



MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE

The power of storytelling in climate campaigns

Storytelling plays a crucial role in climate and health campaigns as it helps to connect people emotionally with the issue and make it relevant to their personal experiences. It can also help to simplify complex scientific information, making it easier for people to understand and internalize the importance of taking action. By creating relatable characters, plotlines and narratives, storytelling can build empathy and generate a sense of urgency to address the challenges posed by climate change to human health. Furthermore, storytelling can help to humanize the issue, making it less abstract and more personal, which can increase motivation for individuals and policymakers to take decisions that promote climate action.

“Respirantes”: Communications as a Campaign Tactic in an Industrial ‘Sacrifice Zone’ in Chile

“I would like the president and company owners to put their hands on their hearts and think of us for a minute. They are poisoning us and killing us little by little. But, above all, they need to understand that we have the right to breathe clean air”, says Annais Medina, who at 11 years of age is a chronic respiratory patient and has been hospitalized more than once for this problem.

“RESPIRANTES: los niños del nuevo viento”

(*Breathers: the children of the new wind*) is a journalistic investigation in the format of a children’s video series that shows how air pollution affects children and adolescents from the so-called “sacrifice zones” of Quintero and Puchuncaví in Chile. The series emphasizes the profound impact that living within an industrial belt of power plants, smelters, fuel storage, and copper and coal ports, among others, has had on local



childhoods. This is an effort to make the invisible visible, and this communication activity is a clear campaign tactic in the broader multi-sectoral campaign to address industrial pollution and the climate crisis.

Respirantes is the result of an innovative collaboration effort. Between May and June of 2020, ClikHub, a Latin American network for climate action knowledge exchange composed of 19 NGOs, including Health Care Without Harm, launched the free virtual course “[Communicating climate change effectively: perspectives from Latin America](#)”, with the aim of sharing tools and advice that contribute to developing creative and impactful climate communication strategies. Such strategies are essential to advancing campaigns around climate and health. Course participants developed their own communication proposals, of which five were selected to access seed funding for implementation. *Respirantes* was among these five proposals. During the course, HCWH Latin America presented on the need to adopt a health framing to increase a story’s impact and advised the makers of *Respirantes* throughout the series’ development process.



Respirantes is structured around interviews with children and adolescents, who were represented through puppets that told the story in the children’s voice. The story is narrated in an entertaining way through Nube and Gaviota (the only fictional characters) and the adventure they undertake to understand what happens in

Quintero and Puchuncaví, where boys and girls are not

able to play outside and do other activities that kids their age do in other parts of the country. The characters explain what sacrifice zones are and address how industries are fueling climate change and affecting their communities’ health. The story finishes on a positive note, with the children of these two areas organizing themselves to face the situation and

rising as proactive actors in the fight against the climate crisis.

The children’s testimonies are complemented by data from scientific and social research, press archives, old photos, and interviews with experts, locals and NGOs. Their voices were also the protagonists of the [virtual event](#) that took place in March 2021 to launch the videos, in which children and youth from Quintero and Puchuncaví participated, together with representatives from environmental, students’ and children’s rights movements, the health community and legislators. The series is a testament to the power and impact of storytelling when innovative communications methods are embraced, but most of all, when the voices of lived experience — especially those who are usually sidelined — are put front and center.





The importance of building participatory advocacy through storytelling

Storytelling can be a highly effective and compelling method of reaching a large number of people — particularly people who are not actively aware of climate change and its impacts on health. Storytelling through art, audio, visual or audiovisual media can more effectively reach communities who may prefer to receive information creatively (rather than as text). However, if these stories are to be authentic, they must be grounded in the experiences of the impacted communities. The use of participatory processes — wherein organizers bring together members of local communities to discuss the problems that they face and share their experiences — to collect and share such stories allows just that. Moreover, bringing them into the process helps in two ways: a) developing advocacy materials that can create a lasting impact on the audience, and b) providing participants in the process with skills and experience that can help them to advocate for themselves in the future.

Additionally, the process of bringing together a group of people for the purpose of discussing and solving a problem can itself be empowering to that group. It allows members to fully grasp the systemic (rather than individual) nature of the problem, helps them to understand what action is needed to address it, and facilitates necessary community organization. Under this participatory approach, the process of creating the media is, therefore, as important as the final product.

An example of this process is a project titled

REFRAMED — North Chennai Through the Lens of

Young Photographers¹

by Chennai Climate Action Group, Zenith Learning Centre and Coastal Resource Centre. *Reframed* presents the story of North Chennai, a region in the state of Tamil Nadu, India, with a disproportionately high concentration of dirty, toxic industries located amidst historically marginalized and predominantly working class communities. The story is told from the perspective of six young residents — one 22-year-old and five teenagers between 14 and 17 years of age. Guided by Palani Kumar, a photographer with



Noor Nisha K

People's Archive of Rural India, the six young photographers spent four months amidst the dystopic industrial-scape and the rustic beauty of the region to tell their stories of their neighborhoods.

(1) — <https://storyofennore.wordpress.com/gallery/reframed-north-chennai-through-the-lens-of-young-photographers/>



Triggered by conversations with the children about poisoned playgrounds and their daily encounters with pollution, this project was conceived to get children to narrate their own stories about the anxieties and aspirations of growing up in a region that hosts south India's largest concentration of climate-changing, carbon-spewing industries.

Reframed tells stories about work, play, joy and mourning in North Chennai using about 50 photographs from the thousands taken by the young photographers since they first got their cameras in July 2021.



📷 Noor Nisha K

This form of advocacy provides the subjects of advocacy pieces with a significant degree of control over the production process. Participants themselves compose their frames to represent their experiences. Facilitators nonetheless play an important role in helping participants identify compelling stories and shaping narratives so that they may reach specific audiences. Sharing knowledge about appropriate information technology has the added benefit of potentially aiding the documentation and the publicity of environmental violations and climate threats in the future.