FROM THE EXPLOITATION OF REPRESENTATION TO THE AUTONOMY OF STORY

An Ethical Storytelling and Decolonial Communication Guide for NGOs

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January 2026

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SUMMARY

This guide was prepared to examine the "storytelling" practice at the heart of communication, advocacy, field research, and resource development activities of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), humanitarian aid organizations, and academia operating in Turkey from a critical and transformative perspective. The guide departs from the observation that current practices, often unintentionally, tend to frame individuals and groups referred to as program participants/focus groups/beneficiaries as exploitable and "victimized" objects, reinforce entrenched power imbalances, and perpetuate an unsustainable communication model. This problem should be read not merely as an ethical violation, but as an indication of the colonial mindset underlying the field.

We position ethical storytelling not as a simple communication protocol but as a decolonial practice requiring radical transformation in organizational culture, relationship-building, and knowledge production. We aim to promote the widespread acceptance of seeing the participant not as a passive source of their story, but as an active, empowered, and collaborative author/subject.

The first section of the guide discusses the theoretical framework of storytelling ethics, along with dimensions of power dynamics and politics of representation. In light of these critiques, a comprehensive and actionable ethical framework is presented, covering story collection, construction, sharing, and post-sharing relationships. By engaging ethical storytelling in dialogue with decolonial theory, the call for transformation in the field is strengthened. In the conclusion, a practical roadmap for change is offered to organizations within the context of challenges and opportunities specific to Turkey.

Keywords: Ethical Storytelling, NGO Communication, Decolonization, Power Dynamics, Ethics of Representation, Participant-Centeredness, Communication Ethics, Resource Development Ethics, Civil Society in Turkey.

INTRODUCTION: THE POWER OF STORIES, THE RISK OF EXPLOITATION, AND THE CORE DILEMMA OF NGOS

Human history is also a history of storytelling. From myths to epics, family stories to national narratives, stories shape who we are, where we come from, what we value, and how we envision the future. In recent years, both popular and academic interest in this ancient practice has increased tremendously. Storytelling is now seen not only as part of literature and art but as an inseparable part of our daily lives, historical understanding, political actions, and even our dreams, fantasies, and aspirations (Gölcü, 2023). However, this revived interest inevitably raises the question: What is the ethics of storytelling? Who tells a story, for what purpose, to whom, and with what consequences in mind? These questions are vital, especially for organizations and institutions that use stories as a tool.

For Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), storytelling is a fundamental component of their raison d'être. Stories make abstract social issues concrete and transform them into an emotional human experience. They turn statistics into faces and complex systems into personal/group struggles. What often moves a donor, persuades a politician, or raises public awareness is a well-told story. NGOs and humanitarian organizations aim to promote the well-being of the communities they serve, and storytelling is a key tool they use to achieve these goals (Ogbu, 2023).

However, the use of this powerful tool brings profound problems. Storytellers have significant power over how the people they tell about are perceived- "the power of the narrator" (Bauman, 1986). This power entails great responsibility, especially when conveying the experiences of others, particularly those of vulnerable, marginalized, or traumatized individuals or groups. Often, the line between telling a story and taking a story is crossed unnoticed. The following questions must always be kept in mind regarding the "voices" featured in a project proposal, a social media post, or a documentary: Whose right is it to tell this story, and who decides how it should be told?

In Turkish practice, this problem manifests itself as a widespread and unquestioned communication culture. Narratives where "poverty is aestheticized," helplessness is emphasized, NGOs are framed as "heroes," and those supported are framed as "victims awaiting rescue" are quite common. Such narratives, whether intentional or not, feed an approach based on the emotional exploitation of suffering and deprivation, often termed "poverty pornography"

(Bhatti & Eikenberry, 2016). This approach may create short-term emotional responses but, in the long run, constitutes an obstacle to generating lasting solutions. It strips individuals/groups of their agency and autonomy, defining them solely through their "needs," and reinforces existing power imbalances and prejudices in society.

