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PHILANTHROPY

SOCIAL IMPACT STORYTELLING IN SOUTHEAST ASIA & NEPAL

An exploration of the support ecosystem

October 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Firetree Philanthropy engaged in an exploration of the ecosystem supporting 'storytelling for social impact' in specific contexts in South-east Asia and in Nepal.

Firetree does not work in this space, so the main purpose of this exploration was to learn and document how this space is currently structured, funded and supported.

The need to map this space was born out of interactions, reflections and analysis on the ever-increasing impact stories and narratives have on the lives and work of the communities and organisations we partner with and support in the region.

As narratives become instruments for participation and for negotiating civic space, we felt we should engage in open learning conversations and explorations within the support ecosystem.

BACKGROUND

The mapping has focused on several ASEAN countries and Nepal.
We have also included some actors based outside the region (Australia, Germany, Netherlands, UK, USA), because of their significant interests and operations in the region.

While appreciating the many existing organisations and actions supporting the storytelling for social impact ecosystem in vital, effective and innovative ways, we opted to focus on **gaps** and **pain points** to highlight what is missing, and how and where the greatest impact could be achieved by avoiding duplications and addressing identified gaps.

We would like to acknowledge the many limitations of this research.

It does not have the ambition to fully portray all the nuances of a complex, vast and fast-evolving space, nor does it claim any academic standards and relevance. We see it rather as a learning journey, starting from the desire to explore and hold meaningful conversations, and to share the findings, for the validity and relevance they can have at this point in time, aware as we are that the circumstances of the whole ecosystem may change even substantially very quickly.

The choice of the limited number of stakeholders to engage and which conversations to hold has been arbitrary, based on the purposes of the research, the willingness to take part in it and their availability. Interviewees have been approached also through referrals from Firetree's wider networks.

COVID-related restrictions have also meant this was purely an online research. All conversations took place online, and no direct observation of any live activity was possible. All resources examined were in English; similarly, all conversations were held in English, which we acknowledge the limitations of.

We don't therefore present this as a robust study, our goal is just to share the insights we have gleaned from this partial exploration, in the hopes that it is a useful contribution for social impact storytellers and other stakeholders too.

We are deeply grateful to all the organisations and individuals who generously shared their knowledge

and insights. We publicly acknowledge their contribution. As agreed with them though, we are sharing the insights gained from these discussions in an aggregated and anonymised way.

METHODOLOGY

Desk-based research
Review of academic literature and grey literature and analysis of media products (documentaries, arti-cles, photojournalistic productions, mixed media journalistic productions, podcasts, comics, etc.).

Stakeholders mapping
A mapping to identify individuals and organisations holding significant interests within the ecosystem, possibly also with the capacity to influence it, and to analyse their positions, roles, relations, affiliations, interests and spaces they represent.

Power analysis
Analysis of the nature of powers at play in the system, and the power relations existing among different actors, in order to understand in what forms, at what levels and in which spaces power is exercised, and the stakeholders' different expressions and dimensions of power - also in relation with one another. This analysis proved to be particularly relevant as the research focused on the support dimension within the ecosystem, and the financial support, in particular, happens in a space dense with power relations, usu-ally obvious ones, but at times also hidden or underexposed.

Conversations
We had 30 curated conversations with stakeholders who play a significant role, who are experimenting in the space.
Although of course state legislation, funding and policies can and do have the greatest impact on the field, we have opted to note this prominence without further exploration or engagement; no state actor was interviewed.
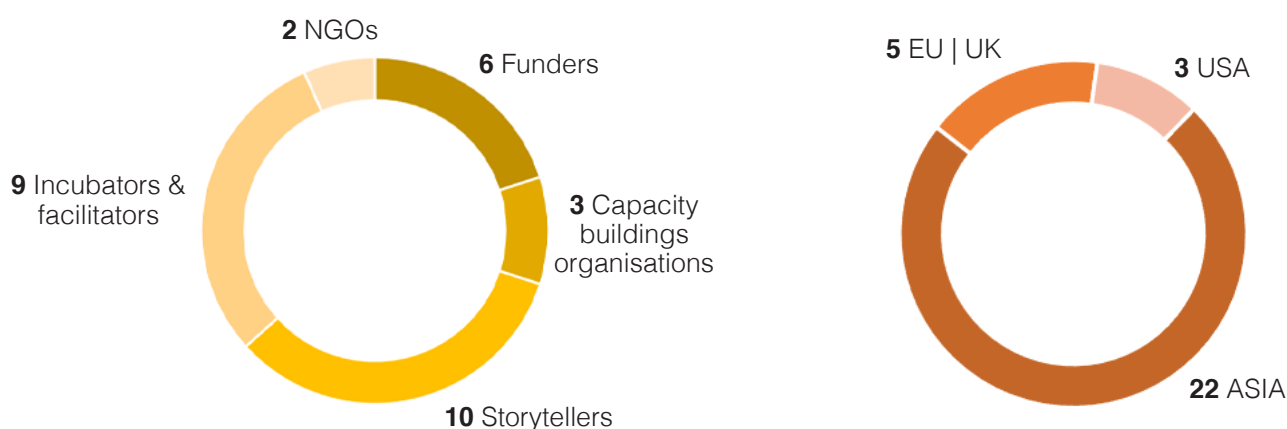
In line with our values, individual storytellers were offered a stipend payment for their time contributing to this and this write-up tries to center their experiences and perspectives as much as possible.

DEFINITIONS

We appreciate the expertise and quality of the research being produced around this topic. All definitions adopted are operational.

We use "storytelling" as an umbrella term, embracing the production of stories intended for an audience in any format, and aimed at having a social impact – that is, for example producing and sharing information on issues affecting society at local, national or regional levels, highlighting dynamics around these issues, and telling the stories of the people working to solve these problems in various capacities, especially when they come from the communities affected.

More "established" storytelling formats explored are journalism, photography, documentary films.

Alongside these, we have also looked into podcasts, vlogs, participatory video productions, practices at the intersection of community-based art, design and storytelling, media productions (short videos, podcasts, etc.) and comics.

In addition, we chose this breadth because we ourselves are in the process of learning, as an organisation, and did not want to limit the exploration to a single medium.

We chose to adopt such a broad view of this also because we're aware that everyday stories reach people in many different ways and from different sources, in a dynamic process of culture and meaning making. Everyday stories are important because they contribute to creating and shaping narratives, which in turn shape norms and worldviews. They are the playing field where social change, or resistance to change, is discussed and formed.

Limiting the scope of the research to more traditional media would have meant:

- Ignoring considerable portions of the population in the region that currently neither produce nor access established media products because of age, geographical, socioeconomic and other conditions – and, above all, because of limited or no access to the tools and resources needed to produce stories with a chance of becoming mainstream.
- Expanding the field of what we consider "social impact storytelling" means also taking into consideration and giving legitimacy to stories that are produced by those most directly affected by the issues covered, who can be thus considered creators and not only subjects of stories.
- Ignoring innovation and all the new ways in which stories are produced, received and shared.

The storytelling we came across during the research covered very diverse issues with local, country and regional relevance – ranging from social to environmental to economic aspects of life: digital rights, human trafficking, ethnic-based discrimination, domestic violence, wildlife conservation, mega-infrastructures, modern slavery, among many others.

And then, of course, COVID-19: stories on how governments have responded to the emergency, stories on how local communities have coped during lockdowns and in the economic crisis. Stories on the effects of legislation passed to better respond to COVID, but putting strong limits on rights and freedom. Stories on vaccines roll-out or on vaccines missing.

We consider "storytellers" to be any professional and non-professional individuals and organisations, media companies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) en-gaged in storytelling work, in any format, with a focus on social impact.

