



Grey clouds gather over Kawangware, Nairobi, Kenya.

A Spotlight on Using Narratives For Change

**An exploration of the contribution of story telling
to program review, reflection and re-design.**

As told through the experience of those who shared their stories in
**The Search for Silver Linings: Creativity and Resilience in the
Response to COVID-19**

While numbers bring focus to a need, an attribution of impact, or the scale or scope of influence, the stories behind those numbers shine a light on what those numbers mean, and how they are understood. In this spotlight we explore the influence that creating and sharing a story can have on an organisation as it builds a strategy to support both survival and growth.

Reflections on Silver Linings: The Process

Stories from 2020, the year in which we built responses to the Pandemic.

On the *Learning Platform Website*; *Story Wall & Webinar links* the experiences of seven Saving Brains Innovators are shared. The stories tell of changes in programs and people. Of moving from reaction to response as strategies were built in the face of Covid-19. Each of story telling team was asked to consider the building of resiliency. We invite you to visit the Story Wall and explore the insights of Episcopal Relief and Development, Brick by Brick, aeioTU, RTCCD, Mobile Creches, Ana Aqra and MECP-K. The stories document changes that may resonate with your own experiences.

Regardless of the method chosen to create the narratives putting these stories together was an effortful process. We reflect on that effort, documenting the potential value of using story telling as part of a rich monitoring, evaluation and learning process.

In this Spotlight we focus on exploring the changes within the organisations themselves, stimulated by the telling of those stories.

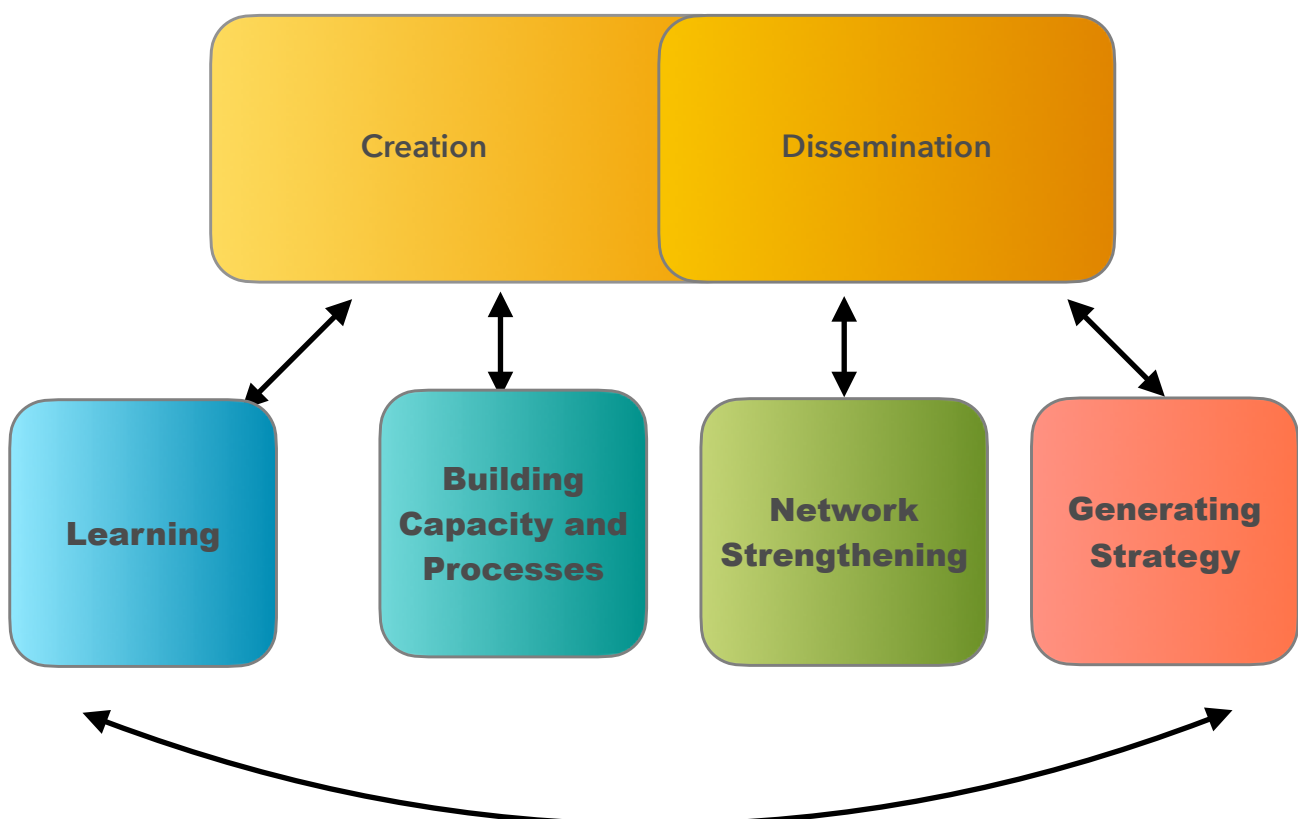
To share reflections on the process Story tellers were asked: *“On delivery of your narratives you were asked how you felt about the process. While you gave positive feedback at that time, the curiosity is whether later, and with the benefit of time to reflect, your feelings, thoughts, attitudes remain the same, or have in any way changed, as a consequence of things that have happened or that you have done since?”*

