

STORYTELLING 101

Throughout the world, storytellers are respected people in their communities. These first-rate communicators skilfully draw on emotions and everyday examples to get their messages across. Issues related to international development are often complex and difficult for the general public to grasp. Actual stories of real individuals are proven to be the best way to make these questions understandable and worth remembering. Telling a story is a more effective way to send a complex message. It goes through emotions and connects with logic.

To help your friends, colleagues and your community become more aware of international development, use stories. The model suggested below can be applied as much to articles (e.g. blogs, newspapers) as to videos, podcasts, oral presentations or other media. Choose what you feel most comfortable using!!

What makes a good story?

- **It gets noticed**
- **It tells the story of real folks:** People seldom want to hear about committees or intangible issues. They want to hear about people, their lives, their struggles, their joys, etc.
- **It gives a living example of the broader, more abstract message you wish to convey:** it is easier for someone to identify and empathize with a central character.
 - o *For example, rather than talking about social and solidarity economy concepts, you could use the story of Madame Nanfadima, a shea butter producer who moved out of poverty thanks to her work with the Léo Cooperative.*
- **It expresses a single, main idea:** someone did something for a specific reason (answers *who*, *what* and *why* questions).
 - o *Example of a main idea: "A woman who produces shea butter joins the Léo Cooperative to improve outcomes for her family."*
- **It adopts a tone to go with the issue:** a sad story doesn't take on a celebratory or funny tone; the tone must add credibility to the story and maximize its emotional impact.
- **It touches emotions by speaking to universal values:** love, hatred, fear, pride, bravery, etc.
 - o *Example: When her husband died, Madame Nanfadima was very worried about her children's future because it was difficult for a widow like her to find a job in Burkina Faso.*
- **It uses rational arguments, appealing to logic:** explain the behaviours described, justify why someone does what he/she does, make links with larger global issues, weave in examples, numbers, etc. -- this makes the whole story stronger.
 - o *Example: It seemed to Madame Nanfadima that the best solution was to produce shea butter (traditionally done by women), working in a cooperative. This would give her meaningful work and a salary, so that she could send her children to school and move out of poverty.*

What structure should I use to make a good story?

- **Start with a catchy sentence:** about the person in the story and about the subject (the main idea)
- **Place it in context:** close your eyes and think of an image that strikes a chord, bringing you into the story. Refer to what people are doing, and to the things around them. Next, go beyond what you see and think to what you would feel (a cool breeze or the sun's warmth), hear (music, the sound of people working, etc.), or even smell or taste.
- **Develop the story of the individual:** set up the who, what, where, when, how, why. Don't hide interesting content! Use simple and engaging language. Avoid jargon or long descriptions (of an organization, a program or their stories), which discourages readers. Keep your attention focused on the person at the heart of your story.
- **Make links with larger global issues:** draw on your experience or knowledge, on programming or the local organization's work, etc. Less is more! You can include statistics, but use them sparingly in order to boost your message rather than dilute it. More often, a few well-chosen words will have more impact than large amounts of words.
- **Integrate key messages from Uniterra, CECI and WUSC, from a specific campaign, etc.:** show that Uniterra makes a difference, one person at a time! Through your story, show how Uniterra, CECI and WUSC contribute to capacity-building in developing countries. People will understand that your example serves to illustrate one situation, and that it can apply to others.
- **Suggest how readers can help improve the situation:** can they donate, volunteer, or make others more aware? They'll recognize the value of your story even more if they feel they can contribute.
- **Make sure to wrap up your story and summarize the main idea:** don't bring up a question and leave readers hanging without an answer. Re-link to Uniterra (or CECI or WUSC) at the end: even if your story is not about the program (or the organizations), let people know what Uniterra is (or CECI or WUSC), and that they can learn more on our web site.

A few tips

- **The "Hey, Mom!" approach for selecting a story to tell:** imagine you've just come home after an overseas assignment and you're seeing your parents or friends for the first time. What would you like to tell them? This will likely interest the public.
- **Add anecdotes:** serious or funny, well-chosen anecdotes will add a solid dimension to your story and will make them easily more memorable.
 - o *Example: Madame Nanfadima seriously injured her back while hauling a large quantity of shea nuts over a long distance. With membership in the Cooperative, she got help; together, they divided the load.*
- **Bring it to life through an image or a voice:** use a photo, drawing, video or audio clip along with your text to show the person at the heart of the story.
- **You don't need to tell everything:** the goal is to make your main idea understood.
- **Don't hesitate to describe your feelings:** at first, people may think you are very different because of your 'exotic' volunteer experience; but if you write what you feel, they will consider themselves much closer to what you've lived. Include feelings that may seem obvious (e.g. *I was sad to learn this young widow did not have support from her family*) and other unexpected things (e.g. *After watching these dynamic women on the job at the cooperative, I was surprised to see them stop mid-work to take medication, and to realize that they were living with HIV*).