This focus can be explicit, such as storytelling that will be used as a tool in awareness or advocacy campaigns of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs,) or it can be an intended consequence for sparking interest and conversations around certain topics.

We define the *"support system"* as the complex of short and long-term strategies, policies and actions actively supporting storytellers in their work, both directly or indirectly, put in place by individuals, communities, private, public, national and international actors.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last two decades several countries in Southeast Asia has shown a consistent trend in the shrinking of civic space, defined as ranging from closed to repressed, to – at best - obstructed[1].

COVID-19 exacerbated inequalities and exposed failures, and has forcefully pushed the digital to the forefront of life and social impact work[2].

The square, the public sphere, the space has become increasingly digital, as much as physical - at times, even more so. The work of civil society happens in a continuum between the digital and the phys-ical realm.

The forced digitalisation of all aspects of life (from education to smart/remote working, to informing, mobilizing and organising communities) has also highlighted and further sharpened inequalities and divides within societies.

"Imagined communities" occupy "imagined geographies"[3]

Parallel to the shrinking of the civic space, there is also a **fragmentation** of the civic space, including the media civic space[4]. In the narrative arena, stories compete for attention and legitimacy, and, ultimately, for power.

Narratives are made of **stories**, and stories are not just words, images, sounds, signs. People make sense of the world with stories. Stories tell the world as it is, or as people perceive it, and allow to imagine the world as it could be. Stories make sense and create meaning. Stories can inspire change or they can instil fear for change. Stories can create empathy or perpetuate hate and stigma.
And they matter. What stories get told, by who; how, when and where they are accessible, in what languages, in what formats – all this matters.

An ecosystem approach to storytelling and the media at large could help overcome closures and isolation, allowing for quality information, greater representation, better communication, and ultimately benefitting not only all the stakeholders in this space, but societies at large.

It appears that the importance of storytelling for anyone involved in human rights and social change is becoming increasingly crucial and evident, yet the sector remains insufficiently supported and severely underfunded.

Funding is a key element of civic space: the adequate allocation of resources to civil society and to those

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[1] Civic space broadly defined as freedom of speech, peaceful assembly and association.

[2] Bernholz, Lucy. 2021. Philanthropy and digital civil society: blueprint 2021.
https://pacscenter.stanford.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Blueprint-2021.pdf

[3] Benedict Anderson. 1983. "Imagined communities" and Edward Said

[4] https://splicemedia.com/our-work/cambodia-media-ecosystem

producing culture in the myriad of ways this can happen is vital for keeping civic space open, dynamic and healthy.

Acknowledging biases and issues related to power and access is necessary for expanding and improving the funding of storytelling, as well as reflections on coherence of words and practices, and assessing whether the design of philanthropic actions is truly supporting the storytelling ecosystem in its components. Coordination and collaborations can also go a long way in nurturing the narrative power and infrastructure in the region.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE MAIN ACTORS IN THE SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

Please note that the section below is designed to briefly capture some of the key trends we heard in relation to each type of actor from the interviews we had, *for those who are newer to this space*.

This is not meant to provide an in-depth or definitive guide and there will be many exceptions and nuances to what we have written below. It should be read for what it is: a brief distillation of the key themes we heard from the limited number of interviews that we conducted.

We would love for this to be a 'live' piece so please do feel free to reach out to us with additional examples, ideas or comments.
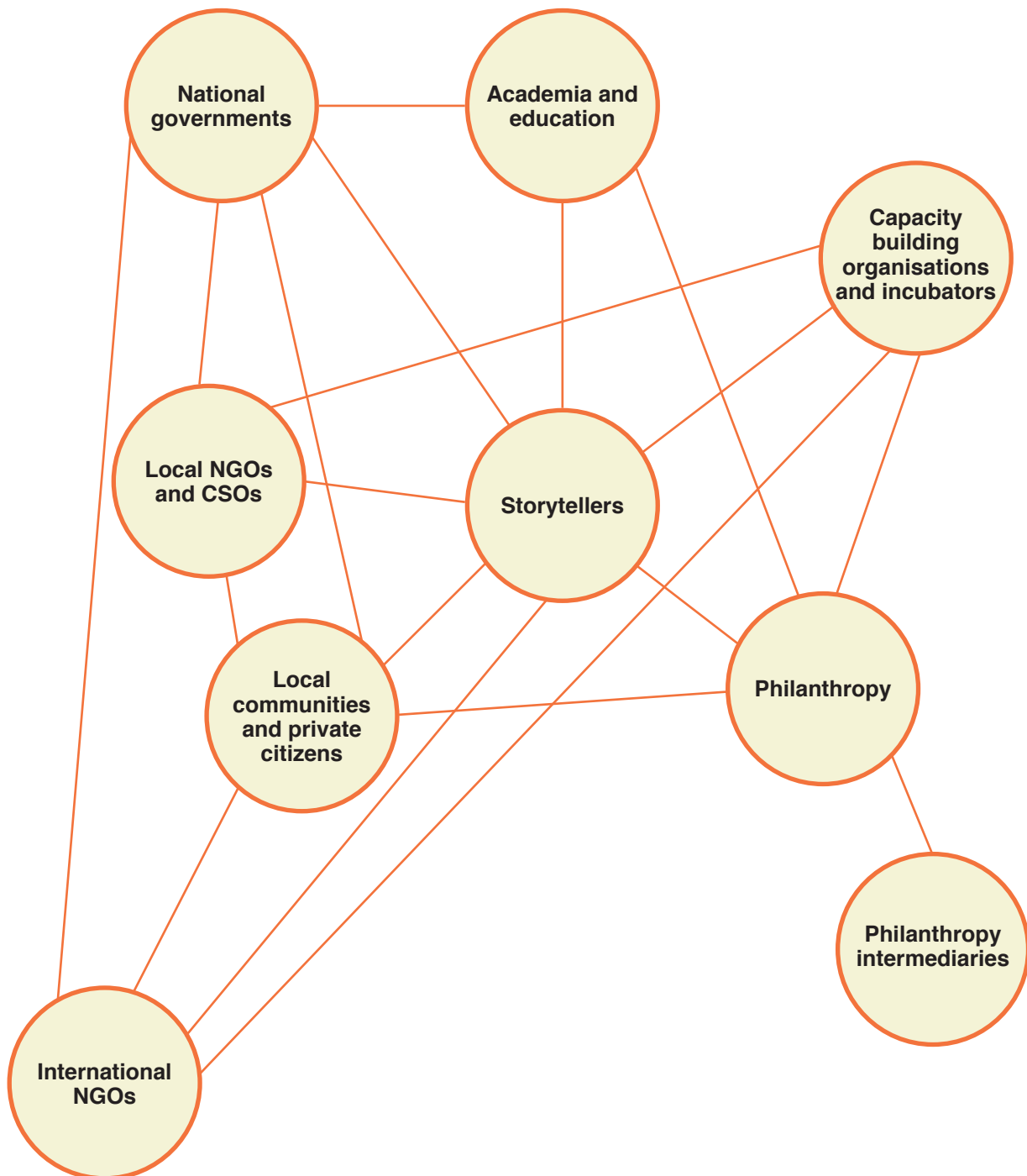
a. **Local NGOs / CSOs**: identified by many individual storytellers as their main counterparts for assignments, for access to communities affected, as sources of information and local knowledge. Despite playing a central role in storytelling, what we heard frequently was that local NGOs often seem to lack specific strategies on storytelling in particular, and communication in general. In general, and especially in the case of smaller NGOs, this may be due to a combination of factors, including:

• lack of **dedicated, adequate human resources**. The role of communication officer or ultimately the communication strategy can fall under the ED / CEO who may have a technical background in the sector of operations of the NGO, but no relevant expertise in the communication and media sector. The lack of a specific department/person may be due to financial constraints, although even larger NGOs struggle to budget for this, choosing to invest otherwise.