Story Telling For Change

The Storytellers described a positive and powerful experience. Their full responses appear below, providing compelling narratives of the change that took place.

The figure *Narratives for Change*, models the threads of change that emerged across the different reflections.

Narratives for Change



Putting the story together, **the process of creation**, provided the opportunity to stop, look and listen, and review in depth, the evidence of what had actually been achieved.

Sharing the story, **the process of dissemination**, provided the opportunity to strengthen, even make new connections with others.

The Threads of Change

Four key areas of change within the participating organisations were described.

Learning took place through the process of looking for, and looking at, the information to share.

Story telling brought a new and richer clarity about their achievements as a program and as an organisation. Preparing the narrative required pulling out information, data, answering questions, and reviewing the responses. The teams all reported how taking a step back, listening to others, and really looking at the details brought an increased awareness of what had been happening around them.

Building Capacity to construct a captivating story was a skill base that developed.

Key to developing the communication skills involved in telling the well crafted story was the feedback received as the narrative was prepared for an audience. Discussions on the framing, review, and re-framing of the stories with the external support team were a valued part of the storytelling process. Not only did this build confidence in the sharing of the narrative, it also gave teams a sense of confidence to use similar techniques as an effective way of including their stakeholders in the monitoring and evaluation process.

Network Strengthening took place both within the organisation and within the wider program network.

Teams found that the process of gathering the content of their stories, of listening to the narratives shared, and of having a crafted product to share with others strengthened old connections, and built new ones. Within the organisation change took place in

the main through the process of creating of the story. Connections with external partners, and with other organisations with shared objectives, were built through the sharing of that well constructed story. Inviting people into sharing stories was seen as a powerful way to draw others into their network.

Generating Strategy came from the opportunity to take a step back and look at the detail and the bigger picture.

The experience of carefully crafting a story to be shared changed the way they viewed the progress of their programs. Hearing from others, as well as the process of listening to your own story, provided a powerful reflective experience. Both the construction of the story, and through attending to the feedback from those who listened to their stories were powerful processes. All the teams drew from this experience ideas and conclusions about next steps.

In Summary

The power of a story is that it tells more than the words. The listener will often be stimulated to think in a direction unintended by the original story teller. It is therefore valuable to build into any story telling process a way for the listener to become the teller, and the story teller the listener, so that they the learning is collaborative, rich and varied.

As you read through the detailed reflections below threads of change other than these shared above may occur to you.

