REVEAL Tools to support community transformation

Story telling

Why use this tool?

Storytelling is a tool that can be used to help people learn something new, to motivate people to do something, or to convey a particular message. Storytelling is an important part of many cultures. Stories can often communicate a message very effectively. They can also help people to talk about and explore difficult or 'hidden' issues.

A brief description

This activity includes ideas and suggestions for using stories to raise, explore and communicate issues and messages to communities.

Time taken

Story telling can be a very short activity or take a long time if you are involving many people.

Keys to success

- Keep it local – use local people and places, and link to existing stories, to help people relate to and enjoy your story.
- Give detail – how loud or high, beautiful or sad was the situation you are describing?
- Use a "hook" – something you know local people are interested in, such as a person or place that they know.
- Use humour or mystery, so that people want to listen to the end.

What to do

Stories speak to the heart and the mind. They make us feel different emotions such as anger, sadness or joy. They often describe:

1. What the situation was like
2. What was done about the situation
3. What the situation is now

For example: The child was hungry. The child ate some bread. The child is now full.

As a facilitator, you could develop your own stories to share with groups to communicate a particular message, or you could encourage a group to develop their own stories to communicate the message to others. You could also use storytelling as a tool to help a group to share different experiences and views, and to enable them to raise and explore 'hidden' issues that are not usually easily discussed. Suggestions for both are shared below.

Awareness-raising

Children & youth

Climate & environment

Conflict & peace-building

Corruption & governance

Disaster risk management

Discrimination & inclusion

Food & livelihoods

Gender & sexual violence

Health & HIV

Influencing decision-makers

Migration & trafficking

Water, sanitation & hygiene

Using stories to communicate a message

You could share a story with a group, and then ask them questions about the story. Here are a few examples:

Example 1

Two women were walking through their village when one asked the other to help her clear away some of the plastic bags which had got stuck in the thorn bushes. The second woman couldn't understand why they should do that when they hadn't put the bags there.
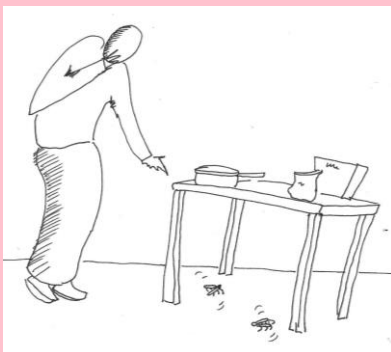
Several days later, this second lady's goat died when it ate a plastic bag. From then on, the second woman helped the first woman to clear away the plastic bags from their village and encouraged other people to do the same.

Discussion questions:
- What principle is illustrated by this story?
- What more could we do to protect the environment in our community?

Example 2

In an informal urban settlement, there was a mystery! Seven children, from three families, got diarrhoea. One week later, another few children also became ill. What did all they have in common?

They all went to the same school and ate school lunches. Maybe this was the cause?

Some of the parents went to visit the school principal and, together, they all went to the kitchen. As they walked through the door, two cockroaches hopped out from a crack in the floor. 'Is this normal?' the head teacher asked the cook, pointing at the cockroaches. 'Yes it is,' replied the cook.

They had found the most likely reason for the children becoming unwell: the kitchen was unclean and the cockroaches were infesting it and contaminating the food. The head teacher asked the school maintenance man to kill the cockroaches by using a safe insecticide. Afterwards, the children stopped getting diarrhoea.

Discussion questions:
- What is the moral of this story?
- What can we do to prevent children getting ill?

You could also ask the group themselves to develop stories to communicate a particular message. You could ask them to consider what the most important messages are for their community. For example, if the community has chosen to focus on improving health, the messages could include hand washing, covering food or using a latrine. Effective messages should be short, positive and easy to adapt. You could also encourage the group to develop simple role-plays or songs to communicate messages.

## Using stories to help raise and explore hidden issues

Stories can help people to talk about sensitive issues that they would otherwise find difficult, or about other issues that they wouldn't normally think about discussing. There are many ways in which stories can be told: they can be spoken or acted. Stories can be told using role-plays or puppets or interviews or drawings or video / film or radio. People can often act out difficult situations without feeling embarrassed. Role plays or puppets can also help people to laugh and relax. It is important to remember that sharing stories about difficult issues requires trust and openness. And some people may not want to share any stories. This is to be respected and people should never be forced to share anything or made to feel embarrassed if they don't take part.

