flags, crests and/or colours.			
			
			

CHALLENGE #3

Striking the Right Tone: Branding Strategies and Guidelines



Branding is indispensable, but that does not mean putting logos on everything. Indeed, branding in the development sector can be controversial. This section addresses three strategic dilemmas.

1. Branding abroad for visibility at home?

Almost all DevCom members agree: their main goal is engaging citizens *at home*. Development actors are accountable. They need to show they are achieving results and meeting urgent development needs. They also [want citizens to feel positive](#) about how their countries, taxes or donations – are helping make a difference.

These pressures lead development actors to adorn their development work abroad with logos. Yet, there is actually [very little evidence](#) to prove that such branding helps achieve communication goals. One [recent study](#) does find that showing UK citizens branded aid work does increase public support, particularly among conservative voters. But critics highlight the potential downsides of aid branding:

- ↓ W. Gyude Moore argues that, by giving donors credit for development results, [branding undermines public support for partner governments](#). He claims that branding is only justified during humanitarian responses, or when it increases the credibility of a studies and reports.
- ↓ In a 2012 study of US aid to Pakistan, Nancy Birdsall and her co-authors suggest that [branding pressures can lead to bad decisions](#) on which development projects to fund.
- ↓ Malika Gharib of NPR shows how [branding can be highly demeaning and undignified](#).

WHY DO WE BRAND?

In a 2020 survey, we asked DevCom members and partners about the goals of their communications partnerships. Among eight goals, “raising awareness at home” was the most popular answer, while “branding our organisation in partner countries” was the least popular.

Visit oecd.org/dev/devcom for the full survey

2. Promoting oneself in an era of partnerships?

While branding aims to raise visibility for individual actors, today's development narratives are all about collaboration. Frank Vollmer argues that organisations should explain how their efforts [contribute to jointly achieved development outcomes](#), even if this loses them individual visibility. With smart strategic branding, they could even improve their reputation as team players.

What is clear is that partnerships need to be at the core of development branding. For a start, branding strategies need to clarify **how to co-brand** joint activities, and **how to engage paid project partners or grantees in branding**.

In January, DevCom conducted a *Survey on Partnering in Communications*. Among 18 respondents:

- 12 say that partnerships are an important part of their organization's communications efforts.
- 8 say have a strategy in place to guide their communications partnerships.
- 12 say they fund partners to deliver communications projects at home.
- 8 say they systematically include communications in all project contracts.

3. Sharing the microphone means letting go of control

Marketing experts tell us that [branding can improve job satisfaction and pride](#) among employees. This may be particularly important in the development sector, which thrives on its sense of purpose. In their [2012 study on branding in the non-profit sector](#), Nathalie Kylander and Christopher Stone call for a more "democratic" approach to branding: involving staff and relaxing brand control.

Yet, there are risks to more decentralized communications, and employees – especially leaders in the public spotlight – need training and guidance on their roles and responsibilities in building organizational trust and upholding brand identity. Errant tweets can have [harmful consequences](#).

Branding guidelines of DevCom member and partners

Many development organisations provide their external collaborators and employees with guidelines on branding. Among the guidelines available online, some focus mainly on the correct use of logos, colours and fonts (e.g. [Ireland](#) and [Sweden](#)). Others go further, providing information on the vision and values they seek to promote (like [Belgium](#) or the [UK](#)).

Here are diverse guidelines from [Austria](#), [France](#), [Germany](#), [Norway](#), and the [United States](#).

FURTHER READING

For the latest trends in branding, design and marketing, visit the following blogs and websites:

99designs	en.99designs.fr/blog/logo-branding
American Marketing Association	ama.org/topics/branding
The Branding Journal	thebrandingjournal.com
Brandingmag	brandingmag.com
Constructive	constructive.co/insights (focus on non-profits)
Crowdspring	crowdspring.com/blog/category/brand-identity
Deloitte	2020 Global Marketing Trends
New Breed Marketing	newbreedmarketing.com/blog/improve-branding-strategy