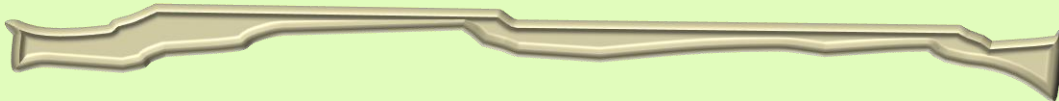


Effective Storytelling in CSOs

A Primer for Civil Society Organisations



Initiative of Centre for Strategic Communication (Vikas Samvad)



Title	How to Write an Effective Case Study?
Format	Primer
Initiative	Capacitation Support to CSOs on Strategic Communication and Storytelling
Serial Number	One
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Transltaion and Editing	Sravni Sarkar, Gurusharan Sachdev and Ranjit Aabhigyan
Publisher	Vikas Samvad
Address	A5, Aaykar Colony, G3, Gulmohar Colony, Bhopal. 462039. Madhya Pradesh
Email	office@vssmp.org
Year	2023
About Vikas Samvad	<p>Vikas Samvad is a practising Social Development (Nutrition Agriculture and Food Security), Capacity Building, Research & Documentation and Communication Organisation.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Self learning and action manuals are prepared under the agis of Strategic Communication Centre (Vikas Samvad) capacitation programme for civil society organizations.</p> <p>If any organization/group feels the requirement of capacity building support, please reach out to us at office@vssmp.org /0755 4252789</p>



Context



What is the Dream, which is to be realised? What is the Goal, which has to be achieved? What is the Change that has to be brought in and why? Do we keep our Eyes, Ears, Heart and Mind open to the voices and situations of people living in the most difficult circumstances? As individuals working with Civil Society Organisations for Social Change and wellbeing, we have to acknowledge the fact that our lives are not merely a bagful of events, meetings and training programmes. It has many dimensions and processes aligned with a vision and mission. CSOs may have reach to a limited population and geography, but it can cover the entire globe and expand its impact through effective Storytelling.

Effective Storytelling is nothing more than keeping Mind, Body and Soul together.

The activities and events must have some major purposes behind them and those purposes are to be in the centre of thinking and storytelling. As the CSO representative, we might have been witness to many incidents – they too have to be interconnected and can not be visualised in isolation. When we present our thoughts by bringing all these together, our stories get ready and refined.

For an effective Storyteller in the Civil Society community, some key points have to be kept in mind. Only then one can become an effective communicator; connect others to one's story and prepare a wide spectrum of the stories where various sections of the society can get connected to and impacted by the stories.

What is a Story?

An incident or many incidents together go on to create a story. When an individual weaves different aspects such as - one's dreams, perspectives, an initiative or activity, experiences related to the activity, information on why or what led to the incident or the activity, information related to changes brought about and one's emotions – in a systematic way, a story is created.

Amongst the incidents that occur around us, each of them seen separately might seem insignificant, but when we look at all the incidents in a holistic manner, then we see a definite pattern, objective and effect. And this is the way a story is created.

Stories are not merely the description of incidents; rather they form a mosaic which helps in creating understanding about oneself, people around self and others. The stories that we hear and weave also impact our lives. When we have a dream about the society and take steps to fulfil this dream or to find a solution to any problem – the incidents that happen in this course, the journey that we make – all these together lead to the creation of a story.

Before civil society activists put forth their ideas before a group, or tell a story, they should be fully prepared and should have complete analysis about the topic, the objective and the desired impact. Only then the ideas will come across in an effective manner.

Why do we want to tell a Story?

We tell a story because we want to communicate; because we want to express our experiences and our thoughts. We all know that the civil society activists tell a story because they want to change the situation. They want to improve a particular situation. Therefore, they put across the problem, suggest solutions and invite opinions of the stakeholders through the medium of a story.

We have a keen desire to tell a story not only because we express ourselves through its medium, but also encourage others. Stories help in linking all of us together. It creates a feeling of empathy within us.

We tell stories to introduce others to the subject, the reasons behind the subject, the likely effect of the subject and the community touched by the subject.

