Telling Stories, Understanding Lives, Working toward Change

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Abstract

Stories are helping us learn more about the livelihoods of the fishers and farmers with whom we work in eastern India. We are engaged with these communities in processes and activities aimed at improving their lives and promoting changes in government policy and service delivery in aquaculture and fisheries. Stories are told in several languages by women and men who fish and farm, about their lives, their livelihoods and significant changes they have experienced. We also record stories as narrated to us by colleague-informants. The written and spoken word, photographs, drawings and films – all are used to document the stories of people's lives, sometimes prompted by questions as simple as "What do people talk about in the village?" Through the power of language, stories can be an entry point into livelihoods programming, monitoring and evaluation, conflict transformation and ultimately a way of giving life to a rights-based approach to development.

"Just Ask Us"

In October 2004, two of us (Graham and William) were in a workshop in eastern India that was part of designing a monitoring and evaluation system which includes the use of Significant Change Stories collected from fishers and farmers. As the facilitator, one of us (William) posed a question to our fishing and farming community colleagues about a process that we could develop together to collect, filter, analyze and document stories of significant change in their lives and livelihoods as a result of the work we had been doing together for several years. Their response was, "We don't need a process, just ask us and we'll tell you."

We were reminded once again of how easy it is to get caught up in the design of processes and frameworks and structures, when what we really need to be doing is simply to take the time to listen to people's stories. For those of us who work toward improvement in the lives and livelihoods of individuals and communities - what some people might call development - we sometimes forget that the true knowledge about people and their objectives comes from them, and all we have to do is ask and listen.

This paper is about stories and how we are using storytelling to help us learn more about the lives and livelihoods of people with whom we work, not only in eastern India - from

where our examples will come – but also in other countries where STREAM works, and in the case of two of us (Kath and William), with other organizations we work with as consultants. The paper is also about how telling and listening to stories enables us to begin understanding other people's perspectives, their realities, their truths, as we learn to combine these with our own perspectives, realities and truths, so that we make possible complete descriptions of the experiences we share and the situations we find ourselves together in.

Lives, Livelihoods, Policies and Services
STREAM is an initiative of the inter-governmental organization called NACA, or the Network of Aquaculture Centres in Asia-Pacific, based in Bangkok, Thailand, and supported by its member governments. STREAM's "rural development through aquaculture and fisheries" activities happen through its four themes of livelihoods, institutions, policy development and communications. We work with local government and non-governmental colleagues in 12 of NACA's 16 member countries, implementing projects ranging from capacity development for carrying out livelihoods analysis with fishing communities, institutional development with government departments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and federations of Self-Help Groups, engaging in processes leading to policy change, and sharing what we learn through a variety of communications media.

Getting back to that workshop in eastern India in October 2004, we had been working with these colleagues from tribal communities in three Indian states for several years toward implementing improved government and non-governmental service provision in aquaculture and fisheries. This followed as a result of a previous project where together we had documented people's experiences of government service provision, set up a process for eliciting recommendations for policy changes, and eventually presented these as a story to central and state policy-makers for their consideration. Several of the recommendations actually resulted in changed policy, for example, lengthening of lease periods on community ponds so that groups could make them productive, and the establishment of One-stop Aqua Shops in villages so that potential fish farmers would not have to travel to numerous locations for financial and material support and information. It was the purpose of the second project to try out some of the changes to service provision with the same communities who had been part of the original documentation and recommendation process.

The story that was told to the policy-makers began through fieldwork carried out in six villages across the three eastern Indian states of Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal. Working in Hindi, Oriya and Bangla with local colleagues, we transformed the spoken stories of fishers and farmers – women and men – into a series of case studies representing a variety of experiences of service provision. These took the form of film documentaries, storyboards with photographs, and written text. All of this material was turned over to a local tribal playwright who crafted a street-play that expressed the lives and livelihoods of the fishing communities, their experience of trying to make a living in their traditional ways, the difficulties of doing that in the present economic, social and political context, and the recommendations they made for changes to policy and service provision that might offer an opportunity for them to improve their circumstances.

During a Policy Review Workshop, the audience of policy-makers and representatives of other stakeholders viewed the films, received the written reports and watched the performance of the street-play. That workshop ended with people talking about the sorts of commitments they could make to effect changes to policy and service provision, which led in turn to the second project. As the screenwriter Robert McKee (2003, p 52) says, "… to persuade people – [we need to unite] an idea with an emotion. The best way to do that is by telling a compelling story. In a story, you not only weave a lot of information into the telling but you also arouse your listener's emotions and energy."

