

Writing and Reporting about Poverty

**GUIDELINES
FOR
RESPECTFUL REPORTING
ON POVERTY**



DIE ARMUTSKONFERENZ.

EDITORIAL INFORMATION

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Die Armutskonferenz

The Austrian Anti-Poverty Network has been active as a network linking more than 40 social, education and research organisations in Austria since 1995. It addresses the background and causes, facts and figures, strategies and measures to combat poverty and social exclusion in Austria.

The Network is committed to improving the living conditions of people affected by poverty in collaboration with those concerned.

Sichtbar Werden (Becoming Visible)

Since 2006 self-help organisations and initiatives of persons with experiences of poverty and exclusion, such as street newspapers, initiatives started by unemployed people, single parents, representatives of drug users have created a network in the project Sichtbar Werden/Becoming Visible of the Anti-Poverty Network in order to exchange experience and discuss problems, voice concerns and demands and organise joint public activities.

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INTRODUCTION

Poverty exists – even in a rich country like Austria. Which members of a society are labelled poor depends on general historical and social conditions. In Austria, and in the EU in general, people who earn less than 60% of the median per-capita income are considered to be at risk of poverty. Ultimately, this limit is arbitrary and also problematic, because it only takes income aspects into account. However, people who experience poverty not only have a lower-than-average income, but also fewer chances of education, are affected by illness more frequently and can participate in social life only to a limited extent.

POVERTY IN THE MEDIA

Media reports about poverty rarely describe the everyday lives of people who have to make ends meet with little money. However, people are never just "poor". In such reports, their other qualities rarely get a mention: they are inventive, clever, astute, enduring, suffering, strategic, caring, responsible and a lot more.

Media coverage follows certain rules:

- Only the exceptional will become a news item
- You need a "hook", a topical event
- Tabloids in particular need protagonists, faces, individual stories
- The media will reinforce those images that already exist in the minds of the recipients.

Because they lack access to experts, journalists often contact officials of the major charity organisations. As yet there is no lobby strong enough to involve the people affected by poverty in the discussion as experts.

"The issue is respectful reporting which points out social injustices. What matters most in the long run is that those injustices are changed. I take the optimistic view that investigative journalism can contribute to change.

Christian Granbacher, Magazin ECHO



"New young homelessness":

Article in the magazine NEWS, July 2011, by Sandra Wobrazek – Winner of the award for journalism "from below" in the category Print 2011.

Photo: Marcus Deak/NEWS

The aim of this booklet is to view people facing poverty as experts of experience and to hear what they have to say. This is an essential contribution to making various aspects of poverty visible and thus breaking with clichés, which mostly show stereotypical, extreme forms of poverty.

REPORTING ON POVERTY NOT JUST A MINORITY ISSUE!

Poverty and its social consequences are a side issue in the media. Comprehensive coverage tends to be found on the back pages of newspapers, or on late-night TV news programmes.

However, the issue of distributive justice in fact concerns all members of a society. Surveys have shown that EVERYONE benefits if the gap between the poor and the rich is narrowed.

"How much airtime and coverage is dedicated to the rich and powerful, the business tycoons and profiteers? And how much airtime is given to the disadvantaged and the exploited? Or to the children? This imbalance needs to be examined."

Mirjam Unger, ORF/FM4 (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation radio)

*"Being poor certainly doesn't mean you are a different species."**

LANGUAGE IS NOT NEUTRAL

Language can be derogatory, discriminating or racist, if it is not used in a sensitive way. Language contributes to reinforcing prejudices or, conversely, to dismantling them and changing negative perceptions. The aim of these guidelines is to make suggestions for respectful media coverage on poverty by using language and images mindfully. They have been drawn up in collaboration with people experiencing poverty.

The following aspects of reporting poverty are presented:

1. PEOPLE
2. IMAGES
3. LANGUAGE
4. FACTS/CONTEXT

The passages marked with * are quotes from people who have experienced poverty and exclusion: the quotes were registered on the occasion of a group discussion of the Working Group on Media of the project Sichtbar Werden (Becoming Visible) in October 2013.

