A manual for Strengthening Civil Society programs
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. **Introduction**  
   1.1 Narrative Assessment in a nutshell  
   1.2 Contributions of Narrative Assessment stories to PMEL in SCS  

2. **Setting up a Narrative Assessment**  

3. **Guidelines for creating Narrative Assessment stories**  
   - Step 1: Inviting interviewees  
   - Step 2: Preparing narrative interviews  
   - Step 3: Conducting narrative interviews  
   - Step 4: Distilling stories from the narrative interviews  

4. **Story usage**  
   - 4.1 Reflection, learning, and knowledge development  
   - 4.2 Mid-term review (2023) and end-term evaluation (2026)  
   - 4.3 Reporting and communication  
   - 4.4 Stories for different audiences  
   - 4.5 Language  

5. **Ownership and safety**  
   - 5.1 Introduction  
   - 5.2 Safe gathering and reporting  
   - 5.3 Categorization, storage, and retrieval  

---

**Table of Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1 Narrative Assessment in a nutshell</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2 Contributions of Narrative Assessment stories to PMEL in SCS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Setting up a Narrative Assessment</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Guidelines for creating Narrative Assessment stories</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 1: Inviting interviewees</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 2: Preparing narrative interviews</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3: Conducting narrative interviews</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4: Distilling stories from the narrative interviews</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Story usage</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1 Reflection, learning, and knowledge development</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2 Mid-term review (2023) and end-term evaluation (2026)</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3 Reporting and communication</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 Stories for different audiences</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.5 Language</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Ownership and safety</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1 Introduction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2 Safe gathering and reporting</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3 Categorization, storage, and retrieval</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION
Monitoring, evaluating, and learning for advocacy is notoriously difficult. Efforts usually do not lead to impact directly. Many actors and factors influence how change happens, and evidence is often hard to come by. With conventional reporting, it is also impossible to do justice to the difficulties involved in many contexts, to recognize advocates’ capacities, or place achievements in a longer process.

To address these challenges, Hivos and Wageningen University have developed a new monitoring & evaluation (M&E) method for advocacy, Narrative Assessment. This new method creates plausible stories about advocacy processes, achievements, and challenges from advocates’ perspectives. An advocate and a trained Narrative Assessment facilitator co-produce these stories. The facilitator helps the advocate to create a real-life story about advocacy work.

In the Strengthening Civil Society (SCS) programs, Narrative Assessment can be part of Planning, Monitoring & Evaluation and Learning (PMEL). This manual was prepared to support staff and consultants working in SCS programs to become Narrative Assessment facilitators. To help facilitators work with this manual and support them along the way, a capacity-building trajectory will be conducted (at different stages of the program) by the Narrative Assessment developers: Wenny Ho of Hivos, and Margit van Wessel and Peter Tamás of Wageningen University.

1.1 NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT IN A NUTSHELL

Narrative Assessment revolves around building stories about advocacy and its subsequent usage for learning, monitoring, evaluation, and communication.

Narrative assessment stories are different from, for example, most significant change stories. They have advocates as people in the midst of the action. They focus on their work and their understanding of what happened and they are told in their voice from their perspective. These stories let audiences follow the ins and outs of advocacy in context, thus capturing the work of advocates in an interpretable, personal way. These stories bring out the skills and knowledge of advocates in relation to the action and results.

The method emphasizes the plausibility of stories. It helps advocates build stories that inform and inspire peers while also being acceptable and convincing to evaluators, donors, and other advocates. This makes Narrative Assessment especially useful when objective evidence is hard to come by.

Narrative Assessment stories provide new insights that are meaningful to programs because they provide grounded understandings about how and why things happened as they did. They show strengths and challenges and capture contextual dimensions, local capacities, and advocates’ sense-making that other methods do not easily convey. Narrative Assessment stories can help organizations, stakeholders and donors understand and learn, build shared understandings within and across country teams and different levels, recognize different voices, (re-)strategize and improve or (re)design communication.

Narrative Assessment builds on Theory of Change thinking and storytelling. It does not compete with the other methods such as Outcome Harvesting but supports a meaningful use of their findings and the development of deeper insights.

1.2 CONTRIBUTIONS OF NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT STORIES TO PMEL IN SCS PROGRAMS

Through the use of Narrative Assessment stories, PMEL in SCS programs is strengthened in important ways. The key ones are highlighted below:

1. Realistic and contextualized sensemaking:
Facilitated storytelling strengthens advocates’ sense-making which deepens their knowledge and efficacy of their strategies and actions, and improves their practice. Using the Narrative Assessment stories in periodic reflection and (re)planning meetings supports a realistic collective reflection on assumptions, strategies used, and contextual developments. As Narrative Assessment stories share strategizing in a specific place and time, Narrative Assessment contextualizes findings so others can better decide if the strategies used fit their own circumstances. The stories improve the ability of SCS Alliances to work together on what is needed and what works in which context, as well as support knowledge sharing and understanding, and acknowledgment of diversities.

