



Re-shaping the Humanitarian System: How Local Organizations Can Use Narrative and Stories to Have Better Dialogue with Donors

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This paper aims to join the dots between the concept of claiming the narrative, the role of story-telling, and the need to re-shape the humanitarian system.



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Starting Points

In this paper, I reflect on my experience of advocating for Ukrainian local organizations with the National Network of Local Philanthropy Development (NNLPD) in the past couple of years. My aim is to join the dots between the concept of claiming the narrative, the role of story-telling, and the need to re-shape the humanitarian system.

In humanitarian work, a story is often viewed as something soft – a case study, a testimony, a success vignette. In practice, a story could be a narrative unit that will push in one direction or another. And like any unit, it can be assembled, directed, scaled, and weaponized. It has mass, momentum, and political consequence – depending on who tells it, how it's framed, where it's staged, and who's listening.

The humanitarian sector frequently praises local organizations for having “good stories.” But this praise is hollow when not backed by resources, stages, and infrastructure to scale those stories to achieve narrative power. Here, I suggest a few strategies that can help local organizations to use their stories more effectively with the amount of limited resources they have.

1. The Ukrainian Context in the Locally-Led Response Movement

The idea of narrative within the humanitarian system is relatively new, but it reflects a growing sense of self-awareness in the sector. Resources are increasingly being allocated toward reflecting on past experiences and uncovering uncomfortable truths that may challenge the traditional “white saviour” narrative.

Ukraine confounds traditional humanitarian binaries. It does not fit neatly into the categories of Global South or Global North, yet it shares the Global South’s experience of colonialism, extraction, and marginalization within global governance structures. Ukraine experienced this first under the Russian Empire, and later under the Soviet Union. Ukraine only gained independence in 1991 and, just 31 years later, it was invaded by Russia again. Current efforts in locally-led response movements brings Ukraine even closer to the Global South community. And although we have made huge progress over the past three years, viewing Ukraine as exceptional risks sidelining broader efforts for localization worldwide.

Humanitarian operations had already been present in the eastern regions of Ukraine since 2014, but it wasn’t until the outbreak of full-scale war on 24 February 2022 that Ukrainian NGOs fully confronted the realities of being local actors within the international humanitarian system. In the first months of the invasion, many international organizations hesitated to act, taking time to establish offices in the country and launch their missions.

This delay left many Ukrainians feeling betrayed and deeply disappointed, particularly by institutions tasked with peacekeeping and documenting war crimes. Social media platforms were flooded with posts from Ukrainian advocates demanding action from the United Nations, the Red Cross, and other key actors.

One of the most pivotal moments came after the Olenivka massacre – on 29 July 2022 an attack on Ukrainian prisoners of war held in a Russian-operated facility killed between 53 and 62 and injured 75 to 130. Independent investigations strongly indicate the strike was not due to Ukrainian weaponry but was orchestrated from within Russian-held territory, contradicting Russia’s account. Although the UN established a fact-finding mission, it was later disbanded due to a lack of security guarantees. The absence of credible oversight or accountability – particularly from institutions like Amnesty International – sparked widespread outrage among Ukrainians.

Before the full-scale war, the dominant narrative in Ukrainian civil society reflected a strong identification with Western democratic values. Trust in international NGOs (INGOs) and institutions was relatively high and was fueled by hopes for integration, reform, and long-term alignment with the European community.

Facing the lack of meaningful support at a critical historical moment was not only painful – it also felt like being stripped of yet another pillar of safety. Over 2013 – 2014, Ukraine experienced a civil revolution, widely known as the Maidan or Euromaidan, which shaped a new generation’s determination to sever ties with the pro-Russian agenda and the Soviet legacy. It marked a turning point in the country’s pursuit of a new national identity, one increasingly oriented toward the European Union.

I would suggest that Ukrainian society embraced the localization agenda so quickly because we are currently in an active phase of dismantling the oppressive narratives imposed by years of colonial domination. For decades, the Ukrainian nation was framed as a minor actor or “little brother” within a grand pro-Russian narrative – never quite European enough to join the EU, yet unwilling to disappear into the label of “post-Soviet countries.” The 21st century has been a transformative period for Ukrainians: a time of reclaiming identity, language, and cultural heritage that had long been suppressed or erased.

The second stage of realization came with the understanding that many international organizations primarily fund themselves – operating offices in different countries, rather than working as true partners with local actors. When data from OCHA’s Financial Tracking Service revealed that local and national NGOs consistently receive less than 1% of the humanitarian aid sent for Ukraine, it sparked widespread frustration and galvanized civil society into more radical action.

In Ukraine, the education process around localization and locally-led response was deeply intertwined with a sense of urgency. Concepts that had previously existed only on paper were suddenly being implemented in real time. Ukrainian civil society rapidly expanded its vocabulary, adopting terms that had previously been far less common, such as localization, due diligence, and emergency funding.

