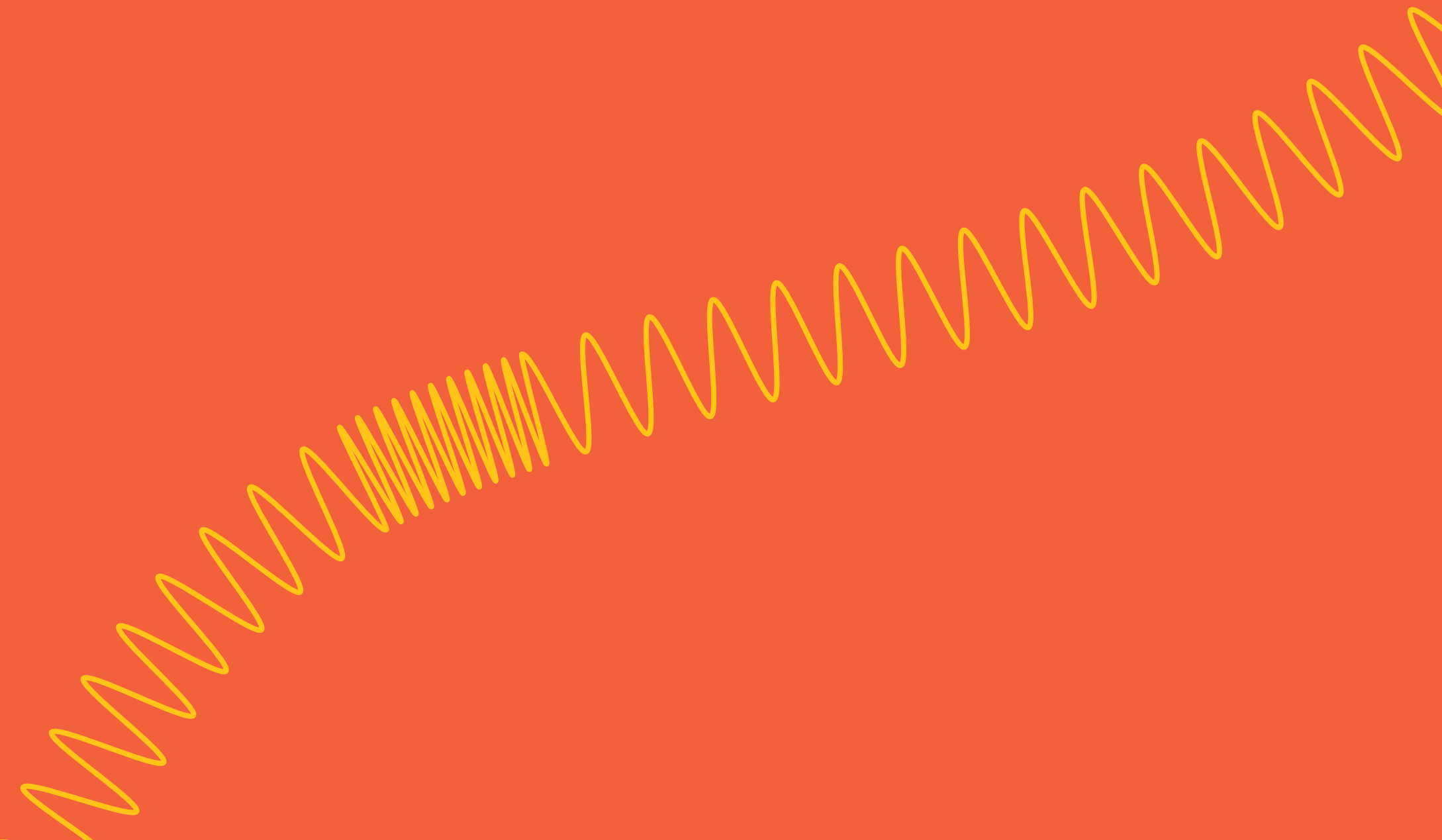


Chapter 1

Why should we tell ethical stories?



“We all believe ‘Nothing about me without me.’ Core to that principle is how we represent each other.”

– Chilande Kuloba-Warria, Founder of Warande Advisory Centre

“To poison a nation, poison its stories.”

– Quote recalled by author Chilande Kuloba-Warria that allegedly comes from a letter written by King Leopold II of Belgium to the missionaries traveling to Congo in 1883 to spread Christianity

How to change why and how we tell stories?