A Video Story
told by the
Stakeholders in the
Mama Ambassador
Program, Uganda

Smiling through the Storm

Reflections by Marc Sklar

1. What was the initial purpose of telling these stories for your team?

I think that initially, we were motivated by the desire to gather the stories, both of our beneficiaries and our Mama Ambassadors, the community health workers who are our primary partners implementing our programs. And why do we want to gather these stories? I suppose it starts with a commitment to honor and acknowledge the dedication, as well as the courage of so many people we work with and for. All of us who do work to improve health and development are most often driven by the 'calling' (not sure that is the right word) to serve, to be of use. But when all is said and done, we are drawn to make connections with people, to let them know that we know that they are here, that they matter, that we are all in this together because the alternative is to feel hopelessly isolated and alone. So, we gather the stories to get to know our fellow travellers/partners, and the women we serve. And then once heard, we are compelled to share their stories so that their humanity, love and courage are known more broadly by others. Of course, we are also very committed to continuing and expanding our work, to increase our impact, to be more of use, so we do also have an ulterior motive, to use the storytelling as a way to inspire others and to gain their trust and support.

2. Was this purpose realised?

Yes, I think so. I think we also discovered that until we begin to gather these stories, we are not fully aware of our full impact. For example, what

do adolescent mothers tell us when we ask them what they have gained from the Mama Ambassador Program? We rarely hear from them about what they learned. Rather we hear about the friends they made, how happy they were to be together, how they felt. Not really a surprise but it's not the kind of information that is not often part of a formal program report or evaluation. I owe a great debt to the storytellers, as through their courage and dedication I find the strength to persevere.

3. Looking back on the process, and what has happened since, what were the benefits of telling the stories?

I do believe that our Mama Ambassadors felt honored and appreciated by being a part of this process. I think it was especially valuable for several of them to participate in the Silver Linings event. As I reflect, I realize that we have not asked them or the mothers who participated whether they felt that they benefitted. So that is next on our To Do list:-) Of course, our primary producer Geraldine, who has since moved on, learned a lot about effective storytelling through the process. We also made deeper connections to our donors and have continued video storytelling as part of our communications strategy. See [Anjelica's Story](#)

4. How do the perceived benefits relate to the initial purpose?

I think we always saw the storytelling process as an act of social justice, empowering people who often are not seen or heard. I think the long-term benefits will be revealed over time, in stronger champions for maternal and reproductive health, empowering young women

to have the courage to speak and feel that they have a right to be heard. So yes, I think there was a strong alignment between our perceived benefits and our original purpose.

Next Steps:

It would be wonderful to have more time between our storytellers and gathered audiences. Our people are often shy at first but with a bit more time, they find their voices. Of course, on Zoom it's tough. Wouldn't it be great to bring storytellers together in a larger forum, and not just as the usual trophy beneficiary telling their inspiring story and then back to real business. But in real time to share and get their views and perspective on the work we are doing together.

From Fatalism to Hope

Reflections by Chiseche Mibenge

1. What was the initial purpose of telling these stories for your team?

The initial telling of 'our Ebola response' was prompted by an invitation by a current institutional donor (UNTF).¹ By April 2020, there was a barrage of calls across the development sector for information about COVID-19 emergency responses and the impact of social distancing on programs. More than one such call referred to 'learning from past crises'.² In a correspondence with Episcopal Relief & Development's Institutional Partnerships team, the UNTF specifically sought out the insight of an International Program staff member with

**A Conversation
Within
Episcopal Relief and
Development
explore and share how
their past has influenced
both their present and
their future.**

experience in the West African Ebola crisis of 2014.

*I'm writing to let you know that the UN Trust Fund is planning a virtual meeting next week (Thursday April 9, morning EST) of all grantees to discuss COVID-19 impact and response. You will be receiving more information on this shortly, though in the meantime I wanted to flag that one session will focus on lessons learned from other similar situations. **Being aware of the challenges ERD faced in Liberia during the Ebola outbreak, we were wondering if a speaker at ERD might be willing to speak to lessons learned or present a case study from the Ebola crisis?***

The Institutional Partnerships team pressed us (the core Liberia team) to recover our memory of, knowledge and learnings from, the Ebola response. Abiy (Episcopal Relief & Development's Senior Program Officer) stepped forward as the keeper of that specific historical memory (it was otherwise undocumented), and he invited Nagulan (Episcopal Relief & Development's Senior Program Officer, Disaster Response and Risk Reduction) into the process.³ Abiy swiftly pieced together a narrative, a 4 page brief, *Lessons from Episcopal Relief & Development and Episcopal Church of Liberia Relief and Development's (ECLRD) Response to the Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) Emergency*, in which he neatly categorized our Ebola response into three phases:

- Phase One – Immediate Assistance -Prevention and Response;
- Phase Two - Scaling up and intensifying sensitization and key messaging work in both urban and hard-to-reach outlying areas, which are under quarantine, and;

- Phase Three - Preparing for post Ebola scenario (rehabilitation and reintegration).