Stories – Telling and Listening

We have come to believe that the importance of stories rests less on their being told, than on their being listened to. When we listen to other people's stories, we are demonstrating that we value what they have to say. When we act on what people are telling us, we are showing that we believe they know what is best for themselves. This requires us, however, to re-imagine how we view ourselves in our relationships with the people with whom we work. "If talking openly means being willing to expose to others what is inside of us, then listening openly means being willing to expose ourselves to something new from others" (Kahane, 2004, p 73).

Carl Rogers, the psychotherapist and educator, suggested a test for the quality of our listening and understanding: "The next time you get into an argument with your spouse, friend, or a small group of friends, stop the discussion for a moment and suggest this rule: 'Before each person speaks up, he or she must first restate the ideas and feelings of the previous speaker accurately and to that speaker's satisfaction'" (Rogers and Roethlisberger, 1991, p 98).

We have listened to and documented a variety of story types. People have told us about the successes and failures they have had, changes that have happened, past events, whether a particular aquaculture technology works or not. Stories are being used to understand how people live, the significant changes that take place in their lives, the impact that conflict has on individuals and communities, and how to enable people to realize their right to be heard.

Livelihoods Programming

STREAM does a lot of work in capacity development for people who carry out livelihoods studies with communities, as components of research studies, or policy change processes, or to design and implement activities to improve people's livelihoods. By using PLA[1] tools, livelihoods teams gain an understanding of communities' lives in terms of the resources they see themselves as having, what they are vulnerable to, processes and institutions that influence their lives, their livelihoods strategies and the outcomes they desire for themselves. Even though this learning primarily takes place through PLA tools, what is really happening – or possibly happening – is that people in communities are telling the stories of their lives.

Telling and listening to stories opens a door to the potential for building relationships and trust, which is fundamental to the kind of work we do. Are stories just a fun way to work, only ends in themselves? Or are we talking about something more here: creating connections, understanding and community among people who have different political, ideological, social and financial realities, but who could work together to make vulnerable people's lives better? Let's be bold and passionate. We are talking about social justice here, aren't we? We know from experience that telling and listening to stories is a way to begin creating socially just change in a world that badly needs that. As Margaret Wheatley (2002) writes:

> I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again. Simple, honest, human conversation. Not mediation, negotiation, problem-solving, debate, or public meetings. Simple, truthful conversation where we each have a chance to speak, we each feel heard, and we each listen well (p 3) … when we begin listening to each other, and when we talk about things that matter to us, the world begins to change (p 9) … There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about (p 145).

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[1] Robert Chambers (2005, p xxi) defines PLA, or Participatory Learning and Action, as a "term designed to be more inclusive of participatory methodologies than implied by the term PRA [Participatory Rural Appraisal] on its own."

By spending time with people, by valuing their lives and stories, we are able to document with them their perspectives of the realities of their lives, as in the following excerpts from a story written by one of our Indian colleagues, Dr Satyendra Tripathi, told to him by Ms Thanda Mahato, of Jabarrah Village in West Bengal, India.

> We discussed the changes in her livelihood. During our last visit she had a bank deposit of Rs 40,000 but now she was left with only Rs 5,000 owing to various expenses which she had to incur during this period.
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> She was herself involved in selling fish as in the past, purchasing it from Purulia or Lalpur markets and then selling it from door-to-door in villages around Jabarrah, which fetches her anything from Rs 30-100 per day. However, this work is limited to winter months only as fish preserved in ice fetches a low price and gets spoiled by noon if ice is not used. She sometimes suffers a loss too.
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> Her husband, Mr Kalipada Mahato, goes for harvesting fish but has to hire a net that costs him Rs 200 which he pays after selling the catch (30% of the fish caught) himself or through his wife, Thanda.
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> She has recently constructed a house on the land that belongs to her husband, spending Rs 70,000 for which she had to get the bricks for Rs 21,000, pay labor charges for five persons and two masons with food and also contribute two laborers from the family. A neem tree that she had was cut to be used for beams and other purposes.
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> An unexpected problem faced by her was the premature birth of her grandson who weighed only 1.9 kg. She had to run to Purulia and keep her daughter-in-law in the hospital and spend Rs 12,000 in just one month. To meet these expenses, she sold 14 goats at Rs 500 each, about 1,400 kg of rice which she had collected in lieu of the wages for grazing the village cattle for one year, 200 pairs of cowdung cakes for Rs 1,000, and birds for Rs 300, besides using another Rs 1,000 received from the salaries of her two sons.
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> Of her four sons and one daughter, the eldest son and her daughter have been married. Her daughter has been widowed and has a school-going boy, who now stays with her. A total of 11 relatives stay in her house. Her youngest son and her grandson (daughter's son) go to school. She borrowed Rs 1,500 from a school teacher to put the two boys in school.
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> Thanda works hard from daybreak to dusk and has been such a great support to her family! It was her planning and savings that helped her save the life of her grandson and build a house for them all.

