Mapping and Capturing a Community Story of Belonging

KULA APPLIED RESEARCH INSTITUTE

This toolkit empowers communities to share their perspectives through participatory art and storytelling. Designed for development practitioners, educators, community weavers, and anyone passionate about a deeper connection, this guide offers a hands-on approach to co-creating meaningful stories and projects with the communities you serve- or are part of!

As you follow along and adapt the framework to your needs, you'll learn how to nurture a sense of belonging, build collaboration, and spark joy through storytelling that is as diverse and dynamic as the people sharing.

Why storytelling?

Because stories are the bridges that connect us, the threads that hold communities together, and the seeds that inspire change. Through participatory art, collaborative projects, and vibrant narratives, we'll explore how to transform the ways stories are told and shared.

What can you expect?

- A step-by-step guide to building belonging, igniting creativity, and weaving narratives.
- Practical activities and prompts to unleash the artist, storyteller, and dreamer in everyone.
- Tools to connect people through shared experienes, aspirations, and visions for the future.

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Our Place, Through our Eyes

by Lamia Anwar Shama

When we think of an informal settlement in a bustling city, the typical images that come to mind are of cramped spaces, poor hygiene, and challenging living conditions. There are likely many more untold stories but the current narrative around these settlements in Dhaka has been built in that way. This has become the single story about urban informal settlements, not just in Dhaka but also around the world, and the danger is that we are not hearing the perspectives of the communities.

In an effort to empower the community and initiate a shift in the narrative, we have been working with POCAA since 2022 to design initiatives aimed at engaging the community and creating a sense of belonging. First, we delved into photography as a means to cultivate this sense of belonging. We gave out four disposable film cameras to residents in the colony and asked them to take photos of their surroundings that evoked an emotion- be it happiness, sadness, anger, or excitement. Through these photographs, a lot of emotion emerged, depicting the daily lives of the colony's people, their likes, dislikes, small or big celebrations, and so much more!

Among these captivating stories are Jhumur's perspective on childhood, Kulsum's portrayal of the absence of hills, Nurjahan's brother Yakub proudly displaying his love for Argentina through a jersey and a photo of Messi, and Rupa sharing about results day at school on a winter morning. Together, they provide a subtle view of life in Gabotli, going beyond stereotypical depictions.

The initiative culminated in a community photography exhibition organized on the school premises on December 1-2, 2023. The event not only showcased the captivating stories but also became a platform for free-flowing conversations between the community members and visitors. The second day of the event saw children from the colony collaboratively painting, expressing their joy, and celebrating their happy places. Over the two days, the entire area buzzed with creativity, as children painted, danced, sang, and celebrated the winter pitha festival.

আমাদের চোখে আমাদের বসতি was not solely an attempt to capture stories; it was a journey in building belonging. The initiative aimed to bridge the gap between organizations and communities. This bridge, built on trust and belonging, empowers communities and facilitates the co-creation of more sustainable, impactful, and resilient solutions. As the process unfolds, and we continue our journey with POCAA and the community, it is allowing for the emergence of future pathways of work to further strengthen trust and enhance resilience in the community.

Meanwhile, in Gabtoli, the community is not just speaking up for themselves; they are breaking free from the stereotypes and building a narrative of belonging- one that truly represents their experiences.
If you would like to know more about POCAA and their work in Gabtoli, visit POCAA.

Step 1: Define the Purpose with the Community

Before any story can be told, it's important to lay a strong foundation by working with the community- not just for them. Start by working with them to clearly define the goals of the project and aligning them with local community needs and initiatives.

Key Steps

- Spend time with the community to understand what truly matters to them, their unique challenges and needs. Build genuine relationships and deep connections.
  - Pro tip: Skip the questionnaires and surveys, go for free-flowing conversations.
  - Pro pro tip: Share a meal- a hearty conversation is guaranteed.
- Meet with local stakeholders, leaders, and organizations to gain insights into their perspective on the community's challenges and opportunities.
- Map out existing programs, initiatives, and strengths already in the community. Identify ways in which the project can align with existing programs and initiatives in the community to ensure relevance and impact.
- Work together to define a purpose that reflects the community's voice, not just external objectives.

Case Study Insight

In the case study, the photography project aimed to provide residents in Gabtoli City Colony a platform to share their stories, closely aligning with POCAA's mission to foster self-advocacy and community co-creation. By aligning the project with POCAA's ongoing work, the stories helped deepen the sense of community and provided valuable insights to address the community's needs more effectively.

Step 2: Create a Participatory Plan

Time to put the tools of storytelling directly into the hands of the community. Design the project to highlight the participants' lived experiences, allowing them to take ownership of the storytelling process.

Key Steps

- Identify simple, accessible tools (such as disposable cameras, audio recorders, phones or notebooks) that participants can use to document their experiences. Use resources that are already available in the community.
- Provide basic training or guidance to participants on how to use the tools, but allow for creative freedom in how they choose to capture their stories. Host a playful workshop!
- Ensure the project emphasizes collaboration rather than observation—participants should feel they are co-creating rather than being subjects of the project.
- Be transparent about your role as an outsider or facilitator, and acknowledge any privileges or biases that may come with that role.

Case Study Insight

By providing community members with disposable film cameras, the project minimized the influence of outsiders on the storytelling process. Participants were not given strict prompts, allowing them to capture authentic, unfiltered images of their homes.

Step 3: Capture and Reflect on the Community's Story

Turn raw materials into meaningful narratives and create space for reflection, connection, and shared understanding.

Key Steps

- Allow participants to capture images, recordings, or narratives over a set period of time.
- Once the materials are gathered, return the content to the participants for their reflection, and ask them to provide captions, thoughts, or further context.
- Organize community discussions or gatherings to share and reflect on the stories collectively. This can help participants see how their individual experiences are part of a larger community narrative.