1. PEOPLE

Journalists reporting on poverty will meet people who, on account of their living conditions, are faced with discrimination and shaming. The aim of respectful reporting on poverty must be to describe poverty as it is experienced by the people affected by it. To show poverty without showcasing the people affected by it is a difficult balancing act.

PEOPLE IN POVERTY ARE NOT JUST "POOR PEOPLE"

Poverty has many aspects. People in poverty are neither helpless victims nor beer-drinking welfare scroungers who are too lazy to work. People experiencing poverty have a history, a family, they have interests and skills, and they may be involved in volunteer work or looking after their grandchildren. Even if poverty is the focus of attention, efforts should be made to go beyond this one aspect in describing the people concerned. Ten different people will have ten different stories, different destinies and different needs. In media coverage, the diversity of people experiencing poverty should be taken into account.

*"Such an article should be well researched and written at eye level, presenting the person in poverty neither as a victim nor as a criminal."**

AVOID CLICHÉS IN IMAGERY

"Many people who are in poverty don't appear to be, and if that is the case, they should be presented exactly the way they are, avoiding any cliché-ridden settings. That's the only way to make people see that poverty may affect anyone at some point."

Lisa Mayr,
Der Standard newspaper

Clichés are also reproduced by images in the media. Examples include the close-up of someone clutching a bottle of beer as well as images of faces with black bars across the eyes, as commonly used to mask the identity of criminals. Media coverage on poverty without clichés restores some dignity to people in poverty (for further details see the passage on "Images").

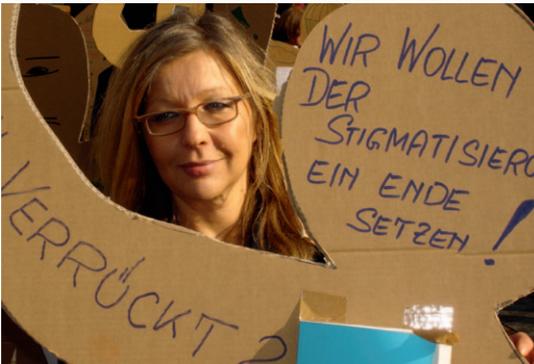
"They say: 'But you don't look poor.' So I think, what are you supposed to look like if you're experiencing poverty?"

*„Well, how did this happen to you?“
As if it was a virus that you catch."**

*"I heard someone say ,You're granting free admission to the wrong people, because that guy at the box office the other day, he was so well-dressed."**

VIEW PEOPLE IN POVERTY AS EXPERTS

In many cases, people in poverty are presented merely as victims who are given the chance to describe their situation, while others are interviewed to analyse it and make recommendations. However, it is people with experience of poverty who should be interviewed as experts, and their opinions and the solutions they propose should be quoted. In this way, the cliché of "passive benefit recipients" can be counteracted. In Austria, suitable interview partners can, for example, be contacted via the Anti-Poverty Network and the project "Sichtbar Werden" (Becoming Visible). It is advisable for journalists to go to places where people experiencing poverty are likely to come by: the Public Employment Service, aid organisations for homeless people, social supermarkets, etc.



As experts, people with experience of poverty present their demands to the public.

Photo: Lucy Lynn /Austrian Anti-Poverty Network

"You are an expert and you know how your situation could be improved in the short, medium and long term. It's like asking a university professor: 'There has been new research, with new outcomes – please tell us all about it.'"

*"They look startled when you tell them ,I just don't have 10 euros to spare. I have to get by on 10 euros for several days'."**

*"And then you talk to the sound engineer, who gets 200 euros and will hopefully be allowed to hold a mic again. Journalists are extremely underpaid, as well; many people know what we're talking about."**

SHOW RESPECT FOR THOSE CONCERNED

People experiencing poverty live under great stress, which requires a sensitive approach and empathy. Poverty is stigmatised. Those affected by it should have the option of not answering questions, not showing the place where they live and not appearing in a report under their full name if they so choose. A professional approach to the interview partners includes a thorough briefing beforehand, clear indications of when the introductory conversation ends and the interview situation starts, a feedback loop with the possibility of withdrawing parts of the interview or images from publication, notification after the interview has been published, and ideally, sending the published version to the interviewees.