This guide was prepared not only to critically diagnose the unsustainable current state but also to offer transformative alternative steps. Its core argument is this: Ethical storytelling is not simply a "better communication" technique but a radical practice that can transform the organization itself, its relationships, and the colonial legacy in the field. This practice aims to move the "participant" from being an exploited "program/project element" to being an "empowered subject" who owns, narrates, and controls their own story. This is not only an ethical imperative but also a strategic necessity that enhances the depth, impact, and sustainability of the work.

The guide aims to bridge academic propositions with field practice. In the initial sections, a theoretical foundation regarding story, representation, and power relations will be built. Subsequently, the concrete principles and practical steps of ethical storytelling will be detailed for each stage of the story cycle (collection, construction, dissemination, and aftermath). The special section dedicated to decolonization is included to situate this local discussion within the context of global injustice and the colonization of knowledge. The conclusion offers concrete suggestions to NGOs in Turkey for initiating this transformation.

1. Why Do Stories Matter? Representation, Power, and the "Single Story" Trap

"We believe in what the one in power believes. They are the ones who write the story. So, when examining history, you must ask yourself: What story am I missing? Which voice was silent so that this one could emerge? Once you've figured that out, you must find that story too. Only then do you get a clearer, though still imperfect, picture." – Yaa Gyasi, Homecoming

Stories are not innocent. They are fundamental meaning-making tools that shape how we understand the world and position ourselves and others. History is, in fact, a series of stories told (or dictated) by the victors. Storytelling is also a practice of representation, and representation is inevitably intertwined with power relations. As French thinker Michel

Foucault noted, knowledge and power are inseparably linked; deciding what constitutes "true" knowledge and who is a "legitimate" narrator is determined by power relations (Foucault, 2011). "The one who holds the pen" not only writes the story but also determines which version of reality will be visible, audible, and remembered.

In NGO storytelling, this power often manifests as a "deficit narrative" or a "savior narrative." In this narrative:

• The focus is on what the person lacks (food, education, money, health, etc.).

• It often aims to evoke pity and sympathy rather than connection.

• Actors are fixed as "victim" (participant) and "hero" (NGO/donor).

• Context (historical, political, economic causes) is obscured or completely ignored.

This phenomenon is also evident in the language of this story: Labels such as "vulnerable," "needy," "poor," "victim," "sensitive" reduce individuals' complex identities to a single overwhelming characteristic. This language also perpetuates power imbalances. For example, even the term "beneficiary" implies a one-way aid relationship, whereas terms like "participant," although still insufficient and problematic in some aspects, reflect a more equitable and active role.

The phenomenon Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie termed "The Danger of a Single Story" comes into play here (Adichie, 2009). When we define a person or a group with a single story- especially a negative, deficient, or stereotypical one- we deny their agency, diversity, and potential. As Adichie says, "The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete." In the common communication of NGOs in a global context, "single" stories associating refugees only with flight and suffering, Africa only with hunger and war, and local communities only with tradition and "backwardness" are unfortunately very common. While these stories may provide donors with short-term emotional relief, they obstruct understanding the systemic causes of problems and producing lasting, equitable, and just solutions.

Why are stories so effective? Because they activate empathy. However, this empathy can operate in two ways:

1. **Transformative Empathy:** Encourages the listener to open to the complexity, resilience, and humanity of the narrator's experience. Creates a connection among equals, a sense of solidarity.

2. **Exploitative Empathy:** Pushes the listener to see the narrator as an inferior, helpless "other." This creates a sense of superiority ("how lucky I am") or a sense of indebtedness ("I must help them"). The relationship remains a hierarchical bond between the "powerful- savior" and the "weak- victim."

One of the primary goals of ethical storytelling is to shift communication from the latter to the former. This requires deep inquiry into how the story is constructed, whose voice conveys it, and what purpose it serves.

2. Ethical Storytelling Is a Decolonization Practice

Colonialism is not merely spatial occupation; it is also the occupation of mindsets, knowledge, identities, and stories. Colonialism created a knowledge hierarchy that coded what is "Western" as universal, rational, and progressive, and what is "indigenous" or "Eastern" as local, irrational, and backward (Mignolo, 2011). This hierarchy manifests itself in civil society, academia, and humanitarian fields as well: Headquarters (often in the North/West) control "expertise," "strategy," and "resources," while field staff or "beneficiaries" contribute only with their "needs," "experiences," and "stories." This is a form of epistemic violence- the silencing or disregard of non-Western forms of knowledge, stories, and ways of being (Icaza & Vázquez, 2013).

