

DUST

Democratising
Just
Sustainability
Transitions



Affective Communication in the DUST Project

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Welcome!

An introduction

Regions around the world, including those in the DUST project, are undergoing long-term structural changes towards more sustainable industries and practices. These changes include increased renewable energy production, shifts from heavily polluting industries to greener economies, and care for healthier natural environments. Importantly, they also present an opportunity to involve communities in the future of their regions.

Making sure transitions are just and inclusive helps to societally root efforts for sustainability and works towards changes that are more beneficial for all of society. Achieving a future that is fair for people, the planet, and our collective livelihoods requires meaningful engagement with diverse communities, where their voices are heard, and their experiences, priorities and concerns are acknowledged, respected and addressed. However, this can be a complex task.

Many less heard communities have been historically ignored and marginalised in decision making. Often, we find ourselves dealing with high levels of distrust towards authorities and governmental bodies, which is only added to by new policies that fail to reflect or target the actual needs of citizens. Even when intentions are good, many obstacles complicate our ability to properly open dialogue with communities.

Navigating these challenges requires that we carefully consider our communicative approaches. Affective communication can present us with a way forward. It focuses on the expression of feelings surrounding interactions and relates to expressions of value and belief. It goes beyond simply conveying information, to also incorporate how ideas are received, felt and understood on a deeper level and create spaces where meaning is transferred beyond explanation or direct comprehension.

The “affective” in communication refers to expressions of emotion, value and meaning. It is a fundamental aspect of how we communicate, alongside expressions of logic and evidence (cognitive). Often the cognitive is valued over the affective in communication, however affect can help us to express and understand contexts in more depth. Functionally, it can be embedded in how we engage verbally, in writing, through graphics and non-verbally. Affective communication is two-way, requiring exchange as a mode of valuing different forms of knowledge.

This booklet contains a synthesis of our learnings on affective communication with communities engaged in the Horizon Europe project Democratising Just Sustainability Transitions (DUST).

Enjoy reading, thinking, and learning about how to more meaningfully engage with communities for collective action in sustainability transitions and beyond.



Reading guide

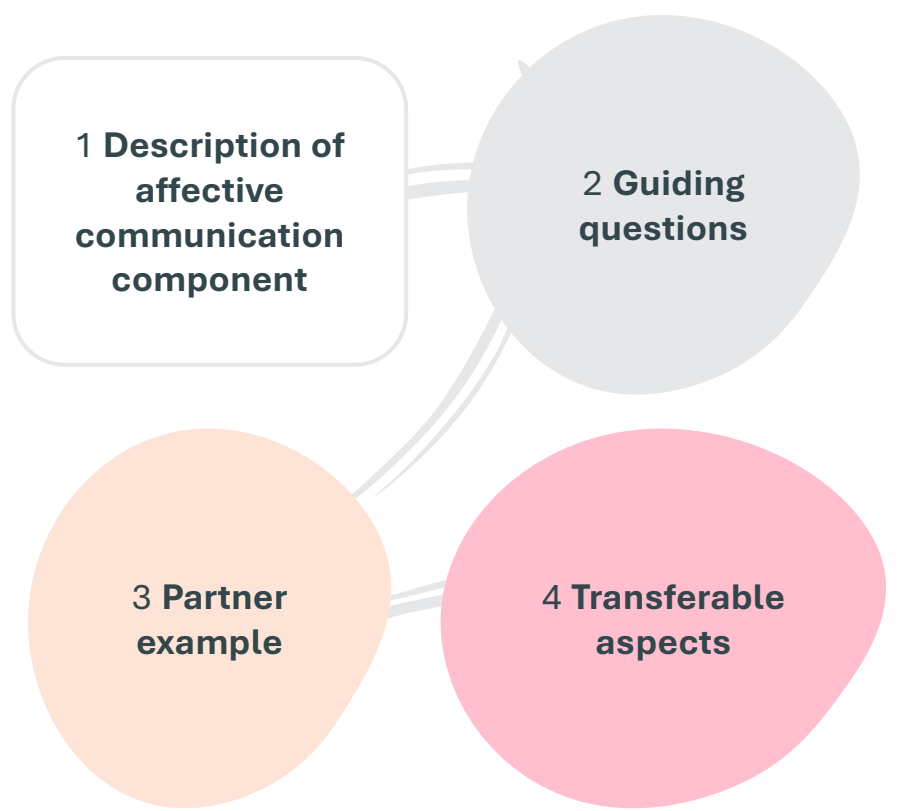
Our Affective Communication booklet shares how DUST partners have affectively communicated in their work, and invites you to reflect on how you might strengthen your own approach to engaging with citizens. Inside, you'll find practical tips and real-life examples that can be adapted to many different contexts.