It is important to tell a story because it is a major way of expressing oneself and to understand others. In the current times, the traditional modes of public relations and image building are not so much effective. Therefore it is necessary that we find newer ways to express ourselves and to impress others. Storytelling is part of this process.

For the social activists, society is like a laboratory. Therefore, through storytelling, the problem is put across in detail and the possible solutions are discussed. When we express our objectives through a story, then we can tell as to what changes we want to bring in, how can the change be brought about and what will be the effect of the change? For this, it is necessary that we constantly analyse our work and experiences. In a story, only the major points are not important.

Stories should be told because they have many lessons. Stories are not merely descriptions of success, but analyses of failures too.

Stories and Values

Our stories also tell about our and others' lives and life values. Every one of us has some or other values that decide our direction and the route we take in life. Civil society activists can become a good and successful storyteller only if they make use of values in their organisational work as well as one's story. These values are the fundamentals of their organisation and their work. Stories mostly mirror the feelings of a person or an organisation. If an organisation adopts the value of transparency and participation, these messages start emanating from the communication made by its members. The welfare of the organisation should appear in sync with the welfare of the society.

How the Stories are Born?

Stories are born out of our own preparations. When we navigate through our lives, our works and experiences, the story gets created there. Stories could be an aggregation of incidents or about a specific incident.

To tell effective stories, the civil society organisations and the individuals linked to them should have the confidence that the role that they are playing is very serious and sensitive. The organisations and the individuals that are aware about the gravity of their roles keep on studying, researching and discussing their subjects of work. They also hold their experiences in their memories. They also practice writing, photography and videography.

The civil society organisations that adopt the system of review and evaluation of their work have many stories related to their works and experiences.

It is necessary that the organisations periodically keep on discussing their work experiences and outcomes and review them. Stories are born out of the experiences and outcomes of the organisations' works.

Giving Shape to a Story

When we develop a habit of asking the following questions to ourselves: what are we doing? Why are we doing it? How are we doing it? For whom are we doing it? What will the effect of what we are doing? What have been the outcomes of our work?, the answers to these questions give birth to stories.

Before preparing or telling a story, it is important that the social workers ask some questions to themselves and seek their answers:

- Why have we selected the role that we are in?
- What analyses have we done or are doing about the society and the current situations?
- What are the different aspects of the problem or the subject
- What are the effects of the problem or the subject? Have they affected others along with us?

- Have we thought about the solution of the problem? If yes, why did we think of the particular solution?
- Is the solution thought by us the most suitable solution? If yes, why do we feel so?
- What were our major strategies and why did we select only the particular strategy?
- What have we learnt from our initiatives
- Did we ever get disappointed during the initiative? If yes, what were the ideas, incidents or individuals who helped us in overcoming the disappointments?
- What were the points that encouraged or discouraged us in a big way? In what way were they helpful or hindering in fulfilling our objectives?
- Why do we believe in our work or our role?

Finding answers to these questions is a continuous process. It is not possible that if one finds answers to all these questions in a single day, his/her story will be complete. When one is in a continuous process of finding the answers, then only one invests emotional capital in the process. The answers are then not artificial. There is a depth in one's analysis. Therefore it is necessary that we regularly scrutinise the questions and record the answers in our memories and in our personal diaries.

By giving answers to these questions, one will first tell the story to oneself and only then the story will reach out to other stakeholders.

Who is Telling Stories on Social Issues?

There are two practical aspects of communication for civil society organisations:

First Aspect – To Communicate/Tell Story on You Own as Civil Society Organisation/Civil Society Activist

- **Intention:** This means that the civil society organisations themselves tell the stories of the work they are doing
- **Elements:** When organisations tell their stories, then their perspective, approach, practical aspects and facts are included in those stories
- **Skill:** When stories are to be told by individuals/organisations, then it becomes imperative that the organisations develop their skill of communication and dialogue. While conducting social development programmes, mostly the representatives of the organisations develop only that much skill, which is necessary to complete the particular activity. Coherent writing, weaving texts with facts and figures, using social media, using technology, photography and videography are also equally necessary. Also, the organisations should practice the skill of presenting their points in a brief and effective manner with facts.
- **Preparation:** When we prepare ourselves to tell stories, then we have to pay close attention to our work, activities and experiences. There is a need for regular self-review and appraisal of the work
- **Credibility:** If civil society organisations are able to engage in dialogue or communication with credible facts and logic in their stories, then their points/messages get much importance because it is considered that they are

presenting the story on the basis of their experiences of social/community work. Due to their direct connection with the community; they can express those emotions that cannot be done by other groups.

