Food and Agriculture Organization
of the United Nations

EMPOWERING APPROACHES TO MEDIA INTERVIEWS

GUIDANCE FOR FAO STAFF

Doing a media interview helps get FAO's main message across to a wide audience. As an FAO staff member you can be an authoritative source for the media when they cover FAO-related issues. Thanks to you, they can answer the question "why" in relation to food price increases, reduction in numbers of hungry people, or any other topic that relates to the mandate of FAO - which is among the broadest of any UN agency.

Be sure to link what you do to impact on people. For some agencies (humanitarian) the link is obvious, but for FAO that may not always be the case. So you need to make the link all the time.

These guidelines will help you better prepare and deal with an interview whether it is radio, TV or print.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Interview the reporter
(done by you or by the OCC officer that helped arrange the interview)

1. What is the story about and what type of story is it? (Hard news, feature, in-depth background, etc.)
2. On the record - off the record

An on the record interview means everything you say can be used. Background means that the material can be used, but without attribution / identification. Off the record means it can't be used at all but it's understood the reporter may go to someone else to get that information corroborated, without disclosing the original source. Off the record interviews should only happen in exceptional cases depending on the mutual trust between the journalist and the interviewee.

3. Who has the reporter talked to and what documents has he/she seen?
4. How does FAO fit into the story?
5. What will the interview format be?
6. When will the story run?

7. What is the deadline?

8. Ask if the reporter has a particular angle. If they don't, you might have one or two in mind to suggest that you think are interesting. An angle is basically how a journalist will frame the issue, or narrow it down, so he/she can dig in and explore it in a meaningful way in the few minutes of airtime (or words of print) he/she will have, and that can help an interviewee know what is relevant to the story, and what's extraneous for this particular interview.

9. Will the interview be conducted in person or by telephone/ Skype audio/video?

Prepare for the interview ahead of time as much as possible. Think about FAO's position on the proposed topic, and identify the most effective key messages. Also, be ready with some good examples or stories to illustrate the messages - which bring it home to the audience. (Personal examples are great – anecdotes about a particular farmer, family etc.)

Believe in yourself.

You are the expert (not the journalist) and you should own the topic. Often, reminding yourself of that is enough to ensure a successful interview.

What journalists want out of a guest is for you to faithfully convey FAO's position, which is **what you truly believe**. It's when you're disseminating information with conviction that you can make the most media impact. For example, moments on TV when people actually tell the truth are very special and very convincing.

That doesn't mean you have all the answers. You can say with a smile "I'll get back to you" or "let me check on that before I answer."

Anticipate the Reporter's Questions

Try and anticipate the questions by the reporter. If a reporter has a script that they are following they may ask a first question - so try and think a few questions ahead, to make the interview more interesting for them and for you. Almost all reporters have a twitter account – follow them and get a better sense of their journalistic style.

Develop Talking Points for the Audience

Prepare some key points (your message) that you would like to get across in the interview. They should fit on the back of a business card, but be careful about sounding too pre-packaged as they will affect your credibility (and if it sounds boring that could end up killing the story). Also, although getting the message across is important, if there is little give and take in the interview reporters may feel like they're being given a press release and will put little energy into the story.

Use anecdotes. The most effective communicators are storytellers. Learn how to illustrate your point with an anecdote or example which helps the audience visualize and empathize. Use clear data when possible.

All your work may be important but only some of it can be communicated in a short media interview. Keep your message focused and simple. What are the newsworthy aspects of your work (unusual, results-oriented, impact on people, controversial)? How might you craft a message that moves FAO's work forward?

Decide how you will dress (appearance). Several choices are available, ranging from formal to casual. Decide which one works best for the circumstance, and avoid flashy jewelry when talking about hungry people – **appearance is important for everyone**.

Can you wear a small FAO lapel pin that helps brand the organization? What can you put in the background?

When you are doing a remote interview via Skype – be sure to have a cloth backdrop with the FAO logo or the slogan of the conference behind you.