• lack of **quality funding**: NGOs tend to, understandably, concentrate their fundraising efforts on covering operations and guarantee minimum levels of financial sustainability. The funding system is oriented this way, and there isn't much space for funding requests that would cover the time and expenses related to the elaboration and implementation of specific plans for storytelling/narrative change. The funds are not consistent in time and nature (typically 12-24 months, kpi, deliverables, set budgets) with the timing and nature of funding that would be needed for quality engagement in the sector.

• possible lack of **strategy**. When elaborating strategic plans for the future, we frequently heard that NGOs tend to neglect the storytelling aspect of their work, most often due to financial insecurity and restricted funding tied to specific deliverables – as mentioned above – but also, in part, because they feel they do not / cannot play a significant role in this.

b. **International NGOs**. Some INGOs – such as Oxfam and Actionaid[5] – have specifically engaged over the last few years in:

• research and systematization of knowledge on the issues of storytelling and narrative change;

• specific programs to support local NGOs using storytelling as a strategic tool in their work;

• offer networking opportunities.

From what we found, the focus has been more on other regions of the world, with limited case studies from Southeast Asia and Nepal.

c. **Academia and education**. What we heard was that the support to the storytelling ecosystem is articulated into two main branches:

1. The teaching. Universities are still the main source of education for professionals, especially at the early stage of their careers. Photographers, journalists, photojournalists, visual artists tend to have degrees or post-degree qualifications in their fields obtained at universities either in their home countries, in the region, or mostly in the USA. These studies may be subsidized through scholarships.

From many conversations, though, it emerged how academic curricula and approaches in some countries in the region may be struggling to keep the pace with innovation in a fast-changing

[5] Actionaid. 2019. Celebrating the power of human rights defenders.

https://actionaid.org/stories/2019/celebrating-power-human-rights-defenders

Oxfam. 2020. Narrative power and collective action: conversations with people working to change narratives for social good (part 1 and 2).

https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/narrative-power-and-collective-action-conversations-with-people-working-to-chan-621020/

space, – and still very much focusing on more "formal" storytelling, such as journalism and photo-journalism. Furthermore, we heard that the field remains mostly male and middle-age dominated, with elements of caste discrimination also heavily significant in contexts like Nepal.

This is particularly true for poorer countries in the region, especially as far as public education is concerned, with richer countries seemingly more able to keep more up to date, offering competitive, quality (and expensive) curricula of study in the field.

2. The commissioning of bodies of work. As universities and study centres collaborate more with NGOs and access public funds, they also engage more in the communication of their projects' results through photo essays and other kind of materials commissioned directly to storytellers.

d. **National governments**. Governments are key actors in safeguarding (or failing to do so), promoting and regulating civic and media spaces.

They can also support storytelling through direct funding. Despite demonstrated considerable returns, budgets for this are often inadequate for the needs, and often not targeted – supporting the arts in general, and thus having to be distributed among a wide number and types of recipients[6].

These types of budgets tend to mostly fund established artists and industries – such as filmmaking by established directors – with limited funding available for innovation or for very young, emerging talents.

Governments also engage in important promotion activities (festivals, events, exchange programs), both nationally and abroad.

Government support to the ecosystem can also take the form of creating and nurturing the wider infrastructure where social impact storytelling takes place – including digital infrastructures, favourable tax regimes, the creation of dedicated departments, etc.

These findings are based on desk research and indirect conversations, as we did not directly engage any state actor at any level.

e. **Institutional donors**, such as foreign aid, foreign cultural centres, UN agencies, multilateral agencies, etc.
Support from these actors comes under the form of:
• Financial support.
• Direct assignments to local storytellers
• Festivals, awards and other events offering platforms for visibility, public recognition and occasions for networking with donors and other stakeholders.

f. **Philanthropy** plays a key, strategic role in the space, accounting for most of the direct and indirect support offered to many recipients in the space. Not all philanthropic support is publicly acknowledged, although there are some philanthropic organisations making this the very heart of their mission, strategies and portfolios. This is probably leading to difficulties in estimating the overall funding dedicated to storytelling initiatives.

We discovered multiple priorities for the philanthropy sector in funding the 'storytelling for social impact' space, and they include (investigative) journalism, support to the production of content

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[6] See, for example, the Philippines National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA)

(including technical training), media development towards business sustainability, media literacy, audience building, etc. Many philanthropic organisations choose a specific sector to (exclusively) fund: documentary, photography, journalism, etc.

Approaches to the support also vary based on whether the focus is the support to storytelling per se, or whether it is communicated as support to civil society at large, where storytelling is one among the actions supported within concerted, larger efforts.

It is interesting to observe the initiatives to foster networking and greater coordination among funders, going towards more systemic and ecosystem approaches, and to share (non-financial) resources, such as knowledge, networks and contacts.

Philanthropy intermediaries can also be of support by contributing to bridging the gap between funders and storytelling organisations, especially when they are committed to progressive and innovative approaches in their mission. Some funders referred to this as a way to expand their partnerships and experiment in a more controlled and faster way. Even though funders still of course conduct their internal due diligence, we heard that organisations being "referred" by trusted sources is a plus, and it can also mean pooling limited resources with like-minded donors to reach a greater impact that funders would not be able to achieve on their own.

A note of caution remains when considering philanthropy intermediaries, given their nature and their accountability (to the clients, and not necessarily to recipients or local communities).

g. **Local communities and private citizens**: the role of local communities is continuing to rise in impact and importance. As the line between subject and actors, between owners and producers of stories and narratives gets increasingly blurred, local communities and private citizens increasingly become active voices in producing their own stories. Local communities and private citizens are key in supporting storytellers in getting meaningful direct access to people and places, and helping them to navigate this space safely. Many storytellers are explicit in saying that without the support from local communities, they would not have been able to cover certain issues because either the preparatory phase would have taken too long, or they would not have had access at all, especially in COVID times.
It is in this relation with local communities that power dynamics become more apparent, and that the issues of both community safety in some situations and of time also gain more importance. We heard local communities can, understandably, be cautious when sensing approaches dismissing important nuances, with storytellers coming from "outside" for a very limited period of time, and potentially contributing through their superficial work and analysis to reinforcing stereotypes[7].

Private citizens are also becoming crucial in funding storytellers through crowdfunding and subscription-based business models, granting both financial support and independence. This is true for both:

• Freelancers / individual storytellers. The most common model is to offer online content that is free in a smaller portion, while longer features or additional content is offered to supporters or subscribers. This typically takes the form of support through platforms intended for content creators, or a newsletter whose frequency varies (e.g. from 1 week to a month).

• Larger organisations that can cover a substantial percentage of their budgets through subscrip-

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[7] See the section below on "Models of funding and support" for more details into the dangers of the "single story" and of "parachute journalism".

tions, with a variety of combinations, such as: with different tiers of membership but the same access to the same content; with access to different content and events based on the membership level; with the possibility of greater interaction with the organisation, such as polling for stories to be covered. Costs appear to range from approximately 50 USD to 500 USD per year.

h. **Capacity building organisations and incubators** can be privately owned companies, social business, not for profit type entities (NGOs). They work to build technical capacities of storytellers and organisations, engage new audiences, build communities of practitioners, bridge sectors.
    We heard that some of these organisations, the non-profit ones in particular, face very similar challenges - as far as funding is concerned – as storytellers do, while due to the "second level" nature of their work, they are often spared the risks and challenges associated with storytelling itself. They often also:
    • act as bridges across sectors (from funders to practitioners) and across jargon
    • facilitate relations and connections in both public/structured and informal ways
    • produce research and data as needed / commissioned, like country-specific surveys on the overall national situation or landscape audits.