Monitoring and Evaluation

STREAM has been developing a monitoring and evaluation system through which we intend to capture two types of changes: those that are expected and can be accounted for through indicators that are objectively verifiable, and those we do not anticipate, and which are difficult to account for with pre-determined indicators. We have been using

Significant Change Stories to understand both types of change, and in particular the unanticipated ones. This is based on an approach to monitoring and evaluation originally developed by Rick Davies (1998) and his colleagues in an NGO in Bangladesh, which they call Most Significant Change. When asking people to tell Significant Change Stories, we ask a question like *"What has changed in your livelihood as a result of this work that we have done together?"*

In a later workshop in the eastern India project, participants wrote significant change stories in Bangla and then read them out. We asked questions about the particulars of the stories, especially those which related to how people perceived the changes they expressed. It became apparent as we listened to the stories that the storytellers were also speaking as if in response to a question like *"What do people in the village talk about?"* and that this might also be a useful way of asking about changes in people's lives and livelihoods. The following story by Mr Kuddus Ansary, of Kaipara Village in West Bengal, is an example of a significant change story. It is called "Will and Self-confidence Show the Way of Victory."

> My house is in a remote village but I dream to make my village recognized among the other five villages where I live. Before knowing others, I try to know myself. By looking in the mirror frame of pictures of Swami Vivekananda [a disciple of Ram Krishna] and Bidya Sagar [a social revolutionary engaged in educational reform], I try to judge myself from the inside.
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> Three years back I did not have this thinking, but now I think of how to improve my locality with my livelihood. Three years back when I used to visit different villages to help to make groups, I remember that women could not come out of their houses. Political leaders were difficult to approach; it was difficult to make them understand what, where and how development was needed.
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> I remember that in an open meeting one of the political leaders not only criticized my work with Self-Help Groups but also instructed the *Panchayat* [local government] head not to sign any of my applications. At that time I wondered whether there was anything wrong with my work; am I cheating people? But still I have continued my work with will and self-confidence. Now I am surprised to see that the same political leader is giving speeches on group formation. Favorable conditions are coming and every organization (GOs and NGOs) is talking about group formation.
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> One of the disadvantages of groups formed by government projects is their instability. No one is responsible for keeping records and information. Once the government money gets exhausted everyone leaves the group, and vulnerable people are not able to know about the development process.
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> Demands of people are growing now. They are no longer talking about hunger and food but about electricity and paved roads. We also want that and also the sustainability of each and every activity. Though government organizations are

talking about different job opportunities, we are not sure about their applicability and effectiveness.

In the last year, through our efforts, we have established a One-stop Aqua Shop (OAS). We will see in a few years if this is working. People who are helping us are a long way off but still we know they can help. We are not having many funds but still we are thinking how we can help communications. STREAM has supported us by providing information, organizing exposure visits, and loaning a fishing net and *hundies* [fish transport containers].

Through the work of the last year we have realized that we can do something better for ourselves. We know that government will not help us much but the Federation of Self-Help Groups we have established will help us in our development. We do not have structural support but we are having will power, and we can do it. We will win.

Conflict Transformation

Stories are also essential to efforts at transforming situations of conflict into opportunities for reconciliation. When we are able to hear about the impact of conflict on other people's lives, and can tell them of how our own lives have been affected by conflict, we begin to understand that ultimately there will be no winners, that we are all losing. But changing the nature of the conflict discourse to discussions of impact – rather than debates about who is right and who is wrong – is not easy. There must be an agreement and commitment on all sides that this is the direction we want to take the discussion. As Adam Kahane (2004, p 2) writes:

> Our talking and listening often fails to solve complex problems because of the way that most of us talk and listen most of the time. Our most common way of talking is telling: asserting *the* truth about the way things are and must be, not allowing that there might be other truths and possibilities. And our most common way of listening is not listening: listening only to our own talking, not to others. This way of talking and listening works fine for solving simple problems piece by piece, applying solutions that have worked in the past. But a complex problem can only be solved peacefully if the people who are part of the problem work together creatively to understand their situation and to improve it.

