

THE POWER OF HOPE IN ACTION: Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds FACILITATION GUIDE



MT ELGON SELF-HELP COMMUNITY PROGRAM



Dulwich Centre Foundation

**THE POWER OF HOPE IN ACTION:
Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds
FACILITATION GUIDE**

MT ELGON SELF-HELP COMMUNITY PROGRAM



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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

by Caleb Wakhungu

MT ELGON SELF-HELP COMMUNITY PROGRAM

Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Program (MESH COP) is a nonprofit social enterprise established in 2005 with the aim of sparking and sustaining local development initiatives among the isolated and disadvantaged (last mile) communities in Uganda. We work with children and young people, women and men, including elderly caregivers and disadvantaged families who are made vulnerable by poverty, conflict, disease and disasters.

We seek to improve the lives of our communities through projects that promote self-sufficiency, economic development and the long-term sustainability of our environment.

Our mission is to improve the quality of life of rural people affected by poverty, disasters, conflict and disease by working with individuals, families and communities to enhance care and support through capacity building, income generation and self-help groups, using our resources in ways that benefit people and the environment.



DEFENDING LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES

Today, when you move around villages, you hear people complaining about how things have changed and how it is increasingly difficult for families to sustain themselves.

Our communities are further weakened by poverty, disasters, chronic diseases, wars, climate change and conflict, disintegrating the traditional social support systems that provided protection for people. In the absence of a comprehensive social protection plan in many underdeveloped countries, greater uncertainties and risks associated with competitive pressures in the new economy, fuelled by the digital divide, push many people under the poverty line.

Communities are stretched to breaking point and important values that kept societies, communities and families together are eroding as a result of colonisation, natural calamities, extreme economic hardships, epidemics and adoption of approaches that disempower people. Quite often, programs to relieve the suffering of our people are designed in major world capitals and our people are positioned as passive recipients of aid – a phenomenon that destroys communities' capacities to respond.

Our approach is different. It starts with local knowledge and local values. Here are some of the values that are being defended in communities we work with.



Work for purpose, not for money

The rewards of work have traditionally included food, communal unity, acquisition of skills and moral values, and survival. It was while working that healing and community-building conversations happened, and individuals, couples, young people, families and communities were strengthened.

Sense of community

A sense of community provides a bond between individuals, families and lineages for social harmony and to ensure the society's continuance. In our communities, whenever an act of ill will occurred, it was viewed as working against the principle of community and as disturbing community stability. Such an offensive act would not be left uncorrected. A sense of community was directly linked to responsibility for maintaining the wellness of the society and its important values.

Valuing family

'Families are the basic and essential building blocks of society and as such are regarded as very important throughout Africa' (Assim, 2013; as cited in Leonard & Amukwelele, 2023, p. 216). Here in Uganda, the family is often considered the primary unit of social life. Historically, it was within the family that the traditional values of an ethnic group were passed on to the young members of the group. It was also within the family that values of love, sharing, compassion and integrity were taught, and most importantly, the role of parenting the child was a community collective responsibility.



Respect for elders

In a number of societies in Africa, there is a lot of respect for people in old age, and people considered having grey hairs to be one way an elderly person could earn the right to courtesy.

With the application of these values embedded in Ubuntu to the care of older persons, societies would aim for the treatment of older persons with kindness, love, and human-to-human bonds. Old age would also mean an opportunity to be given the deserved attention, as well as holding adults and younger generations responsible for the basic needs of older persons. (Murote & Mungai, 2023, p. 363)

In these societies, respect for authority and elders starts within one's immediate family. This explains why people in these areas have a lot of respect for parents and always hold them with dignity and esteem.

Hard work

Hard work was the means through which societies survived. Because of this, everybody, male or female, young or old, was expected to work in one way or another. As such, hard work was always praised, and laziness was condemned. Ugandan societies also understood work as the purpose for which they were created; hence, work being integral to life. Work was done communally, and this helped to promote solidarity and community spirit. Work was therefore not aimed at individual richness, but rather the good of the family, the clan, the whole ethnic group and the wider community. The benefits of work were communally shared. Children were prepared by their parents for full participation in social duties. Right from childhood, they were taught the types of work that suited them, and this was relevant to the respective environments they lived in, making work more meaningful and more productive. How do we maintain this important value in the face of the changing world?



Justice and fairness

Many African societies in their traditional past endeavoured to bring about justice in their communities. This was done by encouraging communal life and discouraging individualism. The needs of the community were as important as the plans or goals of an individual. All this was meant to ensure proper justice. There was no competition in work, and this helped to eliminate unhealthy behaviours between individuals, which would have led to various injustices. Traditional justice was related to the satisfaction of human needs. It was the role of leaders to ensure that all people enjoyed having their basic needs met. If all people's needs were satisfied, then injustices such as stealing would be reduced or completely eliminated. Further, it was the responsibility of every individual in society to keep law and order.

The sacredness of human life

Traditional African societies believed that the life of a human being is sacred. They believed that human life was created by God. Therefore, no human being had the right to take away another person's life. Societies believed that it was everyone's duty to preserve life as a form of obligation, just like parents have an obligation towards their children. From the sacredness of life perspective, the biological world provides a rich field for seeing the universal and permanent value of life in its brilliant diversity. Traditional societies looked at human life in terms of relationships with nature, the living and the dead. These relationships were considered to be based on love, respect and reverence towards the ancestors. Religious life was not separated from other aspects of life. All things were considered to be produced through interactions of human beings and the divine forces of God. The traditions looked at ancestors as guardians of the spirit who linked human beings to God.

Seeking good relations

Good human relations among people in African societies were defined as a mode of living characterised by empathy and by consideration and compassion for each other. The sense of good relations in Uganda, for example, is rooted in dialogue and conversation. People define good human relationships in terms of the other person's interest. They say it is one's responsibility to look after the wellbeing of other individuals. In traditional African societies, there existed a mutual relationship between the individual and society that helped to build and sustain a moral character in the individual and harmony in the society. These two elements helped to construct a strong sense of belonging and identity. People in these communities freely conversed and expressed their problems as they searched for solutions communally. Many people in these societies believed that by discussing one's problems with other people, one cannot rush into trouble. The people were more concerned with human relationships than the different individuals who make up a relationship. Good relations and social harmony were seen as very important values.

Hospitality

Hospitality refers to the relationship between guest and host, or the act or practice of being hospitable. Specifically, this includes the reception and entertainment of guests, visitors or strangers. It's practiced at membership clubs, conventions, attractions, special events and other services for visitors, as well as in our homes. Hospitality is looked at as a rhythm of life without which life would not be complete. No appointment or special invitation is usually required for anyone to visit a relative or neighbour. On arrival, a visitor is invited to eat. The visitor is treated kindly, just as one would wish to be treated when visiting another's home.

Honesty and integrity

Honesty is a quality of truthfulness to oneself and others. It is a value that has been highly treasured in our communities. People were known to be objective, truthful and trustworthy, and there was a high level of moral uprightness and discipline. The traditional values of honesty and integrity involved one consistently conducting oneself in an acceptable manner, being honest and trustworthy, and taking responsibility for actions taken.

African sense of time

In Africa, people are in control of their time, and people are considered to be more important than time. Our societies put little value on punctuality and rigid schedules, and people have no problem waiting. Conceivably in some societies, the element of time is robustly related to past orientation, like in the practices of ancestors or where past generations are viewed as having an influence on the present. Time is related to events rather than the clock; for example, cock crows were taken as determining a particular sense of time, such as the first crow at 3am. Other examples are the sun's position, birds singing or animal movements implying a specific time in one's daily routines. Time is also seen in seasons, which indicate a period for specific activity; for example, the season for grazing, planting, weeding or harvesting.

Humans living in harmony with the environment for mutual benefit

The land is the source of wealth in many communities in our African context. In most African cultures, one of the assets that children inherit from their parents is land. It comprises rocks, water, minerals, soil and plants – all of which are valuable resources that humanity and other living things depend on for survival. Our ancestors protected the land for the present generation, and it is a resource that we have to protect for future generations. That is why we put emphasis on environmental conservation: tree planting for food, protection of soils from being washed away and generation of oxygen needed for humans and animals. Renewable energies like solar power, wind power and briquettes from agricultural waste are used to prevent depletion of our forests. One way we are defending this value is by engaging with school communities to incorporate practical sessions in class, like ending a session on the importance of trees in our environment with each child planting 10 trees.

God created lands with lakes and bountiful rivers for people to live. And the deserts so that people can find their souls. (Tuareg proverb)



***Honouring connections
(including with the sun)***

The sun is the star at the centre of our solar system. It is a nearly perfect ball of hot plasma, heated to incandescence by nuclear fusion. The sun radiates light and heat, or solar energy, which makes it possible for life to exist on Earth. Plants need sunlight to grow, and animals, including humans, need plants for food and oxygen. Without the heat from the sun, our Earth would freeze. Most African countries enjoy the sunlight 12 hours a day! Now we harness this resource to make solar panels locally to provide electricity in rural homes and pump water to improve food production.