    The services they provide range widely – here are some of the main areas of work, with references to organisations interviewed:
    • analysis and support in strengthening the business model
    • themed workshops (on topics such as media literacy, public speaking and communication also for NGOs, .)
    • technical training to individuals and organisations on:
        o safety and security, and how to deal with crisis situations, etc.
        o use of software or platforms
        o production of short films
        o production of documentaries, from filming to editing
    • community building, including across sectors (storytellers, producers, distributors, funders, etc.).

i. **Festivals** - national and international - are crucial in the support landscape. They tend to happen on a regular basis, and besides the event itself (building, consolidating and expanding audiences), they offer a variety of workshops and side programs (like pitching events, mentoring programs, etc.) and represent a space where different stakeholders can meet (including funders). Major festivals also offer funds supporting productions.

j. **Global online platforms** are major players in the space, as they commission, produce, acquire video content, and stream it to over 200 million subscribers all over the world. Netflix's commissioning budget for originals was 8 billion USD in 2018, with yearly budgets for video content around 17 billion USD[8]. It is interesting to note that the trend for the platforms is to also make available content that is locally produced and more relevant to specific local audiences. Despite access to these platforms by local storytelling individuals and organisations remaining one of the main issues (for the quality of productions required, in the first place, which is only possible with significant financial resources), this is an interesting space to observe, with also a growing body of work and research on the relation between pop culture and (narrative) change in the real world[9].
    It is also worth stressing how internet access to such paid services strongly limits the size and nature of the audiences.

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[8] https://variety.com/2019/digital/news/netflix-content-spending-2019-15-billion-1203112090/

[9] https://popcollab.org/

k. **Storytellers themselves** (individual freelancers and in/formal collectives). We heard a strong sense of solidarity and community among storytellers, especially at times of heightened insecurity. This support can be **informal**, and consist of sharing information about funding and assignments opportunities, contacts (of funders, fixers, NGOs, etc.), and in mentoring more junior storytellers, helping them develop their voices and improve the quality of their work.

When it is being **formalized**, the support by storytellers takes the form of category associations, usually at local or national level, and expands also to more formal advocacy actions.

MODELS OF FUNDING AND SUPPORT

This is a brief overview of the models of funding and support that surfaced more often during both desk-based research and the conversations we held. While this has no ambition of being an exhaustive list, given the limited sample examined, we do feel it offers a good picture of the current situation and the main trends in the field. As with all parts of this, it should be read as intended though; as a distillation of the insights we gained from the interviews conducted and from the desk-based research we did and hence, is clearly partial.

a. **Grants**

Output oriented: grants are given for the production of stories in different formats (articles, photographs, podcasts), typically on a given topic or area of interest.

The duration of grants typically ranges from 3 to 12 months, but partnerships can become more organic - especially in the case of organisations, rather than individual storytellers.

Needless to say, from the interviews we heard that in the past year, many grants have focused on COVID or science journalism. Many of the conversations reported how this interest was very strong from funders, as they want to be on the news, or need material (stories, photos) to support their other investments or funding.

Some storytellers pointed out that the timing for the outputs also made it difficult to commission significant stories on this subject, as it takes time to follow a story and find untold, meaningful angles.

It was also added that just choosing a topic doesn't necessarily mean being on top of the news – funders showing sometimes little understanding of how the news cycle works. For example, if a funder commissioning four long format stories in 4 months to a news outlet that would normally publish only 2 long features (a decision made based on their audience's response) in that same period of time, it has added stress to the organisation, that has to add resources in finding the stories and producing them, while not necessarily adding to the conversation, because the audience is then "saturated".

These kinds of grants can differ substantially based on the recipients:

o **Individual storytellers**

The application process can consist of either a full application, or a two-step process (shorter expression of interest, followed by the submission of a full proposal consisting of description and full budget), and also requires relevant supporting material (portfolio).

The amount of time needed for the screening process is often proportional to the length and size of the assignment, ranging from approximately 4 to 12 weeks.

Amounts vary considerably based on the outputs required and the timeframe (from 200 USD for a long read in 3 weeks, to 20,000 USD for a body of work to be produced in 12 months).

o **Organisations**

Grants awarded to organisations are almost always tied to deliverables and objectives (economic or other) to be achieved within a certain timeframe.

Although grants may be issued on a yearly basis, we heard examples of how partnerships can develop and be renewed, so that support can be offered over an extended period of time – sometimes even decades.

Grants given to established media organisations can sometimes be considerable, and may also lead to the creation of entire sections focusing on selected themes or projects – a media example is The Guardian's "Global Development" and the reporting on modern day slavery, exploitation and human rights.

While this is of course the most generous end of the spectrum, we heard grants can represent a very sizable portion of traditional media's outlets income, as is the case similarly for NGOs engaged in storytelling work.

Feedback / reflections on the grant approach that we heard from funders and from recipients.

Please note that this is aggregated feedback about the dominant grants system and approach, rather than about any individual funder.

▲ Pros we heard from funders

This allows for supporting (and then promoting) material that is in line with internal strategies or editorial lines.

The grants system is the most traditional and widespread, so that even for newly established organisations, it is easy to develop a grants-based system building on others' experiences, and it is easy to present results to internal and external stakeholders. It is also easy to manage on a regular basis, requiring limited staff and with management skills easy to find locally. It's easy to monitor results and produce a good picture of the results.

The process (from selection to reporting) can be standardized and monitored with traditional tools; data can be easily recorded and aggregated.

The space for failure is limited, and set plans on how to react in these cases are often in place (and in the contracts).

▼ Cons we heard from funders

The grants system may not allow funders to correctly assess the extent of the impact of their support, due to the project-specific and limited nature of it.
Even if a funder is supporting an organisation for an extended period of time, the funder's monitoring and evaluation system may be based on the duration of the single grant, and not be able to capture the full development of the recipient organisation, or of the issue at stake. This is particularly true when the support is going to movement building or any result requiring significant time to be achieved while not being so easily measurable.

▼ Cons we heard from the recipients

From a media perspective, although organisations will accept only grants that are consistent with their editorial lines, we heard that the fact that themes and deliverables are set well in advance by donors can limit the full potential or the development of a story, and may also lead to neglect equally – if not more – interesting stories that have meanwhile developed, and that may be more relevant for local audiences.

The grants system is often not consistent with the news cycle.

Due to the imbalance of **power**, very limited negotiation is possible, storytellers reported that they felt donors frequently look for implementers of plans that have already been decided (without consultations with the storytellers to be involved) and that cannot and will not be amended. This speaks to wider power dynamic issues that can play out in other aspects of philanthropic funding[10], and are not exclusive to social impact storytelling.

Access to these funds and the whole relationship with the donor is usually in English, or at best in both English and the national **language**, and almost never in other local languages. Besides the linguistic barrier, there is also often a "technical" threshold not accessible to otherwise talented storytellers, who may not be familiar with **technical and project jargon**, including the reporting and financial reporting system – and who cannot afford to pay a producer/consultant to write the applications.

This was reportedly true for storytellers across media and formats, (particularly for storytellers from local communities at very early stages of their careers, accessing grant support on their own is extremely difficult and they may decide to work alongside a CSO or NGO for support) and seems to be having more to do with the level of education and financial background, rather than with the nature of the work done.

Grants (and actually we heard of many kinds of applications, be it for a residency, a pitch, etc.) work in pretty much the same way for photographers, writers, artists, and other storytellers. Storytellers reported that those who can afford it, even hire consultants to perform this kind of work, or pay subscriptions to database type organisations that help finding opportunities, highlight deadlines and sometimes also support the application filling process, which clearly presents a further equity issue as only those who can afford to do so can access this. None of the storytellers directly interviewed, though, had ever used these kinds of services.

