

The Salzburg Statement on Creating Community-Owned Narratives for Healthy Local Economies

OVERVIEW

Good population health, well-being, and community participation are critical foundations for a flourishing economy. Good health and life chances are to a large extent determined by economic, social, and environmental conditions. But these ‘human capital’ factors have not typically been part of economic policy or investment strategies, nor has economic development been part of public health and the care system.

The impact of this disconnect is becoming clear, as communities get left behind, and investment often is not managed for the benefit of everyone. There is also growing recognition of the need to challenge dominant economic narratives that have influenced strategies for improving places and people’s lives. One way to overcome this disconnect is to involve citizens in policy dialogue through the creation of narratives that collectively address issues and identify solutions.

We call on health and economic policymakers to recognize they have a responsibility to stimulate sharing of information between communities and policymakers by the promotion of narratives as an inclusive method, complementary to other sources of evidence.

This Statement was formulated by several Fellows who attended the Salzburg Global Seminar program, *Bridging Worlds: How Can We Use Business and Economic Development Strategies to Support Better Health?* (salzburgglobal.org/go/616), which was held in partnership with the Health Foundation.

It is well-recognized that good population health, well-being, and community participation are part of the foundations for a flourishing economy. We also know that good health and life chances - or their absence – are to a large extent determined by the economic, social and environmental conditions of where people are born, grow up, learn and work. But these ‘human capital’ factors have not typically been part of economic policy or investment strategies. Nor has economic development been part of public health and the care system.

The impacts of this disconnect between health and economy are becoming clear. The material impact is that communities get left behind, and investment often isn’t managed in ways that benefit everyone. There is also growing recognition of the need to challenge the dominant economic narratives that have influenced strategies for improving places and people’s lives. Their focus on economic data, ignoring wider social and environmental impacts, is now seen as part of the problem. Another impact is that communities can lack a voice in economic decision-making, and people feel disenfranchised from the public agencies and private investments in their area. One way to overcome this disconnect is to involve citizens in the policy dialogue through the creation of narratives.

Narratives are stories that humans use to make sense of a complex world. Our ancestors created myths as a way of explaining natural or social phenomena. Fast-forward to today, policy narratives are used in arguments between people of different political ideologies or philosophies, as the logic for decision-making. Creating narratives is a way of ordering information and prioritizing certain characters, goals, and actions.

In literature, a good narrative creates a story that becomes well-known and re-told. In public life and policy-making, a good narrative means that the story that is told about a place, a group of people or way of doing things has resonance and becomes legitimate. A Demos Helsinki publication* on the concept of universalism illustrates how narratives structure values and arguments, so influencing the outcomes of policy-making.*

WHY ARE NARRATIVES IMPORTANT?

Many modern-day challenges like climate change, inequality, and health care are complex and require a systems approach that looks at root causes and interconnections. It is increasingly important that policymakers look beyond a specific issue and associated statistics to see the whole picture.

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A story has many different qualities that make it useful for the work of systems change. It's a direct route to our emotions, and therefore important to decision-making. It creates meaning out of patterns. It creates coherence amongst communities. It engenders empathy across difference. It enables the possible to feel probable in ways our rational minds can't comprehend. When it comes to changing the values, mindsets, rules, and goals of a system, the story is foundational.

Narratives are often used at times of transition, moments of change, or during particular decision-making processes. This is because they help illuminate the past, present, and future in a way that suggests routes for change. Narratives in public life often highlight the divisions or breaks in systems (e.g., included and excluded groups). They are processes to help make a case for change. By creating a timeline or logic that links the past, present, and future, they can change the way people act in the present.

WHAT ARE COMMUNITY-OWNED NARRATIVES?

A community-owned narrative is a shared-story about a place, and events connected to that place and is the product of many voices. At a local level, a narrative links events over time in a specific place. A community-owned narrative will link past events to the present and should include a positive vision for the future, although not necessarily one centered on economic growth or continual progression. The process of creating a narrative includes choices about what events are included and who the story focuses on.

HOW CAN WE DEVELOP THEM?

Successful narratives are the ones that are remembered. They stick in citizens' minds, are shared and re-told, and promote concrete action. Co-creating narratives is an approach that includes relevant stakeholders in collectively addressing issues and ideating solutions. It builds trust between citizens and decision-makers and stimulates ownership of the narrative.

There are several platforms and methods for developing and sharing narratives - most are not the typical tools currently used in policy or decision-making. They include both digital and physical platforms, enabling wide participation. Techniques include writing (e.g., letters to/from the future), drawing, pictures, maps, discussions, and oral storytelling.

Most importantly, the process for creating these narratives should involve co-creation. Some principles for designing co-creation processes are set out below.

Roadmap to designing a successful co-creation process (Demos Helsinki):

1. Know your goal: What is the change we want to make in the community or in how decisions are made?
2. Define what you want to co-create: What parts of the narrative creation should be co-created?
3. Find and motivate the obvious and not-so-obvious co-creators: Who are most likely to participate? Who are the relevant gatekeepers to ensure the narrative includes a wide range of community voices? Which groups aren't often participating in, or are being left out of, decision-making processes?
4. Build an iterative process that has motivating platforms: Is the co-creation process designed to be adjusted along the way? Which platforms do this community prefer or need to co-create the narrative?
5. Support and sustain the change resulting from the narrative creation: Do the decision-makers have the resources and motivation to include the different factors these narratives will encourage them to consider or the whole systems approach needed? How can we continue the co-creation process and continue to evolve the shared narratives about our place?

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL RISKS?

Creating narratives owned by the community opens policymakers to a number of real or perceived risks. These need to be considered alongside ways to mitigate those risks.

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Pessimistic or divisive narratives may emerge. Policymakers and decision-makers who lead processes to develop community-owned narratives may be concerned that by ceding control, they open the way for views that they find unacceptable to dominate. It may be helpful to build opportunities for a range of views, including minority points of view, to be heard and given appropriate weight into the narrative development process. The process may also be 'formative' in that it creates opportunities for people's views to develop and new stories to emerge from the community conversation.

The elite may hack narratives. Where those in positions of power have ultimate control over the final story, an extensive collaborative process can result in a product which does not genuinely reflect the views and understandings of the community. This risks losing the trust of the communities who were supposed to be included. A community-owned narrative must genuinely give as much weight to those who do not hold formal power, as those who do.

Narratives overly focused on the present. A really effective narrative should be a story which connects the past to the present and the future. Processes which gather people's views about how things are now may produce ahistorical narratives of a place which fail to provide the overarching story which is vital for a community's sense of identity. Considering future trends in areas such as democratic reform (e.g., devolution of power), environmental change, and the impact of technology on work future of work, might require a considerable effort but may help to produce a much stronger narrative.

CALL TO ACTION

We call on health and economic policymakers to:

- Recognize they have a responsibility to engage all relevant participants in the development of new policy.
- Stimulate a natural flow of information between communities and policy professionals by the promotion of narratives as an inclusive method, complementary to other sources of evidence.
- Provide a human bond to inform health and economic policy by allowing those people affected to tell their stories and connect their experiences so that more acceptable routes for change emerge.

REFERENCES

*Demos Helsinki. Universalism in the Next Era: Moving Beyond Redistribution. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.demos-helsinki.fi/en/julkaisut/universalism-in-the-next-era-moving-beyond-redistribution/>. [Accessed 19 August 2019].

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