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Value Mainstreaming Guidelines for Civil Society Organizations



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Value Mainstreaming Guidelines

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1 Values

Values are the principles and beliefs that people consider important. They shape how individuals think, influence their attitudes toward social and moral issues, and guide their decisions and behavior. Although people across cultures share many values, they differ in the importance they attach to each of them.

Research shows that values are not static. They are reinforced through everyday experiences, interactions, and communication. As particular values are repeatedly activated, they become more influential in shaping people's priorities and behavior. For example, regularly engaging values such as solidarity, equality, or cooperation can encourage individuals to place greater importance on collective wellbeing alongside their own interests.

For civil society organizations (CSOs), this means that values are not only internal principles but also practical tools for social change. The values an organization promotes through its programs, partnerships, and communication influence how people understand social issues, relate to others, and participate in their communities. A values-based approach to communication therefore seeks to strengthen prosocial values and encourage collective action around shared goals.

Although the contribution of a single organization may appear modest, the combined efforts of civil society, communities, public institutions, and individuals can reinforce shared values that support democratic participation, social cohesion, and solidarity. By consistently communicating and embodying these values, organizations contribute to building stronger and more resilient communities.

Within the EU, this shared value framework is reflected in the founding values set out in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union. These values are further translated into the rights and freedoms guaranteed by the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

1.1 EU Values

The EU is founded on a set of shared values that are common to all member states. These values are established in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and serve as the building blocks for the EU's laws, policies, and democratic institutions. They are binding on all member states, and respecting them is a basic obligation for all institutions and individuals. The values stated in Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union are:

1. **Human dignity:** Human dignity constitutes the basis of all fundamental rights. Thus, it is considered to be inviolable, and must be respected and protected.

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2. **Freedom:** All citizens of the EU can move between and work freely in all member states. Other individual freedoms, such as respect for private life, freedom of expression, and freedom of assembly, are protected in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.
3. **Democracy:** All citizens of the member states enjoy political rights, such as the right to vote, or the right to stand as a candidate in their country of origin.
4. **Equality:** All citizens of the member states are equal before the law. Equality is about equal rights for all citizens before the law.
5. **Rule of law:** The rule of law is the system in which laws, institutions, and norms ensure four universal principles:
 1. Governments and their officials are accountable under the law.
 2. Laws are clear, predictable, and just.
 3. Legal processes are accessible, transparent and fair.
 4. Justice is delivered by competent, ethical, independent and impartial officials.
6. **Human rights:** Human rights are a set of rights that are inalienable, universal, indivisible and interdependent, and that belong to all people.

Therefore, Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union provides the overarching core values on which the EU is founded. These values are then translated into a comprehensive code of specific justiciable rights in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. You can read the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union here: [EUR-Lex - 12012P/TXT - EN - EUR-Lex](#)

What does mainstreaming mean?

Mainstreaming is the systematic integration of particular values, principles, and objectives at all levels and across all aspects of an organization's work. The concept and practice of mainstreaming ensure that issues or objectives that are central to an organization are not stand-alone projects, but rather are integrated into decision-making, planning, communication, and everyday practice.

When it comes to Article 2 of the Treaty on European Union and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, mainstreaming means ensuring that the EU's founding values and the individual rights that all member states uphold are consistently reflected in the way the organization designs, implements, communicates, and evaluates its activities. However, EU value mainstreaming goes beyond focusing on EU

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values throughout the life cycle of a project. Instead, it involves embedding these values into internal organizational governance, practices, culture, and everyday operations.

Therefore, EU values mainstreaming ensures that an organization's internal processes and activities are in line with the core fundamental values on which the EU is founded.

As discussed in the previous section, organizations reinforce values through their everyday practices, communication, and engagement with communities. The EU provides a shared framework of values that guides its democratic institutions and legal order. These values provide a shared reference point for public authorities, CSOs, and citizens across Europe.

