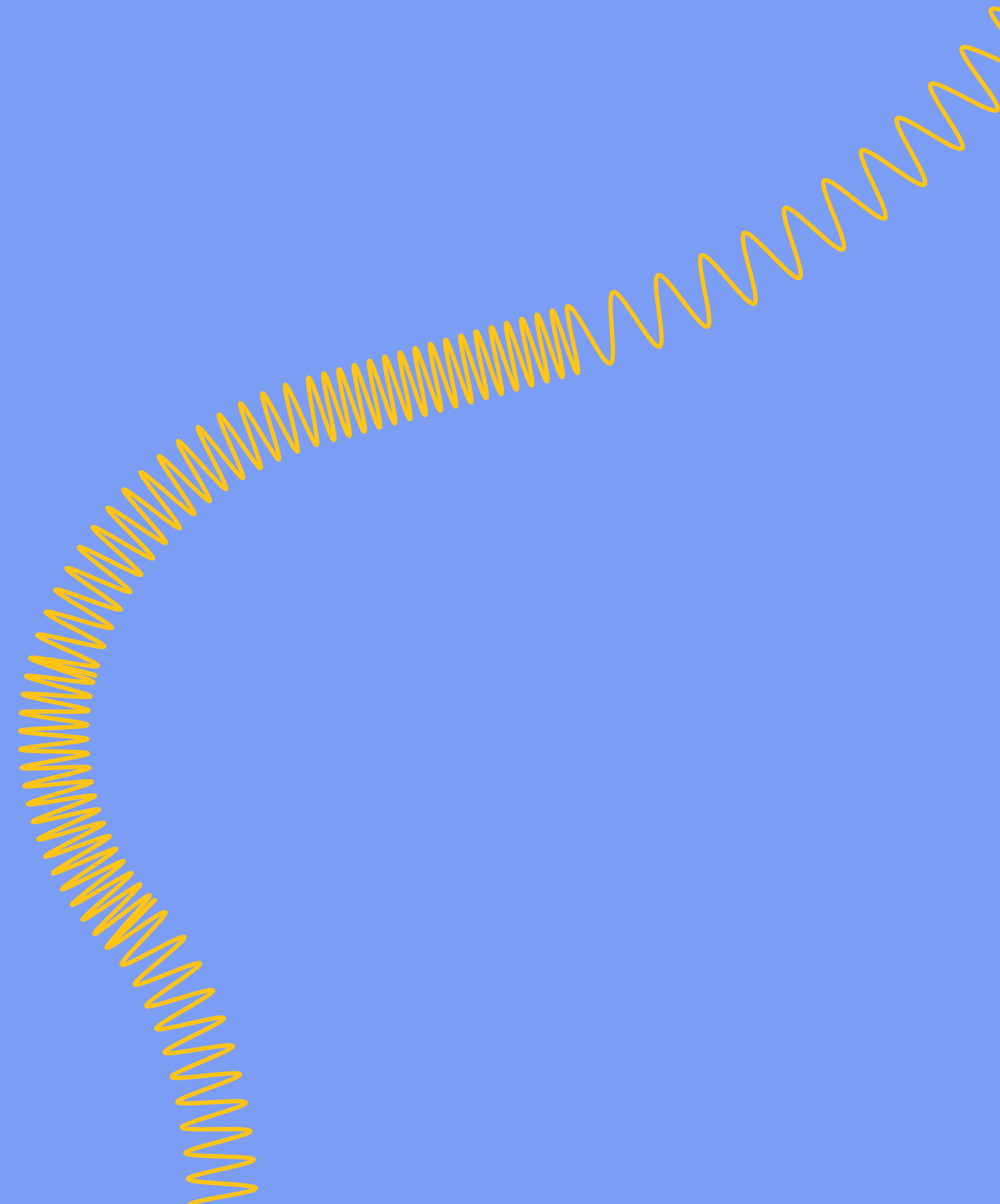


Chapter 6

How do we take this forward?



“I think our goal is 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.

“We are here to amplify their voice.”

