



Commonwealth Foundation

The power of storytelling: findings from interviews with seven storytelling partners of the Commonwealth Writers programme

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Background

In April 2018, the Foundation carried out semi-structured interviews with selected programme partners attending the Commonwealth People's Forum 2018 (CPF). CPF brings together civil society from around the world, including the Foundation's programme partners, every two years. The interviews were designed to learn about partners' experience working with the Foundation, its impact on their work and to explore other opportunities to improve programme outcomes.

This short report highlights the key findings from interviews with storytellers based on their personal opinions and who have been involved with the Commonwealth Writers programme over the last 7 years. In addition to finding out about the impact of the Writers programme on their work, the interviews aimed to explore the ways in which less-heard voices can influence governance and decision-making and to paint a picture of the socio-political environment in their individual countries - how this affects the craft of storytelling and where Commonwealth Writers may be able to enhance its programme support.

The interviewees included Demere Kitunga, a Tanzanian writer; Erato Ioannou, a Cypriot writer; Gabrielle Hossein, a Trinidadian writer; Gloria Kiconco, a Ugandan poet and writer; Kendel Hippolyte, a St. Lucian poet and playwright; Lisa Harewood, a Bajan filmmaker; and Tracy Assing, a Trinidadian writer and filmmaker. See [Annex 1](#) for biographies of each of the storytellers and background at [Annex 2](#) about what storytellers in each of their countries/regions are writing about as gathered from the interviews.

Acknowledgements

The Commonwealth Foundation would like to thank the storytellers who participated in these interviews, for their time and insight.

About Commonwealth Writers

Commonwealth Writers, the cultural initiative of the Commonwealth Foundation, was set up in 2012 to inspire and connect writers and storytellers across the world. We believe that well-told stories can help people make sense of events, engage with others and take action to bring about change.

Findings

How has the work of the Commonwealth Writers' programme supported or had an impact on your storytelling?

Demere highlighted that the Commonwealth Writers' Programme has enabled East African authors, from Kenya, Tanzania and Zanzibar to reach broader audiences through the translation of their works from Kiswahili into English. The aim of the Kiswahili translation project was both to enhance the capacities of local translators as well as broaden the audience for local writers within the East African region. Likewise, Erato commended the programme for giving opportunities for her writing to be heard outside Cyprus through the anthology, *So Many Islands*. Erato highlighted that as the anthology was distributed in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific, the Caribbean, the United States of America and Canada, the United Kingdom and Europe, voices outside the mainstream narrative, were given the chance to be heard all over the world.

Kendel, Gabrielle, Erato and Tracy identified the facilitating role of the Writers programme in enhancing interactions between storytellers. The programme has created a space where storytellers can come together and engage in discussions as well as forge new links with publishers and audiences from around the world who they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to engage with.

The programme has enabled Gloria to write more creatively and afforded her the opportunity to explore parts of her country that she was not aware of. Moreover, the programme helped with her personal growth, as she received mentorship, enabling her to participate in other projects with confidence. Similarly, Tracy stated, **'I feel more empowered to tell my stories.'**

In Lisa's case, the support of Commonwealth Writers enabled her film to be premiered in New Zealand and at high profile festivals. She received a lot of publicity that led to her film reaching broader audiences. Further to this, the programme gave her the support needed to start a new project, the Barrel Stories project, where she recorded oral stories about the impact migration has on children left behind. She was encouraged to keep a diary to record the developments of the project and this enabled her to understand her process. She welcomes the freedom that Commonwealth Writers gives writers to choose what they write about rather than prescribing topics. She concluded, **'If I were to summarise the way in which Commonwealth Writers has impacted my work, I would have to say, and this is not an exaggeration, I would have to say it changed the course of my career.'**

What are the most effective ways to reach people with your storytelling, and raise awareness of issues so that it influences public dialogue?