Get the talking points from the organization on a current high profile media situation (are there any vulnerabilities that you need to be aware of – especially in the area of management and controversial issues like land grabs, or global warming).

Use a small recorder to digitally record your interview (or your smart phone). Make sure that you have a 64 GB micro SD card on your phone to make it easy to transfer the sound to your computer.

If you're a "diesel car" (and take time to warm up), try and warm up just before the interview starts rehearsing out loud 10-15 minutes ahead of time. Don't do this if you are a "race horse" and answer questions quickly without much advance preparation.

Never Forget Your Ultimate Audience:
Although you are speaking to a reporter, you are ultimately speaking to the people who read the publication or watch the show. Make certain to frame your answers from their point of view rather than your own.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Verbal Messages

It is a good idea to **make your point early in an interview**, particularly if it is a live interview. That way if you run out of time you will have delivered your key message. Interviewees are always amazed at how quickly on-air time passes; they must be prepared for that. They must lead with their strongest point first, continue through the interview, sense when they've come to the near-close, and then make their second most important point. Why? Research shows that what is said at the beginning and end of an interview is what viewers retain best.

In a taped interview, repeat your message in every answer. In a live interview, vary the response to maintain the audiences' interest. People remember what they hear first and tend to forget what comes in the middle of your answer.

Avoid answering questions from a personal perspective, which can be misconstrued as that of the organization.

Steer clear of negatives. Dealing with the negative question (essentially not saying anything) maybe a good strategy for a taped interview (where you don't hear the reporter's question) but it will not work in a live interview. In either case, saying: "I wouldn't say that ...." will be better than saying "I wouldn't say we are ineffective…"

When you are answering a reporter don't just go into a discussion about mandates. Instead say something like "Of course we want to eradicate hunger, that's why we're here…" and go back to your message.

Don't speak for the government: remember that you represent the FAO. If asked about the government's position, politely say you might get a better answer from them and then bridge to your main message.

Don't waste your time with a reporter by arguing against the other side. Wanting to refute the other side's point of view is understandable but it is a waste of valuable media time. Stay on your message and convey it positively. Don't mention opponents by names and never use emotional labels if forced to refer to them!

Don't be afraid to say "I don't know."

It doesn't make you look bad; on the contrary, your credibility goes up.

Avoid process-oriented answers; people like to hear about results.

It's very helpful to provide a little background or context on the issues but keep it brief and remember you need to get to your main point early in the interview. **Don't use jargon or insider language.** Many professions have their own lingo and its fine to use that lingo with other professionals, but for the layperson it's best to use everyday language. After all you want the audience to understand what you're saying.

Bridges (pivoting from one subject to another) are useful for getting from uncomfortable ground to firmer ground, but remember there are some questions which a journalist can reasonably expect you to be able to answer.

Never say "no comment." Rather bridge back to your message. The two most dangerous words you can ever tell a reporter are "no comment," particularly during a crisis. Utter them and you might as well scream "we're guilty." "No comment" renders you powerless over your own story. It invites reporters to other people who might not hesitate to put their spin on your issue. Worse yet, it portrays you as a wimp.

Speak in short, simple sentences with just one or two ideas to a sentence.

Make sure to end your sentences, and finish the thought! So many times people will start off sounding great, and the journalist will put stars as they transcribe the interview thinking this is going to be a good sound-bite, and then... they never finish the thought! They get diverted, or distracted, or sometimes their voice simply peters out into a whisper and becomes unusable. So start strong, and finish strong!

Beware of numbers. If you must use them, make them mean something.

Remember to be quotable.

Reporters are always on the lookout for the sound bite or the quote.

Visual Messages and Body Language

Make eye contact with the reporter and not the camera. Sitting upright might help you feel more self-assured, thereby exuding confidence and credibility to the audience. If you must look at the camera make sure that you look at the bottom half of the lens. For Skype put a small picture of the person you are speaking with right below the camera so you will not be tempted to look down or to the side.