The Sun does not forget a village just because it is small.
(African Proverb)

Honouring local values and knowledges such as these helps us to recognise and build on the capacities that exist within communities to respond to the issues they are facing. We draw on practices from narrative therapy to learn more about what people are already doing to address local issues.



KEY NARRATIVE THERAPY CONCEPTS THAT GUIDE OUR WORK

People always respond to hardship

No-one is a passive recipient of hardship. People are always responding, whether they are children or adults. They respond by trying to minimise the effects of the hardship, or trying to make it stop, or by trying to protect others and so on. These responses are often overlooked or disqualified – so much so that people are often not familiar with their own responses. When we identify the actions people are already taking to respond to hardships, we can draw on the skills and knowledge they have used to inform further individual and collective action.

People's responses have a foundation

People's responses are based on what the person gives value to: this might be a dream, or a hope, or a vision of what life could be about. For instance, the person may give value to supporting others or being there for others. These responses to hardship are also based on what the person intends for their life – what they want for their life. This includes the person's purposes, goals, aspirations and commitments. These responses to hardship also involve certain skills and knowledges about life.

When we are working with people who have experienced hardship, we are looking for small expressions that might indicate what they value and hold precious. We are looking for openings to explore so that we can learn about the ways they have responded to the hardships they have been subjected to. We seek to draw attention to people's responses and to make it possible for people to tell stories about them.

We can trace the roots of what people give value to

People's skills and knowledge, as well as their values and dreams, are linked to history, relationships and culture. It's our job to make it possible for these links to be spoken about. It's our job to trace the social, cultural and historical roots of people's skills and to invite stories to be told about these roots.

When people's own skills and knowledge become deeply rooted in history, relationships and culture, these skills and knowledge become more familiar. They also become more available for the person to put to use in dealing with current difficulties they may be facing. At the same time, the links and relationships in a person's life become richly acknowledged. People experience themselves as being linked to others around shared values.

Our lives are multi-storied

We are all constantly making up stories about our lives. We do this by placing events into sequences through time and linking these events together according to a particular theme. All stories consist of these four elements: events, in sequence, through time, according to a theme. There can be many stories told that include the same events, and these stories may have different themes. No single story is the entire story, and a single event or sequence of events can contribute to many different stories. Because we are constantly making up stories about our lives, our lives are multi-storied.

Developing rich alternative stories

Often, the people with whom we are working have become trapped in a dominant storyline that is saturated with problems. For instance, children who have been orphaned due to HIV/AIDS may be living under the influence of a dominant story that they are defined by stigmatisation. As a result, they may feel hopeless or worthless. This dominant storyline can have a powerful influence and can obscure the initiatives that people are taking to respond to hardship. We become mesmerised by the dominant story and a person's initiatives remain invisible, overlooked. In these circumstances, it is important to honour all the person's concerns but not to get stuck in the dominant story. It is our task to seek out subordinate storylines – alternative storylines that exist in the shadows. It is our task to bring these out into the light and to richly develop them. We don't want to remain focused only on the big picture. Instead, we wish to seek out small traces that can be woven into alternative storylines.

No matter what a person has been through, there will always be aspects of their experience that don't fit with the dominant story of hopelessness and worthlessness. Regardless of the hardships that people have been through, there are always treasures to be found. For instance, there will be ways in which children who are orphaned due to HIV/AIDS are taking actions based on what they value in life. They might be expressing care or protection of other children. They may be engaging in acts of

memory and honouring of their parents who have passed away. In our work, we are interested in assisting people to use their meaning-making skills to attend to aspects of their experience that have not previously been taken into the storylines of their life. We assist people to generate rich alternative storylines of their life.

These alternative stories of identity consist of events, in sequence, through time, according to a theme. The theme of an alternative storyline relates to what the person holds precious: what they value and believe in. It is our task to assist people to identify actions that they have taken at different times throughout their history that are in harmony with what they hold precious, with what they give value to. We then want to find out how these actions are linked to the lives and contributions of others.

For instance, an adult's current determination to contribute to the lives of vulnerable children may be linked to a history of support they received as a young person from a grandfather or grandmother. It may also be linked to certain cultural traditions that they were introduced to as a child and that they have always valued. Rich stories can be told that link their actions in the present to what they value. In turn, the historical roots of these values can be traced. In this way, a person can start to see how their life is an expression of a heritage or legacy passed on to them from significant others, and perhaps also from their community and culture. In this way, lives become deeply rooted in history and culture.

When an alternative storyline becomes richly developed in this way, it provides a foundation for the person to proceed in life. It provides a sense of the future. It enables the person to become more familiar with their own knowledge and skills, and in doing so, provides a different sense of identity. Their identity becomes defined by their values, hopes and dreams, and by their special skills and knowledge. It also becomes defined by their links to significant others who share these values.





THE RAISING OUR HEADS ABOVE THE CLOUDS FACILITATION GUIDE

This guide was developed by MESH COP Uganda to help build the capacity of communities taking collective action to respond to hardship by drawing on local knowledge and values, and applying principles and practices from narrative therapy.

It is designed for development practitioners, counsellors, workers and other civil society actors, including those who are concerned with facilitating Child Rights Clubs within schools and communities and training children's rights educators. It provides guidelines about methods, content and preparation for the training of children, young people, single parents, teachers, NGO workers, civil servants and community mobilisers.

Practitioners are encouraged to use the guidelines provided, but they are also invited to adjust the content according to the specific context of the group. Several methods are proposed, so depending on the nature of the group, you can choose appropriate methods for delivering the training. The information provided in this guide is intended as a supplement to the contributions from participants: the target group should be involved in planning and discussions. The choice and order of topics for discussion is not limited to those provided in this guide but can be altered to suit the needs of communities affected by different problems.



STEP-BY-STEP FACILITATION PROCESS

by Caleb Wakhungu

Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Program and others have been using collective narrative practices to spark and sustain diverse economic and environmental projects and at the same time contribute to the reinvigoration of local cultures. We have developed a new way to raise people's heads above the clouds by providing them with opportunities to rewrite their history and overcome enormous challenges, often marked by abuse, neglect, hunger, labelling, violence and poverty. We nurture resilience, aspirations, capabilities, skills and talents. This process raises people's determination and zeal, and invokes renewed commitment to take charge of their lives and appropriately respond to the effects of adversity in more respectful, innovative, empowering, honouring and sustainable ways.

The process takes place over seven steps, which are outlined here.



Illustration by Rebekah Oppenheim



STEP 1:

SHARING STORIES OF PRIDE AND SURVIVAL

During the first part of a 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 life. 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?’

This is the first step of engagement with the people we interact with. Quite often, the stories that people have been telling are problem-saturated, with few glimpses of stories that reinforce resilience. Such conversations end up with frustration, anger and hatred, and then the cycle continues.

Sparking conversations about pride and survival opens up stories beyond the problem story. We can evoke stories of resilience, stories of hope and stories of survival.

Facilitators are encouraged to be creative in finding openings to new stories. One option is to choose a game or task that the group or individuals can work on for a few minutes. The facilitator can look for clues to special skills, competencies or acts of kindness that manifest among participants while they undertake the activity. They might ask a volunteer to step forward for a conversation about what they have noticed. Other group members can listen.

Some questions to support conversation about a group activity can include:

- I noticed during the role play that you seemed to express values of hard work and compassion [quote exact words or phrases you heard]. Could you please share with us a story behind that?
- You shared with us a story of how you have been struggling [e.g. to raise children and support the family]. Is this a first-time experience or something that you have experienced before?
- If you have experienced this before, how did you manage to navigate through the last time you had a similar experience? Was this unusual or have there been times when you've done this sort of thing before?
- Please can you tell a story about an experience you have had that took you some effort to be able to get through?
- Have there been other occasions when you have managed to do this?
- How have you managed to do this?
- Could you please share with us a story about your work or anything you are proud about as a child, parent or community member?
- Is this story linked to something that you value?
- What are you engaged in on a daily basis for survival?
- Can you please tell us a bit more about how you do that?
Who else is helping you to do this?
- Where did you learn these skills from?

- Were there some steps you took to prepare yourself to do this work?
- What do you think was the turning point that led you to being able to do the work that is enabling you to survive today?
- Now that you are through this situation and looking back, what were some of the ways you responded at the time that perhaps you have not shared yet?
- What actions did you take?
- How did you do this?
- Have there been ways since then that you have tried to deal with this experience?
- What would you call the skills that were involved in your response to the challenge?
- When did you learn these skills? Who taught you or supported your development of these skills?
- When you think of these different steps that you took at the time, and have taken since, what do you think this says about what is important to you?

These conversations can take a day to allow group members to buzz in pairs! This is important as many people often share problem-saturated stories daily with their peers or counsellors, but rarely find time to share stories of hope, initiative, skills, accomplishments, goals and resilience. At this stage, people start to appreciate that life is multi-storied and that there are many things we can celebrate in life that may give us power to reduce the effects of the problems on our lives.