A respectful approach also includes letting people take part in deciding about the use of images.

Photo: Franziska Wegner

*"A piece is good when those who appear in it can say: that's me, that's what I stand for, that's my life – rather than being pushed into a tear-jerking story with distorted facts."**

*"Never showcase a low-income person. They're not there to be paraded. They're not some chimpanzees in a cage."**

*"Poverty makes you totally vulnerable – otherwise we wouldn't depend on each other so much. And that's exactly what you need to know in order not to let yourself be debased or humiliated."**

*"No to pity, but empathy, yes. Double suffering makes no sense. But I wouldn't reject empathy in any way. Being objective is the exact opposite of excluding empathy and emotions."**

2. IMAGES

Illustrating social themes is always a challenge. Images are an important element of reporting, but they also make people in poverty more easily identifiable. Therefore, a sensitive approach to representation in images is of the utmost importance! Images of people in poverty tend to slide into clichés and to considerably increase the experience of shame of those affected by it. In order to achieve respectful reporting on poverty, some basic rules for the imagery used to illustrate poverty should be followed.

"I try to film in a way that enables viewers to see the person rather than a stereotype, and my aim is to let them read between the lines, to make it clear that there's a lot more depth and that many things remain unsaid."

Mirjam Unger, ORF/FM4 (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation radio)

"I'm aware that a photograph or a moving image may deprive a person of their dignity. Especially when reporting on poverty, it's essential to give your interview partner the opportunity to have a media appearance which will show their situation in a true-to-life way without harming their dignity."

Elisabeth Gollackner, ORF/ZIB (Austrian Broadcasting Corporation TV news)



*Creative anonymity:
the face behind the mug.
Photo: Franziska Wegner.*

*"The problem is that you're associated with your family, which can have quite negative effects. Especially for the kids."**

PLEASE NOTE !

KEEP THE CAMERA AT EYE LEVEL

Photographing or filming at eye level is a sign of respect and understanding.

SHOW PEOPLE AS THEY ARE

What's most important is to show people as they really are, and not to expect them to correspond to a certain preconception of poverty. People in poverty don't have to justify themselves for wearing an elegant jacket or for owning a TV set. If an interviewee prefers to display a cigarette packet on camera, this must be respected in the same way as the wish to not show it. However, the effect images may have on the viewers should be discussed.

PRESENT PEOPLE IN AN ACTIVE WAY

In reports about poverty, the various roles that a person has in society should be noted and people experiencing poverty should be shown during their various activities:

sitting in front of the computer, reading the paper, football, doing volunteer work in a care home or in a theatre group, etc.

THINK OF WAYS TO CREATE ANONYMITY

There are many ways to make people unrecognisable in images: taking photos from the side or from behind, hiding their face behind a drinking glass, blurring a face in the foreground, motion blurring, and so on.

PARTICIPATION IN SELECTING IMAGERY

Before the material is published, the persons who have been filmed or photographed should have the opportunity to view it and also to participate in selecting the material.

PLEASE AVOID !

TELEPHOTOGRAPHY

To treat people with respect is hardly possible at a great distance, and the viewers get the impression of unlawful acts observed through a keyhole.

CLICHÉ IMAGES

Clichés like the following should already be obsolete: people with cigarettes in the corners of their mouths, holding a bottle of booze or loitering on the roadside wrapped in rags. People on low incomes may still own beautiful clothes; poverty can rarely be recognised by a person's clothing.

PIXELATION AND BLACK BARS

Such methods of making people anonymous have a criminalising and stigmatising effect.

AUTOMATIC ARCHIVING

Photos of people in poverty should not be automatically included in any photo archives. The depicted persons must also be asked for their consent to the use of their image in other contexts.

3. LANGUAGE

Language creates realities! When using common and long-established terms, sensitivity is essential.

"What I consider important is using a realistic style, emphasising the facts rather than tugging at people's heart-strings. A sober description is powerful enough and usually speaks for itself."

