

Writing an Effective Story

A Primer for Civil Society Organizations

Initiative of Centre for Strategic Communication (Vikas Samvad)



Title	Writing and Effective Story
Format	Primer
Initiative	Capacitation Support to CSOs on Strategic Communication and Storytelling
Serial Number	Three
Author	Sachin Kumar Jain
Translation and Editing	Sravni Sarkar, Gurusharan Scahdev and Ranjit Abhigyan
Publisher	Vikas Samvad
Address	A5, Aaykar Colony, G3, Gulmohar Colony, Bhopal. 462039. Madhya Pradesh
Email	office@vssmp.org
Year	2023

About Vikas Samvad

Vikas Samvad is a practising Social Development (Nutrition Agriculture and Food Security), Capacity Building, Research & Documentation and Communication Organisation.

It seeks to provide support to and network with the Civil Society Organisations for Storytelling and Strategic Communication. The intent is to widen the civic space towards creating stronger social and public good.

Self learning and action manuals are prepared under the agis of Strategic Communication Centre (Vikas Samvad) capacitation programme for civil society organizations.

If any organization/group feels the requirement of capacity building support, please reach out to us at office@vssmp.org /0755 4252789

Introduction

As a social worker, we seek to bring about a change in the society, in the lives and behaviour of the people. The objective is that the world could be made a better place.

We want to create a world where the children are happy and they do not face any exploitation. Women are not subject to violence of any kind and they can experience their existence with full freedom, live their lives. There is no discrimination on the basis of caste, colour or profession. There is no economic disparity. People recognise the vital significance of air, water, mountains, flora and fauna in our lives. There is no such work or scheme in society that harms biodiversity.

Aren't we working to fulfil this dream as a civil society activist or organization? Yes, we want to fulfil this dream.

To reach the objective of our work, it is especially important that we turn our dreams into dreams of many individuals, groups, many other organizations, the government and the media. When a single dream is dreamt by many people and organisations, then it moves toward fulfilment. But if the dream remains limited to our own eyes, heart and mind, it can never be fulfilled.

To transfer our dreams to many other eyes, hearts and minds, it is important that we tell, write, inform, narrate stories of ourselves, our subject and the community.

If every day the social workers and representatives of civil society organizations endeavour to be alerted about the changes occurring within the society and amongst the people and look for their causes, stories can be traced, identified and related. Or, if some issue is overly complex and there are constant challenges; then if they notice the reasons for the challenges, then too stories could surface.

The purpose of writing a story is not 'telling', the purpose is 'showing'. This means that we do not 'write' about a subject; rather we 'draw its picture'.

No one 'reads' a story. They 'look at' the incidents recorded in the story, 'meet' the characters and link themselves with its underlying message!

What the Story Means for a CSO Person?

From the perspective of a representative of CSO, story writing means such a format of presentation and communication which is as creative and interesting as the ground experience of the writer, and which is based on actual problems and real initiatives.

When we try storytelling in the role of a social worker, it is important to keep in mind our perspective towards society and social changes. How do we measure such changes?

In reality, one of the purposes of storytelling is also that the society gets to know about the role of social workers and civil society organizations. Thus, in a way, telling stories is an important part of the role and responsibility of a social worker.

For Whom Is A Story Written?

Social workers are active for a particular kind of purpose. Their stories will have the mention of some real problems of the society and the efforts made for resolving them. The target-audience of these stories could also be the media, websites or news/opinion portals.

Government representatives and policymakers can also get help from these stories to understand the ground realities.

Publication of such stories on the websites of civil society organisations could be worthwhile.

Social workers can publicise these by creating their own blogs.

Four Aspects of a Story

The stories of socio-economic changes are made across four aspects/dimensions. These are:

1. Thoughts/Objectives
2. Community/Values
3. Initiative/Process of Socio-Economic change
4. Outcomes of the Initiative

Along with doing our routine work, it is important to simultaneously keep a tab on these four aspects/dimensions of what we do.

It is also important to view these dimensions as the inter-connected ones. If they are perceived separately, no relation could be established amongst them and that they could also be seen to be in contradiction with one another.

Script of Stories

Story -1

Anything could be a story. For example, "Today I was talking to community members, when a group member Sunita informed me that the marriage of a 16-year-old girl in the village had been settled, but she refused to marry. The girl wanted to study and work to promote the folk culture of the community. Everyone was pressurizing her, but she remained undeterred. Finally, the family and the community had to give up and her marriage was cancelled." We have now got the gist of an incident. Now we have to know the entire story. What was the girl thinking? How did she get the courage to resist? Was she helped by someone? What were the kinds of pressure brought upon her? Was she afraid? If the family and community had not relented, what would she have done? Did she learn a new lesson from this experience of struggle? Etc. There can be many questions like these, which when answered can lead to telling or writing a powerful story.