STEP 2:

OUTSIDER-WITNESS RESPONSES

For this step, the facilitator invites people to act as outsider witnesses. These are people who will be listening to the stories being told. Towards the end of the meeting, the outsider witnesses offer their responses, using a specific format (White, 1995, 2000, 2007).

In narrative practice, outsider witnesses are an invited audience to a therapeutic conversation. They listen to and acknowledge the preferred stories and identity claims of the person consulting the practitioner. Outsider witnesses may be part of a person's existing community, such as family members or friends, or they may be invited from outside these networks, in which case they may be professionals (and may constitute what some practitioners know as a reflecting team). Alternatively, they may be invited from lists or registers of people who have previously sought consultation for similar difficulties and who have agreed to help out therapeutically with others whenever this may be relevant. Outsider witnesses may be recruited for a particular one-off meeting, or if they are a group of professionals who work together, may be regularly present at therapeutic sessions.

When there is more than one outsider witness, particularly when there is a team working together, members of the team help each other in making their reflections. For instance, after one outsider witness has spoken, another might ask some questions about what was just said in order to make the whole process more meaningful.

Sometimes an outsider-witness process is referred to as a definitional ceremony. It is an opportunity to be witnessed in a particularly acknowledging way. The outsider-witness process has two parts. First, the individual tells their story, guided by questions from the practitioner. Second, the outsider witness(es) respond to this story, again guided by questions from the practitioner. These responses focus on 'resonance and transport', meaning that they focus on how the story resonated for the listener, and how it moved them. There is often then an opportunity for the individual to respond to this 're-telling'.

When thinking about outsider-witness responses in terms of resonance and transport, here are some considerations for practitioners and outsider witnesses to keep in mind.

Telling

This part focuses on the person or people who are at the centre of the definitional ceremony telling their stories. While listening to the stories, those taking the role of outsider witnesses are invited to pay attention to:

- What resonates with them or catches their attention
 - As you listened to the stories, which expressions caught your attention or captured your imagination?
 - Which ones struck a chord for you?
- What images come to their minds
 - What images of the people's lives, of their identities and of the world more generally did these expressions evoke?
 - What did these expressions suggest to you about these people's purposes, values, beliefs, hopes, dreams and commitments?
- How their responses are connected to their own experiences
 - What is it about your own life or work that accounts for why these expressions caught your attention or struck a chord for you?
 - Do you have a sense of which aspects of your own experiences of life resonated with these expressions, and with the images evoked by these expressions?



Re-telling

In the second part of the process, those participants who are acting as outsider witnesses are invited to speak. The role of outsider witnesses is not to give opinions, or judgements, or advice or praise. Instead, the witnesses play a role in weaving together the story they have heard with their own stories. This is done in a particular way as the facilitator structures the re-telling by asking them the following sorts of questions:

- What particular things did you hear from the person who shared the story that caught your attention or sparked your imagination?
- How does hearing this affect your picture of the person who shared the story? What did it tell you about them?
- What is your guess about what is important to them? About what they hope for and dream about?
- Did any mental pictures, symbols or images come to you as you listened? If you were to draw a picture of this, what would it look like?
- Why is it that you were drawn to these particular things?
- What is it about your own stories of life that explains why these aspects of this story touched you?
- What was it like for you to hear this story?
- How have you been moved on account of witnessing these expressions of life?
- How have you been changed in some way because you have heard her story?

Re-telling the re-telling

In this final part of the process, the practitioner will ask the person who originally told the story questions like:

- How does hearing this affect your image of yourself and your life?
- What does this say about what is important to you?
- Why were you drawn to these particular responses from the outsider witness?
- Where does this take you in your understanding, relationships and ideas for your life?

Tellings and re-tellings happen during these conversations, and participants, including the facilitator, are impacted positively as they find pieces of people's stories that connect with their own values and aspirations.



STEP 3:

HOPES AND DREAMS

This step 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 and to minimise the effects of hardships on their lives and the lives of their loved ones. Outsider witnessing practices can elicit stories about the skills and values that people are already putting into practice. Richly acknowledging these stories can contribute to the interlinking of people's lives. This can involve song and traditional dance as well as words to make the process like a ritual. A 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 acknowledgment 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.

Having acknowledged the steps that each person has been taking, and the initiatives they have been involved with in order to survive, it is important to take care to name the hopes and dreams that each person is working towards.

The facilitator can use participatory methods like inviting people to draw and colour in their hopes and dreams, giving them specific names. Hopes and dreams can include things like building a better house, starting a new income-generating activity or taking children to school. Participants are asked to present their drawings to the group, and the facilitator can ask the following questions:

- Could you please share with us your hopes and dreams for your future?
- Is this something new or you have held these for some time now?
- How have you managed to keep your hopes and dreams alive?
- Why do you hold these hopes and dreams to be important for your life?
- If you went back to yourself at a young age, what would you do differently in your efforts to achieve your dreams and goals?
- On a scale of one to 10, where can you say you are at present in relation to pursuing your goals?
- What did you do to get there?
- What will you do more to accomplish your goals?
- What aspects of your life will change as a result of achieving your hopes and dreams?
- When we get a chance to meet again in the future, in two to five years, what will have changed?



STEP 4:

THE HISTORY OF PEOPLE'S HOPES AND DREAMS

Once people start to speak about their dreams for the future, it is important to learn about the histories of these dreams.

Where did these dreams come from?

Who influenced or inspired them? This is a very important part of the process of 'raising someone's head above the clouds'.

There is always a social history to people's dreams and wishes. By inviting people to speak about their hopes, and then 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'. It involves using the resources of people's stories and histories to spark possibilities for change.



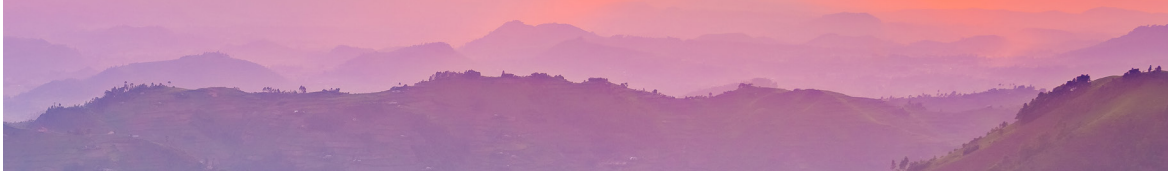
Using tools like the Tree of Life (Denborough, 2008; Ncube, 2006), facilitators can use the following questions to help people trace the histories of their hopes and dreams.

- You have shared with us your hopes and dreams of [mention them].
Has this always been important to you?
What is the history of this in your life?
- Who else in your life would have shared these values, hopes or dreams, or where did you learn them from?
- Is there anyone who would not be surprised to hear about your hopes and dreams for your future? [Mention that this person might be alive or have passed on]
- Is there someone who would recognise and appreciate what your commitment to your hopes and dreams means to you?
- Was there someone who introduced you to the idea of holding on to hope or to dreams for a different future?
- If so, why do you think they chose to share this with you?
- What do you think they saw in you that made them think you might be able to carry this commitment in your life?
- Was there something they might have seen you doing in the past that would have told them that this commitment was important to you back then?
- What do you think it might have meant to them to be able to share this commitment with you?
- What would it mean to them to see you taking these actions now: that despite the effects of these problems and hardships, you are finding ways to honour your commitment to love and care and also to hold on to the hope that life will be different for you?
- What do you think they would say if they were here with us now?
- How would they say it?
- Might there be some way of keeping this person's presence close to you in the coming days?
- Do you do anything that they like or appreciate, like singing songs? If so, would you like to share the song with the group?

In tracing the history of hopes and dreams, we can also learn more about the intentions and purposes that people have for their lives. Michael White described a 'hierarchy' of intentional states (White, 2007). It seems that it is easier for people to articulate what they stand for in life if we:

- first ask questions about the intentions or purposes that shaped a particular action
- then ask about the values and beliefs that supported these actions
- then about the hopes and dreams associated with these values
- then about the principles of living that are represented by those hopes and dreams
- and finally, about the commitments or what it is that people are standing for in life.





STEP 5:

CALL TO ACTION

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

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

The facilitator expresses appreciation to the participants for taking part and sharing their personal stories of resilience, hope, courage, initiatives and survival. Participants are encouraged to think about the next step they would want to take in order to minimise the effects of the problem in their lives. This can be a small step or big step.

Participants are asked to draw a picture of what they want to do next, including the location and the people they will be working with. They can include the time it will take to achieve this action.

Each participant is given time to share their next steps with the rest of the group. The facilitator asks questions to help participants elaborate on:

- what they want to do
- how they want to do it
- who they will be working with
- what will change
- who will notice the change
- what possibilities the change will bring
- how this change will affect their relationships with family and community
- when this change might happen
- who in their team will help them achieve this goal and what roles they will play
- whether there are particular skills and competencies they have that will make it possible to achieve their goal.

In the Mt Elgon context where people have an opportunity to design various projects of their own, people learn to become drivers of their lives. Some new initiatives challenge the status quo, but they are carefully handled and nurtured to allow people to find meaning and value in their lives.