EU values mainstreaming is not about adopting a new set of organizational values. Rather, it is about recognizing where an organization's mission and activities already reflect the values on which the EU is founded and ensuring that these values are consistently embedded in its work. By making this connection explicit, organizations contribute to strengthening a shared culture of democracy, equality, human rights, and solidarity.

In this way, values mainstreaming helps translate the EU's founding values into everyday practice. Through their programs, partnerships, organizational culture, and communication, civil society organizations reinforce the principles that enable cooperation, democratic participation, social cohesion, and respect for fundamental rights across Europe.

What are the guidelines for?

Often, the foundation of CSOs is a commitment to certain values, principles, and objectives. These values shape their missions, their goals, and how they communicate and engage their target groups. Nevertheless, CSOs have been working in increasingly complex and challenging environments that can shift their focus from value-based work to day-to-day survival mode.

The guidelines aim to support CSOs in identifying the existing values that guide their work and reflecting on how these values can be linked to EU values and embedded into everyday practice.

This also helps ensure that the guidelines remain practical and useful for organizations with different levels of capacity, experience, and resources.

Through the structured process offered in the guidelines, organizations can strengthen the alignment between their values and their communication. Therefore, the guidelines support organizations in:

- Identifying and clarifying the organizations' core values

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- Understanding how these values connect to EU values
- Reflecting how values are communicated through organizational culture and day-to-day practices
- Developing communicational approaches that promote EU values, such as inclusion, dignity and participation

Consequently, the guidelines do not create a new set of values for an organization, but rather helps identify, strengthen, and mainstream the values that ground its work.

How to use the guidelines?

The guidelines are flexible and can be adapted to various organizational contexts. Organizations do not need to follow every step; they can prioritize what is most relevant to their needs and capacities.

Organizations can use the guidelines as:

- An internal reflection tool
- A team discussion guide
- A strategic planning resource
- A practical checklist for communication and advocacy development

It is recommended that colleagues, staff members, volunteers, or board members complete the exercises together to create a shared understanding of organizational values and approaches.

Throughout the process we recommend:

- Documenting reflections and conclusions
- Identifying practical improvements
- Creating an action plan
- Integrating the results into communication, advocacy, and organizational planning

Moreover, it is recommended to revisit the protocol regularly to reflect on changes in the organization's work environment, or priorities.

Theory of change

The theory of change of the guidelines is based on the assumption that, when they identify and strengthen their values and connect them with the shared values and fundamental rights of the EU, organizations are better able to integrate these principles into their internal processes, activities, and communication. By doing

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so, organizations can develop more inclusive, rights-based, and value-driven approaches and encourage meaningful engagement with their target groups. These efforts contribute to a stronger and more resilient civil society that works toward shared goals based on dignity, equality, participation, solidarity, and respect for fundamental rights.

Outputs

- Organizations identify and define their core values
- Organizations recognize connections between their values and fundamental rights
- Organizations reflect on how values are expressed internally and externally
- Organizations develop value-based communication approaches
- Organizations translate values into practical actions and advocacy priorities

Outcomes

- Increased awareness of fundamental rights and democratic values within organizations and communities
- Greater consistency between organizational values, decisions, practices, and communication
- Improved communication and advocacy approaches based on dignity, participation, and inclusion
- Stronger relationships with communities and stakeholders

Impact

- Organizations become more resilient and better equipped to operate in challenging civic environments
- Communities experience stronger engagement around shared democratic values
- Fundamental rights and EU values are reinforced through everyday organizational practice

2 Step-By-Step Approach To Values Mainstreaming

2.1 Identify Organizational Values

2.1.1 Objective and Results

Objective:

- Identify and define the values that already guide your mission, work, culture, decision-making processes and the relationship with target groups and stakeholders

Results:

- A shared and updated list of 5–7 core organizational values
- A clearer and shared understanding of how the identified values are expressed in practice

2.1.2 Exercise

This exercise is most effective when conducted as a team discussion involving staff members, volunteers, leadership, and board members. Bringing together different perspectives helps identify shared priorities, as well as areas where expectations may differ.

