

Storytelling as a lifeline for SRH advocacy in tough funding times

Guest blog by Lizzie Otaye, Development Communications Consultant, [EANNASO – Solutions for Supporting Healthy Adolescents and Rights Protection](#) project

If there is any data that should keep civil society organisations (CSOs) and community groups on their toes, it's this:

- [1.8 billion youth](#) aged 10-24 years globally
- [400 million young people](#) aged 15-35 years in Africa

These numbers are not just statistics. They represent a generation whose sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs must be championed with urgency, clarity, and authenticity. But how can CSOs continue to advocate effectively in a time when donor funding is on the decline?

To me, this moment is not a crisis. It's a reset button, an invitation to reimagine how we work. As a communications expert, I believe the jackpot that CSOs need to tap into now more than ever is storytelling.

Real-time stories, real impact

Across the Great Lakes region, from Tanzania to Kenya, Burundi to Rwanda, Zambia to DRC, I have collaborated to transition SRH communication from static report writing to real-time, lived-experience storytelling. Through the Supporting Healthy Adolescents Rights and Protection (SHARP) project, funded by the European Union, storytelling has been one of our strongest tools and in this fourth year of implementation, it remains essential.

Inside the SHARP consortium, I've helped lead a shift from traditional, data-heavy messaging to narratives that resonate with real people in real communities. We've moved from trying to convince solely through using statistics to connecting through shared human experience. In today's world of short attention spans and digital activism, this connection matters more than ever.

Why storytelling is my foundation

Storytelling has never been an afterthought in my work, it's the foundation. Especially in spaces where SRH remains stigmatized, misunderstood, or under-prioritized, stories become bridges. They make complex issues human. They build trust, shift perspectives, and spark action. And in my approach, young people are

not passive recipients. They are the central actors. Their voices, experiences, and truths are not filtered through donor reports or academic language. They speak for themselves, and when they do, change happens.





“When storytelling is not gendered and it is not wrapped in technical or donor jargon, it is s human.”

Whether I am filming youth-led conversations on my iPhone or moderating a sensitive dialogue between faith leaders and policymakers, I always let the stories lead. My presence is often behind the camera, but the impact is front and center. I have learned to say the right things and just as importantly, to avoid the wrong ones – because I understand how deeply cultural and nuanced African contexts are. Language matters. Respect matters. And truth matters.

I don't shy away from addressing the "elephant in the room". I say it plainly:
Yes, adolescents are having sex.
Yes, many pregnancies are unplanned.
Yes, silence is harmful.

But I don't say this to shock. I say it to create space for honesty, growth, and change. And through storytelling, we give permission for everyone: youth, persons with disabilities, religious leaders and policymakers to see themselves in the narrative.

What storytelling has helped the SHARP project achieve

I'm proud that storytelling has been the leading approach of our communications strategy and that has helped make the SHARP consortium feel like a real team, not just in structure, but in spirit. It has allowed us to:

- Mentor emerging communicators and empower young voices
- Co-create learning spaces across regions and sectors
- Run campaigns involving influencers, adolescents, political leaders
- Call on African states to ratify the Maputo Protocol and fulfill international treaty obligations
- Use tech tools like smartphones and tripods not for aesthetics, but for authentic documentation of change

From blogs to newsletters and campaigns, SHARP's content has remained factual yet heartfelt.

Start telling your stories today

Storytelling is evidence and lived experience all wrapped in one. These are characteristics that CSOs and Community Groups have and should maximize as a new strength while sourcing out for funding. To all CSOs within the SRH space, I would like to remind them that the shrinking donor space does not mean the death of CSOs. It means regrouping and re-aligning how we communicate. In a world where money is tight, stories are free. And yet, they hold the power to transform everything, from donor engagement to policy reform to public perception. Stories, after all, are free, but their power is priceless. So don't wait for a grant to tell your story. Start now.