STEP 6:

DOCUMENTING THE CALL TO ACTION

When working with groups living and working together, this process is not rushed. Each step can take a week, and participants will be taking notes or making drawings and be helped by their friends to write small stories on paper. At the end of the exercises, each participant will have made a small booklet of words and drawings and be the author of the stories contained within.

Participants write down the action that they have committed themselves to, explaining how they have overcome obstacles in the past, their dreams for the future, why these dreams are important and where they have come from. They describe the practical next steps they will 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 knowledge.

Before starting the process, participants are asked not to worry about anything since it is not a competition.



STEP 7:

CIRCULATING THE DOCUMENTATION & GENERATING EXCITEMENT

The documents that are created are then read aloud to the assembled group, and participants and the facilitators respond to them during the celebrations.

These documents are also archived in our community library. People read these booklets and provide comments and reflections for 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. 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.



FACILITATION METHODS

For each of these steps, a range of facilitation methods can be used to maintain participants' engagement and involvement. You can choose different methods to suit the group and the moment. Here are a few possibilities.

Question and answer

The counsellor/facilitator/practitioner/trainer asks questions and receives a response from the participants, or vice versa. This method is helpful when the practitioner needs to find out the level of understanding of a group about their community and their knowledge about how people respond to hardships. For each step described above, the suggested questions are carefully designed to help people to share their stories in ways that are respectful, acknowledging and honouring of people stories.

Discussion

This method can be used either with a whole group of participants or in small working groups. The practitioner may wish to help participants explore an issue deeply. The practitioner can choose to give small groups specific tasks, activities or games that may be competitive in nature, but which provide opportunities to pose specific questions for reflection.

Buzzing

This method involves having the participants discuss a question in pairs. This is especially useful where a short discussion is required. For example, participants may be given one or two minutes to discuss an issue in pairs before sharing ideas with the wider group.

Brainstorming

This method is a way of discussing issues in a larger group. Quite often, participants think the practitioners are experts, and they sometimes raise questions about how to better describe their own problems, feelings and lives! In narrative therapy, the person experiencing a problem is the expert! They know the problem. They know how they feel, and they know the effects that the problem has on their lives. And they also know how to deal with the problem. Pushing these questions back to the person or group experiencing the problem is a way of decentring the facilitator, but remaining influential about the shape of the conversation.

Role play

This is a method that can be interesting and lively if the practitioner chooses a topic that is interesting. The facilitator prepares short instructions related to what the participants are experiencing. It is kept short. Role play can be a way to externalise the problem so that people feel the problem is separate from them and they have the power to overcome it.

Visual aids

It is important to remember that people get bored or restless easily and their minds may tend to stray. A practitioner may choose to make a session lively and interactive by using or creating visual aids. This might include asking the group to draw a Tree of Life, Journey of Life, or Team of Life, among others, to spark conversations using a set of questions (for information on how to facilitate a Tree of Life, Journey of Life, or Team of Life session, consult Brakarsh and Community Information and Inspiration Team, 2004; Denborough, 2008, 2014; Ncube, 2006).

Visual aids can also include pictures, photographs, newspaper cuttings, charts, videos and posters.

Debates

A debate can be a participatory, lively and interesting way of bringing out issues. In this method, the practitioner identifies an issue that could be brought out by listening to various opinions. This method can help in discussing controversial or difficult issues relating to trauma. Roles may be distributed, and external witnesses given an opportunity to offer their responses and feedback that may spark conversations about different stories.



SUGGESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS

Facilitate active involvement

Never dictate to a person or group what to do, BUT always facilitate and promote their creative potential as much as possible. In larger groups, it can be helpful to divide the participants into smaller discussion groups of between 10 and 20 people to promote lively discussion and maximum involvement.

Make suggestions

Always be available to the group by providing support, especially when it is requested. Concentrate on the interests of the group.

Encourage taking part

Do not criticise an individual's efforts (no matter how irrelevant or hopeless they may seem). Instead, provide a guideline and reference to reorient and redirect the individual's effort to what is relevant.

Encourage suggestions and decision-making

Invite individuals to express their views and opinions, especially on matters that affect their lives, directly or/and indirectly.

Involve all participants

(no discrimination based on age, sex, gender, ethnicity, race)

Ensure that ALL members of the group (boys and girls, men and women) are encouraged to participate in group activities. Create an environment where trial and error, experimenting, inquiry and practice are freely done. Curiosity should be encouraged.

Meeting time

Ensure that the group members meet as often as possible. Groups established in schools should meet during school hours set aside for group activities. Groups based in a community should be scheduled according to the hours that are convenient for participants; for example, after house work in the evenings or after church on Sundays.

Always consult with parents and guardians to see that out-of-school children are able to fit into group activities.

Reminders

- Use various participatory methods because people get easily bored when they are not involved.
- Group members may have various needs and capabilities that the facilitator needs to be sensitive to; for example, needing to sit or to move around, preferring to draw rather than write.
- Tone down the more elaborate or lengthy methods to suit the needs of child participants. Sophisticated language, long instructions and numerous procedures may confuse or discourage younger children.
- Apply as many examples and illustrations as possible, and include real-life scenarios that people can relate to.



PRACTICE EXAMPLES

CONVERSATION WITH A SINGLE MOTHER WORKING HARD TO SUPPORT HER FAMILY IN RWANDA

by Claudine Marie Nyirakigwene

At SOS Children's Villages Rwanda, I work with children in vulnerable families who are at risk of losing parental care or who have already lost parental care. This vulnerability is due to poverty, big family sizes without resources, chronic diseases and family conflicts.

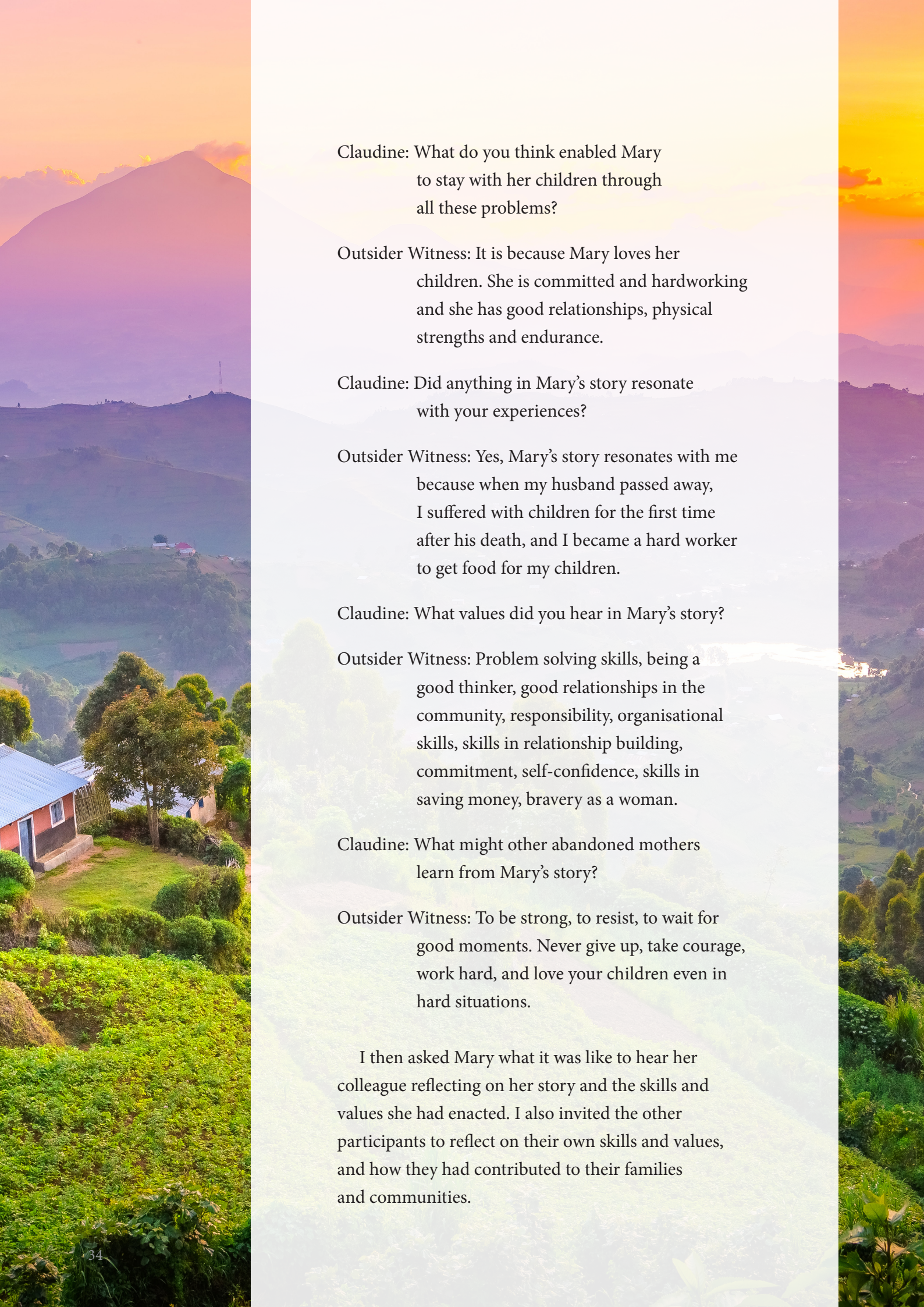
After graduating from narrative therapy and community work training through a collaboration between the University of Rwanda, SOS Children's Villages Rwanda and Dulwich Centre Foundation, I have applied different narrative practices among child-headed households, vulnerable families (couples), single mothers and widows.