Reflection

Before identifying your core organizational values, take time to reflect together on what drives your work and how your organization understands its role in society. There are no right or wrong answers in this exercise. The goal is to create a shared understanding within your team about the principles, motivations, and behaviors that shape your organization's identity and approach.

Discuss the following questions with your team:

- What motivates your work?
- What kind of change does your organization want to contribute to?
- What principles guide your decisions?
- What values do you want beneficiaries and partners to associate with your organization?
- What behaviors demonstrate your values internally and externally?

Practical exercise

Use Annex 1 as a reflection tool to help identify the values that already shape your organization's work. The purpose of this exercise is to reflect on which principles guide your organization in practice, instead of selecting the "best" values from the list.

Step 1: Individual reflection

Ask each team member to review the list of values in Annex 1 and to select approximately ten values each believes best reflect:

- The organization's identity
- The way the organization works
- The type of impact it aims to create

Encourage participants to reflect on the values that guide the organization as it currently operates, as well as the values it aspires to strengthen.

Step 2: Group discussion

Discuss the selected values together as a team.

During the discussion:

- Identify similarities and recurring choices
- Explore differences in interpretation
- Discuss why certain values feel important
- Reflect on whether some values are more visible internally or externally

Step 3: Identify core themes

Discuss with the group whether some values are overlapping and can be grouped into broader themes where appropriate.

For example:

- Fairness, equality, and inclusion
- Transparency and accountability

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- Participation and community
- Dignity and solidarity

Step 4: Agree on core organizational values

As a team, agree on 5–7 core organizational values that:

- Best represent your organization
- Guide your work and decision-making
- Reflect how you want to engage with communities, partners, stakeholders, and each other

2.2 Connecting Organizational Values and EU Values

2.2.1 Objective and Result

Objective:

- Identify how your organization's existing values connect to fundamental rights, EU values, and democratic participation

Result:

- A clearer understanding of how your organization's values relate to broader principles, such as human dignity, equality, and rule of law

2.2.2 Exercise

Reflection

Together with your team, complete the table below. Start by listing the core values identified in Step 1. Then discuss which fundamental rights or democratic principles these values support, using the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union as a reference: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/charter/pdf/text_en.pdf. Finally, identify concrete examples of how these values are already reflected in your organization's work.

Organizational value	Related fundamental right	How is it already represented in the organization's work
Example: Participation	Democracy/Freedom of assembly	Community members are involved in decision-making processes
Transparency	Good administration/accountability	The organization communicates openly about resources

It is important to note that organizational values can be connected to multiple EU values and fundamental rights. The purpose of this exercise is not to find one correct answer, but rather to reflect on how organizational values are related to broader principles.

2.3 Embedding Values Into Organizational Practices

2.3.1 Objective and Result

Objective:

- Reflect on how your organizational values and rights-based principles are expressed through your internal culture, decision-making, programs, and relationships with communities and stakeholders

Result:

- A shared understanding of how organizational values are reflected in organizational culture, decision-making, communication, and daily practice, including areas where further improvement is needed

2.3.2 Exercise

This exercise offers the opportunity to identify strengths and gaps, and to discuss how values can be more consistently reflected in everyday practices.

Discuss with your team the following questions:

- What values are already visible in your work?
- Are there gaps between your intended values and current practices?
- Are there contradictions between what you say and what you do?

- Which values are visible internally?
- Which values are visible externally?
- Which groups or perspectives may be unintentionally overlooked?
- How can your external communication better reflect your organizational values and rights-based principles?
- How do your values influence decision-making processes?
- How do you ensure accountability for living up to your values?

2.4 Developing Values-Based Communication

Organizations often communicate their work through facts, statistics, and technical information. While evidence is important, facts alone are not always enough to help people understand why an issue matters or why they should engage with it. People often make sense of complex social issues through stories, narratives, and the values they communicate.