The booklet is organised into chapters, each focusing on a different component of affective communication. You can draw on these components individually or together, depending on what is most relevant in your context.

In each chapter, you'll first read a short introduction to the component at hand. Then, you'll be guided by reflective questions that help you consider how this element could support your own communication practices.

Next, you'll explore examples from the DUST project. These stories show how partners have used affective communication, through visual, non-verbal, and verbal methods, and the impact they created.

Finally, each chapter highlights transferable aspects you may wish to consider in your own context, encouraging you to adapt them as needed so the ideas stay relevant.



**1 Description of
affective
communication
component**

**2 Guiding
questions**

**3 Partner
example**

**4 Transferable
aspects**

Structure of each chapter

1

Understanding context & target audience(s)

Laying the groundwork for communication

Communication does not exist in a vacuum. Complex, layered contexts shape how messages are received, forming the foundation for both affective and effective communication. These contexts generate discourses that influence audiences' worldviews, values and assumptions.

When we fail to recognise these contexts, which provide invaluable insight into our target audience, our communication falters. Messages risk being misunderstood, dismissed, or even reinforcing exclusion if they do not take account of the landscape in which interaction takes place.

To communicate more affectively, it is paramount to consider the context and the dynamics at play. You might start with the spatial context, noticing how the design and use of space shapes participation and who is included or excluded. It can also be useful to reflect on the historical context, thinking about past events, relationships or legacies that continue to influence present interactions. The cultural context is another area to explore, looking at the norms, rituals and values that shape how people communicate

and interpret meaning. These are just a few suggestions, other aspects of context may also be relevant depending on your setting.

Power dynamics often underpin these contexts. They can appear in both subtle and explicit ways, through interactions between different genders, religions, ethnicities, age groups and more. Over time, such dynamics have shaped communication, determining whose voices are prioritised and whose are silenced. Unequal authority and resources can marginalise contributions, while institutional structures and biases further limit participation.

Intersectionality provides a valuable framework for understanding these overlapping dynamics. Pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw, it encourages us to see how multiple aspects of identity and power intersect, shaping communication in ways that go beyond a single factor.

By acknowledging these dynamics and creating opportunities for equitable participation, we lay the groundwork to practice other components of affective communication.



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Guiding Questions

- **What contexts shape my audience's communication?**

(Consider spatial, historical, cultural, and other factors that influence how messages are received.)

- **What power dynamics and overlapping identities affect communication?**

(Who has influence, whose voices are amplified, and who is often left out?)

- **How can I include marginalised voices?**

(Identify ways to bring overlooked perspectives into the conversation and ensure equitable participation.)

Partner examples



Bulgarian hospitality

A workshop in Bulgaria saw several different social groups brought together. Acknowledging potential power dynamics and creating an atmosphere of respect was enabled through the setting of the workshop. For example, by offering familiar food - including a spread of pastries, sandwiches, juices and a yogurt drink laid out on a tablecloth – not only helped participants feel comfortable in a space, but also valued, creating an environment where power imbalances were less likely to dominate. The selection of regional food and drink reflected the cultural context and resonated with participants.

Youthful approach

In Poland, a strong age hierarchy exists within mining communities, where elders traditionally speak first. However, a DUST partner's unconventional approach of giving the floor to youth initially demonstrated an awareness of the evolving perspectives and engagement needs of the younger generation.

On the same level

During a workshop in Bulgaria, a DUST partner intentionally chose to sit - rather than stand - at the same table as participants while facilitating. This worked to minimise hierarchical differences, creating a friendly and relaxed atmosphere, and promoting a sense of equality where everyone was encouraged to contribute and engage freely, addressing potential power imbalances and biases.

