

# Capturing Compelling Stories from the Field

September 2009 Newsletter

[Center for Sustainable Development](#)

In the [July Newsletter](#) we looked at project design and submitting a proposal, in the [August Newsletter](#) we looked at starting up and managing a project, and this month we will look at the next phase of the project cycle—reporting—and the importance of compelling stories about the impact of the project.

## Capturing Compelling Stories from the Field

Whether writing a final report to a donor or a quarterly newsletter, many of us look upon these assignments with trepidation. We instantly become seasoned procrastinators. Thoughts go through our heads like ‘no one is going to read this anyway.’ And then there is the time: what other task will I steal time from in order to write this report?

## Problem turned Opportunity

A few years ago I was asked suddenly to do a final narrative report for a large, multi-year project. We had lost the teammate who had overseen the project—and the institutional project knowledge that left with them. I knew nothing about it, and the notes that were handed over to me had been translated back-and-forth from Spanish to English to Spanish enough times that they no longer held cogent information. I realized this wasn’t going to be a cut-and-paste job.

And then something wonderfully transformational happened to me. With no other recourse, I armed myself with my camera and my notebook and went looking for the people and the equipment that had been funded by the donor. A new world opened up to me: people were excited to show me how well their part of the project had progressed, and to explain to me in infinite detail what an indecipherably-named piece of equipment actually did. Their enthusiasm was contagious, the project impressive.

My hastily scribbled notes were full of compelling anecdotes and my photos danced with smiling faces and action filled scenes. In short, I met new people that I never would have met in a normal day, my head was filled with new ideas, and the project re-kindled my flame for my work.

Full of energy, I set to the task of writing and selecting photos. My enthusiasm must have come across, because the donor loved the report, they were able to use some of the stories themselves, and they funded the next round of projects. On top of the positive donor feedback, this reporting project also represented a one-week refresher from my daily grind and a chance to look through a new window into a new world within our organization. The point is: Get out into the field in order to see what your organization actually does.

## Field Staff

I firmly believe that the field staff that implement projects are some of the most important people in an organization. They represent for the beneficiaries the face of an organization—they are our organizational ambassadors—and we entrust them with carrying out the project’s impact-oriented goal. These two charges represent a tremendous amount of responsibility.

But they also get to have all the fun—and I jump at the chance to spend a day bouncing around in a dusty pick-up truck with them. This is where you get the compelling stories for your reports. These trips breathe life into your writing.

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On the other hand, it can be difficult getting stories from field staff long-distance via email. They are the conduit of compelling information, but can unfortunately lose the sense of newness of their field experiences, and besides, they are working hard. So in this newsletter I'm going to focus on two things: techniques for developing reports from your in-country site visits, and techniques for helping field staff provide compelling stories.

### **Compelling Stories: What are they?**

For our development purposes, a compelling story is an anecdote—a short story that paints a picture that makes the reader feel 'I was there' (juxtaposed to the normal report's lecture about your work). What is going to capture a reader's imagination? It can be a heart-wrenching story about an event in the day of a family suffering extreme poverty, or it can be a heart-warming story illustrating something wonderful that happened to a family as a result of your organization's work.

Much like a famous, archetypal National Geographic photograph, the best compelling stories illustrate a single, human-centered image that supports the theme of your work, and is interwoven with one facet of the human pantheon of emotions: something readers can relate to with a sense of urgency and immediacy through joy or sorrow. This compelling story need only be one-half of a page; it is not a 30-page final report of the whole project. Short and concise, it can serve as a stand-alone side-bar in a final report, or a short feature in a newsletter, or a letter to a donor.

In the field, the story collector's job will be to find the compelling story line. Once found, their second task will be to collect a color palette of descriptive locations, people, objects, color, smells, sights and activities (not to mention who, what, when, where, and why) with which to paint the picture that brings the story to life. Some of the palette can be collected during conversations, some with photos.

### **Examples of compelling story lines:**

An illiterate father who hadn't let his small son attend school is invited to an NGO-led teacher-training workshop on math. Afterwards, he confided that he didn't know what math was, but now that he sees its daily usefulness, he will encourage his son to start school.

An illiterate family has their third grade daughter read them stories at night after dinner—opening a window to a new world and expanding future opportunities for the family through their literate daughter.

Through small but consistent earnings from NGO assisted sales of her textiles, a poor woman was able to increase family income enough that her daughter wasn't required to work, and was able to attend school. Now, 15 years later, she will be taking her bar exams this fall.

After attending workshops about the importance of health and hygiene in her family, and by saving her micro-enterprise income, a woman was able to leave behind her smoke-filled, hard-to-clean dirt-floor kitchen by building a brand new, clean, smoke-free kitchen with a fuel efficient wood cook stove and an easy-to-clean slab floor.

A woman learned about the importance of nutrition in her children's physical and cognitive development, and through micro-enterprise savings, was able to buy the small lot next door to plant a healthy vegetable garden and raise chickens for improving her children's daily nutrition.

### **Meeting Storytellers During Site Visits**

Informal is better than formal. I've felt that when I'm taken on a planned tour, I'm led through canned presentations and staged interviews. People are stiff and interviews are cautious. The presentations may not reflect the true depth of the project. Your handlers are purposefully engaging you; you don't really have the free time to think, snoop around and meet people in their natural setting.

To avoid prepared tours, I ask if I can just tag along with a field staffer on a normal day of normal rounds—and I ensure supervisors that I'll stay out of the way and not slow things down. Staffers do incredibly interesting things with even more interesting people. Since I'm not 'working', I'm free to observe, be curious, think up questions, roam a bit, talk casually to people, and take photos. Invariably, things that are painfully normal for staffers turn out to be tremendously compelling.