When people encounter a message, they interpret it through existing mental frameworks, often referred to as frames. These frames are shaped by life experiences, education, culture, media, and personal relationships. They influence how people understand words, events, and social issues by connecting them with existing ideas, values, and emotions.

For example, the word “marriage” may evoke very different associations depending on a person’s experiences and beliefs. The same applies to concepts such as migration, equality, freedom, or democracy. Because frames can be reinforced and reshaped over time, the way organizations communicate about social issues matters. Communication that consistently reflects values such as dignity, equality, participation, and solidarity can help strengthen understanding, encourage engagement, and build support for positive social change.

EU values mainstreaming does not require organizations to explicitly refer to the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union in every activity or communication. Instead, it encourages organizations to ensure that the values underpinning their work are reflected consistently in the language they use, the stories they tell, and the way they present the people and communities they work with.

One of the most effective ways to communicate values is through storytelling. Stories connect abstract principles to real people and real experiences. They help audiences understand not only what an organization does, but also why it matters. By illustrating values such as dignity, participation, equality, inclusion, and

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solidarity through authentic experiences, organizations can build trust, strengthen empathy, and encourage meaningful participation.

A values-based communication approach therefore seeks to:

- Frame issues through shared values rather than focusing only on problems or statistics
- Promote narratives that respect dignity, participation, equality, and inclusion
- Communicate through authentic stories that illustrate the organization's values in practice
- Encourage dialogue, trust, and active engagement within communities

2.4.1 Objective and Result

Objective:

- Develop communication approaches that consistently reflect your organizational values while promoting dignity, participation, inclusion, and respect for fundamental rights

Result:

- A communication approach that aligns with your organizational values and uses rights-based, values-driven storytelling to communicate your work in an engaging, respectful, and authentic way

2.4.2 Exercise

Step 1: Assessment of the organization's communication

Divide your team into smaller groups and assign each group one area of the organization's communication to review.

Review the following areas:

- Website
- Social media
- Campaigns
- Public materials
- Visual identity (photographs, graphics, videos)

Step 2: Reflection

Once the groups have finished their discussion, ask them to share their findings and then discuss the following questions:

- Which organizational values are clearly reflected in your communication?
- Which values are missing or only weakly represented?
- Does your communication present people as rights-holders and active participants, or as recipients of support?
- Are dignity and participation reflected in your messaging?
- Would someone unfamiliar with your organization understand what values guide your work?
- Do we use stories enough?

Step 3: Applying a values-based perspective

Ask your team to go back into their small groups and rewrite or redesign the examples they were working on using a more values-based and rights-based approach with the use of storytelling tools. Here are some examples:

Instead of...	Values-based framing	EU value(s) reinforced
Our project helps poor families survive the winter.	Our project helps families access the support they need to live with dignity throughout the winter.	Human dignity, equality
The victims received assistance from our organization.	People affected by the crisis worked with our organization to access support and rebuild their lives.	Human dignity, participation
We save vulnerable people from difficult situations.	We support people to exercise their rights and make informed decisions about their lives.	Human rights, participation
340 people attended our environmental demonstration.	Peter joined our environmental demonstration for the first time. He said that standing alongside hundreds of others who care about the city's future gave him confidence that collective action can make a difference.	Democracy, participation

Instead of...	Values-based framing	EU value(s) reinforced
We trained 50 volunteers this year.	Fifty volunteers developed the skills and confidence to support their communities and advocate for local change.	Participation, empowerment
We provide free legal advice to migrants.	We help people understand and exercise their legal rights so they can participate fully in society.	Rule of law, human rights
Our campaign reached 10,000 people.	Our campaign helped people connect around a shared issue and encouraged them to take part in community action. Five hundred families were able to access food with dignity during a difficult period.	Democracy, participation
We help refugees integrate into society.	We support people seeking protection to rebuild their lives, participate in their communities, and exercise their rights.	Human dignity, equality, solidarity

Step 4: Establishing communication responsibilities

Even in small organizations, it is important to have clarity on responsibilities to avoid inconsistency or accidental messaging that does not reflect your values. Start by clarifying who is responsible for communication within your organization.