To understand the mechanisms through which good intentions can lead to flawed storytelling, we must first look at the underlying power dynamics that shape the relationships between the countries that send and receive international aid.

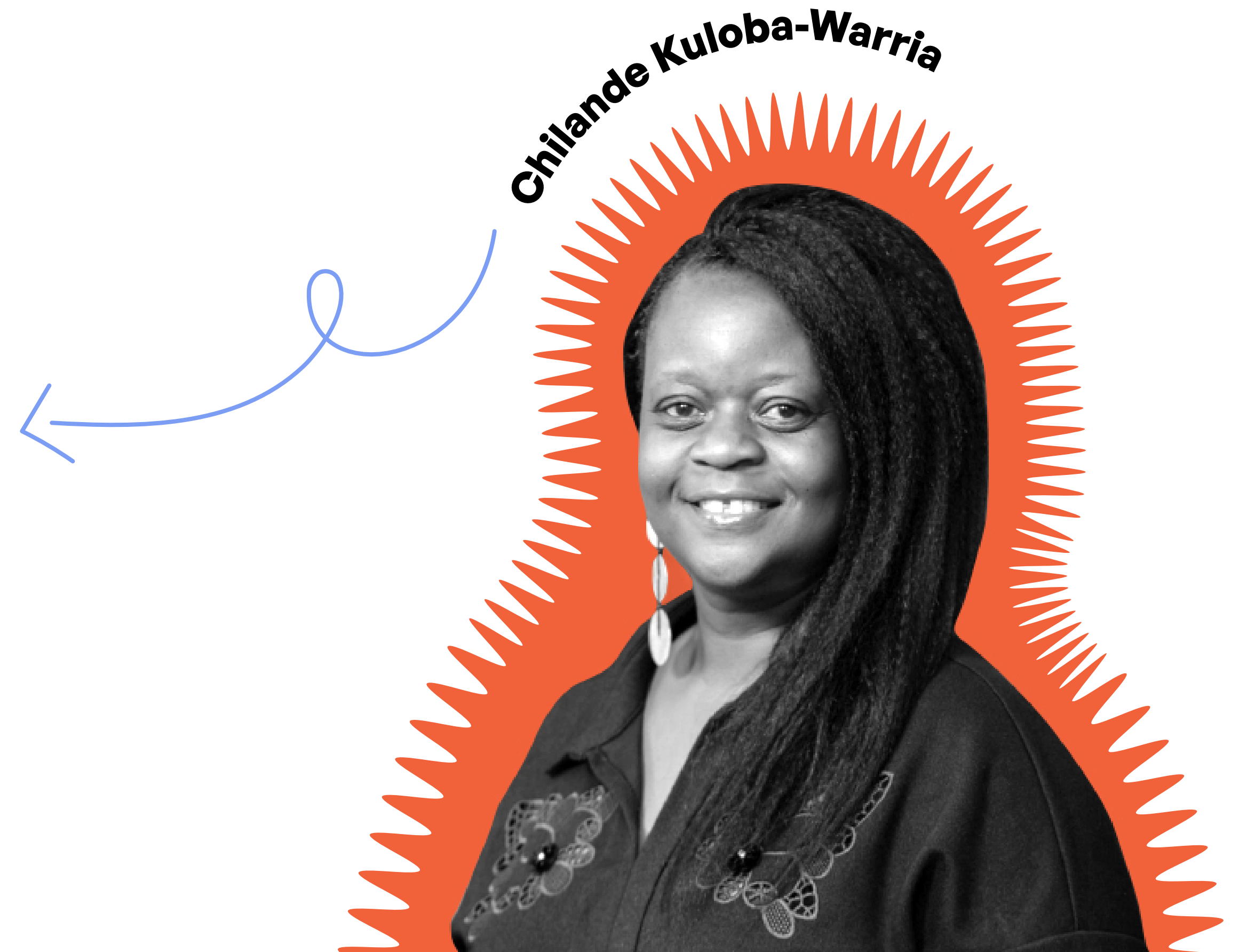
Chilande Kuloba-Warria is the Founder and Managing Director of a technical support facility called the Warande Advisory Centre, based in Nairobi, Kenya. With over 20 years of experience providing strategic leadership, management and technical assistance to local, national and international CSOs in sub-Saharan Africa, Kuloba-Warria has a knack for fostering thought-provoking conversations and tackling difficult questions with warmth and humor.