2. Team building, connecting levels, (South-South) sharing:
Narrative Assessment stories inspire other advocates in an advocate’s country team, or another country team by making visible how they dealt with challenges under similarly difficult circumstances. It also helps build team cohesion and solidarity, as stories from colleagues working in similar circumstances show they are not alone. Sharing
and talking about richly developed stories together leads to the development of understandings between advocates working in international, regional, national, and sub-national arenas, thus strengthening the connection between levels, which strengthens strategizing.

3. Local ownership:
Narrative Assessment is consistent with the narrative forms of knowledge and learning found in many local knowledge systems. Narrative Assessment recognizes local knowledges, makes these visible and makes SCS programs’ dependence on these knowledges explicit, thereby strengthening local ownership.

4. Amplification of voices and shifts in discourse:
Narrative Assessment stories provide accounts of advocates, told on their terms embedded in their context. The stories produced by Narrative Assessment, therefore, amplify local voices.

5. Strengthened reporting and communication:
By providing compelling insights on the otherwise hidden knowledge and skills of advocates that go into everyday strategizing, Narrative Assessment stories capture and showcase advocacy in a manner that help programs build legitimacy and support with audiences like donors and wider publics.

Chapter 2 will explain how to set up a Narrative Assessment. Chapter 3 details the way Narrative Assessment stories are produced. After that, Chapter 4 will go into the different usages of these stories. Finally, in Chapter 5, questions of ownership and safety are addressed.
Advocates, global PMEL task force members or others conducting the Narrative Assessment, and possibly other stakeholders (organizational staff, allies, and partners) define the parameters of the assessment. These parameters are:

1. **For what and for whom?**

   Defining the purposes of the assessment. Specifying the purpose as clearly as possible will help get valuable stories, since those involved will have selected a specific direction together and, as a result, will know what to focus on. For example, the purpose could be to learn why certain parts of a program were much more successful than others in a certain year; or, what did certain advocates do to contribute to a remarkable success; or, why the replication of a success in a new context did not yield expected results nor contribute in-depth information about a program for an end-evaluation report, and so forth.

2. **What?**

   Picking the program or the part of to be covered. For example:
   - In contributing in-depth information about a program for an end-evaluation report, a team might select a certain advocacy trajectory that has taken place and belongs to the heart of a program; for example, in terms of centrality to objectives, exemplary nature of the work done, or challenges faced.
   - Because of unexpected outcomes (good or bad) using a novel strategy in a campaign in a country program, an organization wants to know if there are important lessons to learn for other countries.
   - Because of setbacks in a country program, the organization expects to unearth a story about the role of context change that it wishes to share internally or communicate externally.

3. **Who?**

   Identifying the advocates who have carried responsibility for programs and whose inside information or role make their
participation key to the assessment. Narrative Assessment commonly revolves around a collection of related stories (e.g. from different CSOs working together in a country program; from different advocates working together on a campaign; from different country teams working on a single theme in a program). Depending on the purpose of the Narrative Assessment, advocates can be selected for interviewing who may have the best insider information. In any case, only those who have relevant first-hand experience of what happened are relevant potential interviewees.

4. When?
Stories gathered right after important events to capture their unfolding will be different in scope from stories capturing a longer period that tell about a series of developments over time. They will be less detailed but can show the interconnections between larger developments. Stories will also be less detailed and lifelike when asked about long after they happened, but it may be possible to reflect with more distance. The ‘when’ question is thus not just a matter of planning; it may also shape stories’ qualities.
GUIDELINES FOR CREATING NARRATIVE ASSESSMENT STORIES

INTRODUCTION
Creating a Narrative Assessment story consists of four main steps.
1. Inviting interviewees
2. Preparing narrative interviews
3. Conducting narrative interviews
4. Distilling stories from the narrative interviews

Each step involves different aspects. Below, the different steps and their aspects are explained.

STEP 1: INVITING INTERVIEWEES

There are two types of Narrative Assessment stories. Some stories can be told by a single advocate, while other stories recount a collective effort or a longer history, involving different people over time. In that case, several interviews will need to be integrated into a larger story or stories (see Step 4). Potential interviewees need to be approached in a way that makes the relevance and nature of the exercise clear.

Narrative Assessment is a special experience for many advocates for whom it may be the first time to talk about their work from a deeply personal perspective. Generally, people will be pleased to share their stories, but it will be helpful to explain this special nature, the purpose of the Narrative Assessment and what is expected of them, also in terms of time investment (up to 1.5 hours of their time plus the checking of the story draft). How interviewees are invited to interviews has two important effects. First, done right, those invited become interested in participating. Second, how you introduce yourselves and your purpose will immediately begin to shape their expectations, which will affect what they share.