I used narrative practices learnt through Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds with a group of widows and women who had been abandoned by their husbands because of poverty, family conflict or the economic pressure of supporting a great number of children.

Sharing stories of pride

During my work with these women, I applied an outsider witnessing approach following the steps suggested in this guide so that the participants could draw inspiration and learn skills from each other's stories.

This story is about Mary (a pseudonym), an abandoned woman who was raising six children. She raised them through hardship, and they remained together as a family. The following is part of a conversation with an outsider witness responding to Mary's sharing of her story.



Claudine: What do you think enabled Mary to stay with her children through all these problems?

Outsider Witness: It is because Mary loves her children. She is committed and hardworking and she has good relationships, physical strengths and endurance.

Claudine: Did anything in Mary's story resonate with your experiences?

Outsider Witness: Yes, Mary's story resonates with me because when my husband passed away, I suffered with children for the first time after his death, and I became a hard worker to get food for my children.

Claudine: What values did you hear in Mary's story?

Outsider Witness: Problem solving skills, being a good thinker, good relationships in the community, responsibility, organisational skills, skills in relationship building, commitment, self-confidence, skills in saving money, bravery as a woman.

Claudine: What might other abandoned mothers learn from Mary's story?

Outsider Witness: To be strong, to resist, to wait for good moments. Never give up, take courage, work hard, and love your children even in hard situations.

I then asked Mary what it was like to hear her colleague reflecting on her story and the skills and values she had enacted. I also invited the other participants to reflect on their own skills and values, and how they had contributed to their families and communities.



Hopes and dreams

I asked the group: ‘What does Mary’s story make you think about your own hopes and dreams for the future?’

One of them replied: ‘Mary’s story pushes me to be confident and to start my own income-generating activity to make our family stable.’

From these tellings, some of the women renewed their commitment to taking care of their children and ensuring food security for their family.

Mary herself dreamed of keeping her children in school, renovating her house, increasing her shares in the savings group, and buying a better bed for visitors.

In each step, both Mary and the team participated in planning for their hopes and dreams. They linked them to their past and their future and they committed to excite other women in the community.



GARDENS FOR HEALTH INTERNATIONAL RWANDA

by *Niyibizi Muhayimana Annonciata*

Gardens for Health International works towards a world where all families and communities have the knowledge, resources and support to meet their nutritional needs. The simple concept that food alone does not equal good nutrition is at the heart of our mission. We partner with health clinics and schools in rural and peri-urban areas so that communities facing or at risk of malnutrition are equipped with seeds, skills and knowledge to diversify food production, prepare and consume balanced meals, and keep their children and families healthy.

In my work, I witness many problems as I move around the villages, especially for single mothers. The majority of single mothers think it was a 'sin' against the community to have a child or children without living with the child's father. Of course, relationships do not run in a straight line, and life can change at any moment triggering ups and downs. Most single mothers here face frustration, stigma and discrimination. As divisions increase, so does the anger, frustration, depression and resignation, and children can be at risk of abandonment.

As a practitioner of narrative therapy and community work, I'm committed to supporting this group of women by using narrative therapy ideas to help them raise their heads above the clouds.

Sharing stories of pride and survival

The women meet regularly to share stories of hope and survival. They get the time together to sing songs, share stories and learn new skills from each other. During the first meeting, they are asked to brainstorm about things that they have done recently that they are proud about. Songs and dances and flowery gifts dominate the session to acknowledge people's stories of survival and pride.

During this meeting, women discover that they have shared stories, skills, relationships and capabilities, and that these matter given the fact that they have been able to survive and support their families. They then do what they call being a 'guardian angel' (*malayika murinzi*) for each other: everyone adopts someone else in the group to take care of and check in with each week. This is to avoid feelings of abandonment and loneliness. It also helps the participants to stay in touch until they meet again the following week.

Hopes and dreams

The next session is on the single mothers' hopes and dreams for the future. These might be hopes for their own lives or hopes for their families. These might include taking care of children. Some of these hopes have been:

- having a husband with whom they will not be disappointed
- reconciliation with the fathers of their children
- working hard to ensure food security for their families
- starting income-generating projects and providing for the basic needs of their families
- supporting their children in succeeding in school by feeding them balanced meals every day.

The histories of people's hopes and dreams

We want to learn about the histories of these dreams: Where did these dreams come from? Who passed them on? This is very important as 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.

Often when the histories of their hopes and dreams are explored, the women speak of their aunts as their role models, or they tell stories of how their own mothers navigated through hard times. For example, Amina spoke of her mother (whose husband passed away) and how she was able to be patient in any hard situation and to work hard. This example was the reason that Amina had been able to do the same. When Amina's child got sick, she was able to find a job that enabled her to survive with her child. The values of 'hard work', 'patience', 'hope', 'commitment' and 'never giving up', as learnt from her mother, enabled Amina to love her own children and stay motivated.



Changing collective stories

In community, single mothers are often assigned negative identities and values that are not right for them. These might include describing them as

- a burden to their families
- bringing shame to their families
- having been abandoned
- being careless
- having no value in the community.

There is also strong stigma if they are associated with sex work.

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

This group decided to initiate a small savings club that they would add to each time they met as an additional activity. In this way, they could support each other to raise their heads above the clouds to where joy, hope and comfort lie. They were now able to start the journey of hope and build their resilience. Every time they met, they were saving. Each person in the group has a target to achieve at the end of year, so they save with purpose. Along the way, they can lend to each other to respond to emerging needs, and repayments will be made as agreed to allow other group members to borrow.

After participating in this work, and after putting some money into savings clubs, new identity stories and values are discovered, which they want to show to others in the community.

They are include being:

- patient
- hard working
- empathetic
- good teachers
- good communicators
- good at offering care.

And valuing hope and joy. The group wanted to say to the community:

- please don't judge us negatively
- we are proud of our children
- we never give up
- we are together as a group
- we want to go far and raise our voices.

They have been happy to find new identities, learn new skills, support each other and to rewrite their new preferred stories.

Now they are ready to work on how they can raise their voice above the clouds, in the communities they are living in, as a way of supporting other single mothers that are still experiencing difficult situations.



RAISING OUR VOICES ABOVE THE CLOUDS THROUGH A COMMUNITY RADIO PROGRAM

by Caleb Wakhungu

Radio is the most accessible, participatory and effective medium to reach people in the developing world, giving voice to people to air and solve their own problems. Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Program chose to establish a community radio program in order to do justice to people's stories of hope and resilience, and the initiatives that breathe life into seemingly difficult situations. The radio coverage spans a 10-kilometre radius reaching close to 300,000 people.

Through citizens' media, communities can start to fight epidemics and corruption, and develop methods to hold government officials accountable for their actions. In this way, radio not only informs people about government failure, but it also provides a vehicle through which to work for positive political change.

While the colonial educational system widely used in Uganda puts emphasis on theoretical approaches to learning, MESH COP Community Radio is designed to bridge the gap between knowledge and practice and share stories of solving practical problems.

MESH COP Community Radio:

- reaches out to disaster victims and communities in and around the Mt Elgon region
- discusses programs within the communities such as education, human rights, peace-building and reconciliation, and fighting poverty among communities that have been affected by natural disasters for decades
- promotes dialogue, debate and change fostering sustainable and equitable development
- creates a communication pathway between community organisations and local governments, thereby helping the communities hold developmental workers and the government accountable; people are allowed to discuss programs going on in their communities including achievements and challenges and areas that still need to be addressed.

We are also changing behaviour through radio plays. Our aim is to ensure that the perspectives of the people whose lives are most affected by development (mainly the poor and marginalised) are included in decision-making.

Significantly, the broken-hearted and traumatised find healing and forgiveness as they engage in conversations and receive outsider-witness responses.

Plans are underway to use internet radio to join with other people across the globe who can then offer outsider-witness responses live on air.