Second Aspect – Storytelling/Engaging in Dialogue on Civil Society Issues by Others

- **Intention:** This means that other organisations/people tell the story on subjects on which they are working. These others, including journalists, writers, litterateurs, government representatives, columnists, prominent people, people's representatives, experts, teachers, youth etc., should talk on the issues of social development in a pro-people manner; should see and understand the programmes running for development and engage in dialogue by analysing the programmes.
- **Elements:** When different persons and groups (other than civil society organisations) engage in dialogue on issues/subjects, they have their own perspectives. They might not be directly linked to the subject and in such a situation their perspective is built on the source of their information, meaning from where they got the information. If they have personal experiences and study on the particular subject of social development, their perspective will be different.

It depends on their perspective of the subject as to what side they take. Primarily, they will not be subject experts and it will be therefore important that they are informed about the subject.

- **Skill:** When other persons/groups tell a story, they might be people who have a different role to play. For example, the role of a writer or journalist or of a teacher or politician. Representatives of civil society organisations should have the skill to engage in dialogue with/talk to these individuals and groups with different roles. Different skill sets are required to talk to each of these groups/individuals.
- **Preparation:** When as a representative of the civil society organisation we feel that people of other groups should also talk about, write or make presentations on issues of development, then it becomes necessary that the organisations/representatives have a trust-based relation with them.

There should be a regular dialogue with these different groups. Also different resource materials as per the need of different groups are required like one-page brief for common citizens, fact-based detailed documents for subject experts or researchers, notes with clear description of the basic subject/problem, etc.

- **Credibility:** When academics or researchers tell a story on a subject, or analyse it, they are considered impartial and therefore credible. When people's representatives talk about social development topics, it is thought that it will make an impact on the working or policy of the government. But now, some groups make use of communication for vested interests. Some groups prompt well-known writers or columnists to write with a particular perspective for their own commercial interests. When a much esteemed person or artist expresses an opinion on a social subject, the government and society take it very seriously.

The Storytelling Language of CSOs

The words or the language that we use as a social organisation or its activists is very important in conveying our message and to connect people to our objectives. The language used by a CSO leader should be full of elements like empathy, sympathy and determination. The talk should be such that the community, which is being communicated with, feels a connection with the communicator. Their language should neither be superficial nor full of promises like that of a politician, nor too technical, nor full of jargons like that of a bureaucrat.

Identical Difference in the Language used by Different Stakeholders

We will select an incident as an example where the people of the village called Shyampur were facing different kinds of problems. Youth of the village do not have employment, they are addicted to alcohol and other intoxicants and since the mothers have to work, they are not able to send their children to schools in time. These problems will be addressed by the media, a politician, bureaucrat and CSO activist in different manners.

Language of Media

Shyampur faces double trouble of unemployment and addiction

Shyampur village in Shivpuri district of Madhya Pradesh is making headlines due to wrong reasons lately. Addiction of the youth of the village to alcohol and other intoxicants is creating trouble not only for the villagers but also for the populace in the vicinity. Most of the residents of the village are dependent on manual labour for livelihood and the rampant addiction among males force women to work. Teetering under the dual responsibility of work and domesticity, women are often not able to send their children to school in time, affecting the education of the children. Also, due to failure to attend school, the children are deprived of mid-day meals and this is negatively impacting their nutritional status.

Village head Ram Kishore said that the situation has worsened after liquor and bhang shops were opened near the village. Many youth of the village go to work, but while returning home they spend their daylong earning on their addiction. He said that he has given an application to the district officer to shift the shops elsewhere, but he is not hopeful that this will happen. Ram Kishore also said that a voluntary organisation was conducting a de-addiction awareness campaign in the village and some encouraging results are being seen. The youth have started realising their mistakes and it is expected that the situation will soon improve.