Case Study Insight

After the photos were developed, each participant was invited to reflect on the images they captured and provide captions. This helped deepen the connection between the images and the stories behind them.

Step 4: Amplify the Voices and Stories

Share the stories in a way that honors the community's voice and ensures they remain central to the narrative. Celebrate the narrative to inspire community members to connect with one another and their environment, and take collective action for sustainable development.

Key Steps

- Work with the community to decide how their stories should be presented. Organize exhibitions, presentations, or online platforms to showcase the community's work, ensuring the community has input into how their stories are presented.
  - Pro tip: Make the showcase interactive! Add live storytelling, Q&A sessions, or art installations to bring the stories to life.
- Ensure that any dissemination of the work is done with the consent of the participants, and that they are credited and acknowledged.
- Challenge the single stories- find ways to connect these stories to larger initiatives or advocacy efforts.
  - Could they influence policy? Raise awareness? Spark new conversations? Stories have power—use it to amplify the community's voice on a broader stage.
- Work with the community and stakeholders to use the stories to inform any action and initiatives in the community.

Case Study Insight

The project not only empowered participants to share their own stories but also allowed them to influence the work being done in their colony. Their voices were amplified though a community photography exhibition and vibrant conversations, bridging the gap between the residents of Gabtoli City Colony and organizations like POCAA, building trust and collaboration for meaningful change.

Step 5: Evaluate and Evolve the Project

This is where you pause, reflect, and think about what's next. Evaluate what worked, what can be improved, and how the community can keep telling their stories.

Key Steps

- Gather feedback from participants on how the project impacted them. Did it strengthen their sense of belonging? Improve their connection with the community? Empower them to advocate for themselves?
- Evaluate how the stories collected contribute to a deeper understanding of the community's needs, aspirations, and challenges.
- Explore how the project can evolve to involve more participants or be adapted to other contexts or communities.
- Inspire the community to continue co-creating their stories and use them to contribute to efforts addressing their needs.

Case Study Insight

Reflecting on the photography project in Gabtoli City Colony showed how sharing their own stories helped the community feel more connected and challenge stereotypes. The stories offered insights into their needs and challenges, which is critical for co-creating sustainable and impactful solutions with the community. This set an example for future iterations of the project at Kula Applied Research Institute.

Step 6: Document, Share, and Replicate

Share about the project so that it can be replicated by other communities or in other contexts while maintaining the core principles of co-creation and belonging.

Key Steps

- Document the process and make it available to other practitioners, emphasizing flexibility in tools and methods so that the project can be adapted to different settings.
- Share lessons learned, challenges faced, and successes with a broader network of practitioners and organizations.
- Encourage the formation of cohorts or networks where communities can share their stories and connect with one another.

Case Study Insight

The photography project was adapted to the local context in Dharamshala, India, where community members documented their own experiences, free from external influence. It aimed to bridge the gap between development practitioners and the communities they work with, integrating the community's perspectives into their work.

Ghar Par: : Dharamshala, India

by Kiran Topiwala

In development and humanitarian work, a lot of ideas, programs, and projects tend to have a single-story perspective and they are often created and disseminated by people who are not living in the shoes of their subjects. There is a bias and a privilege in being able to go there and show views of the world which is not necessarily what the subject's perspective is.

As I approached my summer of work in Dharamshala, India with EduCARE, this was something I was aware of. Not just as a development practitioner, but as a photographer. I realized that while my heritage and roots are Indian, I would quickly stand out as an outsider because of the way I dress, my inability to converse easily in Hindi, and my mannerisms. And this proved to be true as, upon arrival, I experienced how hard it was to get candid shots of people.

When walking around on my first day in India, I noticed how quickly people noticed my camera, and how keen they were for me to take photos of them, even providing me with a posed smile. That was not my intention, and I found it hard to blend in and capture "raw" moments without being quick and subtle.

To tackle this differently, taking myself out of the picture, I brought with me to India, 10 disposable film cameras. The idea was to empower people to tell their own stories and capture what they saw unfiltered and unadulterated without my "outsider" presence. After I mentioned my intentions to do such a photography project to my mentor, Harjeet Bhullar, we spoke about how we could align the project with EduCARE programs as an applied learning tool that would help the organization's stakeholders advocate for themselves and their community. We discussed how giving people a way to express themselves and a voice in the work that EduCARE is involved in would help create a sense of belonging with the work itself. This would enable EduCARE projects to be more co-created with the communities and people we hoped to work with and for.
With EduCARE's support, the project was completed in about 5 weeks, and the photos were developed upon my return to the US. Soon after receiving the scans, I marveled at the art that was created by the participants. I reached out to each participant, shared the photos they took, and asked if they could provide a few words or a brief caption for some of the images. Then, together with Harjeet, I reflected on the experience and the project's relevance. While the art speaks for itself, what was demonstrated in the project further emphasized how important it was to give participants a voice and allow them to be heard.

This emphasis on belonging, and how I had demonstrably used art to help create it, led me to connect it with what I believe to be the missing piece in regenerative sustainable development: closing the gap between the development practitioner and participant community. While intentions may be well-founded, there still seems to be a massive disconnect between what participant communities want and what we as innovators think they want. Closing this gap and creating a sense of belonging with all aspects of the environment (everyone and everything), is an overlooked step in sustainable development initiatives. At Kula, we have set out to change that, by iterating the photography project and giving participant communities a voice to advocate for themselves, while emphasizing the notion of belonging and principles of deep ecology.

For more on EduCARE's projects, please visit educare.in

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If you're inspired by what you've learned from this toolkit and want to bring these ideas to your community, we offer tailored support for individuals and organizations passionate about ecological storytelling and advocacy.

Get in touch with us at lamia@inserviceofearth.org