Participants must agree to what they are getting into, what will be expected of them, how their identity can be protected, and what will be done with the stories they share. This informed consent must be secured before the interview takes place.

STEP 2: PREPARING NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS

Interviews for Narrative Assessments are not like other interviews. A narrative interview is an interview that does not revolve around questions by the interviewer but helps someone tell their story. For Narrative Assessment, the facilitator helps set up the story, does very little but listen while the story is being told, and then asks questions after that enrich, clarify and build plausibility. Narratives have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The role of the facilitator is, thus, very different from that of a normal interviewer.

Right before the interview, four actions must be taken to prepare the interviewee. Together, the four actions may take about 20 minutes.

1. Preparing the interviewee for telling a story
The facilitator starts by explaining Narrative Assessment and the question or interest that motivates the interview. Many interviewees will be used to reporting and reports are not stories. Therefore, Narrative Assessment requires a mental shift. The stories Narrative Assessment seeks are personal: they encourage advocates to open up and share personal knowledge of developments in their work, in the form of stories from their perspective. While many people share stories frequently outside of work, a preparatory conversation and supportive interview can help bring about and sustain this mental shift. One strategy here is to lead by example. The facilitator, for example, could share with the interviewee how this interview came about.

2. Getting a sense for the story
While the purpose of the story will be defined already (in Step 1), the interviewee and facilitator should agree the story is to be that of the interviewee. Together, the interviewee and facilitator go through the following steps to prepare the telling of the story.
It is crucially important to have at least some sense of the story before the interview starts. All stories have plots. They are accounts of interconnected developments over time, with actors taking action, leading to some result. Stories are accounts of things that happened over time. For a good story, the interviewee must know what happened firsthand. Often there is a main message, something meaningful to the interviewee regarding these events, and the reason to tell the story – defining how it is built up. This main message defines the plot. For example: something was learned, something worked out, or failed for reasons the interviewee understands.

However, having some sense of what the message is about, and keeping what it is about in mind, is important for helping the interviewee to actually tell a story. It will be clear to them what is to go into the story. The exact nature of the message will develop through the telling of and through the facilitator’s probing questions about the story, helping to release memory and make sense of events and actions. This interaction may be the first time the interviewee reflects deeply on what happened and its meaning. This reflection will help the interviewee learn from the interview themselves.

The interviewee and the facilitator explore the question of the message until the interviewee finds they have defined it enough to tell the story, and the facilitator helps to make sure the story is rich and serves the purpose of the Narrative Assessment. A simple way to do this is to establish with the interviewee what the story is going to be about. There are two elements to this that both need to be discussed:

1. **What is the theme of the story:** the set of things that happened that will be talked about. For example: how we changed our strategy from trying to have conversations with the government agency to organizing protest.

2. **What is the message of the story about:** For example: what we learned along the way that made us realize we had to change our strategy in this way.

While the theme will always be identified in advance, there are times where the facilitator and interviewee will discover important messages during their interaction. These unexpected findings, messages that become visible during coached reflection, are a key contribution of Narrative Assessment. When these occur, it may be wise for the interviewee to name these new points and to explore these new messages further. One of these newfound messages may become the theme of the story.

Once the theme and message are adequately clear, it is possible and necessary to delimit the time and scope. If the timeline is too long and the number and types of actions too many and complex, there will be little chance to create a story with sufficient detail and context to be insightful and convincing. A clear idea of where and when the story starts and some discussion of how to pick which details to include (and often more importantly, exclude) along the way is necessary. The scope should be set so there is enough time to go into important details, clarifying things like crucial turning points at events, explanations of strategy, and reflections on reasoning at the time.

---

**Box 1. Setting scope**

A way to set an appropriate scope is for the facilitator to discuss with the interviewee beforehand what developments the story will discuss, also going into the kinds of details that are important to show and make understandable how things happened. This can help the interviewee decide what story could be told within an hour. In addition, a facilitator can decide to adjust the scope if the story becomes so large (e.g. covering a multi-organization campaign over three years) that it is impossible to include the details necessary for an insightful and plausible story on how or why things happened as they did. In such situations, a facilitator can ask the interviewee to focus on a subset of events or actors or consider returning for a second or third interview.
3. Setting the timeline
Together with the interviewee, the facilitator decides upon the starting point of the story (time and place) and invites the interviewee to start from that moment. To help make this happen, the facilitator can ask questions such as: What was for you an important starting point in time for this story? When do you think this story should start? How did this begin? The facilitator will then locate the interviewee at that starting point by asking them detailed questions about that situation.