The Liberia team responded with feedback on the brief. I was only six months into my job at Episcopal Relief & Development but I responded to the case brief with two noted studies that were circulating at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic and that captured the gendered impact of Ebola and more generally, pandemic on communities, from the University of Ibadan (2015) and a working paper series (April 2020).⁴⁵

We were satisfied that we had facts, learnings and a good story. The prompt by UNTF was important, but we as a team quickly caught on to the true purpose of our excavation, and that was internal learning in order to inform our response to an emerging crisis.

2. Was the purpose realized?

Ultimately, the funder notified us that our Ebola story was not going to be featured in the program because of time restrictions, so, in that sense, the initial purpose wasn't fully realized.

But we could not deny that we had enjoyed the exercise: a rare opportunity to tell stories; an intellectual and collaborative engagement between colleagues; and the demonstration of Episcopal Relief & Development's faith-based praxis.

The knowledge that was retrieved by the exercise/brief became part of the foundation of our COVID-19 response and the story/knowledge circulated beyond our Liberia team, and to our International Programs team. As far as external sharing of our Ebola-cum-COVID-19 response went, the invitations to make a 2-3

minute presentation continued to come in, and we accepted them, but the outcome of the storytelling, we realized was the reminder that the emerging global health pandemic was not as novel or unpredictable as we thought, and our response could be informed by our well tested praxis.

3.Looking back on the process, and what has happened since, what were the benefits of telling the stories?

Early in April, at a webinar on COVID-19 and development programs, Penny (Saving Brains Platform Team) heard Abiy talking about our Ebola response vis our COVID-19 response and she understood the power of this story. When Abiy was invited by Penny to tailor the story for the Saving Brains Learning Platform's experimental webinar and website, we had a story that had been polished, whose threads had been carefully connected and tied by many hands. We had teased out features such as: the gender dimensions of the Ebola response in Liberia; the continuum from our food security and farming program with ECLRD to our current ECLRD flagship Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) program; and the impact of volunteer groups such as savings and loans groups and farmers collectives to mobilize and influence community behaviors during emergency. This iteration process took place over email and zoom meetings, including within our virtual Communities of Practice (CoP climate resilience, and CoP early childhood development (ECD)).

By participating in the Saving Brains Learning Platform storytelling process, Abiy and I (and

team members that accompanied us) experienced:

- ◆ The unexpected (gift) benefits of a coaching relationship with the Saving Brains Learning Platform team. We had our well-formed story but our meetings with Penny, Ray, Jasmine and others allowed us to reflect deeply on the meaning and practice of: storytelling to fellow grantees and innovators; listening and responding to others interjections, interventions and queries; and listening to and assessing our own storytelling styles and developing a joint storytelling strategy and performance.
- ◆ The rewarding and rare experience of being professionally vulnerable before a receptive and affirming audience of peers. This allowed us to present a story that demonstrated our failures and omissions as well as our learning and growth.
- ◆ A deepening relationship with the Saving Brains team, that is extending beyond the original donor-grantee dynamic to new fora for co-learning and thought partnership. Two examples, are: In the wake of the storytelling event, Tammi (VP Operations, International Program) invited Penny, James and Jasmine to an International Program staff meeting as guest speakers. This was for many people in the room, their first interaction with the Saving Brains team, model and practice. And subsequently, Chiseche supported and co-facilitated the storytelling series, allowing her to gain an insight into COVID-19 adaptations, but also to expand her network of ECD programs.

