



Raising our heads above the clouds

**The use of narrative practices to
motivate social action and economic development**

**The work of Caleb Wakhungu and the
Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project**

**Edited by David Denborough
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Introduction

by Caleb Wakhungu

Here in Mt Elgon, Uganda, there has been increasing concern that traditional social support structures will be overwhelmed. Economic, social, and environmental crises are the reasons for this concern. The problems of poverty, conflict, and disease are combining to threaten the stability of families and communities.

When you move around the villages, the predominant stories are usually about how the world has changed, how things are not easy now, and about how it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain family life. There is increased conflict within families, and cases of divorce and separation are becoming more common. When people talk about these issues in the villages, the conversations sometimes lead to anger, frustration, stigma, and discrimination. As divisions increase, so does anguish and depression. And children are at risk of abandonment.

In recent months, we have also had to face the consequences of devastating landslides that have led to the destruction of villages and the deaths of hundreds of people around the slopes of Mt Elgon.

These are the ‘clouds’ that encircle our communities. We must find ways to raise our heads above these clouds and to work towards the world we hope for: where joy, peace, and comfort lie. On the top of the mountains is the dream world, representing what is possible. In the middle are the problems. On the ground, where men and women and children are stepping, are anger, wars, conflict, and so on. How can we raise our heads above the clouds? How can ordinary people be brought together to paint the world in the colours that they wish to see? We are harnessing our histories along with harnessing the heat of the sun and the strength of the wind.



Drawing by Rebekah Oppenheim





Raising our heads above the clouds:

The use of narrative practices to motivate social action and economic development

*This section has been written by David Denborough
from a series of interviews with Caleb Wakhungu*


We have developed particular ways of using narrative practices to motivate social action. Even in circumstances of poverty, disease, and hardship, communities have their own resources. Community members have their own histories, and their own knowledges and skills. They have their own hopes and dreams. We are using these existing resources. We are using our own histories in ways that inspire action.

This process begins when we call an initial meeting in a community and start to talk together. As facilitators, we start asking questions. These are questions that seek to learn about the resources of history in this particular place, and at this particular time.

Step one: Sharing stories of pride and survival

During the first part of the meeting, we ask participants to share experiences. We particularly want to hear stories about what people are proud about in relation to their family, their community, or their own lives. We ask each participant to tell us something that he or she has been able to do well. If they cannot think of something of which they are proud, we ask a different question: ‘How have you been able to survive up until now? What have been some of the things you have been doing to survive?’ As people tell stories, we facilitators ask them more questions. We ask them for details, such as how they took particular steps, and about who was involved, and so on. We ask them to give a name to the initiatives that they have been taking. We help them to name the different skills and the special knowledge that they have been using to survive. We do this to enrich the stories that people were telling.

Here is an example of the sort of story we heard in our first meeting:



Muyama is a widow taking care of six children. During our conversation, we asked her to share with us what she does to earn a living. She replied: ‘When I lost my husband two years ago, I thought this was the end of the world for me and my children. We entirely depended on him for provision of basic needs and life was so bad for one year.’

When we asked her what she was doing in order to ensure the survival of her family, we learned that she was carrying water to supply the restaurants in the Bumbo Trading Center. Muyama was carrying 20 jerrycans of 20 litres each per day. Through doing this hard physical work, she was earning just enough to buy food for her children. She also told us: ‘I also wash clothes for people, especially those at the Bumbo Trading Center. And occasionally I sell cooked food and sugar canes. This is how our family is surviving at this time.’

Step two: Outsider-witness responses

Towards the end of the meeting, the Mt Elgon volunteers stand up and speak. We offer outsider-witness responses (see pages 47-48). We speak about what we have heard in the stories that people have told, what was most significant to us, why this was significant, and how these stories had affected us.

For example, in listening to Muyama, we highlighted the following skills that we heard in her stories:

- Her physical strength and endurance
- Her skills in building good relationships with the people at Bumbo Trading Center
- Her skills in organisation, in order to be able to conduct all this work and still provide care for her children
- Her good communication skills that make it possible for her to sell food to people in the market
- Her agricultural skills and knowledge about sugar cane, harvesting, and selling.

We also reflected back what it meant to hear about her hard work and dedication to care for her children. We linked these to the stories of other women who were also in the meeting, and to the histories of mothers caring for children in Uganda through difficult times. We spoke of our respect for the work and dedication of mothers.

These re-tellings take place in a ceremonial way. We take care to honour the stories and initiatives that have been shared with us through songs and traditional dances.