– Lamea Tanjin Tanha, Founder and CEO of TransEnd

“At the core of your work is the belief in the power in communities to change their own life”

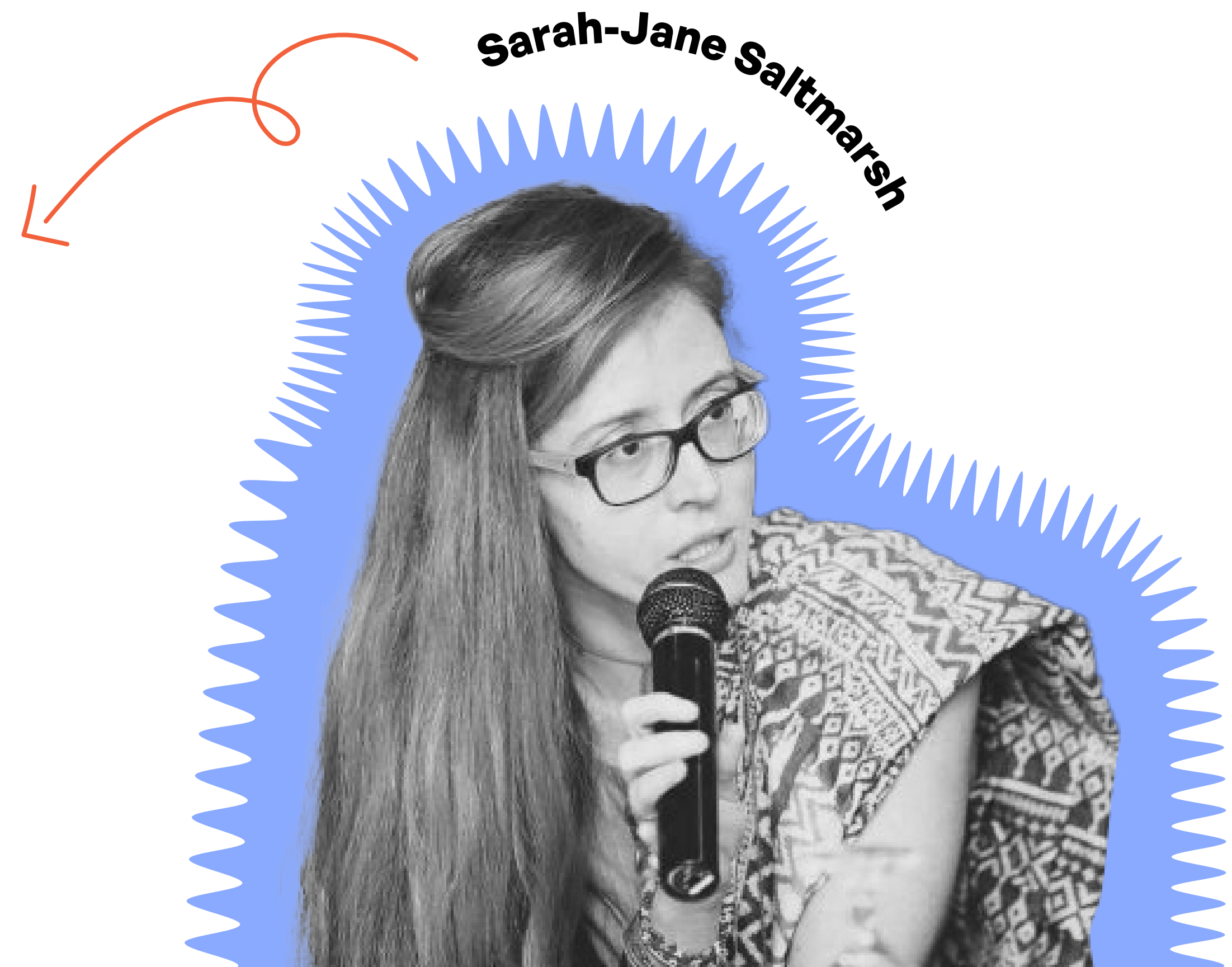
– Sarah-Jane Saltmarsh, Head of Thought Leadership and Content at BRAC

How can we push the boundaries in storytelling?

While this toolkit's authors have shared helpful pointers on how to change communications practices, there are no rules that should dictate how organizations should move forward. Storytelling is and must remain a living art form that shifts and adapts to the ever-changing needs of its time.

Sarah-Jane Saltmarsh heads Thought Leadership and Content at BRAC, one of the world's biggest NGOs, operating across Asia and Africa, headquartered in Bangladesh. She has worked with BRAC for 8 years and lived in Bangladesh for 10. In this chapter, she offers inspiration from recent initiatives that have crossed the threshold of traditional mediums to tell stories of change in a novel way.

For more on how this toolkit and its chapters came to life, head to the introduction, where you'll find information about our process of engaging with community members, international development professionals and communications experts.



There is widespread recognition now that it's time for better storytelling. In addition to moral and ethical realizations, social norms are rapidly changing, younger generations have more exposure to information, and audiences across the world are demanding better.

We ask you to embrace the opportunity, and to recognize that the NGO sector never “gives a voice to” anyone. Every person already has their own voice – NGOs have often been bad at listening to them.

I want to explore two practices: person-centric storytelling and diversity in mediums. I'll outline what they are, and give examples to show how you can action them.