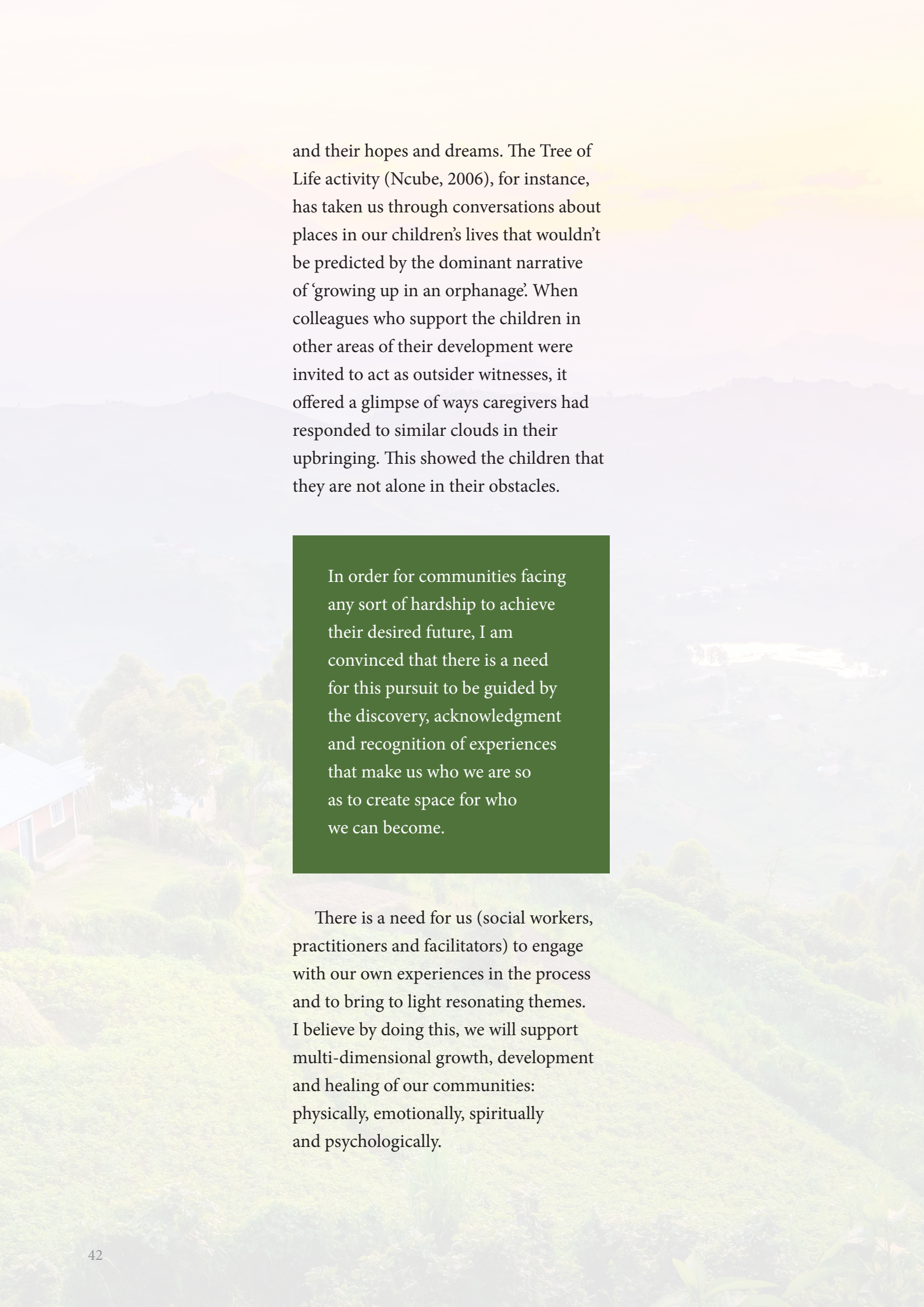
REFLECTIONS

A REFLECTION FROM TANZANIA

by Deborah Mrema

As I reflect on my learnings from engaging with narrative ideas as applied by the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project, the following theme stands out: no matter where we are located around the globe, our communities have in common the deep desire to navigate the world with peace, joy, acceptance, acknowledgment and purpose. The road to this destination is filled with all sorts of 'clouds'; however, we can overcome them if we can engage our curiosity muscles to question dominant identity storylines.

I work in Tanzania with young people orphaned by HIV/AIDS who have been encircled in clouds like opportunistic infections, discrimination, poverty, stigmatisation and depression. I have observed that turning points occur when we create space for them to share their stories of pride and survival. This goes hand-in-hand with acknowledgment of stories of where they come from, the hardships they face in life and their effects, how they survived these,



and their hopes and dreams. The Tree of Life activity (Ncube, 2006), for instance, has taken us through conversations about places in our children's lives that wouldn't be predicted by the dominant narrative of 'growing up in an orphanage'. When colleagues who support the children in other areas of their development were invited to act as outsider witnesses, it offered a glimpse of ways caregivers had responded to similar clouds in their upbringing. This showed the children that they are not alone in their obstacles.

In order for communities facing any sort of hardship to achieve their desired future, I am convinced that there is a need for this pursuit to be guided by the discovery, acknowledgment and recognition of experiences that make us who we are so as to create space for who we can become.

There is a need for us (social workers, practitioners and facilitators) to engage with our own experiences in the process and to bring to light resonating themes. I believe by doing this, we will support multi-dimensional growth, development and healing of our communities: physically, emotionally, spiritually and psychologically.



FINDING HOPE IN THE MIDST OF STRUGGLE

by Hugo Kamya

The call to raise our heads above the clouds, as Caleb Wakhungu invites us in his work with the people of Mt Elgon, reverberates in many ways. Indeed, it transports me to many places.

It reminds of a journey that began 15 years ago when a group of students travelled with me to Uganda. While there, they saw firsthand people whose lives had been devastated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The scourge of HIV/AIDS left no-one unscathed. Then, just as it is now, no cure or vaccine was in sight.

Today, over 40 million people are living with HIV/AIDS. There are up to 12 million orphans in Africa. The plight of HIV/AIDS is exacerbated by many other ills such as war, trauma and natural disasters, as Caleb has documented in his work.

Caleb's work brings me full circle to the efforts of goodwill all over the continent: people who have taken it upon themselves to make a difference in people's lives, harnessing the gifts of the people, with the people, from the people and by the people themselves. People empowering themselves to find their own strength through the stories that have held them together over the years.

These are stories of survival and endurance. These are the hopes, the dreams and the gifts they bring to the table in their daily struggles. In the midst of those struggles are gifts that connect us all in our humanity.

Exploring small moments of hope and survival rings true in the work I have done with a little community in the outskirts of Kampala. This children's project, The Makula Fund for Children, has focused on education as the cornerstone of success. Education is a prized commodity all over Africa. Every child longs to go to school if they can afford it. Every child longs to stay in school and bring home a report card that a parent would be proud of. A certificate of pride. Having a child go to school and stay in school is a badge of pride and honour for every parent. It is a story of pride and survival.

In this project, we talk with the children about what school means to them. We have explored together stories of pride. The children have told us their dreams for a future. Together, we have imagined what that might look like for them. In one of these meetings, we asked the children if they had one wish what that would be. The story of one child



stands out to me: six-year-old Carter told us, 'If I had one wish, I would like to have a pencil'. We were blown away by this response.

We have explored the dreams each child has shared with us. We have reflected back what these dreams mean to us and to them. We have also pondered together the complexity of these dreams as we have listened to their simplicity. We have linked these simple moments in a variety of ways and imagined what a pencil can do, will do and has done, exploring the potential that lies in a pencil.

Our work with the children's project has also led us to ask more questions. We have asked ourselves to imagine what else is missing and what else remains unspoken. We believe that there is much in what is spoken and much in what remains unspoken. There are many stories to any one moment. In what is unspoken are moments of survival and resilience, so we ask about them. We ask the children to tell us what keeps them going and why it keeps them going. We believe that through building a curiosity around these unspoken stories, we will find clues and calls to action in these young persons.

As part of the children's project, we provide breakfast before the children go to school. Breakfast is very important so that they can function at school. Breakfast consists of a cup of porridge and a piece of bread. One morning, a five-year-old arrived late and took time to mingle with the rest of the kids. He looked nervously around as everyone prepared to walk to school. My eyes followed him, and as we walked to school, I checked in with him. I noted that he kept his hands in his pocket as if he were holding on to something. With even greater nervousness and perhaps embarrassment, he revealed a small piece of bread he was carrying in his pocket from the breakfast. I asked, 'How come you did not eat your piece of bread?' With tears flowing down his cheeks, he said he was saving it for his brother who could not make it to the breakfast meeting. I marvelled at this five-year-old's sense of agency, caring and empathy. His call to action was to start his own vegetable garden. His story of survival was collectively felt in his brother's survival, his brother's hopes, his brother's dreams. Whether it is a pencil or a piece of bread, this is the call to action.



These are the emblematic stories of hope and survival, of joy and anticipation, of pride and life into the future. We have sought to listen with new eyes and to see with new ears. To seek survival in action, in healing, in hope and in the future.

Our work culminates in celebration as children share stories of their achievements. They share these stories in music, drama and dance. Movement provides creative moments of self-discovery and collective discovery. Older kids have engaged in the call to action by starting income-generating activities: brick laying, tailoring, raising poultry or pigs, growing vegetables.

Like Caleb and his team, my work and my team's work with the children's project has been about finding positive entry points, finding moments to explore and expand the children's stories of survival, seeking together to build on each one's Tree of Life as a collective. It is ultimately a call to connection, to understanding and to action. The community is intimately involved in imagining what this action should be.