Step three: Hopes and dreams

Having acknowledged the steps that each person has been taking, the initiatives they have been involved with in order to survive, we take care to name the contributions that each person has been making. We then ask a further question: ‘What does this say about the dreams or hopes that you have for your future life?’



Participants then start to speak about their hopes and dreams for the future. These might be hopes for their own lives, or hopes for their families or community. These might include taking care of children, ensuring food security for their family, taking children to school, building a better house, reuniting with family members, initiating income-generating projects, and/or taking part in community work.

Muyama mentioned three dreams: to take good care of her children, to ensure food security for her family, and to diversify the ways in which she could earn income.

Step four: The histories of people's hopes and dreams

Once people start to speak about their dreams for the future, we want to learn about the histories of these dreams. Where did these dreams come from? Who passed them on? This is a very important part of the process of 'raising someone's head above the clouds'. We seek to make it possible for people to link their current actions, and their hopes and dreams, to the legacies of those who have come before them. We consider ourselves to be the living legacies of those who have passed away.

When we asked Muyama about the histories that inform her dream of taking good care of her children, she linked this to her grandmother who took good care of Muyama and her sibling when her parents died. Muyama said that her grandmother would sometimes go without food, but that she made sure the children always had something to eat.

Muyama also connected her dream of ensuring food security for her family with her grandmother who used to work so hard to provide food. Muyama told us stories of how her grandmother would work in the garden from sunrise to sunset, only ever returning home to prepare food for the children before soon returning to her labours.

Muyama said that her dream of developing income-generating projects was connected to another mother in the village. This mother had separated from the father of her children and Muyama had admired the ways in which she fended for her family before she died. This woman had a poultry farm, five cows, and vegetable gardens. She also knew how to grow maize. All these projects enabled her to earn the income to support her family, and Muyama had been inspired by this.

This narrative process takes as its starting point the initiatives that people are already taking in their lives. No matter the hardships that people are experiencing, individuals and communities are always taking initiatives to try to respond to these hardships and to minimise the effects of such hardships on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. For instance, in response to her husband's death, Muyama had been carrying water, washing clothes, and selling food in the marketplace. Implicit within these responses are certain skills, knowledge, and values. Narrative practices are used to elicit and then richly acknowledge these skills and values through what are known as 'outsider-witness practices' (see pages 47-48). The Mt Elgon volunteers noticed and acknowledged Muyama's particular skills in building good relationships, in organisation, in communication, and her physical strength and endurance. Through outsider-witness responses, her values of hard work and dedication to her children were linked to the storylines of other women who were present and to the history of women's work in these communities. These rich forms of acknowledgement and the rituals that contribute to the interlinking



of people's stories involve words as well as song and traditional dance. This ceremonial process generates a sense of pride and dignity in participants. It also facilitates a sense of connectedness to skills, to one another, and to community histories. It enables people to experience themselves as knowledgeable and as active in the face of hard times.

After such acknowledgement of people's current initiatives and the skills and values implicit within them, it becomes more possible for people to speak of the future. Implicit within people's current actions, no matter how small these actions may be, are certain hopes or dreams for the future. When Muyama was asked about this, she spoke of a range of dreams for her children and herself: to take good care of her children, to ensure food security for her family, and to diversify the ways in which she could earn income.

There is always a social history to people's dreams and wishes. By inviting people to speak about their hopes, and then by tracing the social history of these, a rich textual history is created. It is this process that we refer to as 'raising heads above the clouds'. This involves using the resources of people's stories and histories to spark possibilities for change.

The hopes that Muyama spoke about were soon interwoven with the legacies of her grandmother and other women in her village. In doing so, Muyama was assisted to define a broader purpose of her existence. Once this broader purpose was articulated and linked to significant histories in her life, it became much more possible for Muyama to consider further action.





Step five: Call to action

At this time, we then challenge participants to take an action, to come up with a particular assignment that will be the next step towards fulfilling their dreams. This can be done individually or in groups. It can be a small step or a large step.

Having realised that her grandmother and the mother in the village were outstanding figures in her life, Muyama said she could not afford to sit back and wait as the family demands would only increase. She said that she realised that she needed to get started on something. She decided to join the women's saving group and to start a vegetable garden.

Our entire approach is built around making it possible for people to take action, and then ensuring that the action is sustainable.

Step six: Documenting the call to action

Participants are requested to write down the action that they have committed themselves to. In fact, if there is time, they often create a booklet around this particular theme. Each participant writes a small book explaining how they have overcome obstacles in the past, their dreams for the future, why this dream is important, where it has come from, and they describe the practical steps they will next put in place. Participants experience power over obstacles in their lives when they spend time writing these booklets which remind them of their strengths, skills and knowledges.