No prior knowledge

In Groningen, invitations for focus groups explicitly stated that no prior knowledge was needed. This approach proved successful as participants later shared that, without this detail, they would have felt discouraged from attending. They also mentioned that they often feel that meetings regarding the transition tend to involve 'experts' and promote 'exclusivity'. This highlights the need for communication to amplify diverse voices and nurture environments where everyone feels their contributions are valued, regardless of their knowledge level.



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‘Power-filled’ spaces

Seating arrangements and different ways of using a space (standing, sitting on chairs, sitting on the floor) also play a significant role in promoting a sense of equality or hierarchy depending on what is desired. Arranging seating in a circle, for example, rather than in rows or at a head-of-the-table setup, helps break down barriers and signals equal respect for everyone’s voice.



A caring environment

Hospitality and care serve a critical function in making people feel valued and welcomed while also reflecting an understanding of context. Offering food and drinks during workshops or other events engaging citizens, especially when thoughtfully chosen and presented with an audience’s preferences in mind, signals to participants that they are appreciated, are cared for, and that their comfort matters. These small gestures can lead to improved rapport, help ease tensions, create a relaxed atmosphere, and foster more open communication.

2

Purpose, relevance & benefit to community

Aligning messaging

Building on an understanding of context (which may be a continuous process), using these insights allows us to craft messages that resonate emotionally and offer real relevance and benefit to the communities we engage.

The challenge lies in interpreting context to filter what is most important, turning knowledge of an audience's experiences, beliefs, priorities and concerns into communication that resonates. Without interpretation and self-reflection on our worldview and limitations as communicators, messages risk missing the mark, failing to connect or silencing unheard voices.

Affective communication works by adapting messages to the audience's environment and needs, paying attention both to the larger context and to how the audience may feel about it. This can mean aligning

content with what the audience values to build an emotional connection, or addressing beliefs in ways that encourage reflection and discussion.

In practice, this involves recognising diversity within audiences. For example, generational narratives shape how different age groups perceive and communicate information, as each generation has unique shared experiences, cultural touchpoints and values that influence understanding. Recognising these patterns allows communicators to adapt messages and approaches to connect affectively with each group and enhance engagement. Tools such as framing theory can further support this process by guiding how information is presented to different audiences to highlight perspectives and sentiments most relevant to the audience.



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Guiding Questions

- **What assumptions and (unconscious) biases am I bringing to the table?**
(Reflect on how your own ideas, thoughts, and beliefs might shape how you interpret information.)
- **How do aspects of my audience's identity shape their perspectives and needs?**
(Think about factors like gender, culture, age, or background.)
- **Does my message connect with my audience's emotions, values, or sense of identity?**
(Reflect on how your content resonates with what matters to them.)

Good for you

Dutch workshop participants emphasised the need to frame sustainability as relevant to, beneficial for and respectful of their daily lives, as was the case with the Sami community in Sweden. By doing so, topics such as the transition become more relatable and resonant by connecting the audience's understanding and immediate concerns with the broader goals of sustainability.

Form and function

Workshop development across the DUST project prioritised audience appeal through a give-and-take approach.

For instance, participants in some of our Polish workshops consisted of retired miners, trade union representatives, government officials, and some youth climate activists. Based on the characteristics and expectations of participants, this diverse group necessitated a more official format, with in-person presentations by government officials and climate activists, allowing for direct engagement and networking opportunities. In contrast, Swedish workshops, targeting volunteers in community development programmes, benefited from less formalised discussions that delved into existing Swedish citizen engagement methods used by authorities.

Mind the generation gap

During a workshop in Poland, we learned more about using the ideas from different social groups to frame, discuss, and act on the transition. Polish and Dutch youth expressed a feeling of often being dismissed. They expressed that older generations do not take them seriously, while older generations perceive a lack of desire from youth to actually participate. These perspectives allowed us to further understand the optimal messages that may resonate with different generations. For instance, discussions of fear, despair, and confusion when talking about the transition and climate change were impactful with youth, helping to create environments of solidarity and support, whereas this type of communication would not have worked with older generations.