“The only reason TransEnd was born is because of stories. Before TransEnd, there were no organizations working for [Hijra community’s] economic rights because of the absence of their stories. Through the sensitization program, we do a lot of social media campaigns, and we found this enormous reach, and saw we’re not alone. We get the Hijra people to tell their stories. They were taboo in 2018 - people wouldn’t look at them or talk to them. But when we showed stories like ‘look they’re human beings, they deserve these rights’ then people started to be more sensitized. They have the power to empower themselves, we are just making the platform.”

- Lamea Tanjin Tanha, Founder and CEO of TransEnd

Person-centric storytelling

“We have this African proverb that says ‘Until the lion learns how to write, every story will always glorify the hunter.’ That’s the spirit of how the narrative I see needing to change because so far, a lot of pictures that are taken, a lot of stories that are written are written from an outsider’s perspective. Very rarely do we see the voice of the very same communities that we are looking for. Why don’t we see their voice? They can speak. There’s a laziness about storytelling – it was sitting and talking to someone in a cushy office.”

– Chilande Kuloba-Warria, Founder of Warande Advisory Centre

“It’s better when the story comes from first-hand instead of a second-hand account. It’s about the relevance of the experience and the feeling shared with the audience. The emotion is more real when we give the voice to someone who has that experience, like indigenous youth.”

– Michelin Salata in an interview conducted by Diah Dwiandani (Special Assistant to the Regional Director and Communications Specialist) for this toolkit (2022)

When a producer is involved, stories are co-created through a partnership between the person and the producer, in which power is purposefully shared.

The producer lets the story set the pace, respects the time and effort given by the person, ensures a safe, welcoming space, is perceptive and responsive to emotions, and leads with curiosity. The person in the story is fully informed, has adequate time to get prepared, and is in control of their story the whole time. Crucially, discussions cover not only the person’s lived experience, but delve deeper into the analysis, strategy and insights from that experience. The focus needs to be on – and stay on – accurately capturing the person’s raw, organic feelings and experiences.

“When I’ve been able to share with people in writing or poetry or however, things that I’ve been through that have really isolated me, that I’ve experienced in an individual way, and that I thought were just my cross to bear – when I found ways to share that with people and they’ve resonated with it, it’s really transformative for both sides. It can take the thing that was isolating, exclusionary and was seen as othering, and can make it into a means of connection.”

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

This is achieved by making space for granularity, investment in nuance, and a purposeful avoidance of linearity.

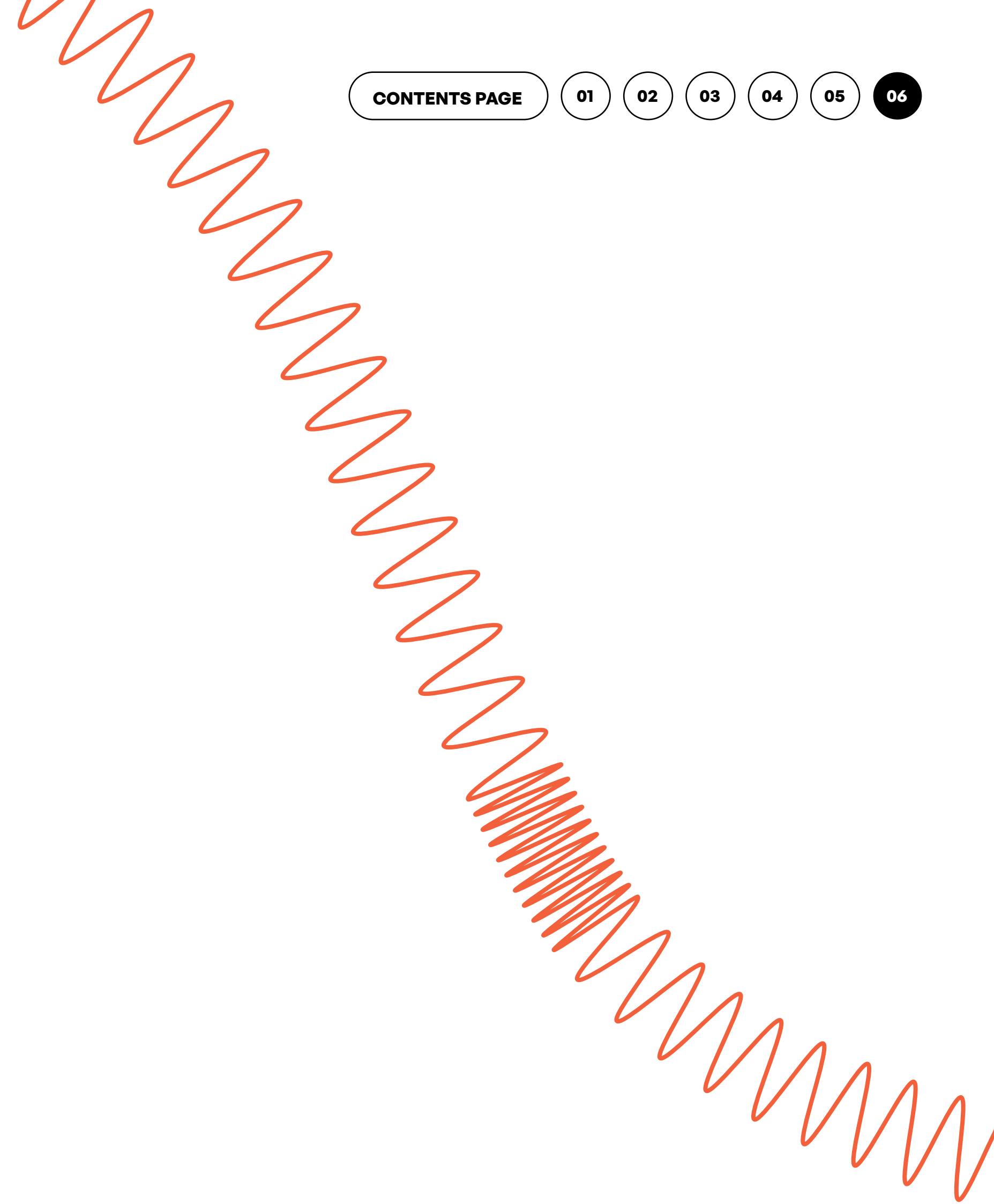
Ask a whole range of questions, and take indirect routes as well as direct, to find second stories.