Step seven: Circulating the documentation and generating excitement

The documents that are created are then read aloud to the assembled group, and participants and facilitators respond to them. These documents are also archived in our community library. People read these booklets and give comments and reflections back to their authors. These processes surround people's commitments with excitement. To create audiences and interest around people's commitments is one of our key tasks. We seek to get people interested in their own histories, their own dreams, and their own actions.

As Muyama became interested in her own initiatives, her own histories, dreams, and actions, this proved to be a significant turning point:

When I joined the Elgon women's group, I learnt skills in business management. We meet regularly to discuss various issues that include parenting, family planning, income generation, savings and loans, and initiating projects. It makes a difference to listen to each other's stories and offer each other help.

At present, I have a garden of vegetables that I sell to buy food for my children and to support them with scholastic materials. I am now saving money with the group, and soon I will take a loan from the group in order to buy a cow that I hope will give me milk to sell and raise more income.

This is one of the processes we use to 'raise heads above the clouds'. It involves eliciting people's current initiatives, and richly acknowledging the skills and values involved in these. It involves linking these skills and actions to hopes and dreams, and then tracing the social history of these dreams. This process of moving backwards and forwards across time gradually builds a collective momentum. Once it starts you cannot just stand by and watch! Everyone wants to get involved. It becomes possible to run without getting weary.

There is another method that we have also used to raise people's heads above the clouds. It is called the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life

The 'Tree of Life' is a collective narrative practice methodology developed by Ncazelo Ncube and David Denborough (Ncube, 2006; Denborough, 2008). This activity involves drawing your own 'Tree of Life'. Its roots represent our heritage; the ground represents what we do each day; the trunk represents our values, skills, and abilities; the branches represent our hopes and dreams; the leaves represent the significant people in our lives; and the fruits represent the gifts we have been given by others.

Caleb Wahkungu describes what this activity makes possible in Mt Elgon:

This activity helps us understand our heritage and those who came before us. When I drew mine, I was able to discover a lot about my lineage. Our great father was called Khayaki, and this is where our clan name of Bakhayaki originated. He came to live in the home of Mukimba around 1530



CE as a herds boy. He was believed to have stayed around the slopes of Mt Elgon. Mukimba at that time was a wealthy woman, very rich in cattle. Mukimba circumcised Khayaki and paid pride price for him. So the genealogy of our family is: Khayaki (1530), Manana (1582-1684), Bwira (1630-1740), Wamukoko (1739-1788), Makumi (1789-1890) Bisuche (1884-1967) and Joshua – my father (1924 and still alive). These are my roots.

Here are some facts about the Bakhayaki clan:

- We are assertive and highly opinionated*
- We are known to be principled people*
- We are hospitable and always willing to help*
- We love sharing stories and songs with others*
- We are hard-working*
- We are always concerned about passing information and new skills to our young generation*
- Each time that we are confronted with challenges in life, we gather together in order to find solutions.*

This knowledge appears on the trunk of my tree.

When we participate in Tree of Life workshops, we dig deep into what we hold precious. We engage in the history of what we give value to. We can see our foundations more clearly and how we grow from what our parents taught us. This helps us to notice our sense of hope and our values and, because of this, our dreams and aspirations grow stronger.



Tree of life with couples

More recently, Caleb Wakhungu has also innovated a way of using the Tree of Life with couples:

On one side of the roots, the wife lists her heritage, her family's history. And then, on the other side of the roots, the husband describes his. Similarly, on one side of the trunk, the wife lists her skills and values, what is important to her, and the ways in which she protects the family. And, on the other side of the trunk, the husband records his skills and values and the ways he protects the family. Then they come together to describe shared hopes and dreams and place these together on the branches of their trees. We speak about how they want their family to be in two or three years. We can then talk about the different storms that affect and threaten families, and discuss the ways in which families can be protected from these storms and difficulties. This process is proving very helpful in working with couples in the community.

Tree of Life with organisations

We are also using the Tree of Life to help organisations and community initiatives to become stronger. On the roots, participants write the origin of their organisation. They are able to indicate the people who initiated the idea of their organisation. These people could be alive or no longer living. They could be living in the community or elsewhere. On they ground they indicate the activity that the organisation is doing on a daily basis. The trunk represents the skills and values that members of the organisation demonstrate in their work. The branches represent the hopes, dreams, and aspirations of the organisation. The leaves represent partners, friends, and those important people who have contributed significantly to the growth of the organisation, while the fruits represent the achievements already gained.