We heard that the amount of **time** needed to fill in the forms and prepare the accompanying material requested can be considerable, and is never compensated (only in extremely rare cases, in case the grant is assigned, the storyteller can budget some resources for this) – many of the storytellers consulted shared how the process of writing for applications and pitches can take up to 80% of their working time.

The space for **experimentation** is limited, unless it is a specific grant on innovation (which is definitely a niche). Grants tend to be awarded to organisations with very clear and successful **business models** and individuals who already have a proven track or recognition from prestigious sources (awards, publications, etc.)

▲ Pros we heard from the recipients
No praise for the dominant grants system as outlined above emerged in the conversations we had, or the desk-based research. Despite this, storytellers do engage in the grant system as it is one of the most common ways to access necessary funds.

b. **Assignments**
Assignments typically last from 3 days to 1 year, depending on deliverables and funders. They share many features of grants, but the recipients are almost always individual storytellers or

[10] https://www.alliancemagazine.org/blog/tag/edge-funders-annual-conference-2017/
    https://www.edgefunders.org/walking-walk-trust-relationships-breaking-power-dynamics-grantmaking-practices/

a collective of storytellers – mostly, although not exclusively, photographers, photojournalists and journalists, and not NGOs or other types of organisations.

▲ Pros we heard from funders

• It is easy to **control** the whole process, from the bid to the final product. Contracts and other details of the relationship are usually not negotiable, reducing the time and human resources needed for management.

• Funders limit direct exposure and expenses, and contribute smoothly to their own editorial lines.

▼ Cons we heard from recipients

• **Limited freedom** for the storytellers to choose and craft their stories, as the assignments have strong set requirements in terms of the deliverables to be produced. Budget and timing are also non-negotiable, and typically do not cover the research phase.

• **Short term** horizons and unpredictability, as these funds may be linked to projects or other strategies not publicly shared, and that may last for only a few months / years.

• Danger of the "**single story**", where the majority of the stories funded are on issues that may be more relevant to the funder (and a far-away audience) rather than to local communities, may reinforce stereotypes, or focus on non-controversial issues (lifestyle, travel, etc.)

• Danger of "**parachute**" storytelling. Assignments may also contribute to the reinforcement of stereotypes and the distortion of perceptions, that can all have very real consequences. For example, if assignments are given only to cover violent crimes in a certain part of a city, the prevalent narrative around that city will be of a violent place, where nothing else happens (because nothing else is being told).

• Commissioning organisations may not be fully **transparent** on the purpose of the assignment and on the use that will be made of the stories produced. This may cause ethical dilemmas in the storytellers, who feel they may not have all the elements to make an informed decision.

Storytellers often also lack sufficient knowledge of **contract** provisions, and legal implications especially surrounding rights on the material produced – or might not be in a position to negotiate the terms, even when changes to standard contracts might actually benefit both parties.

NGOs sometimes rely on standard contracts that limit the use of the images produced by the storyteller – when this might actually amplify the audience and reach of the messages, and increase interest around the issues. We heard this is because of lack of reciprocal knowledge, and because of the use of standard contracts.

▲ Pros we heard from the recipients

The main pro that we heard in regards to this type of funding was around the certainty that the work will be published, and the certainty on the fee (amount and time of payment).

c. **Dedicated funds**

These kinds of funds are focused upon specific categories of storytellers (such as feminist photography, minorities storytellers, etc.) or for production on specific topics of interest (human trafficking, wildlife conservation, modern slavery, etc.).

Many of the funds that we came across in this category appear to be global in outlook and often based in the USA, UK or Europe, rather than specifically based in or dedicated to Southeast Asia. We would love to connect with examples of this type of funder in the region.

d. **Core funding / institutional support**

This kind of support is issued upon agreeing not short-term deliverables, but on a longer change to be achieved. Although it may be issued within 1-3 years installments, relationships may develop through an extended period of time, with the support lasting for as long as 15 years.

▼ Cons we heard from funders

For funders with more traditional operational models, this would require major internal changes, and possibly an expansion or development of human resources as well. It would also entail the development and adoption of new models of monitoring and evaluation of progress, success and impact.

Also, the process of selecting recipients can be perceived as cumbersome and long, compared to other models (grants), and requiring the development of a deeper and longer relationship with the recipients.

▲ Pros we heard from the recipients

This has been defined in some interviews as the "**unicorn kind of support**", for it was something interviewees had heard of, but never directly experienced.

This kind of support acknowledges **real life** challenges experienced by the recipients – including covering all expenses necessary for their work and success that funders are reluctant, though, to cover when they operate through grants or assignments, such as preliminary research.

It also acknowledges the issue of **time,** in its many facets. Time between one grant and the other, during which individuals and organisations still have to "pay rent". Time needed to achieve considerable results and change (which might be longer than 3 years). Time wasted on writing multiple applications that might not suit 100% the needs of the applicant, not putting it in the best position to achieve its mission. Time saved in paperwork and data collection.

We heard, in turn, that storytellers perceive that this can lead to a better allocation of resources, as the recipient has the freedom to respond in the best way to reality, which is constantly and fast evolving, in ways that cannot always be predicted when writing a proposal that will then be implemented up to 12 months after it was drafted. This in turn can foster experimentation and innovation, including through failure and trial-and error approaches.

Core support goes also in the direction of developing a **meaningful connection** between the funder and the recipient, that goes beyond the financial support. Being based on **trust**, it is nurtured through regular and mutually enriching exchanges, and helps organisations and individuals fulfill their work in a better, more efficient way.

While Firetree is totally new to this space and undertook this as a learning exploration, we were struck by the similarities between the feedback / critiques of funding in the storytelling field and our own experience of the feedback / critiques of some of the approaches to funding NGOs and CSOs.

e. **Fellowships programs**

We found there are some fellowship programs specifically supporting media practitioners in Southeast Asia - mostly focusing on journalism, investigative journalism and photography, but also including media incubators.

There are also "global" fellowships that may not be exclusively for storytellers, but they might include among the recipient individuals working closely with storytelling, focusing on narrative change or social change through social movement building and campaigning.

Although not necessarily and explicitly labelled as social impact storytelling fellowships, they might

be designed for this, from the selection (open only to certain underrepresented categories such as women and ethnic minorities) to the kind of overall support given (besides the financial one). These programs are limited in time (up to 12 months), and, we found, usually fall under two major categories:

• Sabbatical model: during which the selected person receives a stipend for some months in order to continue one's education or focus on research. The fellowships are usually granted with a regional focus and on a regular basis (every one or two years), when a cohort of fellows is selected. Dedicated events are organised for the fellows for the duration of the program. These included travelling to the funder's country, but have been happening online since the outbreak of the pandemic. Recipients are unlikely to be at an early stage of their careers, and tend to be affiliated to an organisation.

• Training-Mentoring-Networking model: these programs offer a mix of opportunities, from training to mentoring and networking, plus facilitated access to funding programs in order to implement the work / change planned. Recipients tend to be at mid-career level.

• Implemented in close partnership with a local NGO acting as the implementer of the program on the ground and building on existing relations and knowledge of local communities.

As with other parts of this exploration, please do reach out to us if you know of examples or fellowships in other aspects of storytelling in Southeast Asia, thank you.

▲ Pros we heard from the recipients
Fellowships can be "boost support", often representing a significant **turning point** in the careers of the recipients, able as they are to get technical and educational support from high level sources. They allow the recipient to become part of a wider, often international **network**, and to access contacts and resources that would otherwise be inaccessible in such a short time and smooth way. Fellowships also tend to actively search beneficiaries coming from minorities and remote communities, expanding the **representation** and **diversity**.
They also represent excellent **credibility**, that will in turn open new doors. They also take into account the need for rest & (relative) relaxation, and for the **mental health** of storytellers who may be constantly operating in stressful and dangerous conditions – and who may also benefit from a period of time away from the ground.