Demere and Tracy feel that oral story-telling is an effective means to reach people. Demere suggested **'meet-the-author style forums'** in schools as well as the use of **'e-communication tools'** to promote storytelling.

For Gabrielle, writing in diary form enhances creative writing style and advocacy. Diaries are an effective way to reach people as they give writers the chance to be as creative as possible. Diaries accurately reflect a writer's story particularly and are effective at contributing towards public discourse when written with the strategic aim of reaching the public domain. She also believes in the power of fiction in its ability to reach people in an indirect story form. These forms of writing give a picture of what people are going through, enabling stories to resonate more deeply with people, as they avoid the use of jargon. Similarly, Tracy highlighted how creative expression, for example through films, **'provides one of the most approachable avenues'** as opposed to academia where language can be too dense.

Erato emphasised the power of fiction in its ability to raise awareness of issues as **'even though sometimes you might not be fully aware of it...by the end of the story you realise that you are addressing an issue which...rises above nationality, geographical location, social class, financial standing. It is a global and universal issue, which concerns us as humans and which deals with our shared humanity.'** In Erato's view this is why more initiatives to support writers outside the mainstream are needed. Literary festivals, workshops, anthologies, support platforms, writers' retreats are just a few ideas.

In Kendel's view, theatre is the most effective means to reach people with storytelling as it is an art form that directly exhibits life. It is accessible to all audiences regardless of the language it is performed in and is able to affect one's emotions and therefore get people to think deeply about topics. He explained that for him **'theatre is the one that has the most scope for the overall understanding of head and heart and hand'**. It engages the head through steering intellect, engages the heart through drawing upon emotions and finally the hand which is engaged through the desire to act and influence change as a result of a performance.

Lisa and Gloria have found that access to platforms is the most effective way to reach people with storytelling. Examples include the *Writivism* Festival, a literary festival in Uganda, and *Brittle Paper*, an online blog about the latest writing from Africa. For Gloria, platforms such as these provide an opportunity to access books, stories and other art forms that may not be accessible in country. Having an online presence and discussing an author's new work has a big impact and the ability to set future writing trends. Therefore, she believes that these platforms **'that writers are paying attention to and other people are then receiving information through are a powerful way of reaching people.'**

Lisa noted that the use of suitable technological platforms gives people back the power over their lives and stories. Every story is unique to a person no matter what the common underlying theme is and providing people with an accessible outlet to tell those stories without too much mediation, is a source of empowerment. Using technology to engage people who may be spread across a diaspora encourages people to talk to each other, creating communities of care.

What literary infrastructure is needed in your country to support writers to get their stories out and into the mainstream?

In Tanzania, Demere has experienced that although authors have manuscripts, they lack the capacity to publish as there is no infrastructure to distribute, sell and return the investment for publishing. In Trinidad, Tracy observed that there is a need for a strong publishing industry, with resources that can take risks as distribution is expensive due to expensive trade between islands.

Erato expressed the need for literary translation of Cypriot contemporary writing to English. Erato felt that this is essential if we want to support Cypriot writers to help them to be heard outside their language.

All interviewees mentioned financial support as lacking. In Gabrielle's view, financial support for literary festivals in the Caribbean region, such as the Bocas Lit Fest in Trinidad, is needed. This will create a sense of regionalism, community and mentorship. There needs to be a commitment to building literary communities to take literature into schools and into communities. There needs to be a way to connect literary festivals across the region particularly where mentorship work is taking place. In Tracy's view, investment is needed to preserve history. Unfortunately, she feels there is a lack of respect for history.

Lisa identified capacity building and knowledge transfer. More focus needs to be placed on building a set of professionals who are capable of helping filmmakers develop their talents in the Caribbean, particularly at the writing stage making strong scripts. Distribution platforms are also needed to ensure films are seen by local people. In Barbados, hiring out screening spaces is expensive and it's impossible to compete with foreign blockbusters. Some concessions should be given to local films to enable more public screenings. Filmmaking at this level should be seen as a social and cultural good and not a profit making industry.