4. How do the perceived benefits relate to the initial purpose?

The benefits of our taking part in the storytelling series exceeded our expectations. From a two minute bullet point brief, we crafted a textured historiography and account of our praxis that deepened our own understanding of our engagement with implementing partners and we feel compelled to keep developing our story.

We see the potential for the development of a knowledge product, for example, a journal article, field notes, a case study, a book chapter. We felt the limits of our existing platforms for reflection, and story capture and telling and we are speaking as an International Programs team about an internal forum for storytelling, group learning by storytelling consultants (for staff and program partners), and more emphasis on qualitative inquiry within our reporting processes.

I would recommend the process to others on the grounds that it contributes to learning and development, but more so because of the possibility for deepening relationships. The latter is a universal desire in the landscape of donors and grantees, but it can be thwarted by the inherent power dynamic and pressing demands of day-to-day administration and management. The storytelling process continues to foster an ongoing and dynamic engagement between Episcopal Relief & Development, the Saving Brains Platform and innovators such as Uganda's Brick by Brick: coach, mentee, co-learners, co-facilitators, thought partners, guest faculty at the Transition to Scale workshops, guest speakers, key informants, and friends and collaborators.

¹ The United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women

² Correspondence from the UN Trust Fund (9 April 2020):

*Dear Partners, In response to the need for increased information sharing at this very critical time, the UNTF EAW is hosting a meeting opened to the entire community of stakeholders (grantees, donors, UN partners) to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the ending violence against women ecosystem. The objective of our meeting is to hear directly from women's rights and civil society partners about the impact of this pandemic on their organizations and their beneficiaries and discuss what we can do collectively to support women and mitigate the increased risks of violence against women and girls in this context, **learning from previous crises**. We hope that you will be able to join us for a very open and honest dialogue, scheduled for Thursday, 16 April 2020 from 08:30-10:30 (NY time).*

³ Correspondence from Abiy Seifu to Liberia team members (8 April 2020)

Hi All, As you recall, Anna from UNTF suggested that we share our experiences on the Ebola emergency at the virtual meeting of grantees scheduled for April 9. Gemma, who is the UNTF, M&E Manager hasn't reached out to us yet on how we can share our learning, either through a case study presentation or just an oral presentation. We would be ready to share our experience. But then, reflecting back on the Ebola emergency, I find that we and our partners -ECLRD and others can learn from the past. I found that some of the learning from the Ebola response still has some resonance and relevance to the current emergency. For example, having the wrong approach in delivering messages led to more harm than good -'Ebola kills, there is no cure!' instilled fear, disillusionment and mis-trust. Angry village mobs began chasing out front line health workers and resorted to seeking traditional cures, burials were being carried out according to custom and religion ignoring safety protocols. It was only later on, after the messaging content and methods were re-centered on prevention (the installation of hope and dignity etc.) that things started to improve.

I have put together some notes (attached) which we can always discuss on and if requested, use at the April 9th convening. Many Thanks. Best Abiy (P.S. Nagulan was there during the Ebola emergency and may have some reflections of his own that he can share :))

⁴ Correspondence 9 April from Chiseche Mibenge

Dear Abiy,

Thank you for your leadership on this, and Nagulan's. This is an important platform to share our work and learnings. I've added a few comments and attached an article that captures much of what you have said around the gendered impact of Ebola. The information on p. 13 on adolescent girls, pregnancies, school expulsions and exploitation by 'Ebola responders' such as burial teams and health workers was of particular interest to me.

This 2nd article addresses women's agency and how they were central to ending the spread of Ebola:

*"It is worthy to note that **women's relationship to Ebola was not primarily one of vulnerability. Women were in the front line of response to the disease, as caregivers and health workers in hospitals, families, and communities. Olufunmilayo Fawole and others (2016). At the community level, they were part of the social mobilizers and contact tracers. Women were able to use their connections to facilitate dialogue between global health experts and local caregivers, including religious leaders and opinion leaders, with their unique status.***

⁵ Amber Peterman, Alina Potts, Niyati Shah, et al., *Pandemics and Violence against Women and Children (2020) Center for Global Development (Working Paper Series)*

Olufunmilayo I Fawole, Olufunmi F Bamiselu, Peter A Adewuyi, Patrick M Nguku, *Gender Dimensions to the Ebola Outbreak in Nigeria (2015) Available at <https://www.annalsafirmed.org/article.asp?>*

issn=1596-3519;year=2016;volume=15;issue=1;spage=7;epage=13;aulast=Fawole#ft11

A Webinar describing how MECP-Kenya managed their response to school closures.