I ask questions like:

- Where your favorite place is in the village and why?
- What could be your top three priorities if you were the Mayor of this town?
- Who do you aspire to be like?
- What could others learn from your community?
- What's special about your community?
- What would you most like to preserve for future generations?

I was recently visiting a community in Mongla, in southern Bangladesh, where BRAC is working with communities to build climate-resilient, migrant-friendly cities. I asked one community about what they most wanted for their community in five years. Their initial answers were what people would expect – better houses, a toilet in each house – but then after discussing for some time, a second story

emerged. What they most valued and wanted to preserve was their solidarity. “We want to be like we are now, helping each other out. When someone needs to go to the doctor or hospital, someone will always go with them. We’d like to create a shared scholarship fund so that if any children in the community get an opportunity for higher education, they can use it.”



→ [Click here](#) to watch Sarah-Jane Saltmarsh (Head of Thought Leadership and Content at BRAC) lead a discussion with Lamea Tanjin Tanha (Founder and CEO of TransEnd), Peter Torres Fremlin (Author of Disability Debrief, and freelance writer and speaker) and Shakil Ahmed (Futurist at Ridiculous Futures and Country Lead in Bangladesh's EdTech Hub) that explores the questions:

Why do stories matter in our sector?
What positive impact can we create when we tell stories collaboratively?



Shakil Ahmed
Futurist at Ridiculous
Futures and Country Lead in
Bangladesh's EdTech Hub

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

Inspiration station



Matagi Mālohi: Strong Winds

“Brown bodies moulding brown minds. Moving between healer and warrior, you are future ancestors carving visions of liberation we can’t even imagine. You are matagi mālohi.”

Matagi Mālohi tells the story of the Pacific Climate Warriors’ journey to uplift their people and shape a narrative that paints them not as victims of the climate crisis but as leaders, healers, nurturers, artists, gardeners, growers, seafarers and navigators.