General Cons / notes of caution that we heard or came across:
Fellowships programs are based on an individual, trickle-down approach: dedicated support is offered to an individual, who will then go back to where s/he/they came from, and benefit the organisation/community with all that was learnt during the fellowship.

Some literature highlights also the potential risk of (intentional or unintentional) **hijacking** / **co-optation** of social movements by taking leading figures (including committed storytellers) away from the place and dynamics at the heart of the issues tackled.

Although no significant research on this was found so far, it would be interesting to understand the "return rate", one of the critiques being that many fellows choose not to return to their original stations, either because new opportunities have opened up thanks to the fellowship, because they were not allowed back in the country after the fellowship, or because the situation on the ground evolved in such a way that their role (as it was before the fellowship) was no longer needed or viable. Although this may be more significant in the case of social movement leaders, rather than storytellers, the reflections may still be relevant and worth considering.

These points of reflection emerged only in the desk-based research, and did not emerge in any of the conversations had so far.

▲ Pros we heard from funders

The design of the program can take longer, but its implementation is then relatively smooth and less human resource-intensive, and can remain the same in its overall structure through time (allowing minor adjustments).

▼ Cons we heard from funders

Some funders noted how the selection process may be particularly time and resources consuming, especially when aiming to reach beyond the usual targets in terms of social and geographical scope – this was particularly true when not adopting a public call for applications, but rather actively searching for potential fellows.

Other concerns shared were related to the real and perceived impact of the fellowships. As most fellowships aim at supporting an individual at early-mid career, rather than well-established individuals, there are many variables that may affect the career of the recipient. Some donors reported, for example, supporting fellows who later decided to disengage from the field of practice they had been supported through the fellowship, due to major changes in their personal lives. Although this was singled out as an exception, it did become a note of caution for these funders.

Another cause for reflection for some funders was the difficulty to measure and communicate externally the impact of a fellowship, as professional development and achievements of the fellow may take place after several months or years after the fellowship.

f. **Ambassadors programs**

These are run by companies producing technical equipment used by storytellers, especially photographers. Storytellers get the latest equipment for free or at extremely favourable conditions, together with technical training and mentoring support from extremely well-established professionals. In exchange, the storytellers have to produce certain bodies of work with the equipment received, and they also have to produce certain deliverables (produce # social media posts, participate at # corporate events regionally and globally, sometimes mentor # early-career professional, all for free).

Storytellers have shared this may be the only way for them to get access to up-to-date and extremely expensive equipment. Furthermore, there was a general agreement on these positive aspects: accessing international networks; visibility; positive association with a well-established brand. There was an equally general consensus around the idea that as soon as you can afford not to be an ambassador, you'd rather not be an ambassador, as demands are quite high in terms of time, and can be disruptive to the overall work (if for example you have to attend a corporate event while on assignment somewhere else, or if you have to give up an assignment because the timing clashes with some corporate event you have to attend).

MODELS OF CAPACITY BUILDING

There are both regional and international organisations offering a mix of the modalities listed below to build the capacities of storytellers.

a. **Technical training**

   It can be on the methods and practices of the professions. The offering seems to be richer for journalists, whereas for other types of storytellers it seems to be more niche (or at least public information about the former is more widely available).

b. **Workshops**

   Workshops serve both the purpose of training and the purpose of networking, especially when happening face to face; their duration ranges from 1 to 10 days.

   Several pain points emerged around the "workshop factories" model.
   Organisations may carry out workshops under donors' (indirect) pressure, because it's easy to measure participation and results – even when they might not be the best solution to answer the needs.

   Also, we heard that an excellent workshop might turn out to be ineffective if the people attending it are not then in a position to even remotely implement what they have learnt. An example of this that we heard was a workshop on impact producing in Asia. The workshop was conducted to train producers on the role of the impact producer for documentaries. Participants were excited by what they had learnt, and willing to put it in practice – but there was no chance they could do it in their everyday lives, because the actual production budgets available for local documentaries are so tight that the director is also performing the role of producer. Many other conversations went in the same direction, also coming from organisations having workshops among their activities.

   Overall, it was perceived that workshops happening in a vacuum lack any real impact, and that they should be relevant to the local context, realistic and part of a more articulated strategy of support to the ecosystem.

   From conversations with capacity building organisations operating in the field, it emerged how some funders seem to favour workshops because they are easy to communicate and to evaluate, although it may be challenging to assess their true impact. While competencies may actually be transferred during workshops, learning usually takes time and reiteration, so that not everybody may benefit from this format, nor have the time or capacity to further and deepen what is learnt. Also, if the material conditions are simply not there to put into practice what has been learnt, the impact of a workshop is extremely limited, at best.

c. **Professional exchange programs**

   They tend to take the form of exchanges both within regions and internationally, and by sector / type of work, usually targeting early-career to mid-level professionals.

d. **Advisory services / audits / assessments**

   This type of support emerged mostly for journalists, photojournalists and photographers, to support in critical phases. It may focus on offering consultancy services to develop, test, scale or consolidate a business model, and to improve operations inside newsrooms or media organisations.
   In the case of freelance photographers, this kind of support can take the form of portfolio reviews.

e. **Help-desks**

   Mainly for journalists; they respond 24/7 to specific requests from journalists on the ground facing

difficulties in their work, by tapping into internal resources of fellow journalists, trainer and other experts. Assistance is punctual, mostly focusing on overcoming contextual rather than structural issues.

f. **Fellowships** - please see earlier notes.

g. **Mentorship programs**
We heard that these mentoring programs are aimed at early-career professionals, or people with established experience in the sector. They are aimed at both improving skills and offering professional advice from senior staff.
Fellowships typically also include mentoring.

GAPS IN THE SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

The main gaps that we heard of in the support system all seem to stem from the lack of a systemic, coordinated and strategic approach. What emerged from the exploration is often a fragmented, rather than holistic approach, aiming at supporting storytelling on a specific activity and for a limited time, but ignoring the ecosystem as a whole, and the power dynamics at play. This gap, we heard, also leads to ignoring the material conditions and infrastructures allowing storytelling to happen in a significant and relevant manner.

Stemming from this, other main gaps identified by the storytelling individuals and organisations inter-

a. Lack of funding of **preparatory phases** (research, time spent in the communities, etc.) and between one grant and the following one. These disruptions in funding make it unpredictable or impossible to implement a long-term strategy, or follow stories that might need longer timeframes.

b. Lack of focus on **local audiences**. Lack of relevant news emerged as a critical issue, a consequence of lack of funding to more traditional, alternative and local ways of doing storytelling primarily intended for local (including in local language) audiences. While much of the funding and attention goes to national or mainstream media, the local level is usually even more underfunded.

c. Lack of funding long-term for **local support ecosystems**, funding the narrative power of local com-munities, investing in local, grassroots leadership and in strategic work, and acknowledging the need to fund also the material conditions of the storytelling space. The most interesting organisations we came across funding in this way would be difficult to categorise as specifically storytelling support organisations – their approach being wider and aimed at narrative change, grassroots leadership development, human rights work, so that storytelling is (only) one important component of the civic space needed to uphold wider rights.

d. **Funders' awareness and advocacy**: it was clearly articulated that there is a widespread need to create and share knowledge on the different stakeholders' challenges and needs. We heard that funders are often not aware of how the media currently work, and this is reflected in the way their support is structured. There is an overall need to advocate within funding circles on the growing, pressing need to invest more and better in this space.

e. **Conversations** and human connections. The feedback that we heard was that there aren't enough open conversations on subjects such as ethics around doing and funding storytelling; transparency; digital rights; tokenism. Even when they happen, they are siloed and do not cross sectors.