FOSTERING COMMUNITY ECONOMY THROUGH COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE PRACTICE: IMAGINING A NEW ECONOMIC POLITICS

by David Denborough

In his descriptions of the ground-breaking work of the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project at the beginning of this book, Caleb Wakhungu described what many African rural communities are up against:

Communities are stretched to breaking point and important values that kept societies, communities and families together are eroding as a result of colonisation, natural calamities, extreme economic hardships, epidemics and adoption of approaches that disempower people. Quite often, programs to relieve the suffering of our people are designed in major world capitals and our people are positioned as passive recipients of aid – a phenomenon that destroys communities' capacities to respond.

In response, the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project centres local knowledge and local values. This involves honouring cultural knowledge in particular ways that are in sharp contrast to most economic projects that are imposed on the majority world.

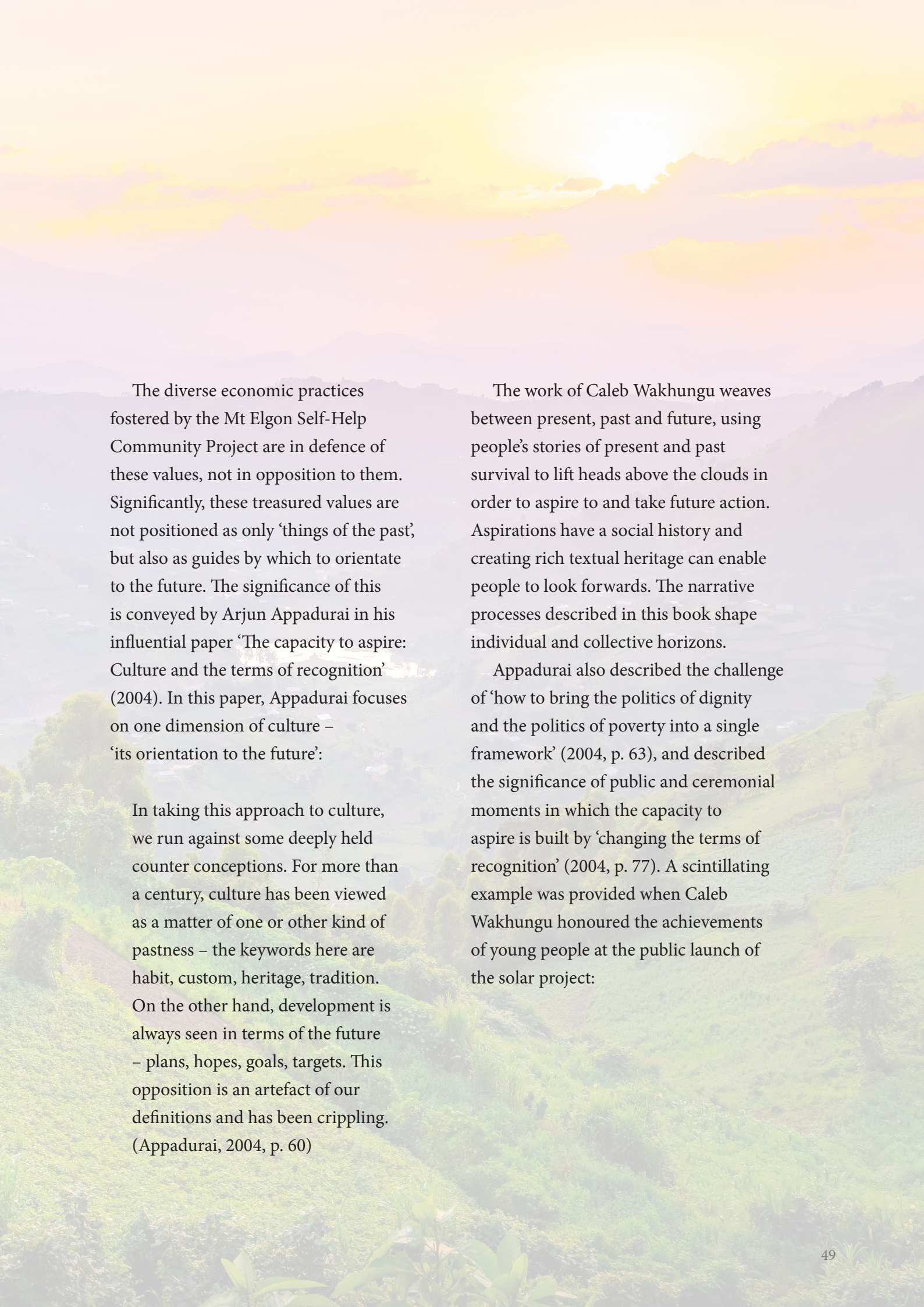
CULTURE AND ECONOMICS

Amartya Sen (2004) has described how, generally speaking, 'economists pay inadequate attention to culture in investigating the operation of societies in general and the process of development in particular' (2004, p. 37). Where culture is discussed in economic literature (Harrison & Huntington, 2000; Landes, 2000), too often the cultures of the majority world are described as somehow 'the enemy' – 'a voice from the past that inhibits societies from functioning in the modern world' (Rao & Walton, 2004, p. 10).

In contrast, the work of Caleb Wakhungu and the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project is based on grassroots leadership and autonomy in which culture and history, far from being conceived of as the 'enemy', is the gateway to social agency and possibility.

Caleb Wakhungu grounds the approach of 'Raising heads above the clouds' in the following treasured local commitments and cultural values that his community is seeking to defend:

- work for purpose, not for money
- sense of community
- valuing family
- respect for elders
- hard work
- justice and fairness
- the sacredness of human life
- seeking good relations
- hospitality
- honesty and integrity
- African sense of time
- humans living in harmony with the environment for mutual benefit
- honouring connections (including with the sun).

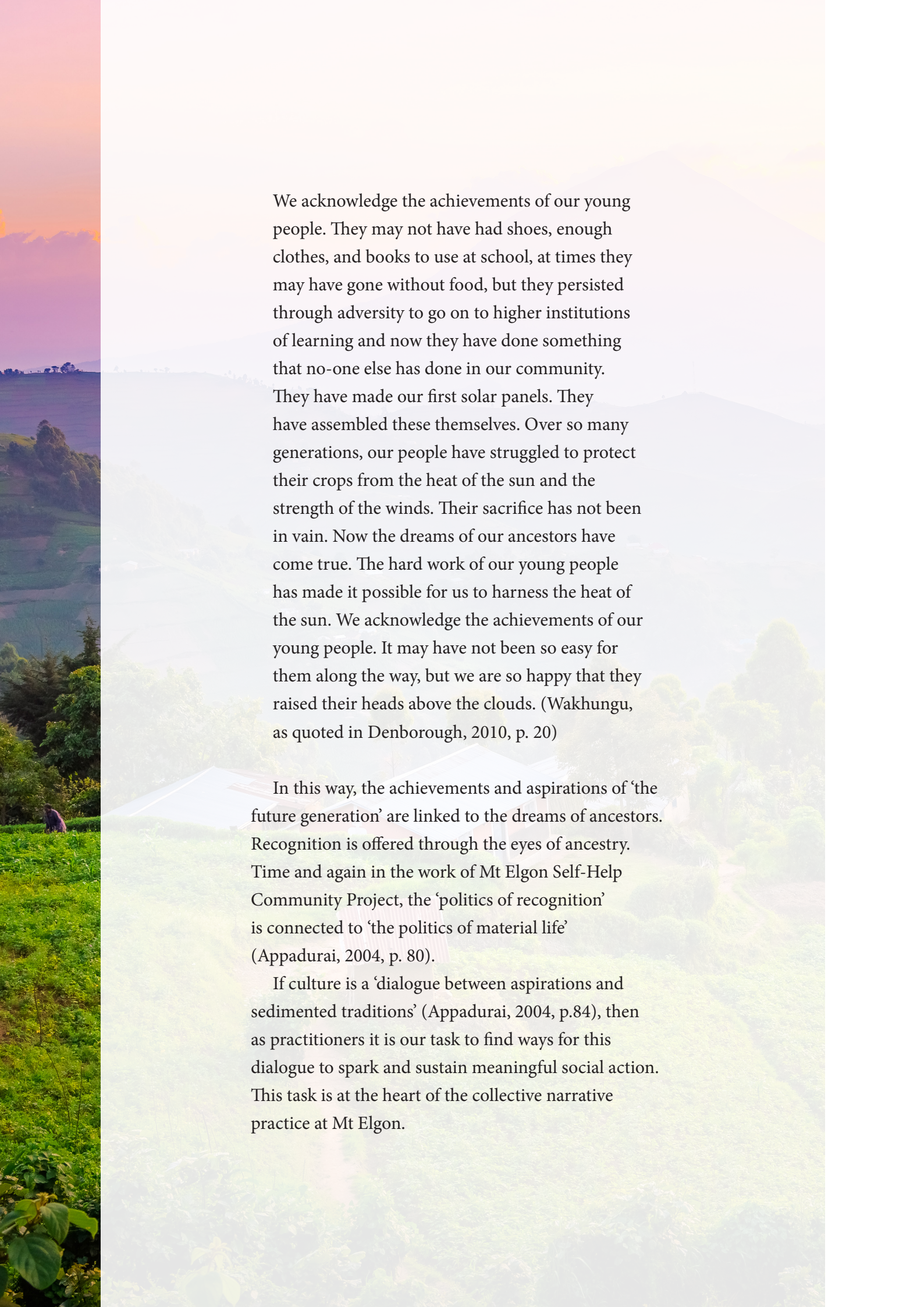


The diverse economic practices fostered by the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project are in defence of these values, not in opposition to them. Significantly, these treasured values are not positioned as only ‘things of the past’, but also as guides by which to orientate to the future. The significance of this is conveyed by Arjun Appadurai in his influential paper ‘The capacity to aspire: Culture and the terms of recognition’ (2004). In this paper, Appadurai focuses on one dimension of culture – ‘its orientation to the future’:

In taking this approach to culture, we run against some deeply held counter conceptions. For more than a century, culture has been viewed as a matter of one or other kind of pastness – the keywords here are habit, custom, heritage, tradition. On the other hand, development is always seen in terms of the future – plans, hopes, goals, targets. This opposition is an artefact of our definitions and has been crippling. (Appadurai, 2004, p. 60)

The work of Caleb Wakhungu weaves between present, past and future, using people’s stories of present and past survival to lift heads above the clouds in order to aspire to and take future action. Aspirations have a social history and creating rich textual heritage can enable people to look forwards. The narrative processes described in this book shape individual and collective horizons.

Appadurai also described the challenge of ‘how to bring the politics of dignity and the politics of poverty into a single framework’ (2004, p. 63), and described the significance of public and ceremonial moments in which the capacity to aspire is built by ‘changing the terms of recognition’ (2004, p. 77). A scintillating example was provided when Caleb Wakhungu honoured the achievements of young people at the public launch of the solar project:



We acknowledge the achievements of our young people. They may not have had shoes, enough clothes, and books to use at school, at times they may have gone without food, but they persisted through adversity to go on to higher institutions of learning and now they have done something that no-one else has done in our community. They have made our first solar panels. They have assembled these themselves. Over so many generations, our people have struggled to protect their crops from the heat of the sun and the strength of the winds. Their sacrifice has not been in vain. Now the dreams of our ancestors have come true. The hard work of our young people has made it possible for us to harness the heat of the sun. We acknowledge the achievements of our young people. It may have not been so easy for them along the way, but we are so happy that they raised their heads above the clouds. (Wakhungu, as quoted in Denborough, 2010, p. 20)

In this way, the achievements and aspirations of 'the future generation' are linked to the dreams of ancestors. Recognition is offered through the eyes of ancestry. Time and again in the work of Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project, the 'politics of recognition' is connected to 'the politics of material life' (Appadurai, 2004, p. 80).

If culture is a 'dialogue between aspirations and sedimented traditions' (Appadurai, 2004, p.84), then as practitioners it is our task to find ways for this dialogue to spark and sustain meaningful social action. This task is at the heart of the collective narrative practice at Mt Elgon.



CULTIVATING COMMUNITY ECONOMY – AN ANTI-COLONIAL ECONOMIC PRACTICE

The work of Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project represents an initiative in which local culture is utilised as a gateway to social agency and possibility. Having considered the ways in which Caleb Wakhungu is enhancing the capacity to aspire by linking a politics of recognition with a politics of material life, I now wish to propose that the work at Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project also provides an example of ‘cultivating community economy’ (Gibson-Graham et al., 2021) in ways that offer the possibility of invigorating a ‘new economic politics’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xxxiv).

Feminist economists Katherine Gibson and Julie Graham (Gibson-Graham, 2006) emphasised the significance of making ‘visible the hidden and alternative economic activities that everywhere abound’ (2006, p. xxiv) and in doing so constructing a language of the ‘diverse economy ... populated by various capitalist and noncapitalist institutions and practices’ (2006, p. 54). Their work is an attempt to expand our ‘economic vocabulary’ (2006, p. 62) to include different kinds of transaction, different types of labour, and different forms of enterprise (2006, pp. 62–63). In doing so, they hope to bring

forth ‘new ethical practices of thinking economy’, which in turn can enable ‘different kinds of economic beings’ (2006, p. xxvii).

As previously mentioned, the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project is cultivating community economy in ways that defend preferred local cultural values. These include particular attitudes and commitments to work, to time, to human relationships and to the environment. This is in contrast to dominant Western economic practice. Linked to the defence of these values, the ‘Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds’ process sparks and sustains not only market-based economic activity, but through the principle of ‘the gift of giving’ and a range of collective narrative practices that link individual action to a collective ethos and collective action (savings clubs, collective house-building processes), it equally prioritises what are sometimes referred to as ‘informal economies’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 58) or ‘nonmarket economies’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. 26). These are economies that sustain values such as ‘work for purpose, not for money’, ‘sense of community’, ‘valuing family’ and so on.

At the same time, the work at Mt Elgon prioritises environmentally sustainable economies and biodiversity. The work therefore represents the use of collective narrative practices to spark and sustain three inter-relating strands of diverse economic practices: market-based economic activity, nonmarket transactions/relations, and environmental sustainability. The sort of community economy being generated through the Mt Elgon process aspires towards an 'ethical interdependence' (Gibson-Graham & Dombroski, 2020, p. 3) of these three strands. It's an approach to economics that is not separate from ecology:

The 'eco' in economy comes from the Greek root *oikos*, meaning 'home' or 'habitat,' while 'nomy' derives from *nomos*, meaning management. We view economy as referring to all of the practices that allow us to survive and care for each other and the earth. Economy understood this way, refers to the ongoing management – and therefore negotiation – of human and nonhuman ecological relations of sustenance. (Gibson-Graham et al., 2021, p. 411)

Cultivating community economies also influences forms of subjectivity – ways of relating to oneself and others. Gibson-Graham (2006), in writing about a slum dwellers' alliance in Mumbai, describe the ways in which certain forms of economic practice are linked to new practices of self:

Saving groups are the consciousness-raising groups of the Alliance ... It is in these small groups that individuals embark on a project of ethical self-transformation in Foucault's (1997) terms, or a micropolitics of (re)subjectivation in Connolly's terms (1995, 1999). To join such a group is to engage in new practices of the self – setting aside savings from what is already too little to live on in the case of the women slum dwellers ... In the process, new senses of self are instituted – through self developments as citizens, house designers, investors, or entrepreneurs, through self-recognition of their survival capacities as poor women and migrants, through daily recommitment to the cultivation of solidarity. The savings groups focused on individual self-transformation are the foundation on which alternative economic interventions are built. (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xxv)

Similarly, the work of Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project involves 'new' practices of self, but these are sparked and sustained by interweaving present hopes and dreams with the perspectives and views of the ancestors. What is 'new' is also 'old'.

Michel Foucault, in a very different context, wrote:

The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our day is not to try to liberate the individual from the economy ... but to liberate us both from the economy and from the type of individualization that is linked to the economy. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. (Foucault, 1983, p. 216)

In Mt Elgon, this refusal is also anti-colonial. It involves the restoration and defence of treasured cultural values at the same time as making real differences to people's material lives.

In critiquing the Eurocentrism and environmental consequences of the assumptions that underpin notions of 'economic development' that are regularly imposed on the majority world, social scientist Wolfgang Sachs (2010) emphasised the urgent need for the greater autonomy of local communities, which in turn would make possible:

transition from economies based on fossil-fuel resources to economies based on biodiversity, and oppose the trend to functionalise work, education and the land in order to boost economic efficiency, insisting on the right to act according to values of culture, democracy and justice. (Sachs, 2010, p. xiii)

Sachs went on to argue that there can be 'no equity without ecology in the twenty-first century' (2010, p. xii) and that this will require a 'decolonization of the imagination' (2010, p. ix). Perhaps the work of Caleb Wakhungu and the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project can provide pathways for our imagination.

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The Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project, based in rural Uganda, uses narrative practices to spark and sustain local social action and economic development among isolated and disadvantaged communities.

Quite often, people in vulnerable communities are positioned as passive recipients of aid programs developed elsewhere. The Mt Elgon approach is different. It starts with local knowledge and values.

This facilitation guide has been created to assist practitioners to use the 'Raising Our Heads Above the Clouds' methodology developed by the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project. The guide describes the local values this approach is built on, and the narrative assumptions and principles that underpin it. We take the reader through each step of this innovative process, and also share stories from practitioners in Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda and reflections about how the Mt Elgon approach fosters community economy through collective narrative practice.

The mission of the Mt Elgon Self-Help Community Project is to improve the quality of life of rural people affected by poverty, disasters, conflict and disease through capacity-building, income generation, self-help groups and using our resources in ways that benefit people and the environment.

www.mt-elgonproject.org