Story-2

It is a general perception that women cannot be vehicle drivers or mechanics. These are considered to be heavy works to be done by men. Such work requires interaction with men only; therefore, women should not do these works. Aren't these mere perceptions?

In such a situation, the voluntary organization Samaan of Indore started to train women as drivers and mechanics, give confidence to them and stand by them. Now, at least 50 women mechanics are working in Indore and 200 women are driving taxis. Isn't this an incident of important socio-economic change? How was this change brought about? Why was such initiative taken? What challenges did the organization face? What challenges did the women face? Did they ever feel that they should not have done this work? When they started doing this work, how did society look upon them? Was there any change in the society's attitude? How are they looked upon now by their family and society? What have been the objectives of the organization? These are important and basic questions, the answer to which can help in creating a very effective story.

Story-3

Avnish of Satna shared three photographs and a 50-word story on Twitter. During the lockdown of COVID-19, Krishna Mawasi of Kelhora village shared vegetables grown in a Poshan Vatika (Nutri-garden) at her home with those families in the village that had small children, pregnant women or lactating mothers. Krishna Mawasi had been trained and supported in developing the kitchen garden by a social organization. When this story was shared on social media, the chief minister and the government came to know about the initiative. The local Member of Parliament (MP) and the MLA met Krishna and held discussions with her. Impressed by her commitment, the government decided to provide additional development aid to the village. Due to her work, Krishna Mawasi also gained respect in the local community. Later, the story of Krishna got space in national media. Why did Krishna Mawasi select this role? Did she get any help from anywhere? What was in her mind? How does she feel after doing such work? Many characters like Krishna Mawasi, from amongst the work that the social workers and civil society organizations are doing, could become humming stories.

Why is Storytelling Important?

Telling stories is important to establish a link with people's lives. A story is a medium through which the rest of the society could be made aware of any problem prevalent in any part of the state or country and the initiatives taken by civil society organizations to resolve these problems. Else, initiatives taken in a small or remote place could get limited to that area only. This limitation does not decrease the importance of the initiative, but the rest of the people, organizations and government can remain deprived of the energy, inspiration and lessons generated by the initiative.

Theories, processes and techniques are one part of the work done for social changes. These theories are available in books.

But the other part is the ground-level implementation of those theories and the realities linked to them. Actually, field experiences are far livelier than mere theories. Whether the theories are correct can only be proven by community level work.

When the representatives of the civil society organizations tell stories of work, experiences and outcomes, they help the government, media, youth, students and teachers to form correct understanding about the work done by social organization. If these stories are not told, then only the perceptions are formed about the civil society organization which could go wrong more often than not.

The civil society organization or activist might have played a very important role in the story that is being told, but their mention in the story should be just in the form of a facilitator. In such stories of changes, we make the community and the community members as the central characters. It is natural that when the question arises as to who trained or inspired the community/group, there will be a mention of the organization or the social worker.

How to Identify a Story?

Is It Worth Telling?

Whenever we feel that oh! Something really worth sharing or telling has happened? Is this really new happening? Whenever it becomes clear to us as a social activist that we have such a topic, outcome or incident that should be in knowledge of other individuals, organizations, teachers or anyone else, then we should take a deep look at.

To Be a Keen Observer

To identify stories, it is very important that we notice and feel the atmosphere, incidents, people, groups and changes around us in a very alert manner. Often it happens that we limit our role as social workers merely to routine activities. It is important to undertake activities, but simultaneously, it is equally important to see and understand who is saying what? Why are they saying it? What has happened and why? What are the circumstances? How do people live? What is available with them? Who is speaking and who is not? Sometimes important topics for stories come out merely from interactions with others.

Diarize and Document it

The social workers should develop a habit to write down their experiences every day. They should notice what the usual incidents are during the day. But with that, they should also re-run the entire day in their minds for five minutes to find out whether something interesting or special has happened during the day.

Be an Intent Listener

To identify stories, it is important to be a thoughtful listener. Take a look at yourself, pause and ponder. You will find whether you really listen to what the other person is saying when you are talking to them. Or are you thinking about some of your work? If your mind is thinking of something else, then you are not listening to the other person. If we do not listen, we cannot find stories.

Be Inquisitive

Social workers play the role of facilitators in the process of socio-economic change. To play this role effectively, it is important that they know the problem and the side of the society/community in-depth. For this, they should have a sense of deep inquisitiveness. What is the problem? Why is it so? What are the reasons? What are the hurdles? What are the solutions according to you? What initiatives could be taken for a solution? What are your experiences after taking up the initiative?

Activities Are Not Stories In Themselves!

We conduct many activities as a social worker. But these activities are not stories in and by themselves. The outcomes of these activities might become the subject of a story. Thus, everyday there should be an effort to look at the outcome. The best questions to find out the story are: What is the outcome? What were the reasons for the outcome? How did the outcome become possible? What solution was found? If there was no initiative for resolution, what would have happened?