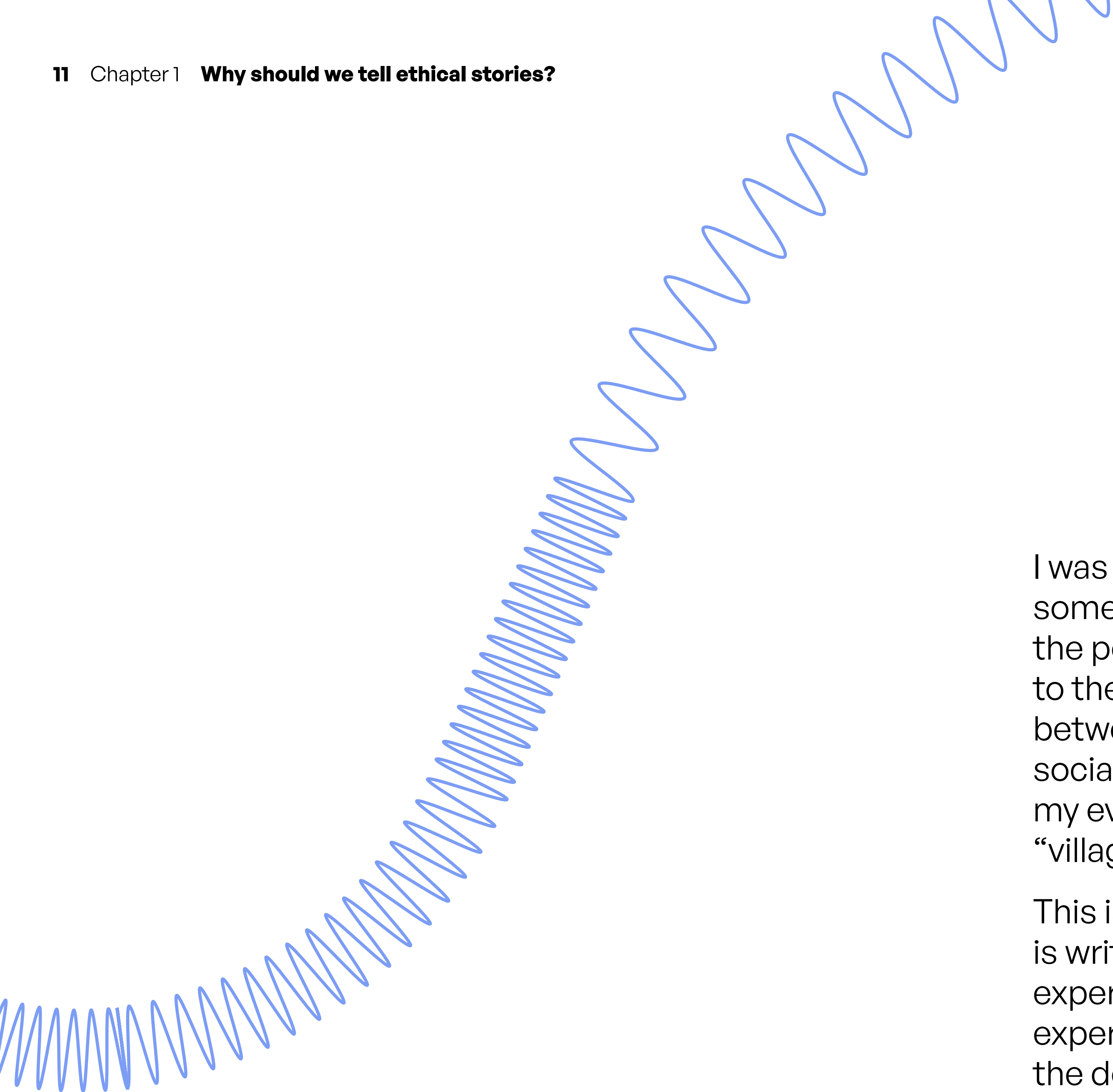
In this deeply personal chapter, Kuloba-Warria draws from her memories and experience growing up in a culture steeped in traditional

storytelling to reflect on the way colonialism has shaped communications in the social impact space, and propose a different way forward.

Note: We've included quotes from community members who took part in consultative workshops held in 2022 in the lead-up to this toolkit. The workshops were held anonymously so that participants could express their views more freely. Their names have been kept hidden throughout this toolkit in accordance with their preference.