The Norwegian conflict mediation pioneer Johan Galtung (Achakulwisut, 2003) pushes the purpose of conflict transformation even further: "We are not so interested in the beginning or making people understand each other. We are much more interested in making a creative jump, bringing them to a new point and make it better." Kahane (2004, p 125) puts it this way: "We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together. And we agreed, and then we decided." And when we put our purposes together we can sometimes be transformed. As the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh (1995, p 8) says:

> In a true dialogue, both sides are willing to change … We have to believe that by engaging in dialogue with the other person, we have the possibility of making a change within ourselves, that we can become deeper … We have to allow what is good, beautiful, and meaningful in the other's tradition to transform us.

Finally, from Kahane (2004, p 102) again, a reminder that by mindfully sharing of ourselves, we can discover our own and each other's commitments and roles within a common purpose:

> … stories enabled the participants to understand their individual and group roles as part of the problem and what they needed to do to be part of the solution. These understandings can occur through any kind of open conversation, but they often occur through personal storytelling. When people choose to tell a personal story in such a group, they are revealing something of themselves. They are sharing what matters to them about this problem. Furthermore, because (in Carl Rogers' paradoxical phrase) "what is most personal is most universal," these stories also illuminate the source of the group's shared commitment.

Approaching Development through People's Rights – Power through Language

A typical understanding of a rights-based approach to development is that it addresses the underlying causes of poverty and social injustice, rather than the symptoms of it. We can learn about people's own perceptions of injustices, of the realization or denial of their rights, and whether people consider themselves empowered over their own circumstances, by listening to their stories, and by finding ways to contribute to what people say they need, rather than what we think they need. As Peter Uvin (2004, p 179) puts it: "A rights-based approach to development means listening to and respectfully working with marginalized groups …"

How should we be working as development practitioners? As listeners to stories? As people who are in positions to mediate between the realities of people's lives and opportunities that may exist to improve them? In India, comfortable local conversations in villages were the beginning of a journey of stories that led to policy-makers (and policy change) in Delhi. According to Uvin (2004, p 183), we need to:

> give much more priority to promoting local dialogues, to stimulating local knowledge generation and research, to finding ways of making people's voices heard by those in power – both out of respect for the dignity of people and because they are the ones who have to live with the consequences of being wrong. As a matter of fact, this may well be one of the things in which external aid agencies have a comparative advantage: to create spaces for discussion, for innovative knowledge, for thinking – and listening. Their external nature allows them to be less implicated than locals and thus to take a leadership role in the emergence of new knowledge.

In the tangle of the international development world, where we use management tools and somewhat latterly rediscovered monitoring, evaluation and learning, we often aim to anticipate outcomes, and define their indicators in advance. These actions are a comfort to those who, with some justification, seek assurances about impact from their spending. Yet sharing of ourselves, being open to change and to being transformed is not the stuff of fixed schedules and predictable outcomes. It is rather more personal, unpredictable, individual and challenging - it's the source of stories. As Kahane (2004, p 77) reminds us, we must constantly roll back the barriers and take on the hard part:

> We peace people have always listened to the oppressed and disenfranchised … One of the new steps I think we should take is to listen to those we consider "the enemy" with the same openness, non-judgment, and compassion we listen to those with whom our sympathies lie. Everyone has a partial truth, and we must listen, discern, and acknowledge this partial truth in everyone – particularly those with whom we disagree.

And again from Kahane (2004, p 127), our essential roles are to provide the stage, the page and our selves:

> … the job of the facilitator is to help the participants speak up, listen up, and bring all of their personal resources to the work at hand. Our job is not to direct or control the participants … even though we [remain] neutral with respect to the substance of the participants' work, our process [is] not neutral: it embodie[s] values of openness, inclusion, and collaboration. (p 89) … Our job as facilitators and leaders is simply to help create a clean, safe space. Then the healing will occur.

"Just ask us …"

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