PAIN POINTS IN THE SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

a. **(Un)Predictability of funding**.
    "In traditional fundraising there are 'donors' and 'recipients,' and the donors decide who gets what. [This is] one of the biggest sources of dissatisfaction with current models, in which large funders target support according to their own particular priorities and interests. These interests change all the time, making funding completely unreliable, but they rarely include transforming the systems that have put them at the top of the social and economic tree."[11]

    Social change and narrative change often take place over decades[12]. In contrast, only a few progressive funders commit to long term support and strategies specifically supporting the storytelling ecosystem. Most of the other funds come in bits and pieces, and can be short-lived (or relatively so). The grants and assignments prevailing model also does not allow or ensure continued support in accessing the funds.

b. **Discriminatory access** to funds. The first barrier to access is language. Almost the totality of application processes (grants, assignments, pitching, proposals, etc.) are in English; some are in the national language, but very few are in multiple local languages. The same goes with all documents and communications regarding the management and reporting of funds.
    Announcement and publishing of grants also happens mostly online, so there may be issues with storytellers with limited **data connection** and knowledge on where to navigate to access information. The funding system is also currently designed to require a certain level of education in order to elaborate all materials required. It is not sufficient for storytellers to be good at their work – they also have to be good at writing narrative proposals, budget and financial reports.

    Another very common way to access funds is through **personal connections**, discriminating those more distant to the centres of power and education, while also favouring those coming from privileged backgrounds. Considering that also access to (very expensive) technical equipment might be a challenge, the risk is that the storytelling support system as it is would fund only the already rich and powerful to tell their stories about the rest (majority) of the (peripheral) population.

c. **Extractive model to access funds**. The model to access funds and support is functioning with an extractive logic, with applicants having to spend huge amounts of time in activities like scouting for funds, pitching, writing proposals, preparing supporting documents, building relations with potential donors, etc.), with unpredictable and generally low success rates.

d. **Siloed approaches** with stakeholders in the ecosystem not understanding each other's needs and challenges, or the consequences of certain choices on other stakeholders and on the ecosystem as a whole. This is mostly because there are not many occasions where different stakeholders can meet and dialogue in a safe space and without fear of consequences. When they do happen, these occasions are too rare and not at regular, predictable time intervals.

    This means different stakeholders often do not necessarily perceive themselves as belonging to the same ecosystem.

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11   https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/transformation/forget-billionaires-lets-build-our-own-system-to-fund-the-transformation-of-society/

12   See the examples of sex marriage Nix, Kevin. 2015. It's all in the frame: winning marriage equality in America" and smoking BBC. 2012. Smoking and health 50 years on from landmark report.

Some **examples** quoted in conversations:

• NGOs and storytellers: NGOs may feel storytellers are only interested in the story and not in the people, that they are interested in producing a documentary / photographic story only to go to festivals, so focusing more on personal motivations. They might feel costs are exaggerated, as they may not have a clear idea of how much equipment and services cost.
On the other hand, storytellers may feel NGOs don't have an adequate sense of the importance of quality in the stories produced, and that they will not be able to make the most of the material produced. NGOs will give an assignment of even a couple thousand USD because it's in their project budget, to produce a video that may then get only a small number of hits on YouTube because there was no clear strategy on how to use it once available. We did, however, also see examples where smaller NGOs had achieved outsized impact and reach with their storytelling work, with a limited budget, through careful planning and strategy.

• Funders and international NGOs having long term strategies developed maybe 2-4 years before in another continent, and implementing them on the ground without much space for adapting them to local and present conditions.

• Funders focusing exclusively on a certain area (the funder's mission) of work, but ignoring that it is part of a local system. For example, initiatives supporting the development of local media organisations, or the professional development of journalists, but not taking into consideration the fact that once fully developed these media organisations might not be able to operate because of the context or because their business models will not be sustainable in the long run. Vice versa, organisations focusing on the bigger picture, say for example, the access to digital infrastructure, might focus too much on high level advocacies.

• Unrealistic expectations by funders, in terms of:

    o **Time** needed: funders may have internal deadlines they want to stick to, linked to internal budgets or strategies (they need x stories or x documentaries by a certain date), and will issue a call for proposals or a grant specifying these dates. No negotiation is possible on deadlines or outputs.

Funders may have no precise idea of how long it takes for a storyteller to research and prepare for a story, and produce the final output. For example, they may not know that it can take several (4-5) years to produce a documentary, especially when a good portion of the time is spent trying to raise and match funds (match as some funders might fund only certain activities or expenses, and not others).
They may also not be aware of how a newsroom works, or may not know the recipient's editorial line. Grants are made with a one-size-fits-all approach.

    o **Budget** allocation: funders might not understand how the expenses for shooting a documentary may vary over time, and might not be flexible enough to allow changes and major shifts from the budget first presented and approved. They might also not appreciate the importance of having certain expenses that are absolutely vital for the production itself (such as, for example, experienced, reliable and adequately paid local fixers), and might be asking for financial reporting documents that are either difficult or impossible to obtain in certain circumstances.

    o **Distribution**: where chicken-and-egg situations often occur, with grants being issued only if the recipient storyteller already has an editor or a distribution platform that will publish the story, but is not willing to fund the production of the story itself. Funders seem to prefer to step in once the risky and uncertain production phase is over, in order to support impact-related activities.

e. **Lack of synergies across sectors**. Although of course no single stakeholder is expected to bring about changes in the whole ecosystem, there was a widespread idea in the conversations that each stakeholder develops approaches and strategies without even acknowledging the system as a whole.

We heard there can be a lack of coordination among similar stakeholders - funders, for example, to avoid duplication and, more often, the widening of funding gaps (Firetree's initiative to map the system in order to better understand it, and do so reaching out to stakeholders in the system was always greeted with enthusiasm and appreciation, as something quite unusual).

NGOs and the media can also suffer from a lack of synergies: NGOs might actually have privileged access to communities affected by issues that could be of interest to the media, but there is no organic synergy between these sectors. What sometimes follows is unmet expectations, unrealised potential of the stories produced and products' quality not at the best possible standards.

This has implications at many levels, from the micro to the macro, and it leads to an overall reduced impact of the ecosystem as a whole.

f. **Lack of strategies**, strategic approaches and national government policies.

As noted earlier, there was no direct engagement with governments.
The lack of strategies can take many forms.

For example, a **funder** supporting only the production of stories on people affected by certain issues, and not engaging directly (by funding) or indirectly (by funding other related actors in the ecosystem) in building local capacities for storytelling and for engagement through storytelling.

NGOs lacking strategic communication, social media strategies, wrong framing of their work etc. Even NGOs with clear strategic plans and objectives may not have a specific strategy for communication, or might not incorporate storytelling and communication as key elements in their strategies.

Civil society may lack strategies on how to develop, communicate and achieve alternative futures, or on how to gain popular support through cultural production (including storytelling).

CHALLENGES FOR FUNDERS

a. **Time**: the true impact of funding this space may be observable only after a considerable amount of time. Although, of course, shorter horizons would still be positive, a strategic involvement, both the observation of foundations specifically funding this sector and the feedback from incubators seem to suggest that a 10-year timeframe might be best in order to be able both to offer consistent and sufficient support, and to appreciate impacts.

b. **Internal changes**. A new definition of impact might have to be adopted, together with new monitoring and evaluation systems, new procedures, etc. This is perceived as a long and tiresome endeavour – basically not worth it if the percentage of funding in this space is only a small percentage of the yearly budget[13].

