Can Storytelling Fuel Community-led Development?

August 2023 | Emily Kombe

In 2022, I worked as a community organizer in an underserved neighborhood of West African and South American immigrants in Maryland, USA. My goal was to use relational organizing to build power within the community to create change. I focused on building relationships with people, asking to hear their stories about coming to the United States and what the community could become. Much of my time was spent on fraying couches and concrete front stoops, listening to stories.

In 2023, I interned for Movement for Community-led Development, researching how storytelling can facilitate community-led development internationally. In international development, stories are often used only to fundraise. They're *about* the community, not *for* the community. They aren't taken seriously as a tool for societal change. This research confirmed what I experienced in the US, where I saw storytelling emerge as a powerful tool to facilitate and evaluate community-led development. It showed me the unique ways that stories can promote locally led development, both at home and abroad.

Emily Kombe

THE MOVEMENT FOR COMMUNITY-LED DEVELOPMENT

Movement for Community Led Development

STORIES CAPTURE WHAT QUANTITATIVE DATA CAN'T

[CDA's independent research equips humanitarians and peacebuilders in the most complex environments. They depend on us] ... rely on quantitative data. They collect data *on* communities instead of *with* communities.

[Support CDA today] [And we depend on you!]

... or incorrect. Stories provide a strong addition to quantitative data. They ... communities, looking at the whole instead of just the parts. In Maryland, ... increase in crime, an issue often portrayed solely through statistics that missed the full story. I learned that outsiders had committed the majority of the recent gun incidents. Crime was one piece of the larger system: it started increasing when the streetlights stopped working. Connecting with people yielded a much more nuanced understanding than the data on the community.

Additionally, figurative language enables people to capture things they couldn't in quantitative data. One mother told me a story of hearing gunshots while at home. She dropped the plate of food she was holding and ran outside to find her children. While recounting this story, she reached for my hand, held it above our heads and let it drop. "I felt my heart falling *comme ça*" (like that). Quantitative data couldn't possibly capture a mother's anguish for her child. It seeks to summarize information of the many, whereas stories validate each individual experience.

STORIES HELP US LISTEN TO PEOPLE WHO AREN'T NORMALLY HEARD

Stories provide a shared language to talk about community knowledge and experience. This engages those without technical expertise, power, or privilege.

Most community members refused to attend our meetings to share how to improve the community. I sensed many were unsure of themselves, so I learned to change my wording.

Credit: Emily Kombe, 2021

Instead, I asked for stories about what they envisioned for their community. This exercise seemed less intimidating: stories allowed people to imagine what felt too scary to hope for. People who spoke English as a second language, kids, and neighbors who rarely left their apartment told me stories of the local YMCA opening back up and of their community being a safe place, with a bus stop.

My follow up question was *how can you make this community more like the one in your story?* I wanted to highlight the different contributions needed to realize this future. As the community saw themselves as part of the solution, it inspired them to take action.

STORIES BUILD TRUST

Envisioning a better future brought strangers together to discuss difficult topics. The community was racially and ethnically divided, and each group blamed their neighbors for community issues. But stories helped neighbors realize what they had in common. After one storytelling session, I watched three mothers who usually ignored each other walk home together to continue the discussion. Their stories revealed their mutual desire for a safe place for their kids to play and created connections across cultural divides.

STORIES HIGHLIGHT COMMUNITY ASSETS AND AGENCY

Community storytelling provides a strong alternative to the deficiency-based narratives often used to define communities. Storytelling can identify important intangible community assets that often go unused.

This community was defined by outsiders and by what it lacked: safety, clean apartments, and parking. It was stories about the community's greatest assets – the history of soccer uniting the community or of neighbors sharing their favorite recipes from back home – that shifted the dominant discourse to what the community *did* have and what they *could* do to enact change. Meetings that began with complaints and hopelessness ended with an eagerness to organize. The question became *how can we leverage what we do have to get what we need?*

For those unfamiliar with asset-based community development, these intangible assets aren't immediately identified when taking stock of what can support development efforts. Yet these aspects were crucial to spreading the word and uniting the community.

STORIES EVALUATE DEVELOPMENT FROM THE COMMUNITY'S PERSPECTIVE

At the end of the project, our team used stories to evaluate the community-led development.

Credit: Emily Kombe, 2021

We asked the community for stories about the progress we collectively made. In addition to tangible successes, the biggest change I saw was that many community members now believed change was possible and worth fighting for. Naturally, their view was what mattered most – it would determine if they would keep fighting after my organization left.

Our final storytelling session reflected the community's progress in a way that looked at the whole picture, not just the parts. Members spoke about new friendships, their children's interest in community organizing, and the neighborhood's excitement for future projects.

Storytelling is not the only tool in the community-led development toolbox, but it is an important one that is often overlooked. It can be an equalizing process that empowers voices traditionally excluded from development conversations. In this community, stories provided a way for community members to take ownership of their narrative and co-imagine a different future. It drew in reluctant actors and shifted the narrative to what the community *did* have. I'm privileged to have witnessed this community's collective mindset blossom into believing in their agency and resilience.

About this article

This blog was written as part of the "From where I stand: Unpacking 'local' in aid" series, designed to listen to people most affected by aid as they explore and amplify their leadership experiences, stories, and lessons for the aid sector.

Check out recent blogs:

- Is the Aid Sector Tèt Anba? by Marie-Rose Romain Murphy
- Shifting the Power with Power Footprints by Patrick Meier
- On Statues, Robots, and Shifting-the-Power by Patrick Meier
- HOW LOCAL IS 'LOCAL'? A Bottom-Up Perspective of Localization From Narok by Elly Maloba
- Donors can do better by Linda Mwesigwa

If you are interested in contributing, please contact Hasangani Edema at hedema@cdacollaborative.org. We would love to hear from you and include your perspective.

About the author

Emily Kombe is pursuing a Master of Public Policy at the University of Maryland, with a specialization in international development. This semester she interned for the Movement for Community-Led Development, researching participatory narrative processes and how stories can facilitate community-led development. As a slam poet, she believes words have the power to empower communities, create societal change, and advance social justice.

Posted in From Where I Stand

About
Who We Are
Why CDA?
How We Work
Our People

What We Do
Conflict Integration & Peacebuilding Effectiveness
Local Leadership & Shifting Power
Humanitarian Risk & Accountability

Resources
Browse Publications

Insights
From Where I Stand
CDA Perspectives

Contact
Contact Us
Work With Us
Subscribe to our Newsletter

CDA · PRACTICAL LEARNING for INTERNATIONAL ACTION

617.661.6310
Alewife Brook Pkwy #1119 160
Cambridge, MA 02138 USA

CDA is located on the traditional and ancestral land of the Massachusett people, and we pay our respects to elders past and present.

EN