How important is it to hear from storytellers outside the mainstream, those less-heard voices, and can they impact the dominant narrative?

Erato views stories from less-heard voices as a source of knowledge. She states, **'Our voices, the less heard voices, contribute to the polyphony of literature, to its multiple dimensions. [...] Our stories do impact the dominant narrative. In one way or another, they do affect existing perspectives and prevailing perceptions. So yes! It is important to let the voices of storytellers from outside the mainstream to be heard.'**

Similarly, for Kendel, voicing people's everyday experiences is crucial to getting a picture of their lives. If the voices of the marginalised are not heard, decision-makers will not take them into account as they most likely will not be able to relate to them. The structures of class and power need to be dismantled first in order to increase the power of those that are marginalised. Storytelling has the ability to bridge this gap.

Gabrielle highlights how less-heard stories published through collections and films are powerful because no matter how big global issues are, everyone experiences the issues at a micro level, thus highlighting an emotional connection to stories. She states, **'because we are human beings...and**

because stories register at the level of our emotions and our memories and our senses, there is something about stories that can reach and resonate with people in a way that speaking about an issue using data...may not in fact reach and I think stories from the margin are absolutely central’.

Stories of less-heard voices challenge stereotypes and give individuals the opportunity to represent themselves with the highest degree of accuracy, according to Lisa. She went on to say that, ‘when we talk about people, whatever these groups of people are that we talk about, if we’re talking about migrants, if we’re talking about LGBT people, if we’re talking about people that are disabled, if we are talking about the elderly, when we use that umbrella word, what we lose is the nuance of the individuals’... ‘Every single story is absolutely unique to that person and when you put a face on them, and you give them emotions, and you give them back their voice then you give them a power, not necessarily to have an obvious activist agenda. They are simply saying, this is me. This is what I went through. I am valid. I want to be heard. And that’s really, really healing for people’.

Tracy and Gloria highlighted the importance of listening to indigenous stories because these stories speak about important subjects like the environment and create access for people who may not necessarily speak English. In Tracy’s view, inviting less heard voices, such as indigenous people, especially writers, to tell their stories in whichever way they express themselves, provides one of the most approachable avenues for people in marginalised communities to amplify their voice. Although academia attempts to reach out and tell the story of the lives of indigenous people, their language is too dense and not accessible to most readers.

How does the socio-political environment impact on your craft?

Demere explained that the publishing industry in Tanzania is nascent and the book chain is ‘lopsided’ due to shifts in education policy. There is a lack of policy on writing as well as a lack of a network of libraries. Therefore, there is no organised market to sell books. A stable policy infrastructure is needed to enable a focus on extensive reading and to stimulate vibrancy and curiosity in readers.

In Erato’s view, freedom of speech and the absence of censorship in Cyprus is important as this enables writers to touch upon whichever issue they wish. There is funding from the Cypriot government for writers who wish to participate in events abroad. Additional funding is available for translation but only if the work is in book form or has won an award. Erato believes that it is important to share the love for literature with the next generation to highlight its value.

In St Lucia, Kendel noted that capitalist structures and methodologies are creating negative impacts. For example, the upper-middle class benefit the most from the current socio-economic system, thus leading to wider class disparities and inequality. Writers are speaking up against it but there is still more work to be done. Despite this, Kendel feels that every writer has a unique audience and so while the socio-political situation will affect craft, the extent is limited.

Gabrielle believes that writers who are involved in supporting the institution building of strong feminist centres and engaged in advocacy around gender, sexuality, violence, human rights, and ecological issues are well suited to contribute to political and institutional change.

