

Report on “Storytelling: A tool for change” – a session at Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development

Stockholm, May 6th 2024



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive Summary

As part of the 2024 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa, in collaboration with the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI), hosted a round table discussion entitled “**Storytelling: A tool for change**” on May 6th.

The session reflected on how storytelling can be a tool to overcome biases and to create stronger mutual understanding, including between people from different cultures and different generations, to enhance human connection. It also discussed how storytelling can help to develop empathy and contribute to dialogue processes, and thereby to the building of peaceful societies. It started with a panel discussion featuring prominent speakers from different walks of life, from civil society, creative industries/private sector, media and think tanks.

Key-take aways that emerged from the discussion included:

- To be absorbed, stories need to be sincere and relatable. Even a brief story can challenge pre-conceived ideas, prejudices, and biases, can invoke empathy, and make the audience understand the perspective and situation of the storyteller.
- Storytelling can play a transformative role, help to change perspectives, and thereby support in building more peaceful societies. It can have the power to affect policy and decision making.
- Media and social media can be powerful tools for storytelling and can help amplifying the outreach. Media can tell stories but is even more powerful when acting as platforms, allowing people to tell their own story.
- While recognizing the potential positive power of storytelling, one needs to remember that storytelling is not neutral. It is subject to biases, politics, battles of narratives and power dynamics of those in the position to finance and produce stories. This can twist a story and change its narrative.
- It is therefore important to ensure that storytelling is inclusive and supported, which could be achieved by society and state institutions enabling diverse perspectives and be mindful to include underrepresented voices and allow for different voices to be heard.
- Intergenerational dialogue, through storytelling, can serve as an important tool in dealing with trauma and reduce the risk of conflicts being inherited from one generation to another.



Detailed Report

On May 6th, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa and the Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) hosted a roundtable discussion entitled “**Storytelling: A tool for change**”. The session reflected on how storytelling can help us put biases aside, create stronger mutual understanding, including between people from different cultures and different generations. It also discussed how storytelling can contribute to enhancing human connection, developing empathy, and contributing to dialogue processes and thereby to building peaceful societies.

The session was part of the 2024 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development, hosted by SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute). The forum is a major annual dialogue-driven event that provides a neutral platform for interdisciplinary exchange among members of international communities in the development, humanitarian, peacebuilding, and security spheres. This year’s forum was on the theme “**On the Edge: Navigating a Changing World**”¹.

To set the scene for the roundtable discussion, the Dialogue Institute had invited a varied set of speakers: Caroline Faraj (Vice President and Editor-in-Chief, CCN Arabic), Nadim Houry (Executive Director, the Arab Reform Initiative), Shady Khalil (Co-founder, Greenish and Campaigns Lead, Greenpeace), and Linda Mutawi (Film Producer, Fikra). After a conversation style panel discussion, moderated by the Director of the Dialogue Institute, Charlotta Sparre, there was an open roundtable discussion with some 60 participants.

The discussion encouraged participants to exchange experiences and best practices around storytelling, as a way of developing empathy, increasing mutual understanding, and enhancing human connections. Storytelling was covered within various thematic areas that included but were not limited to advocacy, civil society engagement, filmmaking, environmental activism, media, as well as policy making.

“Everyone is a storyteller. The best stories are the personal stories, the stories that are told and framed by those who lived them.”

¹ [2024 Stockholm Forum on Peace and Development/SIPRI](#)

“The best stories are the stories that put us in the shoes of others, of those who are different to us.”

What makes a good story?

On what makes a good story, Caroline Faraj, who is a prominent Jordanian journalist and passionate storyteller, began by saying that *“Everyone is a storyteller. The best stories are the personal stories, the stories that are told and framed by those who lived them.”* She explained that the most important thing in storytelling is to let the people tell their own story, in their own environment and in their own way. She added *“if they are guided, limited, or put in a certain frame, their story risk being lost”*.

Palestinian filmproducer Linda Mutawi, stressed that *“the best stories are the stories that put us in the shoes of others, of those who are different to us”* as they can help us to challenge our biases. Nadim Houry, who is from Lebanon and leads the Arab reform initiative (ARI), a collaborative think tank established with mission to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change in the Arab region, added that stories that have a surprise element make us think, reflect, and can help to reassess our preconceived ideas.

Shady Khalil, who is a passionate Egyptian environmentalist and the co-founder Greenish, a social enterprise focused on educating communities about the environment and empowering them to develop solutions for their most pressing environmental challenges, underlined that *“the best stories are the ones that are relatable and sincere and that resonate on a human level”*.