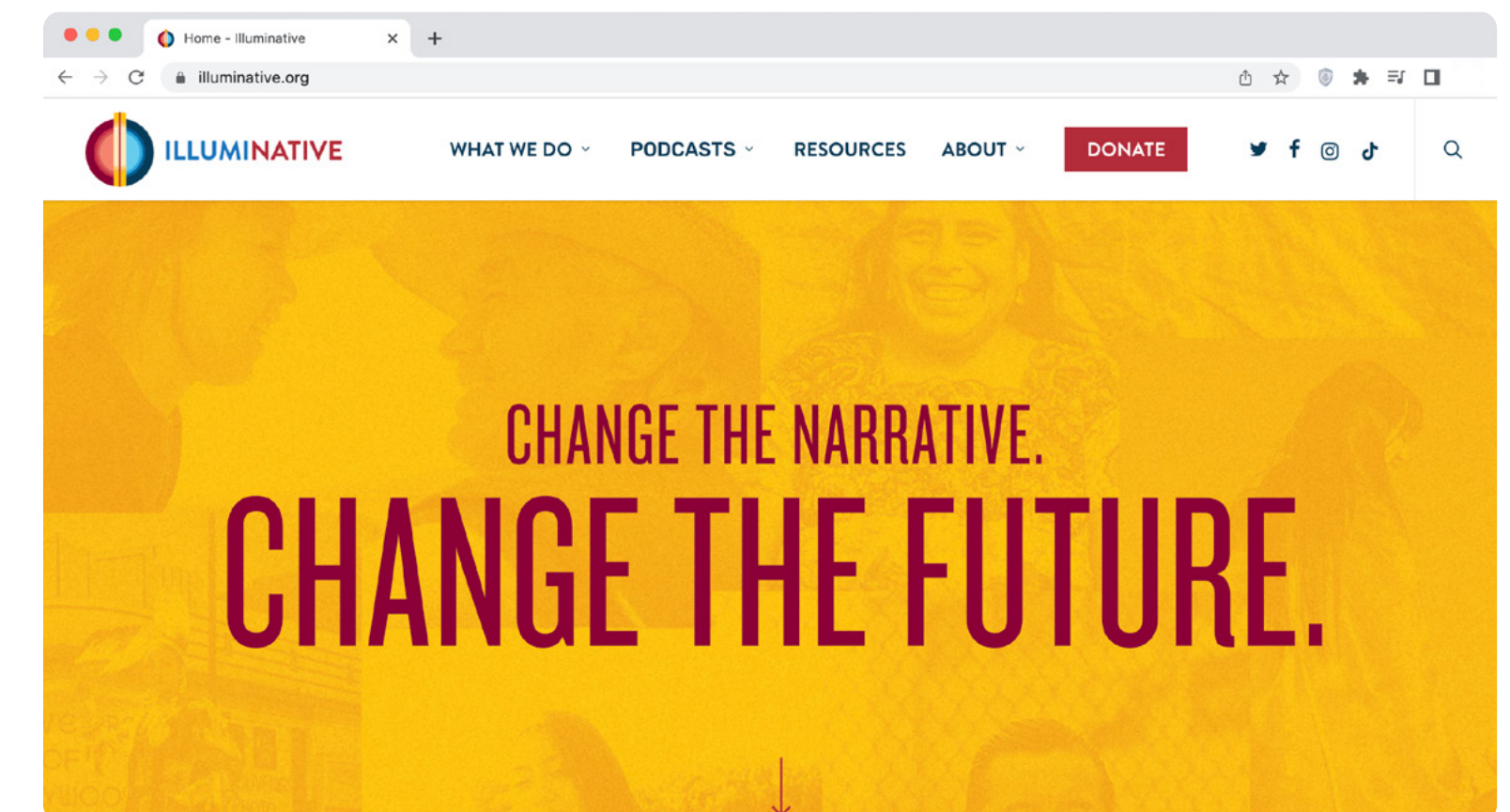
Combining activism, advocacy, art and storytelling, through stunning visuals and powerful poetry, this call to action puts the real, raw emotion of young people from the Pacific at the center of the story to give courage to keep pushing for change.

