

“TELL-TO-ACT”

An alternative framework for culturally aware community mobilization and engagement in development work.

Let me start this with some reflection questions we encounter but rarely give enough attention to when working with communities in different contexts in our projects.

When is a word a buzzword? For example, what do we mean by words like development, empowerment, engagement, participation, equality in relations, and so on? What do our missions, visions, values, and goals mean in reality – especially for the communities we work with? Do we mean them and live the values we load into them, or are they just for fashion? Beyond the secretariat, what place do the rest of our stakeholders take in our strategic processes? Are we accountable to them? How do we mobilise and engage the communities around us in our work? What becomes of the story we find in the communities before our project story? Who owns the story of what we do? Who is the storyteller? and whose story is the most vital?

These are questions we believe our recently concluded project and the frameworks emerging from this could support paying more attention to. Titled Tell-To-Act, we combine True Storytelling and the Protreptic dialogue concept, to develop all-around value-based strategies on how to ethically mobilize and create commitment among the communities we work with in our projects and organizations, towards more equal relations and co-creation/co-ownership in our work.

Emerging from a long-known effective communication method storytelling, the concept of ‘True Storytelling’ builds on a wholistic approach to discovering the ethical grounds for engagement in our work and the people we work with, by being both true/ethical to who we are, and what the contexts we work in really call for, but also equal making space for all stories around us and all stakeholder voices (Jens Larsen et al, 2020). On the other hand, Protreptic calls for us to turn the individual, the organization, and society towards the essential and ethical. The concept has roots in Ancient Greece and the philosopher Aristotle as a form of dialogue that helps us achieve a greater and more nuanced understanding of the concepts we work with in different contexts and times.

Combining ‘True storytelling and Protreptic’ in this project was thus a clear ambition to co-create preconditions and usable frameworks for NGOs and other institutions/actors in development work, to ethically reflect on their role while working with different communities and contexts. And, although it feels like a huge job to take on, it is a work in progress – our aim and hope are to create dynamic frameworks that tincture continuous reflection and improvement of our praxis over time.

Indeed, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), experts, staff, and volunteers in development work know that good intentions and innovative projects are not enough if we are to succeed with our projects and make a difference in the world. It is our ability to deal with complexity; build bridges of understanding across borders and cultures; the ability to create ownership and motivation among our partners, followers, employees, and all relevant stakeholders that is centrally and all-important (CIVICUS, 2022).

Research from among others, consultancy Mckinsey points out that 70% of implementation plans in organizations fail. This is due, among other things, to the lack of involvement of all relevant stakeholders,

where often the strategy is planned by a small group without the involvement of especially the grassroots. Another reason is that those involved find it difficult to see the meaning of the strategy or project, which commonly relates to failure to find common value for the work we are involved in. And finally, it can be difficult to understand the strategy because it is communicated unclearly and far from reality. For example, NGOs must continuously decide on many buzzwords and concepts, which can be difficult to translate and use concretely. As a result, energy, human and financial resources are wasted.

We hope, therefore, that our project can contribute to the many efforts that aim at improving our practice towards more effective community development.

Specifically, we have created:

- An online course in what we have come to call the “Tell-To-Act” method, that combines ‘True Storytelling and the dialogue method ‘Protrectic’ to create value-based clarity in relations while making space for all stories to be told.
 - The course is supported by guides that define the concepts ‘True Storytelling and Protrectic’, along with frameworks/tools on how you work with these.
- All the materials are freely accessible online here: <https://civilconnections.org/tell2act/>

The project was implemented by five partner organizations including:

- Civil Connections Community Foundation – www.civilconnections.org
- SDG World – www.sdgworld.org
- 100% for Børnene – www.100%.org
- Alternative To Separation (ATOS) – www.alternativestoseparation.org
- Early Care International (ECI) – www.earlycareinternational.dk

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