Currently, Ukrainian civil society is actively searching for its own place in the international humanitarian system and its own agenda within the upcoming change. Ukraine was placed in a peculiar space between two colliding narratives – brave warriors and struggling victims – with somehow both of them remaining true. As noted in the report “Narratives and the Ukraine Response” by the Humanitarian Policy Group (2024):

“The idea that people impacted by crises are in some way vulnerable and so deserving of help is the foundation of most public fundraising, programming, and advocacy messaging created by the humanitarian sector. In this respect, Ukraine has also presented some challenges to this standard narrative.”

While the international community often praises the visibility and outspokenness of Ukrainian local actors, the actual power shared with them by INGOs remains disappointingly low. The annual localization report by NGO Resource Center “A Humanitarian Localization Baseline for Ukraine – Progress Report” (2024), notes:

“There was a general perception that while Ukrainian actors were visible in operations and implementation, their presence at decision-making tables was limited.”

Moreover, while indicators measuring the capacity and participation of local organizations in the localization process were marked as strong, policy influence remains the weakest point.

Ukraine's history of colonial suppression, combined with its recent identity-building efforts and democratic aspirations, made local actors particularly sensitive to external control and rhetorical tokenism. As a result, the localization agenda in Ukraine gained traction not just as a policy goal, but as part of a broader societal process of reclaiming agency and redefining national identity. In this context, narrative isn't just a communication tool. It is a strategic asset in the fight for visibility, legitimacy, and self-determination.

2. Meetings for Change: A Case Study

After launching our advocacy campaign, the NNLPD team quickly identified a significant gap between local organizations and INGOs in terms of communication, mutual understanding, and contextual awareness. In response, and to create more opportunities for community foundations to engage in shaping the locally-led response agenda, we developed the concept of *Meetings for Change*.

While networking events and short-format story-telling are not uncommon in the NGO space, we saw potential for these gatherings to become meaningful pillars of community-building – if they were rooted in local identity and tailored to meet the specific needs of our audience. The *Meetings for Change* campaign was designed with this in mind: the visual identity featured a blue-and-yellow color palette, alongside symbolic elements inspired by traditional Ukrainian embroidery. The event agendas were shaped around the practical concerns and strategic interests of local organizations.

Despite numerous challenges, I consider this initiative a success. In measurable terms, participants rated the events an average of 4.8 (out of 5) in feedback surveys. Hundreds remain engaged in the community that formed around them. More broadly, *Meetings for Change* became a signature initiative for NNLPD within Ukraine's nonprofit sector – and we were proud to see other organizations begin adapting and replicating the format in ways that reflected their own identities.

The first event, held in Kyiv in October 2023, quickly exceeded expectations. Interest was so high that we ran out of available space, ultimately welcoming over 100 participants. Motivated by this response, we committed to expanding the initiative into a series of networking events that could reach local NGOs across the country.

One of the major barriers for local NGOs in Ukraine is regional disparity. Most events and networking opportunities are concentrated in the capital, which makes access extremely difficult for organizations based in more remote areas. Limited resources and time constraints often prevent regional NGOs from attending, resulting in a fragmented and disconnected civil society landscape.

With support from the Global Fund for Community Foundations and the Cash Delivery Working Group, the NNLPD team went on to organize five Meetings for Change, engaging a total of 361 participants. This series became a unique opportunity for our team to map the landscape of local organizations throughout Ukraine and to deepen our understanding of ongoing dialogues around locally-led humanitarian action.

A key success factor was the consistency of the events, which were held approximately every two to three months. This regularity fostered a sense of trust and community, especially important for local NGOs encountering this format for the first time. The predictability of the meetings allowed participants to grow more comfortable over time.

As exclaimed Inna Paseyko, founder of the local NGO ChangeX, from a village in the Poltavaska oblast:

“It’s my first time seeing a donor in person. That’s so unusual!”

The networking process was designed in a fair-like style. INGOs were assigned tables labeled with their logos, allowing local organizations to approach any of them freely and initiate conversations. To minimize confusion, all participants wore color-coded badges: blue for donors, green for local organizations, and yellow for staff.

3. Partnership Outcomes and Findings

From the very first event, the attitude toward participation noticeably differed between local organizations and INGO representatives. There were frequent last-minute cancellations, sudden changes of plans, and a surprising amount of negotiation required to confirm INGO attendance. One particularly telling example involved an INGO that failed to inform us that they had sent their team abroad on the day of the event. Some local organizations expressed frustration, noting that certain INGOs:

“Showed up just to check a box, with zero genuine interest in the topic.”