Here, decolonial theory, and particularly decolonial feminism, offers us a powerful analytical framework. Decolonial feminist thinkers propose "border thinking" to break these patterns- that is, moving beyond dominant Western categories and taking the experiences and knowledge of the marginalized (especially women from the Global South) as the starting point (Motta, 2020). As Frantz Fanon said, the colonized person is constructed as a silent body, a "non-being" (damné) (Fanon, 2024). When their story is told on their behalf, detached from their own language, this state of "non-being" is reinforced.

Traditional organizational storytelling- the kind that has been the hallmark of fundraising campaigns and non-profit communication for decades- is based on essentially extractivist

practices. The term "extractivism" is often used in the context of exploiting natural resources (oil, minerals, timber): extracting resources in their raw form and transporting them far away for processing to meet the needs of metropolitan centers, causing permanent damage to local ecosystems. This logic bears a striking resemblance to the traditional storytelling practices of NGOs, academia, and humanitarian organizations.

Like ore beneath the soil, participants' experiences of trauma, poverty, struggle, or "inspiring" moments of transformation are seen as a raw, unprocessed commodity. These experiences are "extracted" from their local contexts and integrity. Communicators, field staff, researchers go to the field (the "periphery" distant from the metropolis) and "extract" this raw experience through surveys, interviews, or observations. This process is usually a one-way transfer: knowledge/story is taken from the community and transported to the center. The extracted raw "story ore" is processed at headquarters according to the expectations, linguistic patterns, and emotional triggers of Western/urban/donor audiences. Complex background, contradictions, and context are filtered out; the story is refined and packaged to produce "emotional donation," financial donation, or "awareness." This is a form of epistemic violence: local knowledge and narrative forms are transformed by being poured into dominant narrative molds. The packaged final product (campaign video, donation letter, social media post) is presented to the consumer audience in the metropolis (donors, supporters). In return for consumption, emotional satisfaction ("I feel good"), social capital ("I am a sensitive person"), and, of course, financial capital (donation) is obtained.

Just as in mineral extraction, this process leaves behind toxic waste: symbolic waste from the stripping of the participant's autonomy and narrative competence over their own experience; social waste from reinforced stereotypes and the normalization of the "savior-victim" relationship; and structural waste from rendering systemic roots of problems invisible, thereby delaying real transformation. Stories are detached from historical causes like colonialism, unequal global trade, and debt policies, and problems are presented as local or personal misfortunes. What remains is often only temporary material support and a story that is alien and sometimes distorted to the participant. This type of relationship is not one of solidarity or partnership but one of exploitation.

So, how does ethical storytelling reverse this process? How does it become decolonial practice? Ethical storytelling is precisely a practice that rejects this extractivist logic and instead proposes

a "circular" or "symbiotic" relationship model. In this practice, the story is not "extracted" but co-created. Value is produced not only in the metropolis but, as the first and most important component, in the story owner themselves and in the storytelling process itself (healing, recognition, empowerment). Here, knowledge flow is two-way and dialogue based. The final "product" is a set of tools that strengthen the participant's own narrative sovereignty and position within the community.

1. **Democratization of Knowledge:** Recognizes storytelling by acknowledging the participant as the primary owner and interpreter of their own experience and knowledge. The "expert" is no longer the NGO worker from outside but the person who lived that life.

2. **Recognition of Complexity and Multiple Realities:** Opens space for numerous, contradictory, rich stories about a person or community, replacing the single story (tragedy). This shatters colonial stereotypes.

3. **Emphasis on Relationality and Interdependence:** Rejects the individualistic "savior-victim" dichotomy. Instead, it builds relationships based on mutual learning, solidarity, and joint struggle. The NGO is not an "empoweree" but a partner that recognizes existing power and walks alongside it.