Chilande Kuloba-Warria





I was born in an African community in Western Kenya, somewhere near the slopes of Mount Elgon and overlooking the peaks of Mount Tororo in Uganda, then later moved to the capital city of Nairobi and shuttled back and forth between the two communities as part of my upbringing and socialization. Stories were and continue to be a big part of my everyday life, used dynamically by the members of the “village” that raised my generation for various purposes.

This is the experience that informs this chapter, which is written as a reflective piece that draws on my natural experience with stories, and compares it to how I have experienced stories in my professional life as a key player in the development and humanitarian sector on a global scope.

Storytelling lessons from my culture

The Nigerian Novelist Ben Okri famously remarked:

“To poison a nation, poison its stories. A demoralized nation tells demoralized stories to itself. Beware of the storytellers who are not fully conscious of the importance of their gifts, and who are irresponsible in the application of their art.”

Storytelling is a powerful medium that has been used since the beginning of time by societies at various stages of their evolution, right from when they were perceived to be “illiterate” and “backward,” to date.

Why stories were told in my culture

My early years of life in rural Bukusu culture were spent typically with my grandparents, mainly my paternal grandmother. She would often gather us as children and tell us stories, whose purposes depended on her mood and our behavior.

Storytelling to teach

I recall vividly the stories about “the boy who ate the elephant’s rumps,” “the hare and the leopard,” “the hare who steals a hen” (the hare basically was always a main feature in my community but we never asked why,) “the woman and her daughter of clay” (a story on a mother’s excess love and the consequences of disobedience,) “the hyena who ate his protector” (a story about trust,) “a dying old woman who earned bride wealth for her sons” (showcasing the love and resilience of a mother,) “the thirsty intruder” (with lessons about trust...)

The stories were many! They taught us what the society expected of us. Some of them, especially those involving the hare, were pure entertainment, as we learnt that to be clever and cunning was something we should all aspire to if we are to survive in this world. We learnt of the undesirable traits in our communities and were also encouraged to be our best selves through the stories of brevity and prowess we were taught.

Storytelling to entertain

Perhaps the most famous Bukusu folk tale is the one of “Mwambu and Sella,” which, now that I am older, is strangely similar to the princess stories we learnt later on. The story tells of a brave soldier who rescued the most beautiful girl in the land. She had been sacrificed by the community to a mysterious monster that lived in a high mountain nearby, in exchange for receiving rain that had been elusive for many years in the country. After Mwambu killed the dragon, rain returned to the country, people rejoiced, and the king married Sella to Mwambu in a pompous wedding ceremony.

In these stories, Sella was described as “really charming: she had a symmetric, tender frame and a mellow voice. She had eye-catching shapely legs, moon-white teeth, bewitchingly gentle, sparkling eyes, ghee-soft lips, egg-shaped breasts, and when she walked, her motion was graceful like that of a goddess. Indeed, she was the epitome of beauty itself, and every young man in the country aspired to court her.”



Mwambu rescues Sella from the monster. Source: East African Development Library.

I especially would like to draw your attention to the poetic and romantic description of Sella. Of course, this was before these very traits described above were deemed “strange,” “weird” and “undesired,” and all manners of negative descriptions used by the supremacist colonialists who looked different. However, I am leapfrogging this conversation, let us pin this for later.

Storytelling to uplift

Many a times, my grandmother would gather us around after a long day of studies and, especially when one of us — or all of us — had been scolded by our parents, she would tell us a story that would have educational value and give us hope. Stories that involved the cunning hare would always involve a protagonist who made a bad choice or erred in some way.

Eventually, they would find their way, or were welcome back into the fold by the village, especially after learning their lesson. The stories that I recall were told with punctuations of poetry, songs, and dramatization with gestures, voice variations, or movements all for our enjoyment. The storytelling that I recall, and that nurtured my love for stories, was an art!

In conclusion of my musings, let us reflect back to the statement from Ben Okri: “To poison a nation, poison its stories.”

The question of why stories were told in the past was simple: it was to uplift, encourage, instruct, inspire, or caution, all with an aim to keep the peace and prosperity between communities and within them by encouraging positive behaviors and inspiring the young to cultivate certain desirable qualities. Basically, stories were told towards progressing a society. I have no recollection of stories that were told to retain a negative notion of a person. Even when a story was told of an undesired trait, the moral of it was always to reinforce positive behaviors. Basically, stories kept us alive and spurred us to evolve and expand.