Transferable aspects

Mutual benefit

Focusing on mutual benefit is important and valuable for engagement. Highlighting how everyone involved stands to gain encourages collaboration, investment and inspires people to join in the collective effort of co-creation.



One size does not fit all

Adaption is a more accurate and affective approach when engaging diverse groups with varied beliefs, narratives, experiences and so forth. This diversity may stem from generational, religious, cultural, and other differences.





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3

Building a communication toolbox

Finding imagery & language that resonate

Once we recognise what matters to audiences, cultural and visual elements as well as body and verbal language can be used to strengthen connection, foster trust and make communication both more meaningful and memorable.

A common obstacle is identifying and sourcing material that is relevant and representative of different audiences. Sharpening our interpretation skills and out-of-the-box thinking to identify what is contextually significant and aligns with audience values helps build a ‘toolbox’ of visual material for affective communication.

A powerful way to achieve this is through familiarity. In imagery, this can mean portraying people in ways that genuinely reflect the

audience’s cultural background, traditions and customs. It can also involve thoughtful use of symbols, patterns, styles (such as polished versus organic aesthetics), colours and forms to resonate with audience preferences.

Various traditional and alternative sources of information, from magazines to streetscapes and shop fronts, can be used to gather data and build insights about what resonates with different groups. Observing engagement patterns allows communicators to identify what is culturally relevant and contextually significant. These insights help refine the visual “toolbox,” which can be applied flexibly across groups, adjusting for demographics, preferences and cultural norms.

Guiding Questions

- **Where can I find culturally relevant imagery and language?**

(Consider both traditional sources, like books or archives, and less obvious sources, such as local spaces or social media.)

- **Which visual or cultural elements respectfully reflect my audience?**

(Think about symbols, imagery, and styles that align with their identity, values and lived experiences.)

- **Are design elements chosen with cultural awareness?**

(Check that symbols, imagery and colours are used accurately and thoughtfully to represent the diverse meanings they may hold.)



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Partner examples

Champions and Fire Souls

When translating material, it is important to use words that resonate and connect with targeted audiences. For example, 'Community Champion' is the English term the DUST project uses to refer to representatives for various marginalised groups addressed in the project. As the direct translation is abstract in Swedish, partners in the Scandinavian country opted for a phrase that translates as 'Fire Soul'. This more culturally-rooted term is a well-circulated and understood in the country's context and carries the same meaning as Community Champion but with more cultural nuance.



Sing to me

Music can be a good way to make communication material more culturally recognisable. For a social media campaign in our case study regions that aimed to increase users of the e-democracy tool Pol.is, we created videos that used music from artists located in the regions, where instruments, time signatures, modes and tones would be recognisable to target audiences



Art-based research

In DUST, regional communication was adapted to the familiar forms of digital expression. To understand what visual styles and formats resonated with communities in DUST regions, partners conducted art-based research to seek out recurring visuals and themes in regional artwork. They also explored designs on social media by entered the hashtag “- place name” into Instagram to see what was relevant and trending in those areas. This analysis aimed to identify visual cues and cultural symbols that could be effectively used in communication materials to engage local communities. The analysis pointed to the use of colour, shape, style, theme, mood, and language expression that may be regionally familiar.

Pop visuals

Exploring unconventional or alternative resources can provide valuable insights into what resonates with different audiences. For example, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and others offer a wealth of information about trends, interests, and preferences across various demographics. By observing user-generated content, popular hashtags, or viral challenges, organisations can gain a deeper understanding of what captures attention and sparks meaningful conversations.

Questions and answers

Asking questions and being open to learning about what resonates with and matters to people is an essential ingredient for affective communication. This process may involve moments of discomfort, as we acknowledge that we do not yet know or fully understand. However, embracing this uncertainty allows us to seek understanding beyond our assumptions, ultimately helping us connect with others on a deeper level.



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4

Communication channels & accessibility

How & where to reach people

With materials and messaging shaped by audience needs, for affective communication it is equally important to consider how messages are delivered, ensuring accessibility across spaces, formats, and languages.