Christian Granbacher, ECHO magazine

PLEASE AVOID!

We should take care not to make generalisations and to avoid expressions that are derogatory or felt to be discriminatory, even if they are part of everyday usage. The examples below are explanatory English translations of phrases commonly used in German. Such examples, and non-discriminatory alternatives, can certainly be found in all languages.

THE POOR

People are never "just poor"; the word poverty points to one aspect of their living conditions: their low income.

SOCIALLY WEAK

People experiencing poverty are anything but socially weak. On the contrary, in many cases they are strong social networkers and also engaged in volunteer work. The concept of social weakness implies that people in poverty lack social skills.

SCROUNGERS IN A SOCIAL HAMMOCK

Concepts like these discriminate against people in poverty. They were coined in order to fuel a populist debate of envy and turn public opinion against people affected by poverty.

IN NEED THROUGH NO FAULT OF THEIR OWN

This expression implies that poverty is a matter of individual "guilt". However, poverty has many causes. Economic crises, unemployment, unaffordable housing and illnesses have the greatest impacts on poverty. The distinction between "deserving" and "undeserving" poor people increases poverty in Austria, as groups are defined which do not "merit" help.

WORKSHY

The fact that a person is not gainfully employed may have a variety of causes: low qualifications, a lack of open positions in the job market, low self-esteem as a consequence of long-term unemployment, health impairments and so on, other than the person being unwilling to work.

A CAREER OF POVERTY

The German word "Karriere" is usually associated with a successful professional life. In the context of poverty it might be interpreted as a planned, conscious and chosen way of life. People in poverty perceive this as cynical.



A typical children's room? Images of poverty effectively tell a story even if there are no people in them. Photo: Franziska Wegner

PLEASE USE !

The following concepts and definitions are deemed more appropriate by experts and people who have experienced poverty:

AFFECTED BY POVERTY

This expression clarifies that being poor is neither a character trait nor a chosen state.

PEOPLE WITH EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY

This concept expresses that people experiencing poverty are in fact experts concerning their situation.

PEOPLE WITH LOW INCOMES OR PEOPLE WITH INCOMES BELOW THE POVERTY LINE

These expressions denote a specific aspect of poverty: income poverty.

ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED

This concept points to the fact that poverty is linked to disadvantages and has structural causes.

MEN, WOMEN OR CHILDREN WHO (ARE FORCED TO) LIVE IN POVERTY FOR VARIOUS REASONS

This description also focuses on the structural causes of poverty.

PRECARIOUS INCOME SITUATIONS

This term points to low and unstable income situations.

4. FACTS/CONTEXT

Reports on poverty should not only convey emotions through images and individual stories, but also take the context into account, research the facts and present a differentiated view of poverty to the audience.

USE THE RIGHT FACTS

There are many statistics and data on poverty and social exclusion. For specific reporting, the right facts that are relevant to the context in question should be filtered. Reporters searching for concepts, definitions and figures should seek support from experts and documents like those available at the European Anti-Poverty Network:

<http://www.eapn.eu>

The current statistics on poverty in Europe may be accessed at EU SILC:

<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/microdata/european-union-statistics-on-income-and-living-conditions>

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE CONTEXT AND POLITICAL DEMANDS

In addition, when reporting on individuals and their stories, they should be presented within the context of the social framework in order to make the structural causes of poverty visible. Demands for eliminating poverty should have their place, as well.

*"I would like to see courageous reporting. Reporting that aims at more than just telling individual stories, where the issue of poverty is grasped in all its political scope."**

"In order to show all the spheres of life that are affected by poverty, it's essential to understand and present the subject in all its aspects and on all levels. After all, it's not just about being short of money."

Lisa Mayr, Der Standard newspaper



*Award-winning photo from a competition held by Fotoschule Wien to mark the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010.
Photo: Peter Rauchecker*

POVERTY HAS MANY FACES

Not only those much-sought-after single mothers with three children should appear in the reports, but also other people experiencing poverty. Poverty has many aspects; reducing it to a few, static stereotypes doesn't do justice to this issue.