When the development sector gets it wrong

As the world opened and communities started interacting cross-culturally and then internationally, storytelling became increasingly complicated. Critical aspects such as intentions, language and cognitive biases begun to influence stories. Storytelling simply

to ensure the preservation of cultural norms, practices, and traditions within a community, has morphed into a tool that conveys a message, to meet the need and/or respond to an external audience. The dynamics have therefore changed significantly because:

The audience has changed

Stories are now told to a “new,” “outsider” or “strange” person, who has come into the community with expectations. In the past, we went to listen to a story with no expectations other than being interested in what our grandmother had to say. The message was crafted skillfully based on what our grandmother had observed during the day, or had been told about us or about a community incident.

Intention and expectations are pre-determined

Now, the proverbial “grandmother” must find out what the “listeners” want to hear and then tell the story accordingly, so that the listener leaves “satisfied.” It means the storyteller must first find out what message is being sought, and then relay the stories in a way to meet these expectations.

Why we tell stories in the development sector

Stories today are told with a certain external interest in mind. In the development and humanitarian sectors, the evolution of development cooperation and humanitarian actions, which have largely been influenced by the international community, have influenced the stories being told about communities today.

Storytelling to appease key stakeholders

Traditional stories centered the young minds, the next generation, and societies' aspirations for their future in their development. They were carefully crafted to keep communities alive and thriving. Stories of today center the one who we want to influence in service to our often self-centered needs, be they to gain a new partnership, get additional resources, etc.

This shift can be explained by colonialism's impact on the stories that are told to and about societies in nations in the Global South. This is best depicted in this extract I recall from a discourse I was a part of it recently.

We discussed this quote that allegedly comes from a letter written by King Leopold II of Belgium to the missionaries traveling to Congo in 1883 to spread Christianity:

“Reverend, Fathers and Dear Compatriots; The task asked of you to accomplish is very delicate and demands much tact and diplomacy. Fathers, you are going to preach the Gospel, but your preaching must be inspired by first, the interest of the Belgium government state” (emphasis mine.)

We all felt like this philosophy has sadly continued to date.

In correcting this lopsided viewpoint, it is important to find a balance that honors those whose stories need to be told and those who need to hear the story. The best scenario is to have a win-win situation where the storyteller's message is well represented alongside that of the one who needs to hear the story.

Who needs to hear	Why they need to hear	What they need to hear	What is shown to them
International Funders/resource providers	So they can retain their funding, and even increase their resource allocations.	Their money is “rescuing” people in dire need of their support	Radical transformations (the “before” and “after”) and the gratitude of the nations.
International governments	So they can keep allocating more taxpayer money to these “disadvantaged” communities.	The disadvantage persists, and so they must keep prioritizing these countries.	Statistics, images that show the “disadvantage,” and the change they are making.



↑ Click here to listen to a clip from **Chilande Kuloba-Warria's** interview with **Gertrude Kabaszi**, Executive Director at Yamba Malaw that focuses on:

The power dynamics partners have experienced from funders.

To hear the interview in full, [click here](#).

Storytelling to center the Western perspectives

“Global South” communities are often labeled in comparison to what an outsider deems to be different from their norm. Words such as “marginalized,” “disadvantaged” or “vulnerable” are used, even when the communities themselves do not always see themselves as such. Development practitioners from the “Global North” have often used terms that are informed by supremacist attitudes, using their foreign standards of living as a reference, and neglecting to honor the norms of the communities they are visiting.

“The pictures we take are not representing the villages now. When I go to my village now, I see there’s electricity, and children are dressed better.... But why aren’t we representing that change?”

– Gertrude Kabwazi, Executive Director at Yamba Malawi.

Let us go back to the story of Sella depicted above. Her description of remarkable beauty is in stark contrast to the now-famous story of Sarah Baartman, who was enslaved and taken to Europe, where her body was put on display

for paying audiences. She was considered a “freak” for having large buttocks — a trait that in many African cultures is considered a mark of beauty.

Indeed, they do say that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and this sad story is a depiction of this.

In the development and humanitarian sector, these biases, misconceptions and stereotypes have been informing how stories are told, from the look and feel of photography to the tone of voice of the narrations about the situations encountered by the “Global North.”

Moving forward, we should listen keenly to the descriptions that the local communities use, take time to understand the cultures and ways of life of the people, and follow their lead on decision-making. We should honor their stories by depicting them in a way that retains their dignity and truth, and eliminates misunderstandings as much as possible.