“The best stories are the ones that are relatable and sincere, and that resonate on a human level”

Media and storytelling



With her long experience from media Caroline Faraj shared her reflections on the role of storytelling in reporting. She stressed that media should strive to reflect the reality as much as possible. It needs to be present on the ground, speak to the people and give them the possibility to *“be storytellers”*. She said that media can provide people with a platform and give them an opportunity to share their own stories. She also shared examples on how trainings could help people to better tell their stories. To be able to reflect the reality, media needs to be present on the ground and to be able to reach out to people. However, Faraj noted, that sometimes *“like currently in Gaza”* foreign media stations can't be on the ground and therefore must rely on local reporting. In such cases people tend to turn to social media reporting.

Faraj highlighted that social media has helped giving space to storytelling, by allowing local storytellers to broadcast their stories and have a broad outreach, even with small means, often only with a mobile phone. At the same time, she reminded that social media algorithms can be selective and overwhelming, and they can risk creating opinion corridors and silos, and they can feed into narratives, hate speech, and contribute to cycles of violence.

In addition, she reminded that media organizations sometimes frame the stories with a risk that the storytellers themselves get sidelined. She underscored that it is important to be mindful that such behaviour risk leaving to either showcasing and selectiveness, and/or to censoring or politicization.

***“As media, we should strive to reflect the truth as much as we can.
Media needs to be present on the ground and speak to
the people and give them a chance to be storytellers.”***

Environmental activism and storytelling



As an environmental advocate, Shady Khalil highlighted that within the field of climate change, it is essential to speak to the reality that people live, not to the imported stories that have little or no relevance on the ground. He underlined the importance of localizing the climate agenda and said: *“We need to avoid imported stories, respect people, and open platforms and create dialogues.”* He added that there is a necessity to make the agenda more inclusive and be mindful of the perspectives of minorities, indigenous people, local communities, etc.

Khalil also indicated that environmental activists often connect with actors, artists, filmmakers, to communicate environmental and climate challenges as it is a way to communicate more effectively – and is a way to raise awareness on existing injustices and inequalities.

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open platforms and create dialogues.”***

Policymaking, advocacy, and storytelling



With his experience from research, policy analysis and advocacy, Nadim Houry, noted that although there is a good potential in the power of storytelling, one needs to remember that even powerful stories can at times fail to impact or gain any traction with policymakers.

He expressed some scepticism towards storytelling in policymaking, based on the idea that one cannot build a policy based on a story. However, he argued that, by combining evidence-based research and policy recommendations, conveying stories can be an important additional tool in the following advocacy work. By avoiding dry and mechanical language and by bringing in stories from reality, including underrepresented voices, the perspectives by policymakers may be influenced.

Filmmaking and storytelling



From her side, producer Linda Mutawi, emphasized on the power of storytelling in films. She started with saying " *Good films are the ones that make you connect to a character and a setting that is different from our everyday life. That creates empathy and an understanding of what other people are going through. It is a tool to humanize*".

She said that films should not aim to tell people what to think, but only seek to create a connection with the audience. However, she reminded that power dynamics and biases that can limit, distort, or even suppress stories that deserve to be told, as funding determines which films can be produced or not.

Storytelling in peace and development work

In a rich and engaging discussion with participants, coming from a wide range of local, regional, and international organisations, added perspectives and experiences from across the world. Participants added that the best stories are those that reach, impact, and create a connection with unexpected audiences. They are those that are not twisted by the biases, complexes and projectionism of the audiences, editors and producers who tell storytellers what should be said or what matters. These stories will also be able to make people understand each other's common humanity and translate into a better understanding of people's conditions in wars and conflicts, people's experiences of violence and traumatic events. Storytelling as part of intergenerational dialogue was also highlighted and participants shared experiences on how story telling between generations could help addressing traumas and reducing risks of inherited conflicts.

In addition to the key take-aways presented in the executive summary, there are some further reflections that emerged from the discussion:

- Everyone is a storyteller and each one should keep telling their stories, whenever and in whatever way they can.
- People in positions of power and privilege should empower, rather than limit, storytellers especially those who lack access and are underrepresented.
- Stories can be used to reflect on biases and find ways to overcome them.
- Stories can be used to change narratives and actions.
- Storytelling can be a useful tool in processes to build peaceful societies.
- Storytelling can play a role in challenging existing systems, question power dynamics and help building inclusive processes, and thereby give people hope.
- Society should lend greater support to cultural and artistic institutions that can empower people to be more confident storytellers.
- Storytelling can serve as an important tool between the generations in dealing with trauma and reduce the risk of inherited conflicts.