Focus on people and their stories. You can always Google the tractor the donor provided when you get home. Beneficiaries will be very curious about you if you arrive unannounced. They will have lots of questions about you, which in turn give you permission to ask lots of questions of them. These are your storytellers. Ask them about their normal lives, about their dreams, about something good that recently happened in their family. Ask if they will show you around their house or their compound or their vegetable garden. Ask where their water comes from, their food. Ask about their work, their children's education. Play with children and make them laugh; if children laugh, parents laugh too, and soon everyone is relaxed.

**Multitask.** Have fun keeping everyone relaxed and carrying on conversations. Keep an eye on the Staffer in case she suddenly starts doing something incredibly interesting – or even better – photogenic. But keep focused on your mission of uncovering compelling stories.

**Drink water.** It took me a long time to realize that when I start getting a bit rummy and tired in the field, it was because I was getting dehydrated: stay hydrated. Bring lots of bottled water on the excursion. You lose sight of your mission when you get rummy.

**Eat.** Bring plenty of snacks for both you and the Staffer to eat in the car; don't eat in front of the families you are visiting. Snack often; days can be long and meals infrequent and unpredictably timed. Bring baby-wipes or Handi-Wipes and clean your hands before you eat. You will be shaking lots of hands that haven't been well-washed.

I try not to eat food offered to me in the field. This might sound harsh—but between the cost of the trip and the time away from the office, site visits need to produce results and I can't afford the down time of being sick. I need to remain energetic. If I'm visiting from abroad, my flora and fauna simply aren't prepared to combat unhealthy micro-organisms found in rural food and water. Over time, I've unfortunately discovered that this is a pretty zero-tolerance situation for my body.

**Roam.** Get off by yourself by visiting the next-door neighbor or the farm-field behind the house. You will discover new things, but better, a moment's quiet reflection allows incredibly important questions to surface that you forgot to ask your storytellers. You will probably never return to this village in your life, so you need to get all of your questions answered now.

**Take lots of notes.** After two weeks on the road you'll never remember the details that bring reports to life. I get them mixed up, so I take lots of notes.

**Maintain a balanced objectivity.** This newsletter isn't aimed at the first-time site visitor. The first visit to extreme poverty is an overwhelming cacophony of sights, sounds, emotions, and guilt, combined with a need to 'fix' the problem and to let people know that you care. Understandable, but not the best frame of mind for capturing mission-driven compelling stories for your organization's department of development back home. It also sets up an unusual kind of relationship between you and the beneficiary and elicits different responses from them than you might be looking for. Tagging along on normal daily rounds with field staff means that you are entering relationships from a normal setting. Relating to people as people, and not relating to their situation helps me in keeping emotions in perspective.

I know this sound like a lot to do, but there is plenty of free time if you are tagging along and not being actively engaged by a handler.

#### **Helping Field Staff provide compelling information.**

Field staff are busy, they have lost the freshness of their surroundings, and they don't necessarily know what piece of information would be interesting to a foreigner from headquarters. The best thing to do is to make the request as easy as possible for them, and to give them concrete examples of what you are looking for. Travelling with them is a great way for them to see what is interesting to you: driving back at the end of the day, share with them some of the compelling stories you discovered. Be sure to let them know the importance of the stories for communication with the organization's donors.

Or, give them a written example of what you are looking for—both a representative example of a storyline, and an example of length and organization. If they can see that you only want three paragraphs—that will be a relief to them. Encourage them to copy, or overwrite what you've written with their own story. This may be much more comfortable for them than being faced with a blank piece of white paper and writer's block. Another good technique is to have Staffers tell stories conversationally to someone back at the office who can take notes and write it up.

I recently met with a field staffer whose job is to collect two kinds of information from beneficiaries: hard data from interviews, and compelling stories. She confided that it's dysfunctional: she can't interview people with a canned questionnaire for an hour and then expect them to slip into compelling story mode. To get her compelling stories, she has learned to plan different trips—formal trips for interviews—and informal trips for communing with storytellers.

### **Writing down your story.**

The two hardest things about writing are getting started and being too self-critical early on. So just start writing. Get one story down, and don't worry how it sounds. When the whole story is down on paper, read back through it and fix the obvious spelling and grammar problems. Read through it a second time for clarity and make a few changes. Then put it down, take a one-day break, and revisit your story the next day when you can approach it with a fresh mind.

Enjoy the process of playing with ideas, moving some things around and embellishing others. When you are happy with the outcome, have someone else read it. Something that is clear as day to an author 'who was there' may not be clear to another reader. Their comments can be very valuable in helping us to get our message across. After revising the story with their useful suggestions, get away from the story again for another day.

Here comes the tough part: inside of your story lives its essence. It is now time to pare down your story by removing extra information and getting to this bare-bones essence—the focused message that you want to convey to your readers. If you have trouble with this, find someone in your office with good editorial skills to help you.

As your story takes its final form, look back through your photos and find one or two that represent a person, a theme or a concept within your story. The photos should be your best people shots: sharp, simple in composition and colorful. The photos should complement and illustrate the message that your story is conveying.

Whether your story is for a donor report or a quarterly newsletter, there will be a format to follow. But armed with two or three well-crafted, compelling, human nature stories, the formatted document will come to life.

If your donors have their hearts warmed and feel that you captured the essence of their mission in your project report, you will have a greater likelihood of maintaining your partnership. Good luck with your next writing assignment: get out there, smell the dust, feel the heat, meet the people and enjoy your new friends—the storytellers.

### **Next month's newsletter, October 2009:**

Capturing Compelling Photos

Please feel free to contact me with questions.

Sincerely

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