A hand-colored etching featuring a caricature of Sarah (Saartjie) Baartman by William Heath. Source: British Museum



↑ Click here to listen to a clip from **Chilande Kuloba-Warria's** interview with **Gertrude Kabaszi** that focuses on:

The negative and static representation of communities.

To hear the interview in full, [click here](#).

How we can tell better stories

In the development and humanitarian sector, storytelling must take into account multiple stakeholders while upholding the dignity and authenticity of the subject of the story. To better achieve this we can bridge the two cultures of storytelling we have talked about so far.

In the following pages we outline three ways in which storytellers can bridge different cultures of storytelling:

- 1 **Broadening the diversity of stories told**
- 2 **Choosing language mindfully**
- 3 **Avoiding deficit framing**

“I think our goal is how to find stories that bring back a dignity that isn’t always granted by society and that bring back a sense of joy and opportunity.”

– Peter Torres Fremlin, Author of Disability Debrief, and freelance writer and speaker.



How do we balance authenticity with dignity when telling stories?

↑ Click here to watch **Chilande Kuloba-Warria** lead a discussion with **Chloe Namwase** (Communications Executive at Wezesha Impact), **Jennifer Katiwa** (Country Director at Jitegemei Children Program), **Monica Nyiraguhabwa** (Co-Founder and Executive Director at Girl Up Initiative Uganda), **Patience Musiwa Mkandawire** (*pictured*) (Founder and Executive Director of Fount for Nations) and **Arinolah Elizabeth-Nite Omollo** (Kenya Country Representative at Warande Advisory Centre).

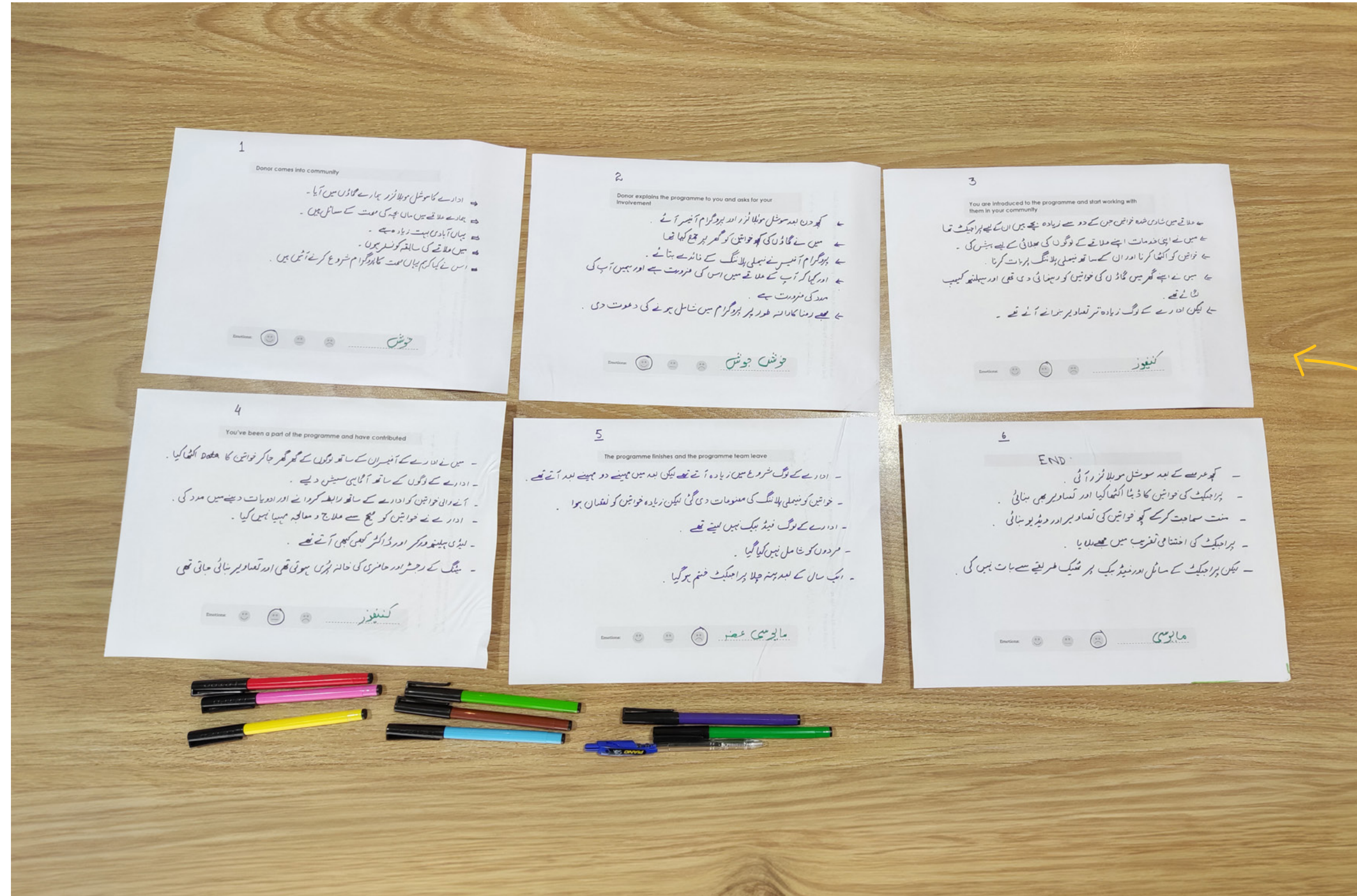
To see the discussion in full, [click here](#).