4. **Recognition of Agency:** Storytelling can pave the way for the participant to redefine themselves as an "acting subject," repair their identity fragmented by colonial processes, and emerge as a political subject (Motta, 2016). Telling one's story is an act of resistance, existence, and healing.

5. **Healing Potential:** Narrating traumatic experiences in a safe, respectful, and controlled environment can be healing. This is not individual therapy but a practice of social witnessing and solidarity. Storytelling contributes to a collective healing and confrontation process by giving voice to the silenced. It demands truth at every step.

Ethical storytelling is, at its core, a set of tools, practices, and mindsets that can help us abandon relationship forms based on different modes of exploitation with the communities and individuals we claim to support and develop more equitable, inclusive, and solidaristic relationships. The discussion on ethical storytelling gains meaning when it moves beyond micro-ethical issues like language and consent to the questioning of global systems of power, knowledge, and representation.

In conclusion, the adoption of ethical storytelling principles at the organizational level is a way for NGOs to reposition themselves not as mere "distributors of goodness/support" but as transformative actors within a system based on global inequality and injustice. This is a challenging but inevitable journey that requires questioning the internal power structures, wage inequalities, and decision-making mechanisms within the field itself. This journey aims to transform a program participant, exploited in various ways, into an empowered narrator not only of their own story but of the goal of a more equitable and just world.

3. What is Ethical Storytelling? A Conceptual Framework

Ethical storytelling begins with the awareness that the act of storytelling is never neutral. Often, power dynamics determine the frame: which voices will be amplified, which will be left out, and how we will understand people, problems, and events.

In recent years, ethical storytelling, which has become a buzzword in the civil society field, is often understood as a superficial checklist (consent form, blurring faces). However, this topic is far more profound and has transformative consequences. Ethical storytelling is more than a set of techniques and rules; it is a mindset, a way of relating, and a self-critical practice. Its foundation is centering the principles of respect, transparency, justice, and reciprocity in all processes of storytelling—initial contact, collection, writing, publishing, and aftermath.

The traditional NGO narrative is mostly based on a "take-give" or "extract-package-sell" logic: a story is "taken" from the community, "packaged" for the donor audience, and "sold" in exchange for resources or awareness. Ethical storytelling, however, aims to replace this function with a logic of co-creation and mutual benefit. To understand this approach, four fundamental axes must be examined:

1. **Relational and Situational Ethics:**

This approach argues that ethical rules should be addressed in the unique context of each story and relationship, rather than applied as abstract and universal principles. Inspired by the social work field, the principle of "cultural humility" comes into play here: the professional sees themselves not as the expert but sees the participant as the primary expert of their own life and experience (NASW, 2021; Barsky, 2022). The aim is not to "judge" like an objective observer

but to "understand" together within the relationship and "co-create a forward-looking map." Every situation is unique; what is appropriate in one context may not be in another.

2. Power Awareness and Analysis:

At the heart of ethical storytelling lies the continuous and conscious awareness and analysis of all power dynamics in the process. These dynamics are layered:

• Organization- Participant: Access to services/support, economic difference, education level.
• Donor-Beneficiary: Control of resources, "savior" position.
• Western/Northern- Southern/Eastern: Global economic and historical hierarchies.
• Researcher/Narrator- Subject: Position of "extracting" and "interpreting" knowledge.

This awareness requires taking steps to make these dynamics visible and balance them as much as possible. The goal is to strengthen the participant's "narrative power" (Senehi, 2002)- the control, ownership, and direction over their own story.

3. Deep, Ongoing, and Informed Consent:

Consent is not a one-time, signed, legal form. In ethical storytelling, consent is a continuous dialogue, a process. Deep consent requires:

• **Informing:** The participant must fully understand, in a language they comprehend (with interpreter support), where their story will be used (website, social media, report), how (text, photo, video), for whom (which audience), and for what purpose (fundraising, advocacy).

• **Voluntariness:** It must be clearly stated and guaranteed that the right to say "no" will have no negative consequences (such as deprivation of service).

• **Continuity and Control:** The participant has the right to give feedback, correct, impose restrictions, or completely withdraw their story at any stage (draft, final version). Consent forms may include an "expiration date" or a requirement for regular renewal.