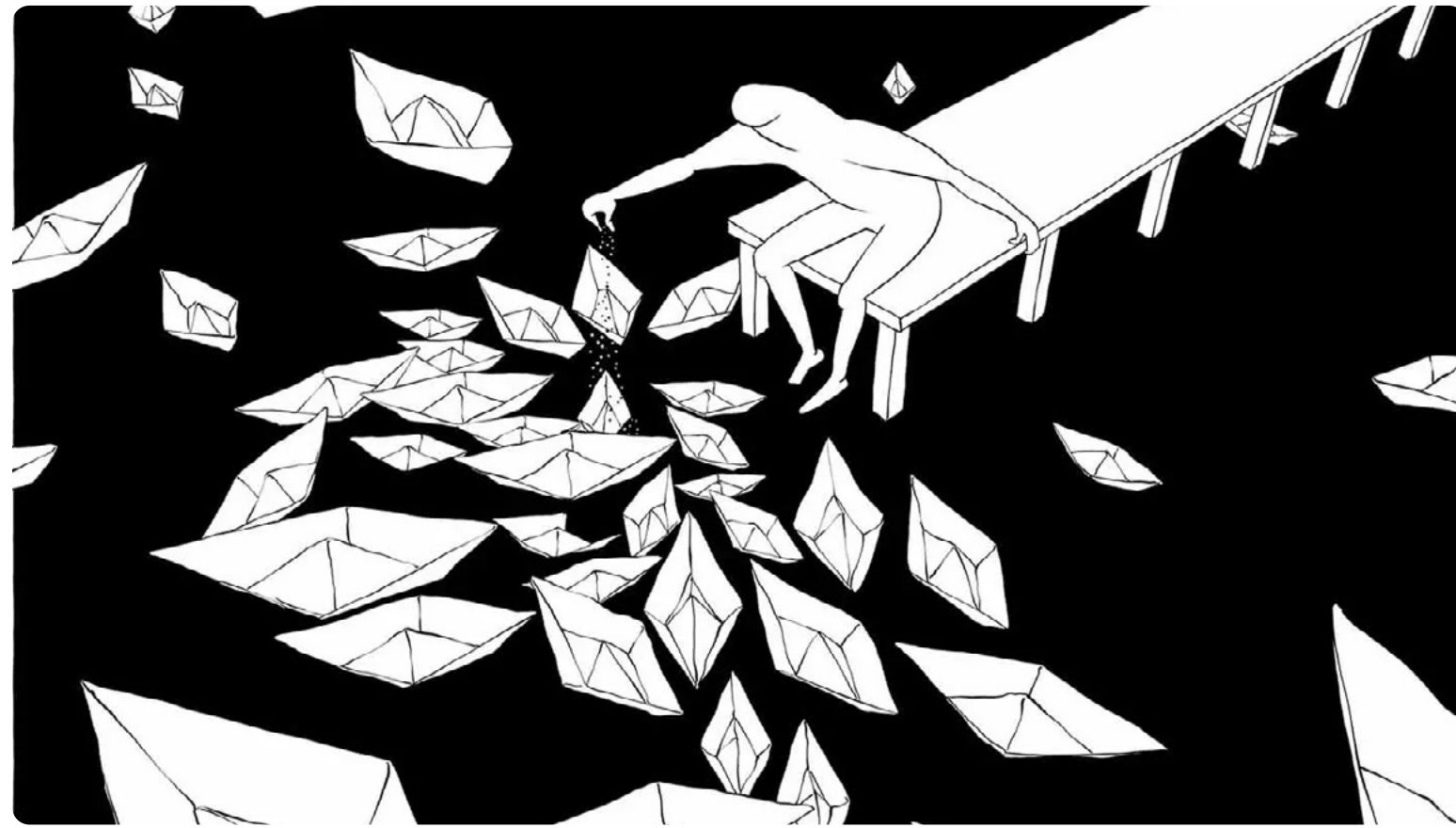
IllumiNative

“We were called stupid and primitive by the world’s colonial forces, but the world can thank our people for 60% of global food sources. We have always known who we are. Scientists, artists, astronomers, deserving of dignity, overseers of 80% of the world’s total biodiversity.”

IllumiNative is a Native woman-led racial and social justice organization dedicated to increasing the visibility of – and challenging the narrative about – Native peoples. The organization aims to build power for Native peoples by

amplifying contemporary Native voices, stories and issues to advance justice, equity, and self-determination. The organization’s storytelling work is impressive in myriad ways, in its strength, diversity and authenticity of voices, its production quality and its holistic approach, blending powerful narrative through art, comedy, advocacy, research and music. A particular highlight is the “Setting the Table” short film, which pairs spoken word with stunning visuals.





Flipping the Narrative

“UNHCR says refugees like me who are forced to leave their homes have three options to resume their lives: voluntary return to the place they’ve left, integration in their host country, or resettlement to a third country. For the vast majority of refugees, these so-called ‘durable solutions’ do not work. I know this because I am a refugee still searching for a ‘durable solution’.”

Narratives around migration and displacement in the media often fail to amplify the voices of the people most affected, instead reflecting the assumptions and agendas of those in

the Global North. “Flipping the Narrative,” a series by The New Humanitarian, puts the voices of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants at the center of conversations about the policies and events that shape their lives, challenging audiences to think about how policy and humanitarian responses need to change, and to question Global North-led migration narratives. The articles combine insights and analysis from lived experience with statistics and research to give the bigger picture of a failed system, and how it plays out in one person’s life.

Always a way

Imagine watching a war unfold in your village at age 10; or being starved, beaten and held captive in a jungle in Malaysia; or becoming a single mother to eight children at 61 with no savings or house. Would you believe there is always a way to turn things around? This book contains real-life accounts of 50 people whose paths have been anything but smooth. But no matter what has happened, they have always found a way.

“Always a way” is the most extensive storytelling initiative BRAC has undertaken, engaging 34 storytellers and 11 photographers

across 11 countries over 12 months to mark 50 years of BRAC. The aim was to create an anthology of hope and courage, a human testament that birth need not be destiny. We are surrounded by so many powerful stories at BRAC every day, and we wanted to pull a snapshot of them together to show people that poverty and inequality are human-made, so they can be unmade, and that embedded in every person is the potential to build a better life. What we ended up doing along the way was creating a blueprint for where we want to move as an organization in terms of storytelling.