01

Broadening the diversity of stories told

Instead of only choosing to tell stories that prioritize the funder, we can choose to share a diverse range of stories. There are countless purposes our stories can have, including but not limited to: to educate, to train, to entertain and to communicate a message.

It is especially important for some of the stories we share to allow communities to share advice and stories for program improvement and evolution. Too often the community perspective is not taken into account despite their unique knowledge of the place and its needs but creating space for stories driven by their expertise can change this.



“Good stories surprise us. They make us think and feel. They stick in our minds and help us remember ideas and concepts in a way that a PowerPoint crammed with bar graphs never can”

– Joe Lazauskas and Shane Snow, The Storytelling Edge.

“Once the project started rolling, they did not pay any heed to the community’s opinion.”

– Workshop participant in response to a journey mapping exercise, conducted by ICARUS (Pakistan) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

02

Choosing language mindfully

One of the barriers to how we communicate in the sector is the language we use across all our communications. Language is a very intimate, contextual and personal aspect of how societies work, and communicating messages about and for a society must take this into consideration. In my society, we joke that “English came by boat” to illustrate the foreign nature of this medium of communication that is often used in professional spaces. It is the same for the other languages used, such as French, Portuguese, Spanish and other languages that are not native to the Global South. As a result, depending on the histories of a people, words can easily cause old wounds to bleed and pains to emerge. Words can minimize as much as they can uplift.

Below is a sample of how words can mean different things in different contexts:

What the sector says:	What people hear:	What people tend to prefer:
Poor	“I would feel bad hearing such words for my community because people of my area are not really poor. So that will be devastating for them to be seen or heard and referred to as poor.”	People/ families with low income.
Minority	“This words creates such a devastating and painful picture of people belonging to different religions and cultures, because they are given less value in society. I would like to use words which represent their identity, which are specific.”	Naming the specific group instead e.g. ‘people from a Black Caribbean background/ Black people’ or if they need to be grouped, then words which address the systemic factors like ‘seldom-heard’ or ‘under-represented’, are preferred to words with a negative connotation.
Marginalized	“It’s not about marginalization, it’s about structural inequalities. Pakistan is poor due to misuse of the nation’s finances and resources.”	People who have experienced X (systemic issues) or people who are underserved or overlooked.
Beneficiary	“It has a paternalistic and colonial association to it”. “These people can earn a better living but are still suffering in same part of their life because they are lacking support and resources. Most of these people do not even ask for help. Make them self-reliant.”	Naming their role in the community e.g. ‘a hardworking father’ ‘leader of the community initiative’, or their role in the project.

* Workshop participants in response to a language analysis exercise, conducted by ICARUS (Pakistan) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.



What are some missteps that partners from other countries have made?

↑ Click here to watch **Chilande Kuloba-Warria** lead a discussion with **Chloe Namwase** (Communications Executive at Wezesha Impact), **Jennifer Katiwa** (Country Director at Jitegemee Children Program), **Monica Nyiraguhabwa** (pictured) (Co-Founder and Executive Director at Girl Up Initiative Uganda), **Patience Musiwa Mkandawire** (Founder and Executive Director of Fount for Nations) and **Arinolah Elizabeth-Nite Omollo** (Kenya Country Representative at Warande Advisory).

To see the discussion in full, [click here](#).

Organizations are encouraged to create and maintain a living “language dictionary” or glossary that is reviewed periodically as the sector continues to evolve.