Characters of the Story

Whatever story we want to tell is sure to have a character. This character might be the community, the village, a woman or a self-help group of women. Whenever you select a story, you should decide about the main and the supporting characters of the story. About whom is the story being told? What do these characters feel? What is their viewpoint? What are their challenges? What changes do they want? How is such change possible? What are the reasons of the existing problem? The answers to these questions will be given by the characters themselves. These answers will not be given by the social activist or the civil society organization.

Format of the Story

Subject

What is the subject of the story based on socio-economic change? For example, we want to say that there has been a change in the malnutrition situation in the community due to the 'Poshan Vatika' (Nutri-Garden) project. In some villages, people came together to stop rainwater, which led to an irrigation facility for 50-acre land and the crop production in the village doubled. As a result, people have stopped migrating for work. Likewise, now, every newborn baby is breastfed within an hour of birth and is given exclusive breastfeeding till six months of age. Due to awareness on the health and nutrition front, there has been no child death in the village in the past three years. It is particularly important that the subject of the story is very clear.

Statements of the People/Characters

Who is saying the things detailed in the story – social worker or the community members! It should be kept in mind that the social worker tells the story of community/people. Thus, the answers to the questions such as: How the socio-economic change was affected? What were the challenges? What was the outcome? – should come from within the community. The statements in the story should be recorded in the name of the person/woman/community members who are answering these questions.

What Was the Process?

There is certainly a process of work that leads to socio-economic change. A complete yet brief description of this process should be a part of the story. It should be kept in mind that this description should be linked with the script of the story. We don't have to describe all the phases of the process. A brief description of the most strategic and major phases adds to the value of the story.

What Were the Challenges and How Were They Faced?

The kind of work we do entails different kinds of problems/challenges/hurdles. Our story should also have the mention of the major challenges/hurdles along with details of how solutions were found. This is actually one of the major objectives of storytelling.

Use of Facts and Data

When our story talks about the extent or expanse of the problem; proper facts and data should be used – referenced and quoted. This helps in understanding the impact of the problem. Also, to establish the claim of changes, facts should be used. Statements of the community representatives are also a kind of fact.

The Fundamentals

Prior Preparations

- ⌘ Social worker should develop a habit of jotting down maximum of the points while doing field work or participating in a discussion in her/his diary.
- ⌘ When we hold discussions with the community or participate in a meeting, then the statements should be recorded as it is (verbatim) along with the name of the one making the statement.
- ⌘ Before writing the story, the subject of the story and its basic concept should be clear in mind.
- ⌘ Select the major characters of the story at the outset. While thinking as a writer, the social worker should have a clear idea as to why the characters in the story are significant.
- ⌘ There should be prior preparation on the facts and the statements to be used in the story.

Whilst Writing the Story!

- ⌘ Select a suitable time and a quiet place to write the story.
- ⌘ While writing, churn the subject and the process of the story two or three times in your mind so that the presentation of the story is good and systematic.
- ⌘ While writing, read the story from the beginning periodically, so that the flow of the story is assured and maintained.
- ⌘ After writing the story, read it from the perspective of a reader at least thrice.

After the Story Is Complete!

- ⌘ When you feel that your story is complete, get it read by some people for review and suggestions. You can ask your colleagues in the organization, any journalist or an editor to read the story.
- ⌘ Try to understand and accept the reactions that you get. It will only make your story better.

Photos in the Story and Story in a Photo!

- ⌘ Whatever story is being told, it is very important to add an effective and suitable photograph with it.

- ⌘ Do use clear, good photographs of the people whose statements are being used in the story.
- ⌘ Effective and good photographs of the most important processes and activities mentioned in the story should be used.
- ⌘ Can you show the change in photographs? For this, you will need three types of photos – one before the work was started, second when the work was being carried out and third after the work was completed. If these three photographs are taken from the same angle, then they can easily draw the sketch of the affected change.

Rules of Writing a Story

- ⌘ Deciding the subject of the story is the first step. Keep looking around you. Story writing starts with Observation.
- ⌘ It is important to decide the subject.
- ⌘ The story should be written in a single sitting. The improvements and editing can come after some break. If the story is not completed in one sitting, it will be very difficult to make it effective or impressive. So it is important that before starting to write, we have the subject, characters and their statements, the format of the story, facts and statistics at hand.
- ⌘ The only rule to make a story effective is – practice. The more you write the better the story comes out and the better the writer becomes. Write at least one story per week.
- ⌘ The message given by the story should be very clear.
- ⌘ Prepare the headline of the story yourself too.
- ⌘ Read the story from the perspective of a reader. Read at least thrice.
- ⌘ Read the story once in a way where you are trying to find the objective and meaning of each of the sentences written. Think of removing any sentence where objective and meaning is not clear.