Developing stories

There are many ways of encouraging a group to share and develop stories. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Ask people to tell each other stories in pairs. Ask them to identify something amusing, thought-provoking or interesting. Then the listener can retell to another person the story they just heard. Or participants could pass one story round a circle, with each person making slight changes each time the story is retold.

2. Another simple approach might be to ask people to talk about what they see – the sights, smells and sounds in their communities – and to share how they would describe their community to a stranger. You could ask them to describe what they feel when they see things in their community: what makes them happy, and what makes them sad or fearful.

3. The following activity could also be used to help a group make up a story. (This is taken from Footsteps 58 – *Using theatre in development.* See 'Finding out more', below.)
   o Divide participants into two groups and form two circles – an inner and an outer, with each inner participant facing one outer participant.
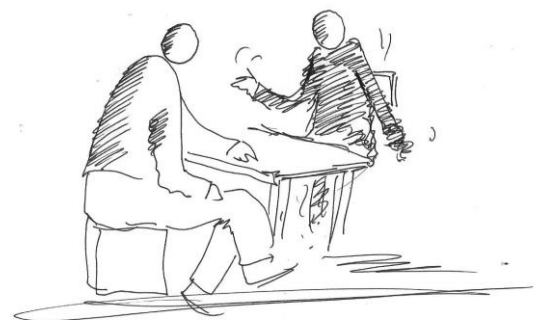
o Ask the inner circle to begin a story. It helps to provide them with a suggestion. For example, 'Tell a story about a secret box.' Each person then makes up a story and tells it to their outer circle partner for exactly one minute.

o Ask the outer circle to move round one place and then pass on the story they have just heard to their new inner circle partners. This time, however, they must include something new in the story – for example, 'a leopard'.

o Again, time the storytelling for exactly one minute. (Suggest words to stimulate thinking about specific topics such as **bullying, violence and gender** but you may need to be sensitive to other people's privacy because some stories may bring up pain and may be difficult to share. However, it is important to add funny or silly ideas too, to ensure a feeling of fun or light-heartedness.)

o Ask the outer circle to move round one place again to the next inner circle person, who will repeat to them the story they have just heard – again including 'a secret box' and 'a leopard' and one more new idea.

o Continue this process of moving the outer participants on one place each time. Participants will alternately listen to a story and then pass it on to another person – always adding one new idea. Stop when all outer participants have partnered with all inner circle participants. Stories will become very muddled and confused, but this is all part of the fun!

By the end of the exercise, each person will have a unique final story which includes input from each participant. Now divide the participants into several small groups. Ask each of them to tell their final stories to each other and decide which story they prefer. These stories can then be told to the other groups. Decisions about what is included in the stories will reveal a great deal about the group as a whole – how they feel, what they think and believe, and how they relate to others in the community.
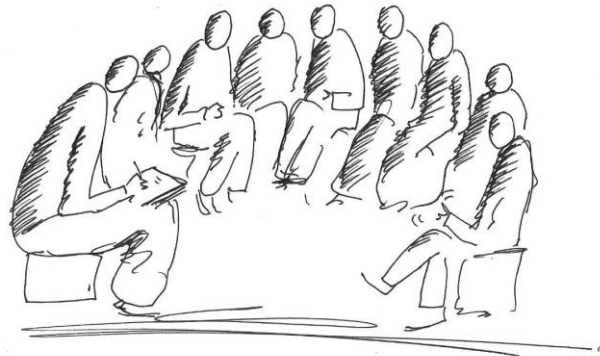
Finding out more

- Tearfund (2004) Footsteps 58 – *Using theatre for development* *http://tilz.tearfund.org/en/resources/publications/footsteps/footsteps_51-60/footsteps_58/*
- Tearfund (2012) Footsteps 87 – *Non-communicable diseases -* article on 'Creative ways of communicating health messages' http://tilz.tearfund.org/en/resources/publications/footsteps/footsteps_81-90/footsteps_87/creative_ways_of_communicating_health_messages/
- Tearfund (1995) Footsteps 23 – *Drug Rehabilitation* – article on 'Puppets' http://tilz.tearfund.org/en/resources/publications/footsteps/footsteps_21-30/footsteps_23/puppets/

Related tools:
- C1 – How to write a community drama *[C1: Awareness-raising-7]*

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