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[13] How aligning principles with practice, addressing the power dynamics of collaboration, and nurturing an ecosystem for narrative power can help narrative work succeed. Savage, James. 2021. Putting words into action: personal reflections on supporting narrative change.

c. **Additional human resources**. Some funders may be concerned by the fact that funding in this space will require managing additional human resources, including for the scouting phase, for the design phase, etc. Again, some funders might not consider it worth it, if the percentage of funding in this space is only a small percentage of the yearly budget.

The storytelling space can be perceived as **too progressive** by more traditional funders, or too vulnerable to political manipulation, and less urgent compared to funding basic needs sectors (health, education, etc.).

d. Relinquishing **control**. Some funders felt that funding this space entails giving up a certain degree of control, as not all outcomes are predictable.

e. **Lack of ad hoc research and mapping**: some funders felt the information available is not responding to their needs because of a number of factors:

• Nature: the information readily available might be too academic, or lacking references to real-life and real-time examples and case studies that might help them in making decisions on the paths to further explore.

• Time and competencies needed to gather and process all the information. Especially for uncertain funders this might be deemed as an investment not worth investing the resources needed.

There is also the challenge of having internal deep, significant knowledge of more than one geographical context or sector within the storytelling ecosystem – so that funders feel they do not have all necessary information they would need to make the best and right choices. In this case, funders may tend to adopt more conservative positions, or avoid funding the space altogether.

POSSIBLE ROLES OF PHILANTHROPY

► **Fund (more)**

Given the strategic importance of storytelling and the challenges faced by this ecosystem, we heard strong feedback of the need for more funders to engage in this space.

► **Fund better**

Adopting an ecosystem approach could ensure that the impact is greatest even for limited actions of support, especially if they go towards filling identified gaps.
Acknowledge imbalances of power, biases, inequality, misrepresentation and under-representation, in order to be more effective in the support to the ecosystem.
Reflect on how the design of the support mechanism deeply affects the impact of the support itself, and might hinder reach and representation.

► **Fund strategies and strategic work**

Philanthropy can favour long-term impact over short term outputs, by supporting concerted efforts to develop strategies. This would represent a turning point for key actors (especially from civil society) that may not otherwise have the resources to ever do so. This may also be done through collaborations with incubators and capacity building organisations.

► **Fund and share research**

Fund and produce research, mappings and other thought material that is relevant for the intended audi-

ences. Do so through time, to observe changes and contribute to fast decision-making processes, so that responses remain relevant even in a quickly evolving context.

Some of the areas of need, as pointed out by storytellers, included:

• Research / horizon scans on the state of the media ecosystem not just one off, but through a long period of time - something people might expect and wait for, and that would become a reference for the system. Fund, for example, existing mapping efforts such as the Media Landscape – Expert Analyses of the State of the Media, a project by the European Journalism Centre, where some relevant country profiles are missing (such as Cambodia and Thailand).

• Research on the impact of storytelling in affecting change and decision-making, producing context relevant case studies.

• Mapping of players at local level (a sort of who's who, but including less glamorous and more under-the-radar realities), including contacts.

• Research on the design of grants proposals, as to lobby for simplification of procedures and increased uniformity of requests, as to reduce the time needed to apply.

• Research on new media and new formats, and the influence they have on local communities – to legitimize and showcase.

► **Win allies**

Lobby the gatekeepers through interaction and sharing.
In mass media communication theory, gatekeepers are "media people who make judgements on what most merits inclusion in what is sent to networks, stations, and web site operators". Traditionally, editors were the gatekeepers, deciding what made the news, and what amount of time and space was devoted to each news.

Stretching and adapting this definition in the context of this research, in relation to storytelling for social impact, we may broadly define gatekeepers as anyone having the power to define and shape the field, and to legitimise the actors in it. Philanthropy actors may well fall into this category, as they have the power to establish and promote a narrative of storytelling and media as essential tools to preserve and enlarge civic space, and to significantly contribute to narrative changes, together with the power to decide what is "legitimate" storytelling for social impact, and who can be a storyteller for social impact.

Advocate with other funders on trust-based models, on the mitigation of the identified problems of access to support, and on possible, practical ways to address the gaps in the storytelling support ecosystem.

► **Expand the field and experiment**

Shift the boundaries of what 'storytelling' (worth funding) is, by supporting also new media, alternative media, formats that may veer away from tradition, but that might reach the intended audiences more and better. **Legitimise** by supporting, and allowing also experimentation (and the possible failure that comes with it).

Expand also the geographical field, by focusing on new centres outside traditional seats of power. Support storytelling by and for the grassroots.

► **Create and nurture space (convene)**

Connect and convene across sectors consistently and through time, creating a safe space where different stakeholders can meet and share. Nurture this space in order for significant human relations to be

established and become a significant, more equal network. Do so with inclusion and equity.

This was specifically explored during the interviews, asking for specific references, but no spaces for this were mentioned.

Something getting closer to this (pre-COVID) were festivals and exhibitions: national and international events happening at regular intervals, and bringing together stakeholders from different sectors, facilitat-ing engagement, interactions and sharing.

The modalities through which this used to happen, though, were reflecting deep power imbalances – as the spaces for interaction were:

- awards
- pitching sessions - where storytellers compete for scarce financial resources
- talks - where the space for larger and longer conversations is limited
- workshops - where experts with sometimes limited knowledge of the local context share their expertise in a condensed manner over a short time (2-3 days).

Nevertheless, these were appreciated as the only times where meetings and interactions were not only possible, but also facilitated. Much was also happening beside the official program, such as informal but meaningful conversations. The community was built basically by the fact that people in the industry used to meet at festivals and events in various locations, rather than with the stated purpose of building a community itself.

Foundations and media incubators also identified this as a major area of need – creating common spaces and building a community of stakeholders across sectors – and have made an organic part of their work also the organisation of regular events. Differing from festivals, they also expand the field be-yond a single "type" of storytelling (photography, documentary, etc.), engaging media producers from different fields.

Going online due to COVID restrictions has further deepened the issue of access and limited interactions - especially physical and informal ones, although in many cases it has expanded audiences and reach.

CONCLUSIONS

It matters what stories are being told, who tells them, how they are being shared, in what ways they impact and shape narratives.

This exploration has tried to offer a snapshot of the ecosystem supporting 'social impact storytelling' in specific contexts in Southeast Asia and Nepal today. It has been especially important for us to listen to different stakeholders – funders, storytellers themselves, civil society organisations, capacity building organisations. Our aim was to understand how things currently work, but we also wanted to investigate the full consequences of the structure and design of the system as a whole.

Despite the many limitations we have highlighted throughout, some key trends emerged from this research.

The scarcity of resources – financial, first of all, but also in terms of time and expertise – has often been quoted as one of the main reasons preventing social impact storytelling to reach its full potential. We also heard how the way resources are accessible is key in preventing or reinforcing barriers and echo chambers.

Another important issue that emerged was the need to invest in long-term, strategic work. Storytelling is meaningful per se, but it becomes an even more powerful agent of social change if it happens within an intentional, purposeful vision and strategy acknowledging complexity.

What seems to emerge strongly is also the need for all stakeholders to engage in greater, wider, deeper conversations, as to better understand each other's needs, and to elaborate strategies building on com-mon interests and shared goals. Operating in an increasingly fragmented, shrinking civic space, trust becomes a vital resource to face present and future challenges.

By focusing on gaps and pain points in the support ecosystem we were hoping to shed some light on where the greatest impact could be achieved by existing or potential actors, also from philanthropy.

We see this exploration as an act of learning and sharing, and we would love for it to be a 'live' piece, so please do feel free to reach out to us with examples, ideas or comments.