Messages often fail to resonate when accessibility is overlooked. Physical, technological, or linguistic barriers can prevent audiences from receiving information, particularly among marginalised groups or those with limited resources.

Addressing accessibility means adapting communication in multiple ways, including but not limited to the three below:

- **Spatial accessibility:** Consider where your audience is located and the practical realities of that environment. For example, rural communities may face limited

technological infrastructure or region-specific challenges. Using familiar spaces for engagement and adapting content to local realities makes communication more considerate and convenient.

- **Format accessibility:** Match the medium to audience needs. In-person engagement, printed materials, or digital channels may be more effective depending on the group. Selecting formats that align with audience resources and preferences helps increase understanding and engagement.

- **Language accessibility:** Structure information clearly and logically, using concise language, headings, bullet points, and bite-sized content to reduce cognitive load. Attention to connotation and terminology ensures that messages are culturally and linguistically appropriate.



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Guiding Questions

- **Have I considered the physical environment and access needs of my audience?**

(Identify spaces that are convenient, safe, and familiar; account for transportation and local infrastructure.)

- **Is the communication medium aligned with the audience's habits and resources?**

(Use social media, print, in-person, or hybrid methods depending on tech access and familiarity.)

- **Have I adapted word choice, phrasing, and tone for my audience?**

(Test readability, ensure cultural relevance, and adjust formality to match audience expectations.)

Young spaces

For physical meetings, young people in the Netherlands and Poland recommend hosting gatherings in cafes, schools and shopping malls or at local sports events and cultural festivals. All these are places where younger groups typically feel familiar, are active, and regularly frequent. This reduces psychological barriers to participation.

Young Polish people expressed interest in participating in and creating a science club focused on the climate transition. This initiative offered them a platform for discussions and decision-making, aligning with their rights to contribute meaningfully. By fostering a sense of ownership and empowerment, it motivates young participants to stay engaged and invested in the process.



Dialect connections

A valuable insight gained during field visits to Groningen was the recommendation to use the regional dialect, Gronings, to better communicate with more rural communities. This demonstrates a genuine care and willingness to better understand the perspectives of local citizens who often feel patronised and dismissed.

Bad language

Language choices in the Netherlands further illustrate the importance of inclusivity. Terms like “energy coach” or “lower-educated” were flagged as potentially stigmatising, highlighting the need to avoid labels that alienate and/or patronise.



Familiar figures

In rural Catholic areas of Silesia in Poland, priests have often facilitated communication for regional renewal programmes by engaging directly with parish members. This highlights the importance of trust, which is often built through familiar and respected community figures. Miners noted that this method remains effective for reaching older, rural populations.

Figures in visual designs should also be carefully considered. During the production of designs as part of DUST’s Regional Futures Literacy Labs, the use of a head image to display community hopes and dreams had to be approached sensitively noting the histories of the Sámi people in that region.