Despite these challenges, we managed to build relationships with several committed INGO representatives who attended multiple events, became increasingly engaged with our approach, and were genuinely excited to contribute after recognizing the value of the initiative.

There appears to be a recurring pattern in which both sides – local and international – blame the other for a lack of enthusiasm or readiness for collaboration. This suggests that the outcomes of each event are heavily influenced by the individual organizations and representatives involved, rather than by the structure of the events alone.

Among local actors, a common refrain was:

“We need more guidance and motivation.”

On the surface, this seems at odds with the self-reliant, agile image often associated with Ukrainian civil society. Participants asked for: thematic spaces aligned with sectoral expertise (e.g. medicine, education, child protection), curated databases of INGOs and donors with clear pathways for outreach, and moderated networking formats. As one participant put it:

“I want to have a structured networking session, not just coffee and hope.”

These are not naive requests. They are practical strategies to rebalance power, navigate unequal dynamics, and stop re-entering the same unproductive conversations. What they also signal is a need for dialogue within the local NGO space itself: How do we enter these rooms? Are we seeking short-term funding or a long-term partnership? This efficiency-driven mind-set might at times overshadow the original goal: fostering genuine human connection, mutual learning, and trust-building across sectors.

In one post-event questionnaire (which counted 54 respondents – 38 from local organizations and 16 from INGOs), 21 out of the 38 local organizations reported that they were either already implementing projects or finalizing negotiations for future collaborations formed during *Meetings for Change*. While measuring the satisfaction or equity of these partnerships requires long-term evaluation, one notable insight emerged from our repeated participant surveys: the average time between initial contact and final project agreement was approximately five to six months. This alone speaks volumes about the level of bureaucracy present in the humanitarian sector.

4. The Birth and Purpose of Local Talks

As we continued developing the *Meetings for Change* format, we wanted to provide more space for local organizations to share their stories on their own terms. At the second event, we introduced *Local Talks* – a series of short, seven-minute speeches delivered by representatives of local NGOs to open the day. The inspiration came from TED Talks; as a student, I admired the platform and had long dreamed of becoming a speaker one day. However, once we published the agenda, a member of the TEDx Ukraine team reached out to inform us that we could not legally use the TED name without official certification.

So, we did what many local actors do best: we claimed the narrative and created our own name and format.

In my view, *Local Talks* became one of the most important innovations enabled by *Meetings for Change*. It's a scalable, accessible, and highly adaptable format that can work in both online and offline settings. The whole process began by adding a simple but powerful question to the event registration form:

“Do you have a story to tell?”

This opened the door for collecting potential narratives from future participants. Together with a public speaking coach, we worked with selected speakers to extract the core message of their story and connect it to the broader context of the locally-led response – while also shaping the delivery to be engaging and accessible.

For many local representatives, this was their first experience speaking publicly in front of a large audience and, naturally, they were quite nervous. All speeches were delivered on stage in Ukrainian and professionally recorded. Afterwards, we created a video library on the organization's official YouTube channel, complete with English subtitles, to ensure wider reach. This not only amplified their voices but also provided local organizations with valuable digital assets for future advocacy and representation.

What surprised me most during preparation was how accustomed local organizations are to reporting, rather than story-telling. Their default approach to public speaking often centres on impressing donors with statistics and proving impact.

But the purpose of *Local Talks* was different: to tell the truth of local experience, and to bring forward the reality of a locally-led response. It became one of the most meaningful parts of our work: helping speakers discover the value of their story as a story.

5. Story-telling, the Humanitarian System and Philanthropy

Unfortunately, story-telling in philanthropy still largely revolves around fundraising, donor engagement, and impact validation. This reinforces a narrative in which non-profit communities craft stories that serve the system rather than challenge or change it.

As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie famously said:

“The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story.”

In this framing, local organizations are often reduced to gap-fillers – doing the work that large INGOs can't reach, acting as insiders on community needs, or serving as the “authentic” faces of campaigns. They're viewed as genuine and kind, but rarely as power holders. Instead, they are cast as the same marginalized populations seen in donation appeals.

Systemic change demands a different kind of narrative – one that centres local actors and amplifies their advocacy messages. It starts when communities speak not just about what they do, but what happens within: the frustrations, contradictions, and hopes that rarely make it into official reports.

Critiques of the international aid system often feel like opening a can of worms. Many local organizations remain silent out of fear of jeopardizing already limited funding by voicing discomfort or dissent. This is where story-telling becomes powerful. A single well-told story can illustrate a long-term, equitable partnership from a local organization's point of view. It can reveal the consequences of poor communication from donors, highlight unmet needs that don't fit into tidy proposal categories, and express hard truths without assigning blame.

Story-telling allows space that data analysis doesn't. It accommodates irony, anger, imagination, and vulnerability. It lets us articulate the future we want for our communities, even if that future feels out of reach right now.