This table can be used by your organization to start the “language dictionary” by recording how the people you work with and feature feel about certain words used to represent them, and what they’d prefer.

Other ongoing debates evolve around more commonly used terms today such as:

- “Local.” In some contexts, this term has a negative connotation of being “lesser than” or “primitive.”
- “Proximate leaders” is controversial where leaders in Global South communities are just leaders, and there is no need to distinguish them further. However, they can be “proximate to the issues/challenges/communities.” This is an example of how

seemingly innocent words can be received negatively. This word is often only used when centering the Global North, and makes a distinction that is not necessarily positive for all, or even necessary.

- The very terms “Global North” and “Global South,” as well as “developed” versus “underdeveloped” need to be used contextually, always keeping the audience in mind, and making time to understand what is acceptable in each context.

03

Avoiding deficit framing

Words such as “vulnerable,” “under-skilled,” “incapable,” etc., can lead to continued prejudice about a people, and a psychological and physical disempowerment.

In being mindful about this potential pitfall, we must look out to ensure that our stories are not doing more harm, for instance by spreading propaganda, by victimizing a population or person, or by perpetuating power dynamics that can lead to blurred truths, skewed validity, inaccuracies, or disempowerment amongst other harmful results.



↑ Click here to listen to a clip from **Chilande Kuloba-Warria's** interview with **Gertrude Kabaszi** that focuses on:

How the pity narrative is overutilized in storytelling.

To hear the interview in full, [click here](#).

“Our community has highly educated work-oriented women and men. In our community we are liberal.”



“People view our community as we are not productive and just waste time. They perceive our community as less educated, less aware and knowledgeable.”

– Workshop participant in response to a journey mapping exercise, conducted by ICARUS (Pakistan) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

Instead, using Asset-Framing® can help us recognize the capacities and the potential of a society or community in how we describe them. Asset-Framing® is a methodology developed by **Trabian Shorters** (the author of Asset-Framing®, Founder and CEO of BMe and social entrepreneur) that helps communicators develop narratives based on strengths and agency when talking about a community.

There are excellent examples of applying asset-based language in the following guides:

[The HERE to HERE Language Guide: A Resource for Using Asset-Based Language with Young People](#)
[Understanding Asset Framing](#)



Sarah-Jane Saltmarsh,

Head of Thought Leadership and Content at BRAC, shares her perspective on the power of more positive stories:

Telling stories in a manner designed to evoke pity, contrary to popular belief in the sector, does not increase effectiveness. Conversely, a 2021 study by Development Engagement Lab showed that positive appeals increase the efficacy of campaigns or the feeling that development makes a difference. Respondents who received a positive appeal were also more likely to sign up for email communications, which has knock-on effects for activating new supporters. Authentic and dignified storytelling is an opportunity to educate, make social change, and give audiences ways in which to think differently about challenging topics, and it activates the powerful emotion of hope, which commercial brands such as Nike have effectively used for years.

To see how we've started to move away from pity-driven storytelling to a more authentic and empowering form at BRAC, check out our [communication guide](#) and [interviewing guide](#).

“I want to see Bangladesh portrayed in a positive way. Our country is not helpless anymore.”

– Interview Participant in response to questions on the impact of stories told by the sector, conducted by BRAC (Bangladesh) in 2022 on behalf of MCSWS for this toolkit.

To conclude, here are factors to consider when thinking about why and how to tell a story:

01

What change would you like to see at a personal and/or organizational level as a result of the stories you are about to tell?

02

Have you clearly defined communications objectives?

03

Is there a level of empathy, understanding and reflection that you would like to trigger with your stories?

04

Are there ethical issues, especially those that could demoralize or disempower the subjects of your stories?

05

Is there an emotional trigger that the story can elicit, and are you ready for the repercussions?

06

Are there aspects that can demoralize another audience? After all, a happy outcome for one person can highlight an unfulfilled outcome for another.

07

Does your story reflect the views of the diverse members of the community of interest – even those with contrasting viewpoints, and those who are often excluded?

08

What are the ethical considerations, especially regarding the power dynamics at play between the two parties? Does the person telling their story fully understand the consequences of having their names published, and their story circulated? Have you determined and communicated to the interviewee how the story will be shared?

09

Does the story omit details, exaggerate, or even make up some of the issues being presented?

10

Are we telling the story in an inclusive and accessible manner?

11

Are we only relying on a word-based communication? Or open to more diverse forms of communication (e.g. art, poetry)?