Diversity in mediums

Stories all over the world are told in many different ways, through oral traditions, performance, poetry and visual mediums, but the development and social impact sectors generally stick to a limited range of mediums.

This restricts the ability of people and communities to express themselves, reduces the relatability of stories to different audiences, and misses out on the power and potential of these traditions. Creating the space for people to express themselves in a wide variety of mediums encourages authenticity, builds on people's strengths, and results in rich creativity that widens the appeal of stories.

When we choose to no longer restrict ourselves by the traditional mediums, our stories can become so much more. For example, your story could be the backbone of an in-depth, analytical piece backed up by infographics that urge policy change, communicated through a spoken word performance, brought to life in a play on a village stage, or shared online through a photo essay.

“The story is not a monolith. What you know people from the Global North call story is not what people in the Global South may call story, and so the offer is both a challenge and an opportunity to invite and introduce different forms of storytelling and different approaches”

– Michael Kass, Founder of the Center for Story and Spirit

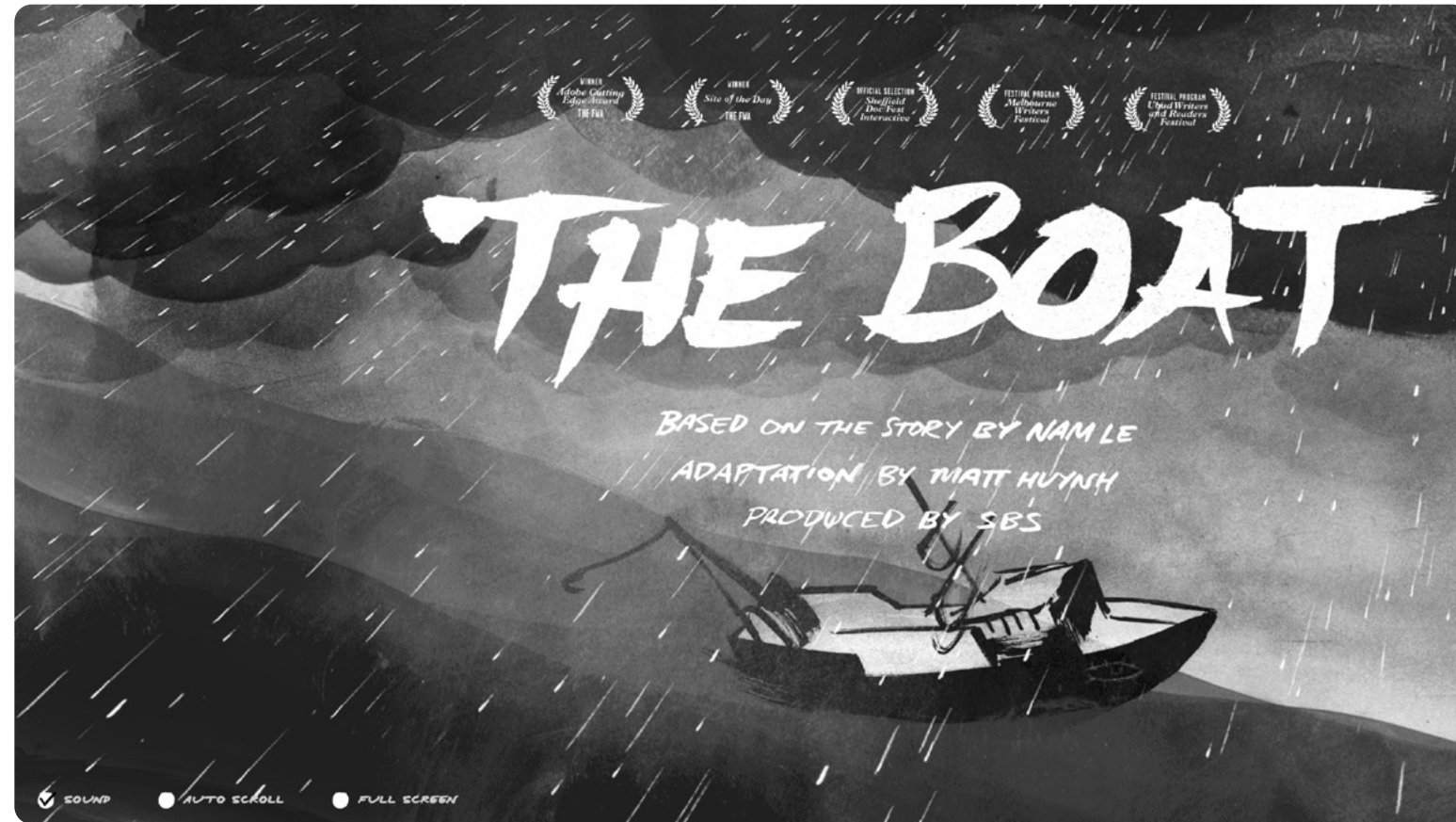


← Click here to watch **Sarah-Jane Saltmarsh** interview **Peter Torres Fremlin** (pictured) on:

How we can tell more creative and meaningful stories in our sector.