4. Safety
Stories contain many rich details. These same details may make it possible to identify people which at times may put people and/or programs at risk. Being safe means deciding in advance, during and afterward what sorts of details may be dangerous to include and how to mitigate those risks. The first step in managing safety takes place once the scope and starting point are set but before the interviewee shares their story. At this point, the facilitator must ask ‘might this story contain any details that put anybody or anything you care about at risk?’ With that answer in mind, the facilitator and interviewee will collaboratively decide what to do. For more information, see Chapter 5.

STEP 3: CONDUCTING NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS
Once the story is roughly framed, the interviewee will know what goes into his/her story, and the narrative interview can get started. Asking many further questions during the storytelling will not be necessary after that and can even be counterproductive, as it can shift attention towards what the facilitator is asking and distract the interviewee from building their story from their perspective as it happened.

There are five further tasks for the facilitator:

1. Helping to build the story
The main task of the facilitator is to encourage the interviewee to tell the story step-by-step, to stay in the moment, and to speak from their position, as it unfolds over time.

A story is an account of events over time in specific places, brought together into a coherent whole, conveying certain messages from the standpoint of the interviewee. A Narrative Assessment story is built from the following elements:

1. It contains an element of transformation (something important changed).
2. It presents this transformation as a movement over time.
3. It contains actions by which this transformation happens.
4. Characters (one of whom is the interviewee) carry it out.
5. These actions take place in specific well-described settings.

These five elements are brought together in a plot (possibly involving crises and turning points). This plot has a point: a key message to take away from the story.

It is important not to treat these elements as sequential steps. They are interlocking elements that combine like the ingredients to bake a cake. With the preparation done, once the normal reporting mode is left behind, telling the story will often come naturally to the interviewee. The facilitator can help, when necessary, to bring out the specific elements more sharply, by asking questions like: So, what happened next? Who did that, can you tell me a bit more? What kind of event was that, where that happened? So why does this matter for your story?

The facilitator may also help the interviewee to explore what should go into the story, during the telling. An interviewee may very well move in different directions for some time, exploring different developments to see if they fit into the story. While supporting such explorations, the facilitator may help the interviewee to assess what should go into the story by asking questions such as: So how does this (actor, event, etc.) matter for the story for you? Or: Why do you think this is actually part of this story? Or is this another important story? It may happen that the story the interviewee tells consists, in the end, of a set of smaller interlinked stories that, when woven together, make the bigger story. That is not a problem for Narrative Assessment, but the facilitator and interviewee should develop a shared understanding of what the different smaller stories are and how they are related.

2. Helping to make the story plausible
A very important task of the Narrative Assessment facilitator is to help make the story plausible. The facilitator needs to pay attention to the following four aspects of the story and ask questions where necessary to strengthen the story⁵:

---

1. **Detail**: Detail makes stories insightful and plausible

Narrative Assessments ask for detail beyond conventional reporting. An important role for the facilitators is to ask for detail along the way, asking questions such as: Can you be a bit more precise about how that happened? How did you manage to get that invitation? What makes you think the minister took you more seriously at the meeting than before? Asking questions on this will often be necessary since interviewees will otherwise keep their stories at a general level.

2. **Context**: Stories that clearly place practice in context are easier to interpret and they are more plausible, as they are embedded in a reality. This helps to understand why things unfolded as they did and if and how those circumstances match the readers. Facilitators need to encourage interviewees to put their story in its context, asking questions such as: ‘So why was it evident to you that the government would respond in this way?’, ‘Why did the strategy you chose fit the situation in that province?’ Interviewees often take their context for granted so asking questions will often be necessary. How much and what parts of that context matter change depending on the audience (e.g. sharing with peers in other countries or donors). Key elements of that context will have to be included.

3. **Consistency**: Stories are more plausible when they are internally consistent and when they are also consistent with what we know about the context from other sources. Facilitators will be more effective if they can tell if the story fits the context as they are hearing it. This will give facilitators grounds to ask detailed questions. Facilitators must test consistency so they should prepare for the Narrative Assessment interview by reading up or having informal conversations with informed people on the theme and its context before the interview(s) start. It may be helpful to ask critical questions to explore consistency gaps and questionable silences or claims and so tease out details to strengthen the plausibility and life-likeness of the story. These silences may cover developments the story tells about. The facilitator may ask the interviewee, giving the interviewee space to reflect. The facilitator can also help construct it (finding the right language, looking back together).

4. **Completing and closing**

After completing the above, the facilitator must also ask the interview if anything came up during their discussion that they think is sensitive. If they do identify something as sensitive, the facilitator and the interviewee must decide on how this information should be handled. For more information, see Chapter 5 on safety.

Finally, the facilitator should share with the interviewee what will happen next. This may, for example, be returning the cleaned-up transcript to the interviewee and scheduling a meeting or planning to interact over email to make sure the story reflects the telling and perspective of the interviewee.