Transferable aspects

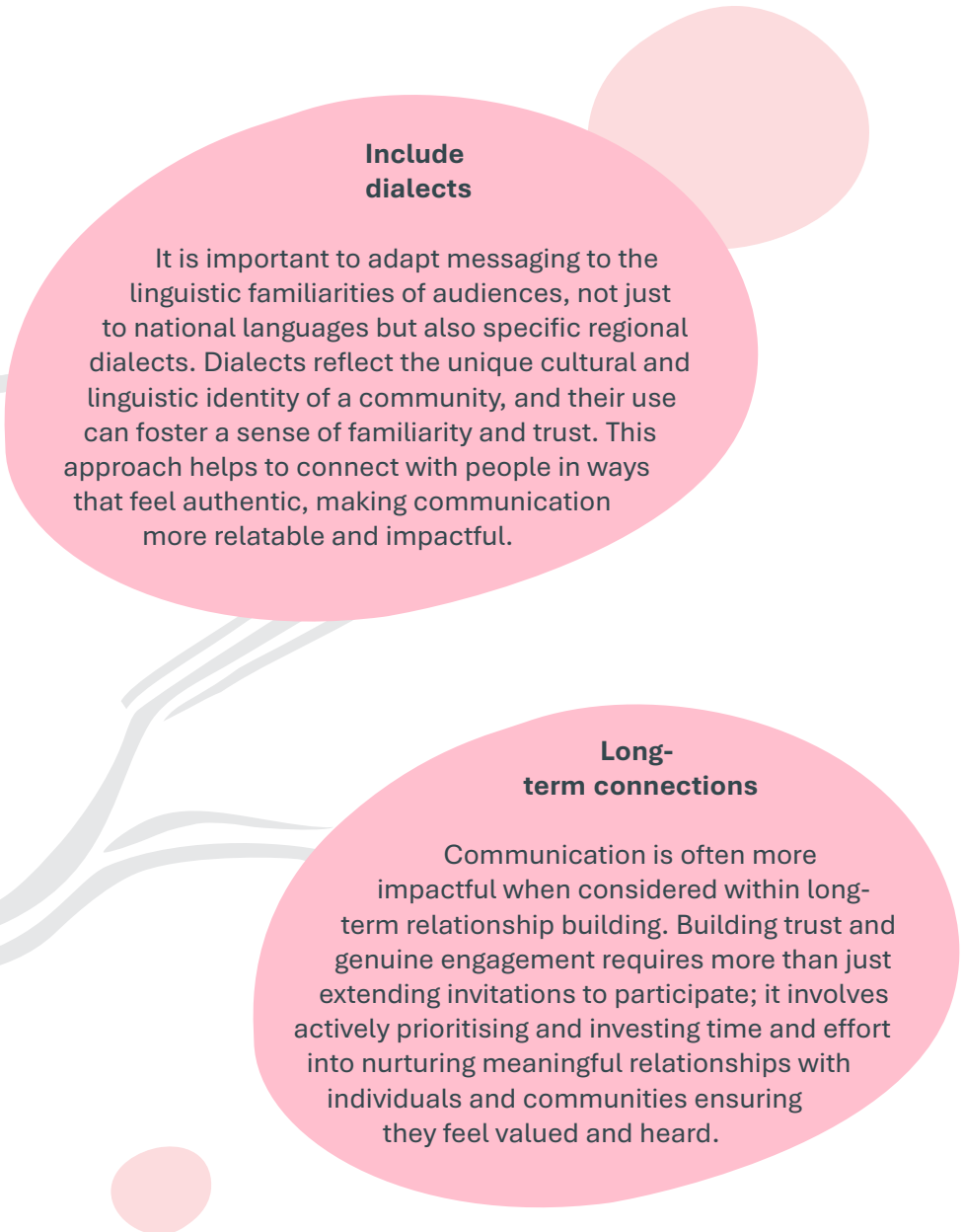
Appropriate language

It is essential to be mindful of how the content, tone, and presentation in speech, writing, or visuals can unintentionally come across as stigmatising or patronising. Such missteps can create unnecessary distance between us and the people we aim to engage.



Meeting points

Being open to exploring different channels and environments is key for maximising and enriching affective communication by engaging people where they feel most at ease. This might involve creating opportunities for dialogue in shopping centres, schools, cafes, sports centres, or other community spaces that are part of their daily lives or serve as hubs for social interaction. By meeting people in familiar settings and adapting communication to suit the environment, not only does communication become more accessible but also demonstrate a genuine effort to understand and respect their preferences.



Include dialects

It is important to adapt messaging to the linguistic familiarities of audiences, not just to national languages but also specific regional dialects. Dialects reflect the unique cultural and linguistic identity of a community, and their use can foster a sense of familiarity and trust. This approach helps to connect with people in ways that feel authentic, making communication more relatable and impactful.

Long-term connections

Communication is often more impactful when considered within long-term relationship building. Building trust and genuine engagement requires more than just extending invitations to participate; it involves actively prioritising and investing time and effort into nurturing meaningful relationships with individuals and communities ensuring they feel valued and heard.

5

Feedback and revision of communication & material

Listening, adapting and trying again

Finally, affective communication is an iterative process: reflecting, testing, and refining messages helps ensure they remain effective, relevant, and inclusive over time.