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

Inspiration station



The Boat

“Inside the hold, the stench was incredible, almost eye-watering. The smell of urine and human waste, sweat and vomit. The black space full of people. Bodies upon bodies. Eyes and eyes and eyes.”

“The Boat” plunges audiences into a treacherous ocean voyage, through vivid graphics and haunting audio, partnering seamless animation with rough brush strokes. Matt Hunyh’s interactive online graphic novel, designed to create an entry point into the conversation about refugees and asylum seekers, is based

on Nam Le’s short story about a 16-year-old refugee sent off alone by her parents after the fall of Saigon. His parents, like Le’s, fled Vietnam after the war. “The Boat” forms part of SBS’s commemoration of 40 years of Vietnamese resettlement in Australia. The production stands out for many reasons, including Hunyh’s familiarity with the subject – one of his previous comics, *Ma*, tells the story of his parents’ time in Pulau Bidong refugee camp in Malaysia. The human touch behind the smooth animation and the strength and relatability of the characters also contribute to making “The Boat” a striking work of art.

Forced Labour

An animation by the International Labour Organization takes audiences on a powerful journey into how people get trapped into forced labor. Lasting just over a minute, it uses muted colors, haunting music and no words or dialogue. Through generic scenes, familiar music and relatable figures, it captures how easy it is to get locked into modern-day slavery, and how impossible it can then be to escape from it, while deftly portraying the complex power dynamics and emotions of desperation and loneliness associated with the experience.



Art 350

This site offers resources on how to integrate art into storytelling to strengthen movement-building, innovate new forms of resistance and win positive change. A wide range of mediums are explored, from visual arts to performance and music, and it all feels fresh, young and powerful.



Fifteen Percent

“When I began this project and started to travel to take photos, I asked the people I met to tell me their point of view, to choose how they wanted to be photographed – how they wanted to be represented in order to challenge the stereotypes they face. What you see here is a collective project where each subject chose their own way to be represented. It is not only my work, but the work of everyone represented here.”

Christian Tasso’s art project aims to combat stereotypes by portraying the many facets and identities of individuals across

the world, in an effort to celebrate diversity as a resource for the whole of humanity, and to bring together civil society organizations, missions, and the UN family to celebrate diversity and promote the human rights-based approach to disability. It involved one photographer, 2000 people, 14 countries, 1250 rolls of film and 15,000 photographs. The project stands out because of its authenticity and humanity, as well as its diversity. Too often, photography of people with disabilities strips dignity, but this series of black and white photos paired with quotes are subtle, real and arrestingly beautiful.

The Greatest

The woman without arms taps Assistive Touch on her iPhone with her foot, then browses images of makeup styles. In a dressing room, a man wearing dark glasses and a bow tie uses the magnifier detection mode on an iPhone to scan the room.

This advertisement by Apple shows how its products can support differently-abled people to lead more fulfilling and independent lives. Musicians, artists, athletes and parents with disabilities use Apple software features such as door detection, sound recognition and voice control to drive cars,

identify items of clothing and take photos. Technology is at the forefront, while a song by the Marliya Choir (a group of female Indigenous singers in Australia) with lyrics inspired by quotes from Muhammad Ali plays in the background. What particularly stands out about the film, in addition to the fact that it has people with disabilities in lead roles, is that it portrays real people living full and fun lives, and just being themselves.



Conclusion

Better storytelling should include person-centric approaches, and embrace diversity in mediums, but it should also be part of broader reforms in communications, as is being pursued by initiatives such as [the Pledge for Change](#), combining authentic storytelling with equitable partnerships and changes in language. And it shouldn't need to stop there. While communication traditionally follows programming in NGOs, good communications can also influence better programming, contribute to improvements in areas such as curriculum development, and encourage mindset change more broadly in development organizations. As a sector, we have a long road ahead, but there are a lot of great examples to inspire us – and endless untapped potential to realize.

“As a sector, we have a long road ahead, but there are a lot of great examples to inspire us – and endless untapped potential to realize.”