---

3. Tagging of stories is discussed in Chapter 5.
5. Recording
To capture stories in all their richness, it is important to record and transcribe (literally) the interview. Given that the quality of a Narrative Assessment depends on details, and that the relevance of these details may not be apparent until later, it is not possible to trust the memory of an interviewer unless they are very well trained in note taking.

STEP 4:
DISTILLING STORIES FROM THE NARRATIVE INTERVIEWS
Interview transcriptions or notes easily run into 10 to 20 pages. Those writing up a story will need to transform the interview transcripts or notes into a story that is meaningful and to-the-point for busy staff and other audiences to read. While the stories need to be easy enough to understand and engage, they must do justice to the story as told by the interviewee. This requires condensing the story while retaining key developments and important aspects of the context. It also involves putting the interviewee at the heart of the story as the protagonist whose knowledge and experience is presented throughout the story. At the same time, the story also needs to bring out critical detail and consistency.

Stories can develop from a single interview, to tell the story of an advocate. It is also possible to develop stories about programs, implemented by several organizations or individuals, or larger events incorporating and connecting stories told by different advocates. These are different types of stories, requiring different forms of reworking. Below, we first address the story from the single interview; we then go into the more complex task of developing stories from multiple interviews.

1. The single-interview story
During a narrative interview, an interviewee is not telling a ready-made story; they are constructing the story, reflecting, remembering, and adding on the spot. There may be main points and minor points, repetitions, and side stories. These things are what often make for a long transcript telling much more than the main story. However, based on the preparatory exploration beforehand and the way the story is told and concluded, the facilitator will be able to distill at least the main story from the interview, identifying and bringing out:

- the main set of interconnected events forming a plot;
- and how the telling of the events conveys a main message;
- connecting characters with action;
- over time;
- in settings that are described so they can be clearly recognized and are demonstrably relevant to the message.

A single interview can usually be boiled down to a 2-3-page story. Sometimes, one interview ends up containing more than one story; and from one transcript, more than one can be distilled. To stay as close as possible to the interviewee’s form of the story, it is advisable to maintain the wordings, the style of narrating, and the first-person perspective of the interviewee as much as possible. Stories are written from the perspective of the interviewee. To get the feel right and stay in the perspective of the interviewee, it is helpful to listen to key bits of the interview before and while writing the story. Cleaning up grammar, hesitation and the like is advisable though, as it will raise the clarity and quality of the story, making it a more compelling read.

In order to make the story interpretable for different intended audiences, the facilitator may add information. This may be necessary since the original audience (the facilitator) is not the intended audience. The interviewee may have told their story rightfully assuming that the facilitator has insider knowledge on, for example, the setting, actors, or events. The facilitator needs to consider what information, for example, about the setting of the story, should be added to the story for an intended audience and then ask the interviewee to check the draft to see whether the adjusted rendering still does justice to their perspective.

Sensitive information may need to be adapted, in particular when the story is meant for external audiences (more on that in Chapter 5 on safety).

After drafting the story, the facilitator must send it to the interviewee for checking, giving them the opportunity to correct the draft. In this exchange, the facilitator must tell what they have added or changed in the story and why those decisions were made.

Sometimes, a story that an interview tells consists of a few interconnected smaller stories. For example: ‘How I built a relation at a ministry’, ‘How an opportunity to influence a policy developed at that ministry because of a political development’. In such cases, we speak of
Guidelines for creating Narrative Assessment stories

a ‘composite story’. Those will be more common still with stories built from more than one interview. At times, these smaller stories can be separated, while for other purposes, they are better kept as one story.

2. The multiple-interview story
Many advocacy trajectories involve several organizations working in alliances, multiple events over a longer period, and more than one advocate. Stories from different interviewees can be put together in a single story. As this is more complicated, the multiple-interview story is more challenging for facilitators than the single-interview story and may require some additional support from the trainers.

When advocates have worked together very closely, there may be a single composite story to tell by combining different interviews into one, with one plot that the interviewees all agree on. In that case, the process of building the story may be similar to that of a single-interview story, be it that you include different advocates’ voices into it. In that case, the facilitator may need not write the story in the first (I) person but, rather, to take up the role of a narrator, telling the story but ‘existing outside of it’ (telling what happened and what advocates did etc. in the third person, he/she/they). In some cases, the narrator will also have to at least partly formulate the plot and main message (and thus also the rest of the story), bringing together different voices into one story (which may shed a different light on the same sequence of events).

For example, a facilitator has conducted a set of narrative interviews with advocates from four different organizations, about a campaign over several years in which each played a role. This set of interviews will have to be reconstructed into one single story that ties these together. The question is how to do this without imposing an interpretation that does injustice to the interviewees. Based on the different interviews, the facilitator can decide that the interviews each show a different part of the campaign (from a similar perspective or a different view on it). A challenge is how to define the main message. It can still be possible to do this, while drawing on the interviews, as they together may provide input for this based on their similarity. For, they all engage the same difficult context and all contribute to the same result, offering part of a sequence of events that led to a certain outcome.