Use of hands and facial expression is important but watch that you don't get carried away with it. **You should only smile when appropriate**. Otherwise the audience may think you are not serious. The best body language is that which is not noticed and is in synch with what you are saying.

You are authoritative, believable and have great energy. You have an engaging way of dealing with the subject matter. You can additional focus by writing down your key points ahead of time.

Avoid sitting too far back in the chair- have some space between the back of the chair and your body. **Make direct eye contact** with the reporter. If there is no reporter present, look directly into the camera.

Vocal Messages

Your voice is a good resource to give meaning to the words. Use these techniques:

Pace: Don't speak too fast and vary the pace of your speech to keep your message interesting.

Inflection: Vary how you emphasize words. Avoid tedious, monotonous delivery.

Pause: Pause before or after key words to underline their importance.

Tone: Keep your tone friendly and measured.

Be sure to put a little emotion in your voice. If you are talking about the plight of starving kids in a famine, then let's hear it, and make the listeners at home feel it. A journalist once told me: "When doing my radio scripts, I tend to put the numbers and process stuff in the script – I'm going for emotion in the sound-bites. If they can do this in a natural way, that's great." So talk naturally and be alive and confident. Much of your credibility will come from the care, concern and enthusiasm that you display as well as the knowledge that you impart.

Summary tips:

- Remember to be quotable. Reporters are always on the lookout for the sound bite or the quote.
- Beware of numbers. If you must use them, make them mean something.
- In most cases the interview will have been arranged through FAO's communication department, but if not they should be advised.

SPECIAL SITUATIONS

Telephone Interviews for Radio

- Keep the telephone a few centimeters away from your mouth.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Emphasize key words which project energy and confidence.
- Repeat your message often. Change your tone of voice to avoid sounding monotonous.
- Never lose your temper.
- Keep your answers brief - 20 to 30 seconds.
- Think of the interview as an energetic dialogue and put yourself in the place of the listener/audience who is at home or in the car and needs to be kept interested in what you say.

Radio and Television Studio Interviews

- Arrive early. Familiarize yourself with the environment.
- Project warmth and variety in your voice during the interview. Slightly animate your face to keep the viewers' attention and stress your message.
- Remember that you may be on camera all the time. Be aware of what you do even when not directly engaged in the dialogue.
- Remember that how you look on television is almost as important as what you say. Steady eye contact and a smile portray confidence and believability.

When You are One of Several Guests

- Do not allow the other guests to take over.
- Disagree when necessary but always politely.
- Do not attack a participant personally. You will lose the sympathy of the public and the focus of your message.
- Show your sense of humor; avoid sarcasm.
- Focus on persuading the listeners/viewers, not the other guests in the studio.
- If an argument becomes bogged down, politely agree to disagree and then bridge back to your message/agenda.
- The more you know about other guests, the easier for you to foresee their counter-arguments.

Office Interviews

- Avoid a bureaucratic setting. Get out from behind the desk if possible.
- Choose a setting that accommodates a television crew and equipment. Outside the office in the garden, for example.
- Make sure that all objects you would not want seen on camera are put away before the camera crew arrives.
- After the interview, the reporter may ask you to nod and simulate a dialogue for subsequent editing purposes. Remember that the microphone may still be on. Do not say anything you might regret.

Quick "Stand Up" Interviews (Door Stop or "Ambush")

- Be particularly brief in your replies.
- Do not refer to a previous statement because it spoils the sound bite. In other words avoid "As I said before……."
- Do not attempt to cover every nuance of the question. Get the gist of the question and then move quickly back to your own "message track."
- Control the pace. Slow your delivery. Stay low key and cool, regardless of how intense the questioning is.
- Do not let the stand-up interview go on for too long. Once you have said what you wanted to say, excuse yourself and leave.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Request a copy of the broadcast interview so that it can be uploaded to FAO's social media channels.

For a print interview get a copy of the link and share it with your constituency via social media. An easy way to do this is to use an aggregator like net vibes or others.

For more information, please contact:

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