When youth were talked to, they accepted their shortcomings, though not too vocally. They said that they feel entrapped by their addiction. One of the youth Manoj says “We do not have regular work. So we used to spend a lot of time sitting around and did not realise when we got trapped in addiction.”

Sumit Kumar, chief of the voluntary organisation working in the village, said that various researches show that the easy access to intoxicants increases their use. He said that the youth of the village were voluntarily joining the de-addiction awareness campaign and it is to be hoped that soon positive results will be seen.

Chandan Verma, a teacher in the local school, when approached on the issue, said that as the mothers remain busy with their work, children do not reach school in time. He said that along with the village chief, he was trying to find a solution to the issue. Anganwadi worker Meena Sahni said that by taking help of the women, she too is trying to ensure that children attend schools and anganwadis regularly.

Language of a Politician

Our government is making all efforts for the development of not only Shyampur but the entire district. We are making schemes for creating employment opportunities. The people of the village have informed us about the issue of unemployment. It is true that the government and the private sector are lagging a bit in providing jobs. We appeal to the industrialists of the state to establish industries and trades here, so that youth can get employment. We will give them land at subsidized cost, free electricity and other facilities. To help the youth give up addictions, we will set up a de-addiction centre here and ensure regular attendance of students in schools, and special directives will be issued to the sarpanch.

Language of a State Functionary

During the past few years, our GDP rate has been over 9 percent. The agriculture growth rate is over 24 percent. There has been a slight fall in employment rate during the past year and it has come down to 4 percent from 7 percent, but the state government is implementing various self-employment schemes for the youth. Under this, more than Rs 800 crores of loans on low interest rates has been disbursed. The state government has announced policies like single-window clearance and various discounts for industrialists setting up food processing units in the region. Several campaigns are being conducted to create awareness against addiction. As for the children, the government implemented the mid-day meal scheme and during the past two years, concrete buildings and toilets have been constructed in all government schools. We hope that the results of these initiatives will be seen in the coming time. We have told the villagers to submit a memorandum of their issues to us. We will take due action on that.

Language of a Civil Society Representative

We have been noticing that the youth of Shyampur do not have employment and they are trapped in addiction. The children here are not able to go to school for different reasons. On the face of it, these situations might seem unlinked, but they are actually related. The negligence of government and administration and the lack of awareness among the villagers towards their own rights are the reasons for these problems. Even if there is awareness, the development of a village is not possible by the efforts of an individual. Rather, the involvement and participation of all villagers is necessary. Before questioning the government, it is not only necessary that we conduct a camp in the village to inform the youth about the self-employment loan schemes of the government, but also that we provide them hand-holding support from making applications to getting loans and to start their enterprises. The help of educated youth of the village could be taken for this. Addiction among the youth will not be eradicated merely by conducting de-addiction camps. It is necessary that the family members and close friends of

such youth counsel them repeatedly as to how the addiction in one individual not only hampers the health of that person but also hampers the socio-economic situation of the entire family. Youth of the village should be involved in conducting awareness activities like street plays and others to make them understand the negative impacts of addiction. Working women and men in the village should be explained about the importance of education. They should be told that education can change their lives. If women are going to work in the morning, then the other members of the family should be made to understand that sending children to school is their responsibility in absence of the mother. The teachers in the local school should be requested to constantly create awareness on this issue among the villagers. In this way, the problems facing the village could be dealt with through participation and cooperation of the villagers.

....These examples show us that different viewpoints come to the fore regarding the same problem. A politician makes promises for the future on the problems, which rather than providing any concrete scheme to end the problems, focuses on the future probable actions.

A bureaucrat or a government official tries to hide the problem under a web of complex data and talks, which paint a picture that a lot of work was being done by the government but yet the ground situation is bad due to unknown reasons.

However, an activist of the civil society organisation identifies the basic reasons of the problem and puts forth a suggestion to resolve the issues through participation and cooperation of the villagers.

Key Points for Effective Storytelling

- **Advance Preparation**

Before making any statement, ask a question to self: What is the objective of my statement? The answer to this question should include all those steps/aspects that you are expecting from your audience. Say what you are saying with full confidence.