• **Awareness of Power Dynamics:** Is a participant whose "consent" is requested by an institution from which they receive services saying it with genuine free will or out of a sense of obligation? To mitigate this risk, offering anonymity and being careful not to create pressure is necessary.

4. Holistic Representation and Emphasis on Agency:

This is perhaps the most important thing: representing individuals not solely through their struggles, deficiencies, or traumas, but as a whole. This means:

• **Strength-Based Approach:** When struggles are told, the individual's and community's resilience, skills, resources, wisdom, and dreams should be given equal emphasis.

• **Redefining the Hero:** In the traditional narrative, the hero is the NGO or donor. In the ethical narrative, the true hero is the participant themselves, who moves forward, makes choices, struggles, and transforms on their own journey. The NGO is positioned as a "companion," "facilitator," or "resource" on this journey.

• **Narrating Context:** Individual stories should not be detached from the systemic, historical, political, and economic context in which they unfold. For example, poverty should be framed as a structural problem, not a personal failure.

• **Respect for Complexity:** Lives cannot be reduced to simple "success stories" or "tragedies." Stories can also include contradictions, uncertainties, and ongoing struggles; this is part of reality and enhances the story's credibility.

These four axes form the theoretical basis of ethical storytelling. The next section aims to show step-by-step how to apply these principles to the concrete stages of the story cycle.

4. Ethical Storytelling in the Field:

Considering the theoretical framework, we must first extensively discuss within our organization and with other organizations/stakeholders how to integrate these principles into our organization's daily practice. These discussions should cover the entire process from the birth of a story to its aftermath.

   A. **Before Story Collection: Preparation and Perspective**

• **Self-Criticism and Self-Reflection:** With your team, what are your biases and assumptions about the community and the topic? Do you have sufficient knowledge about the historical (colonialism, migration, economic crises) and cultural context?

• **Local Collaborations:** If possible, the person collecting the story should seek support from someone who speaks the community's language and understands its culture. This reduces misunderstandings and builds trust.

• **Clarity of Purpose:** Why are you collecting this story? Determine your purpose (funding, awareness, advocacy) in advance and plan to share it with the participant.

B. During Story Collection: A Safe and Collaborative Environment

• **Initiate the Deep Consent Process:** At the very beginning of the interview, explain the deep consent process as described above. If a written form is used, read/narrate its content. Emphasize that the "no" option is always available and will have no consequences regarding "support."

• **Safe and Private Space:** The interview should be conducted in a place where the participant feels comfortable and safe. If desired, a trusted person (friend, family member) can be present.

• **Open-Ended, Empowering Questions:** Questions should be reformulated to center the agency of the interviewed person/group. The question, "What is the most important message for you in this story that you want to share?" should be central.

• **Active and Respectful Listening:** Do not try to shape the story according to your own biases. Respect silences, what is left unsaid. There is no obligation to tell everything.
• **Safety Assessment:** Does sharing this story pose a physical (threat, violence), social (exclusion, stigmatization), or psychological (triggering trauma) risk to the participant?

C. Constructing and Preparing to Share the Story

• **Construction with Participant Approval:** After writing the story, selecting photos, or editing the video, definitely share the final version with the participant. Take their feedback seriously. Make the corrections they request. Share the version of the story they have approved.

• **Include Context:** Add brief background information explaining the systemic causes of the situation to the story. This enables the reader to understand the problem structurally rather than personalizing it.

• **Appropriate Media and Language Choice:**

o **Media:** The sensitivity of the story should align with the platform. A refugee's story might be more suitable for a website article or short documentary where context can be provided, rather than an Instagram post.

o **Visuals:** Avoid exploitative, degrading, overly emotional, or "savior"-highlighting frames. Instead, choose photos reflecting the participant's strength, skills, or interaction within the community.

o **Language:** Avoid labels like "beneficiary," "needy," "vulnerable," "victim." Instead, use expressions highlighting identities or roles like "participant," "community member," "activist," "parent," "student." Prefer words like "support," "work together" over "help"; "participant" over "beneficiary."

o **Sharing of Benefit:** How will the benefit arising from the story (funds, recognition, network) be shared? Can a non-symbolic, tangible return (royalty, fee, capacity development opportunity, platform) be provided to the participant? What is the situation regarding the staff, translators, and photographers who contributed to the story?