The facilitator can introduce that starting point at the beginning of the story, and then proceed including the different voices of the interviews in a single story. Within these parts, the principle remains the same of maintaining the voice of the interviewee as much as possible, with main elements (events forming a plot with a message, characters, action, and setting) distilled from the interview as with the single-interview story. The narrative will have to create text elements connecting those voices, and also a concluding part confirming the main message and reflecting back on the different elements.

A multi-interview story will be longer than the single-interview story. It’s important to decide upon an acceptable length for your audience and adjust the story accordingly. If the case under study is complex, with many story strands, facilitator(s) may also decide to create several stories from the same set of interviews.

An example applying this approach for a Cordaid program can be found here, also in French, in which the authors of this manual worked with this approach.

Here too, to make the story understandable for different intended audiences, the facilitator may add an introduction, some information, for example on the setting, to help these audiences understand the story. This may be necessary since the original audience (the facilitator) is not the intended audience.

Again, sensitive information may need to be adapted, in particular when the story is meant for external audiences (more on that in the section below on safety).

After drafting the story, the facilitator sends it to the interviewees for checking, giving them the opportunity to correct the draft. In case of variety in perspective, the facilitator might want to address this in a meeting with all interviewees where possible. If no agreement is found, it can be decided to resolve this by focusing the stories on agreed elements, with further reflection on plausibility as a key factor deciding what should go in. If different accounts continue to be plausible also after this reflection, stories can highlight the different experiences as partial and/or reflecting different angles.
04 STORY USAGE
Narrative Assessment builds collections of stories for a purpose. The purpose defines the focus of the stories, but also the usage. A set of stories can be brought in for usage in workshops of different kinds, reporting, and communications.

Narrative Assessment stories play a special role in PMEL for SCS programs. They bring out tacit knowledge about the unfolding advocacy dynamics and navigation of developments that is otherwise overlooked, implicit and hidden, and therefore ignored. In that way, they provide a deeper understanding of the crucial role contexts plays in advocacy initiatives. Therefore, the main usage of Narrative Assessment stories is in driving and deepening reflection, learning, and knowledge development. How this looks, depends on the more specific purpose and level of use. This is further explained in the below sections.

4.1 REFLECTION, LEARNING, AND KNOWLEDGE DEVELOPMENT

1. Intentional learning – country level
Countries organize periodic collective reflection and (re) planning to review Theories of Change based, among others, on outcomes harvested. For this specific level, Narrative Assessment stories start from outcome findings.

In such country-level periodic reflection and (re) planning meetings, Narrative Assessment stories are used as input in collective reflection, sensemaking, and learning. Possible meeting objectives can be:
1. Sharing of preliminary reflections regarding interventions, and the handling of challenges and windows of opportunity;
2. Reflection on evidence of successes, failures and their implications, and the validity of assumptions;
3. Dialogue on ways forward, e.g. by refining the Theory of Change based on the assessment of the effectiveness of strategies and their contribution to (clusters of) outcomes.

In this way, knowledge captured in the Narrative Assessment stories enhances a common understanding regarding the effectiveness of strategies, underlying assumptions, and supports collective decision-making about priorities and re-strategizing.

Additionally, country teams can decide to take the learning topics as starting points to build Narrative Assessment stories. As the learning topics mostly center on critical
assumptions of the country’s Theory of Change, the stories can then be used in the same reflection and (re)planning meetings. The global team (GLOPRO) can build and use narrative assessment stories in the same way.

2. Intentional learning – Global Alliance level
At the Alliance level, periodic reflection and (re)planning meetings will also be organized with the Alliance members, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and possibly other stakeholders. Also, at this level, the use of Narrative Assessment stories will enrich collective sensemaking, learning, and knowledge development. Using the stories at the Alliance level will aid in connecting the different countries and bring into perspective the influence of contextual factors at play. For this Narrative Assessment stories can be clustered, for example, by country, by SCS outcome, strategic intervention, and by actor or advocacy target. Clustered stories may be analyzed, among others, to identify patterns or trends.

3. Intentional Learning - South-South Learning
At the country level, South-South learning is built into the way each team interacts with partners and stakeholders for joint learning and reflecting enriched by Narrative Assessment stories. To further encourage South-South learning, SCS programs can organize regional or global peer learning visits. Narrative Assessment stories can be used to point out contextual factors at play in countries.

4. Emergent learning – Country, Global, and South-South
When Narrative Assessment stories are created, whether starting from outcomes or learning topics, otherwise hidden factors will be unearthed, or dynamics or intuitive and implicit strategies made visible. The use of the stories then feeds emergent, unplanned learning whether at country- or Alliance level or during South-South exchanges. In this way, Narrative Assessment stories can contribute to Alliance-wide innovation, or help learn about innovations in different contexts.