Discuss the following questions:

- Who drafts communication materials?
- Who reviews content?
- Who ensures communication reflects organizational values?
- How are stories collected and approved?
- How do you protect the dignity, privacy, and informed consent of the people featured in your communication?

At the end of the exercise, your organization should have:

- A list of strengths and areas for improvement in its communication
- Revised examples of values-based communication
- Agreed principles for communicating in a way that reflects organizational values
- Clear roles and responsibilities for reviewing communication materials

2.5 Applying Your Values in Practice

Organizational values can create meaningful change when they are reflected in everyday decisions and activities. Values such as solidarity, equality, or participation can remain abstract unless they are translated into concrete actions. Value mainstreaming allows the translation of principles into practice. This requires organizations to consider how their values influence the way they design programs, engage communities, make decisions, communicate, and advocate change.

2.5.1 Objective and Result

Objective:

- Translate organizational values and rights-based principles into concrete actions, decisions, and advocacy goals

Result:

- A practical action framework that integrates organizational values and rights-based principles into activities, planning, and decision-making

2.5.2 Exercise

Step 1: Group discussion

Discuss the following question with your team:

- How can our organizational values contribute to meaningful social change in our context?

Consider:

- Which issues are most connected to our values?
- How can our programs and activities reflect these values more strongly?
- How can we ensure that our actions match what we communicate?

Step 2: From values to action

Divide your team into groups and complete the table below.

First, identify a key issue your organization works on (for example, access to information, education, healthcare, participation, or inclusion). Then identify the fundamental right or value connected to this issue.

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Reflect on who is affected, who has responsibility to act, and what practical steps your organization can take.

The final step is to define the change you want to contribute to—in terms of social impact and the values you want to strengthen.

Key issue	Related right or principle	Who is affected?	Who should act?	Planned actions	Desired change
Examples					
Lack of access to information about rights	Freedom of information, participation, human rights	Communities with limited access to information	Public institutions, CSOs, community leaders	Develop accessible information materials and outreach activities	People are better able to understand and exercise their rights
Barriers to participation in local decision-making	Democracy, participation, equality	Groups whose voices are often underrepresented	Local authorities, CSOs, communities	Create spaces for dialogue and community involvement	More inclusive participation in decisions affecting communities

Step 3: Making values visible

Organizations may introduce simple practices that keep values present in everyday work. For example, a Story of the Month reflection can be used during team meetings to share a success, challenge, or learning moment connected to one of the organization's values.

Discuss:

- What example from our work demonstrates one of our values?
- What did we learn from this experience?
- How can we use this learning to improve our future work?

3 Final Remarks

Values mainstreaming is a process of reflection, learning, and improvement. It is about recognizing the connections between an organization's existing values and the fundamental rights and democratic principles that underpin the EU.

By identifying their values, connecting them with fundamental rights, reflecting on their internal practices, communicating them responsibly, and translating them into action, CSOs can strengthen the consistency between what they believe, what they do, and how they engage with their target groups.

It is also useful to revisit the guidelines after the exercises are completed, so that organizations can check whether the agreed values are reflected in follow-up actions, roles, and communication practices.

Values become meaningful when they are reflected in everyday decisions, organizational culture, relationships, programs, and communication. Through this process, organizations contribute not only to their own resilience and effectiveness but also to creating a stronger European community that shares core values.

4 ANNEX 1

Human dignity and solidarity	Equality and fairness	Democracy and participation	Integrity and responsibility	Empowerment and development	Sustainability and future orientation
Empathy	Equality	Participation	Accountability	Learning	Stewardship
Respect	Fairness	Dialogues	Transparency	Education	Sustainability
Caring	Justice	Collaboration	Honesty	Creativity	Long-term thinking
Caring	Diversity	Engagement	Responsibility	Growth	Responsibility toward future generations
Belonging	Accessibility	Citizenship	Ethical Behavior	Empowerment	Awareness
	Inclusion				



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