Navigating from Uncertainty to Certainty

Reflections by the MECP-K Implementation team

1. What was the initial purpose of telling these stories for your team?

We were telling our story so that others could learn from our experience and give us their views relative to their experiences. This would enable us improve our programming in an event of similar occurrence.

2. Was this purpose realised?

Yes, we were able to present our story and equally obtained valuable feedback from peer organizations and members of the Saving Brains platform.

3. Looking back on the process, and what has happened since, what were the benefits of telling the stories?

The story telling supported us to think about our future and our programming in depth. This being our first experience in making such a drastic decision on programme pause telling it in form of a story presented a great learning opportunity which we hope to extend as a practice.

The Benefits and the Changes that came about.

- We acquired skills to present our programming through a story
- Telling the story also supported us in strategic thinking
- We are planning to extend this story telling experience where applicable to other interventions in which we are engaged

**Curated Case Studies
created with aeioTU, Ana
Aqra, Mobile Creches and
RTCCD to describe their
journey through the first
months of Covid-19**

From Reaction to Response

Reflections by Helen Walsh

The initial purpose of the case brief process was to generate stories from four innovators regarding:

- 1) How COVID-19 impacted their programs and communities served,
- 2) How they adapted their programs in response to these restrictions, and
- 3) How these adaptations will benefit their programs in the future.

This purpose was realized, but the benefit was greater. The storytelling process gave innovators space to reflect on their crisis response, strengthened relationships within the Saving Brains community, and provided a platform to share stories with those beyond Saving Brains.

Through our discussions and review of initial drafts innovators were given space to reflect on all they had accomplished in the first few months of COVID-19 related restrictions. Before our conversations the programs had largely been in survival mode and the innovators did not have the opportunity to reflect on all they had accomplished.

Through the review process, participating innovators were able to ensure that my retelling accurately captured their stories and allowed us to ensure any inaccuracies and confusion were addressed and clarified. During this review, a couple of the innovators expressed to me that they had not previously identified all of the potential strategic growth opportunities based on their responses that we included in the briefs.

This was valuable to them as they had not yet (understandably) had the opportunity to comprehensively think about long-term strategy in the midst of a crisis.

The four stories all reflected how people create new relationships and find new ways to engage with and rely on existing relationships during a crisis. The storytelling process, specifically the webinar, set the foundation for deeper relationships between the innovators highlighted and with the larger Saving Brains community. Through the webinar, teams were paired by common themes to structure the discussion. This allowed the teams to connect and identify what they have in common and what they would like to learn from each other. This hopefully set the foundation for future relationships between the participating innovators, as they have now had time to meet and learn about each other.

By listening to these stories, other innovators can identify commonalities between their program or current problems and those featured in the brief and webinar. Hopefully this has led to the creation of new relationships within the portfolio, as teams learn about other programs in the learning community and see other innovators' creative solutions to shared problems.

Sharing the stories with a wider audience helps those outside of the Saving Brains community learn from these creative approaches and is an opportunity for the featured innovators to widen their reach. The stories featured in the case brief highlighted creative approaches to service delivery that could help other organizations in the early childhood development realm and more broadly in the human services field to figure out

how to adapt their programs during the ongoing pandemic. The four featured innovators can use their stories to demonstrate adaptability, credibility and success, further strengthening their reputations.

Key Take-Aways

- **The effort is worth the return**
- **Story telling for change is a collaborative process**
- **Take time to construct your story**
- **Build in time to listen to the reactions of the listeners**
- **Use your stories to generate ideas and new directions**

Thanks goes to those all who participated in creating this document.

Most especially to Helen Walsh who, through her reflective process, framed the process of reflection.