4.3 Reporting and Communication
Narrative Assessment stories will be used in reporting and for communicating with internal or external audiences.

Reporting
Authors and readers of reports about programs often have related complaints. Reporting can be a time-consuming chore. Reading and processing reports can be unrewarding as the commonly found tables and narrations are hard to make sense of, conveying the meaning of what has been done, achieved, or not achieved.

Narrative Assessment offers a way to make reporting more meaningful. Stories and insights from multiple stories can be integrated into reports to convey the
nature of the work being done, as well as the significance of achievements and programs. They can, for example:
1. Provide a robust, plausible explanation of how outcomes have been achieved.
2. Situate outcomes in challenging contexts, facilitating the proper interpretation of programs and their achievements.
3. Do justice to contextually relevant knowledge and capacities.
4. Situate the work in a longer-term process, offering rationales for supporting future action.

Communication
Communication is to account for actions while connecting with audiences and mobilizing support for ongoing and future actions. The stories developed and assessed through Narrative Assessment can form an appealing basis for communication to diverse audiences. They can, for example:
1. Show ways of working that are representative for a program.
2. Highlight key achievements.
3. Recognize diverse organizations' capacities.
4. Amplify different voices.
5. Facilitate connection with and between advocates.
6. Offer insight into advocacy as a challenging journey.
7. In the light of a larger future picture, provide a sense of the significance of ongoing and future support.
Stories can be presented in diverse ways, for example, in written form on programs' or organizations' websites, as videos, as blogs shared through social media, or in the form of (online) collections, such as the one here, also available in French.

4.4 STORIES FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES
Stories for different audiences are to be written differently, although they may originate from the same interview. Below are some main considerations that can inform the adaptation of stories to different audiences:

Purpose: Stories for in-team learning do not have to hold much contextual knowledge, regarding, for example, the country or issue. Stories that are to convince a donor or are used for peer-to-peer learning across countries or regions might be strengthened with that same knowledge.

Safety: Stories that convey sensitive information are best kept internal or adapted for external usage.

Strategy: Stories that convey knowledge about important contacts or strategic knowledge are best kept internal.

Context: The context where something has happened and the context where that story will be read will differ. In order to translate between contexts, the story must contain information that permits the audience to understand how things function. For example, an interviewee may state that they went to their cousin who works in the ministry. This familial relationship may not be relevant in the same way in the context of the reader. To improve quality, then, the story needs to show how the familial relation matters. To insert this knowledge into the story, the facilitator ideally has the contextual knowledge while also being aware it is in fact contextual knowledge. To help identify key elements of context for outside audiences in case of doubt, the facilitator can go over draft stories with a member of the intended outside audiences to see what needs to be clarified. In case the facilitator is from outside of the context, they need to ask the interviewee during the interviews any time that a turn of events or strategizing or role of context is unclear to them. Aware of the content that needs to be added, the facilitator can finalize the story in a way that makes sense to readers who are in different contexts.

4.5 LANGUAGE
A story is supposed to be an account of things that matter to the storyteller. Part of the way people experience things is shaped by language. Language is not neutral. Different languages influence what we see, all translations are partial (they are incomplete and they shift meaning) and nobody is perfectly multilingual. We’re all better in some languages than we are in others. This means that if we want to tell a story as we experienced it, we best tell the story in the language in which we experienced it. If that is not possible, the story should at least be told in a language the interviewee is comfortable with. This implies that the facilitator should also be comfortable with that language. In addition, stories drafted from interviews should be in that language, so the interviewee can check whether the rendering matches their perspective and telling. After such checking, stories can be translated into other languages for usage.
5.1 INTRODUCTION

The stories told in Narrative Assessment are owned by the interviewee as the teller of the story. They are highly personal, sharing perspectives and accounts of events as they unfolded in advocates’ working lives. It is the interviewee who is to decide how much is told and with whom. Since sharing is the main purpose of Narrative Assessment, the stories must be safe enough for interviewees to allow for sharing.

Narrative Assessment asks for a wealth of details and some of these may make it quite easy to identify precisely who did what, where, why, and with what effects. This information may be useful to those who oppose the goals of advocates and programs. For example, if an advocate successfully uses a family network to build trust with a senior official, and if this senior official acts in the way the advocate suggested, public recognition that this official’s actions were influenced could put the advocate, the official, and the programmatic gains at risk. Further, circumstances may change over time so stories that were once safe later become dangerous. These changes are likely not to be detected by outsiders. As such, those who share stories must know that they own them. This means they have the right at any time, to have their contribution modified or removed.