- **What, Why, When, How, Where, Who**

As a civil society activist you should always keep the popular poem 'I keep six honest serving-men' of famous writer Rudyard Kipling in mind. Whatever you want to say can be made more effective and wholesome by using the six maxims given in the poem (and as mentioned in the sub-head). For example, in your statement, you can serially put across some points that should include the following facts:

- What was your inspiration for social work?
- Why did you choose a role of bringing about socio-economic change?
- What problem did you decide to resolve?
- When and why did you take this decision?
- What were the key practical and fundamental values/principles/ethics involved in the work that you chose in your role and took initiative to discharge in that role?

- What were the challenges you faced in this journey? How was this journey? Where did you begin? What were the stopovers in the journey? What support did you get and from where?
- Do you think values like democracy, equity and equality, fraternity and justice could be lived practically in a civil society life? What have been your experiences?
- What according to you is the most important role of civil society organisations? Why are civil society organisations important?
- What have been impacts on your personal life while working for a civil society organisation? How does society look at you?
- Do you ever have regrets that you should not have chosen this work?

- **Time limit, sticking to the subject**

Always try to complete your talk within a given time limit and stick to the selected topic. Audience is able to focus on one topic at a time. If your talk/speech includes many points of different topics, the audience will find it difficult to concentrate on them.

- **Be Precise**

Keep in mind that Storytelling for a long time does not mean effective communication. Conveying your points in minimum words to the target group is the hallmark of a good communicator.

- **Introduction to the subject**

The topic you choose to speak on could be old or new. It is possible that the audience might have prior knowledge about it. But as a good speaker, you should string different evidence and personal observations in a manner that the topic reaches the audience with a solid base.

- **Share your experiences**

While telling your story as a civil society activist, you have to always keep in mind to share only your story with your learnings, attachment and emotions, because only then it will reach the audience in an effective manner. If your story includes your experiences and the incidents that have occurred in your life, it will become more credible.

- **Subject of the story**

The story that you present to the audience will include your emotions like happiness, regret and others and also successes and failures. Try to present all those points that have gone on to shape you and your organisation's work before the audience.

- **Knowledge of subject**

It is important that you have total grip over your subject. Your audience will completely trust the information provided by you, so always share the correct information. Before

including them in speech/presentation, double check the facts, themes, data and details. Use only research-based data from credible sources.

- **Basis of talk**

Give such examples to the audience that they understand easily and relate to. Present your points in a concrete manner. Whatever idea you are presenting about social change, you should explain to the audience why implementation of that idea is important and how it can be done.

At the end of your talk, always inform the audience as to what changes the presented idea brings about in the lives of the audience or the target group. During this process, keep a point strictly in your mind: Your objective is to communicate effectively and convey your ideas to the people. To tell a story or connect the audience emotionally is not your target but merely a communication tool.

- **Revise**

It is not sufficient to merely prepare a speech or statement. Practice the speech repeatedly among different groups like family, friends, and small groups of people and so on. Such practice will help in identifying the shortcomings that you might not be able to identify yourself. If the audience criticises your speech, accept it wholeheartedly, take a lesson from it and try to remove the shortcomings.

- **Be comfortable**

Always be comfortable during your talk. Your face or gestures shouldn't show any tension. Always keep the time-limit and the given topic in mind. Do not deviate from the topic and complete your talk within time. This way, your audience isn't bored and you get appreciation for keeping the time limit in mind.

- **Self-awareness**

To put across one's points, self-awareness is very important for the CSO activists. They should clearly know who they are and what their personal values and moral standards are. These things help in building the image of the activists and provide a foundation to their leadership.

- **Foundation of strong relations**

For good communication, it is important for CSO activists to be humble, ready to learn and focus on their own strengths. They should be able to forge strong and empathetic relationships with people, only then will they be able to create a bond of trust with them.

- **Analytical Strengths**

For effective communication, the CSO or the CSO activists should have capacity for analysis. Only then will they be able to quickly analyse situations and convert vision into action.

About Vikas Samvad

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