*They phone at 12 noon: „There's a TV debate at 4 pm for which I need a single mother with two kids, can you get one here within three hours?“**

JOURNALISM AWARD GOES INTERNATIONAL

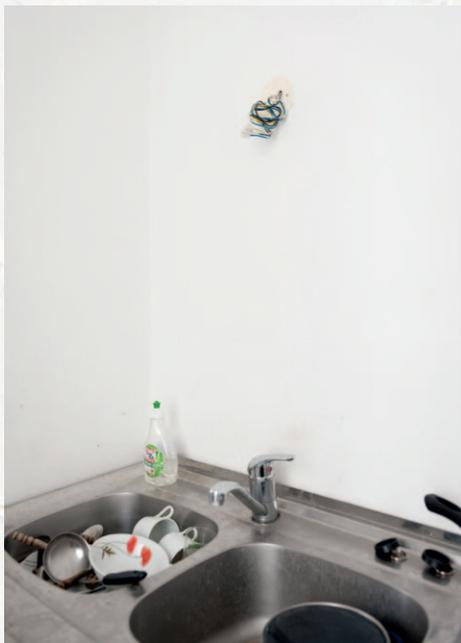
AWARD FOR RESPECTFUL REPORTING ON POVERTY ORGANISED FOR THE FIRST TIME IN FINLAND, ICELAND, CROATIA AND HUNGARY

This award for journalism at eye level was developed by the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network (as "Journalismuspreis von unten", award for journalism "from below") in 2010. The aim of this award is to promote reporting which does justice to the many aspects of poverty, treating the people affected by poverty with respect, making their voices heard and their concerns visible and shedding light on the background context. The jury consists exclusively of people experiencing poverty, which makes the award a very special sign of recognition for the 53 journalists who have received it so far.

In 2015, with support from the ERSTE Foundation and the European Anti-Poverty Network (EAPN), activities were started to spread this award to other countries, and international exchange workshops were organised for this purpose. In 2016, for the first time the Award for Respectful Reporting on Poverty was also given to journalists in Hungary, Croatia, Finland and Iceland. In 2017, the Award will be introduced in Macedonia, Serbia and Romania as well.

Some features of the Award for Respectful Reporting on Poverty are common to all the countries involved: in each case, the jury consists of people experiencing poverty. The award itself is of a symbolic nature and not linked to a monetary prize; one the one hand, the organising NGOs do not have the available resources for such a prize, and on the other, a symbolic award is more in keeping with the fact that the jury consists of volunteers experiencing poverty. And all the countries where award ceremonies were held have reported that the winners received their awards with great joy and pride, and some were even moved to tears.

Particularly in countries where poverty and social crises are burning issues in society, media coverage on these issues is often sidelined. As all NGO representatives agree, it is urgent to bring socially committed journalists into the limelight and show support for them. One idea that has emerged is to involve students of journalism more intensively so as to already include respectful reporting on poverty in the education and training of journalists. The contacts initiated with journalists of various media in the course of the award ceremonies have been maintained and cultivated up to the present day. This is another characteristic of the award in all countries: the festive occasion of the award ceremony is not the final act after the decision of the jury, but rather the beginning of closer collaboration between the media, NGO representatives and people experiencing poverty. It fosters mutual understanding and makes the "perspective from below" visible to the public.



*"Die Unsichtbaren" (The Invisible):
Article in the newspaper "Wiener Zeitung",
December 2013, by Mara Simplerler.
Photo: Christoph Liebentritt*

THANK YOU

We should like to thank all the contributing journalists and people experiencing poverty (quotes marked with *) for their comments and statements.

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SOURCES

- Workshop for people in poverty and journalists as part of the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network Conference in 2008
- Media project of the Austrian Anti-Poverty Network on occasion of the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010
- "Reporting poverty in the UK. A practical guide for journalists", Society of Editors, 2009
- "Writing and talking about poverty", Dr John McKendrick, Institute for Society and Social Justice Research, Scottish Centre for Regeneration, 2010
- Three workshops with people affected by poverty during the preparation of the German version of the booklet, 2013 and 2014

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