Box 2. A three-legged stool

Evaluation often seeks to establish relationships between outcomes, mechanisms (how the outcomes were achieved), and context. Outcomes assessment is, predictably, interested in outcomes. The standard of validity for outcomes assessment is transparency: it should be possible to confirm precisely what is reported. Narrative Assessment focuses on the other two parts of this three-legged stool, namely, mechanisms and context. These two other parts are often used for a different purpose: improving practice. By gathering stories, Narrative Assessment builds a rich understanding of how mechanisms contribute to outcomes, and the role of the context in this.
Ownership and Safety

An insightful, plausible story showing how or why things happened as they did does not require full transparency. In those cases where full transparency is considered necessary, it is possible to gather information that helps others in a manner that does not specifically describe actual practice or an actual context, in a way that can make people or actions involved identifiable. This section describes a few strategies that can be used to improve the ability of people to report useful information, preserve the integrity of the data gathered, and protect the people and programs that have shared their stories.

5.2 SAFE GATHERING AND REPORTING
Facilitators should not ask for or hold information that could be used to harm. If it is not possible to talk about things as they actually happened, then the facilitator and interviewee, before starting to record their session, may agree on a strategy that the interviewee will use to hide those parts that create risks. The simplest way to hide the origin of a story is to change details like the names of the organizations involved, dates, and locations in the story in ways that blur the connection to specific events, actions, or relations. This can also be discussed at the closing stage of the interview or afterward.

If this blurring is not sufficient, an alternative approach is for the facilitator to ask the interviewee to present their narrative in the third person (‘I have a friend who...’), to depersonalize the account by explaining how somebody in a situation like theirs might respond, or to change details in the story that are not relevant to the lessons learned.

While this may sound as going against the transparency and verification purposes of sound evaluation, it may make much sense for advocacy and thus Narrative Assessment, since an important purpose of Narrative Assessment is to understand how things happen in advocacy. It is possible to tell a valid and useful story using a fictional setting. The decision to fictionalize part or all of the narrative must be taken consultatively. While the person asking for permission to do so need not reveal the details, they must provide a strong justification. Incidentally, this sort of fictionalizing need not alter the nature and level of detail present in a narrative, so it is possible to write narratives that protect things that are vulnerable while preserving the plausibility of that narrative.

But what about context then? An accurate description of the exact context in terms of people, places, and exact events may not be crucial for building understanding (of, for example, why an unusual strategy succeeded). What matters is ensuring that the details provided support accurate interpretation as is often done in, for example, rewriting the Bible for modern audiences. It is possible, and sometimes necessary, to modify details in stories and have distant readers make correct interpretations. This means that heavily modified stories can be valid.

To make it possible for a team to validate or more deeply address the story, the facilitator, with permission of interviewees, may choose to create a document stating the modifications, and store this securely.

5.3 CATEGORIZATION, STORAGE, AND RETRIEVAL
To be able to use stories for various purposes, it is important to gather and store them, and to do that in ways allowing for access and retrieval of different types of stories (e.g. stories about outcomes, stories about a certain part of the program, or about certain types of challenges).

Categorization
Stories will be structured around themes. These themes, which will be informed by program interests, will become thematic tags. In addition to these thematic tags, interviewees will answer the question ‘what is most important in the story you just shared?’. This will create a list of ‘key points’ tags. Each narrative will also be classified according to a standard set of variables like location, program, date, identity of the interviewer, and any other non-thematic variable that is relevant. All three kinds of tags will be put as keywords at the top of the story.

Storage and retrieval
Recordings of interviews, original language transcripts, and all working documents (including an ‘info’ file that contains all relevant information about the story) will be stored in a folder accessible only to the team directly involved in that narrative assessment. This folder will be categorized as confidential.

The stories produced from interviews, edited for safety and confidentiality, will be stored both in the original language and in English in a folder accessible only to staff in the country that may be used for their own purposes.

Once the stories, both in original language and in English, have been checked to ensure they do not create risks or violate legal requirements regarding personal data, they will be placed in a folder within the ‘Narrative Assessment
stories’ folder that is accessible to consortium members in other countries. All Narrative Assessment stories shared with the consortium must be safe for public access.

To facilitate retrieval, the location of each story, tags, and contact information for the evaluator will be entered in an Excel sheet stored in the ‘Narrative Assessment stories’ folder. Management will decide whether to keep or destroy confidential records at the end of the project.

Wenny Ho
is senior advisor in Hivos’ Strategy & Impact unit.
Wenny can be contacted at wenny.ho@hivos.org

Margit van Wessel
works as assistant professor at the Strategic Communication Chair Group, Wageningen University & Research.
Margit can be contacted at margit.vanwessel@wur.nl

Peter Tamas
works as a lecturer at Biometris,
Wageningen University & Research.
Peter can be contacted at peter.tamas@wur.nl