My central question for the #ShiftThePower Fellowship was: **Does personally meeting the person who carries the story change one's perspective enough to lead to the right decision?** That question shaped the entire *Meetings for Change* series – creating spaces where international organization representatives could meet someone from the community and, potentially, become advocates.

Yet, in hindsight, I realized this framing risks reinforcing the idea that local actors are only valuable when endorsed by outsiders. In reality, local responses have always had their fiercest advocates: the communities themselves. They carry not only the labour of aid, but the lived consequences of failure.

One encounter might not reshape the worldview of a chief programme officer, but sustained exposure to a vibrant ecosystem of local stories just might. As Lina Srivastava notes,

“transmedia ecosystems” allow complex narratives to shift culture and behavior over time. Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith in her work “Decolonizing Methodologies” (1999, 2021) reminds us that reclaiming narrative is a political act. Telling the story with intention is an action that in itself disturbs the colonial legacy of the humanitarian system.

When local communities tell their stories – unfiltered, repeated, and centered – a new narrative can emerge. It could make the old system of top-down aid feel obsolete. The final goal is to reach the point where local organizations don’t need to constantly advocate for “right decisions” in their favour, but when anything else would feel inherently wrong. The main indicator of a changed narrative in society is when people move past the point of asking if change is possible and start wondering how we lived without it.

One of the most significant shifts in recent years is the reframing of aid and philanthropy from charity to justice. Historically, the narrative painted donors and INGOs as benevolent figures, extending goodwill to the less fortunate. This story, while comforting to donors, obscured the structural causes of inequality and the historical legacies of extraction, colonization, and exclusion. Today, a new narrative is taking root – one that frames aid not as generosity, but as justice. To proclaim that struggling nations are undeserving of help publicly is rather outrageous and righteously criticized, and that was achieved through decades of stories where communities fought colonialism.

There is already an existing theory of change communication developed by Marshall Ganz. The “Story of Self, Us, and Now” offers a powerful framework of what you need to create a compelling story to spark emotion that will fuel future action. Through my personal experience with advocacy, I would like to suggest a formula that could help local initiatives to navigate their way in international advocacy.

To change the narrative, you need more than a good story. You need to be contextually fluent, and you need to deliver your message on the right stage, with very intentional pacing.

1. **Start with a compelling story.** A story that carries a clear message and reflects your lived experience. This is your *Story of Self* and *Story of Us* – why it matters to you and how it connects to the broader community.
2. Then, **develop contextual fluency:** the ability to speak both the language of your community and the institutional language of the system that you’re trying to influence. Movements like #ShiftThePower and Decolonizing Aid help build this bridge, offering shared vocabulary and frameworks that make your message legible to donors, INGOs, and global actors – without diluting its meaning.
3. **Choose your stage wisely.** It could be a tweet thread, a public event, a UN conference, an open letter, a short documentary, or even a private email to a programme officer. You can also build your own stage: a networking event, a workshop, or a digital campaign. What matters is that the right people are watching – the ones who can take action, decide, shift policy, or amplify your voice.
4. Finally, **tune your pacing.** What happens before and after the act of story-telling? Do you prepare your speakers? Is there a petition to sign, a follow-up meeting, or a plan to share this message with more audiences? Can one story lead to a bigger stage or a deeper conversation?

This act of claiming must be repeated – across time, platforms, and audiences – until it results in tangible change. Telling multiple stories on multiple stages builds the narrative ecosystem we need. The locally-led response movement has already shown how stories from different parts of the world echo one another: the same frustrations with bureaucracy, the same exclusion from decision-making, the same inefficiencies in aid. These shared experiences don't just highlight isolated problems – they signal a broader narrative shift already underway. What's needed now is volume.

In their efforts to hold donors and INGOs accountable, local activists often turn to numbers: citing the Grand Bargain, annual reports, or the percentage of aid actually reaching communities. The push for transparency is essential – but when these statistics replace local stories in conversations, it gives space for endless technical rebuttals and delays. We get pulled into a loop of justifying, explaining, and defending why change is needed, instead of demanding it. Local actors end up measuring crumbs when they should be claiming tables. International advocacy requires boldness – not just in ideas, but in presence. Just as once, it was radical feminists who dared to declare that women should have the right to vote.

At the start of this work, and still today, I've been deeply influenced by Deborah Doane's "Narrative Power and Collective Action" (2021), where she argues that those in power often frame story-telling from the margins as too risky. But, as she reminds us, not taking narrative risks simply preserves the status quo.

When your vision is expansive, you don't need to measure crumbs – you'll notice the shift as it happens. So, speak more. Speak louder. Tell stories that resonate. Occupy more stages. That's how we change the narrative – and with it, the system.

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