Even well-researched and carefully designed communication can fall short if it does not align with audience needs, cultural norms, or emotional expectations. Without feedback, messages risk being unclear, irrelevant, or unengaging, particularly for marginalised groups.

To address this, communicators can actively engage in testing and feedback. Topics for review can include content, clarity, visual appeal, cultural alignment, power dynamics and format. This involves consulting target audiences and external experts through methods such as focus groups, surveys, or interviews. By actively involving stakeholders, the revision process not only improves relevance and clarity but also fosters shared ownership and accountability.

Guiding Questions

- **Have I identified which parts of the material need testing?**

(Focus may be on content, clarity, visuals, cultural fit, emotional impact, power dynamics, and format.)

- **Did I create a safe space for honest feedback and follow-ups?**

(Ensure anonymity if needed, explain the purpose, and listen actively without judgment.)

- **Which gaps require quick fixes, which need longer-term changes, and have I prioritised key improvements based on feedback?**

(Focus on high-impact revisions first; adjust content, format, visuals, tone, or delivery channels as needed.)



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Partner examples

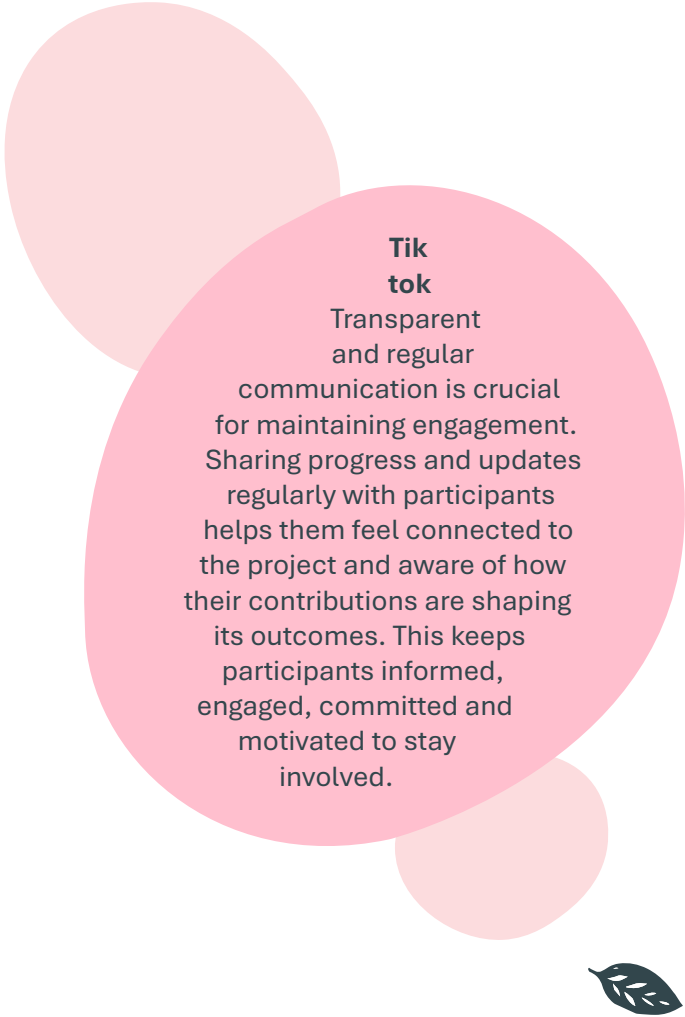
Regular updates

In a series of focus groups and workshops held in Poland, DUST partners deliberately provided detailed updates to interviewees and participants to keep them abreast of DUST progress. This approach helped build a relationship where iterative feedback is welcomed, which was highly appreciated by those involved.



React videos

Feedback can even be used as further communication material, as exemplified with a storytelling activity in DUST where participants of the Regional Futures Literacy Labs reacted to the designs produced to display their inputs. These reactions allowed them to further express their experiences and were filmed to add local voices to the material, helping to authentically explain the depictions to external audiences.



Tik tok

Transparent and regular communication is crucial for maintaining engagement. Sharing progress and updates regularly with participants helps them feel connected to the project and aware of how their contributions are shaping its outcomes. This keeps participants informed, engaged, committed and motivated to stay involved.

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Handbook #2

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DUST

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