D. After the Story: Support and Sustainable Relationship

• **Post-Story Support:** Do not cut communication with the participants after the story is shared. Share with them where the story was published and what reactions it received. Especially ask if they need psychological support.

• **Accountability and Self-Reflection:** Regularly review your storytelling process. Learn from your mistakes. As a team, create a written "Communication and Storytelling Policy Document" containing storytelling principles and ensure the entire team is part of this process.

• **Community Feedback:** At regular intervals, gather feedback from communities whose stories are shared regarding your general communication practices.

These steps form the backbone of an ethical storytelling process. However, to understand why this transformation is so essential and important, it is necessary to deepen discussion with a decolonial perspective.

5. Turkish Context: Challenges, Opportunities, and A Call to Action

NGOs in Turkey face both unique challenges and significant opportunities in the process of adopting ethical storytelling.

Challenges:

• **Resource Dependency and Urgency Culture:** Most NGOs are dependent on external resources and frequently have urgent funding needs. This increases the tendency towards "quick, emotional, impactful" stories; ethical processes can be seen as "time-wasting luxuries."

• **Internalized Hierarchies:** Hierarchies in society are also reflected in relationships between fund-distributing national/international organizations and local NGOs, making participatory, egalitarian dialogue difficult.

• **Donor Expectations:** International and local donors are often accustomed to "classic" aid narratives and may find more complex, strength-based stories "not emotional enough" or "persuasive enough."

• **Lack of Capacity and Awareness:** The number of people who have advanced in ethical storytelling is quite limited. Organizations, to a large extent, have not yet fully internalized the strategic importance of this issue.

Opportunities and Recommendations:

• **Local and Cultural Richness:** Turkey has a strong oral and written storytelling tradition. This cultural collective memory can be a resource for participants to narrate their own stories powerfully.

• **Dynamic Civil Society:** NGOs in Turkey have developed significant experience and creativity by struggling under challenging conditions for many years. This accumulation can provide the flexibility and determination necessary for transformation.

• **Digital Platforms and New Narrative Opportunities:** Social media and digital tools offer opportunities for communities to make their own voices heard directly. NGOs can use these platforms as empowering tools for participants to produce their own content.

Call for Concrete Steps:

1. **Develop Policy:** Create and disseminate a written "Ethical Storytelling and Communication Policy" within your institution, reflecting the principles outlined in this guide.
2. **Training and Raising Awareness:** Organize regular ethical storytelling training for your entire team (managers, project staff, communicators).

3. **Transforming Donors and Funders:** In your reports and meetings, explain why you tell less dramatic but more respectful stories and how this increases long-term impact. Take steps to make them part of this transformation.

4. **Involving Participants in the Process:** Focus more on ethics in storytelling workshops. Equipping participants with basic communication skills and co-producing your media content is an important step.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling is an indispensable tool for NGOs. But how we use this tool shows who we are, what we value, and what kind of world we want to build. One-dimensional narrative practices based on exploitation are not only unethical but also ineffective and unsustainable. These practices not only disrespect the communities we work with but also create an obstacle to real social transformation by rendering their power and solutions invisible. Ethical storytelling should be seen not as a simple matter of a "consent form" but as a call for deep awareness of power dynamics, a participant-centered mindset, a continuous process of consent and collaboration, and ultimately, a decolonial transformation in organizational culture and global relations.

We have prepared this guide to present it to your consideration as an unfinished and contributory relational process regarding current problems. The ultimate goal is to use stories to build genuine and solidaristic connections, understand systems based on unjust and unequal power relations, and change together. The change should be from an "exploited program participant" to an "empowered storyteller." Institutional resistance, resource constraints, and habits may slow us down. However, every step is part of this transformation. We hope this guide will serve as a discussion text and a source of inspiration for all civil society actors, academia, and humanitarian organizations in Turkey. Change begins with a story. So, let's tell more ethical, more just, and more empowering stories.

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