Lisa and Tracy both felt that the social pressure of the Caribbean's small, conservative societies limits how people express themselves. Some people self-censor and this limits the scale and scope of writing. In Tracy's case, the Chief of the indigenous community in Trinidad, because he does not agree with her sexuality and her politics, will not invite her to conferences or make her work available in the Community Centre. In close knit societies, people try not to rock the boat because of the impact it may have on the family if they speak out. Tracy nevertheless is determined and persists to get her work out.

Gloria highlighted that one of the biggest challenges in Uganda is getting the members of government to believe in the importance of reading stories and valuing the arts as culture is not seen as a priority on the nation's agenda.

Interviewees mentioned that funding often dictates what writers can and cannot write about. For example, writers funded by the state might refrain from writing a controversial piece about the government. Lisa believes that cross pollination of different ideas as well as working collaboratively with different people improves creative expression. It would be great to have more social and cultural exchange which allows people to think outside the usual boxes.

In your opinion, how can the Commonwealth Foundation use less heard stories to influence governance and decision-making?

Expanding creative writing

Demere suggested expanding the Foundation's reach and focus on creative writing as this has the power to shift perceptions.

Create shared spaces for activists and policy makers

The power of stories is about finding ways for stories to permeate the mass spaces. Kendel emphasised the importance of combining activist and policy spaces in forums such as the CPF. Additionally, Gloria emphasised that creating opportunities for storytellers and policy makers to interact would ensure that their work influences policy. This would open access to spaces for storytellers and facilitate constructive engagement so that their perspectives are being listened to.

Create linkages

Kendel and Tracy believe that it is important to create linkages between people, groups and countries and that the Foundation should provide the resources to facilitate this. Kendel proposed multi-country initiatives based within regions. A play or film, for example, could be put together with contributions from different people within that region; a host country could be selected to

lead the performances. Different writers or producers, for example, can be brought in from different Caribbean countries. A project around, for example, a well-known Caribbean story (such as a Caribbean folk tale - e.g. Mamma Wata), involving people from the different Caribbean nations would lead to an increased sense of regionalism. It is important for people to come together through the bond and linkages that a single project creates. This will in turn expand the audiences that will view the projects and thus enable the message of the project to travel further.

Lisa also highlighted the importance of South-South linkages. Networking with other storytellers in regions of similar sizes or with some shared issues enables them to expand their networks and create the potential for future collaborations outside of the usual partnerships. One example of an effective networking space is the People's Forum.

Bringing storytellers and activists together

Kendel has found that organising representation from relevant activist organisations to be present at storytelling and theatre performances is a powerful way in which to encourage people to translate their emotions into getting practically involved. After listening to performances, people in the audience can be directed to find out how to take action and can be encouraged to talk to the represented organisations' spokespersons. Facilitating these linkages therefore contributes towards creating the change we want to see.

Gabrielle espoused this view and stated, **'the power of stories isn't always about directly reaching the policy makers... the power of stories involves finding ways to get them to reach the wide population... the power of stories is best situated around strengthening people power because it reminds people why we need power and what makes us people and why it is that the stories between us signal the issues that we need to organise around.'**

Set up ways of tracking impact

Kendel further suggested that monitoring the numbers of people that join an organisation's cause and tracking their actions after the performance, could be useful information to demonstrate the effect that storytelling has on its audiences.

Anthologies

Erato highlighted how anthologies, like *So Many Islands*, are a powerful means to bring less-heard voices to the forefront. Erato explained that **'writing fiction is a way to explore reality and to touch upon sensitive issues in an alternative way, through art.'** This is powerful as it enables readers to view the world from a different perspective and can thus create change. She states, **'people start to change from within and once you start changing from within, you can have an effect on government.'**

Are there other areas of support you think would be beneficial to get your stories more widely heard?

Platforms

Gloria, Tracy and Demere recommended platforms - as a way for voices to interact, learn from each other and be amplified. Platforms enable storytellers to get their stories more widely heard.

Invest in skills development

Demere mentioned investing in skills development that would enable storytelling to transcend generations and create opportunities for authors to make money off their work. This would enable them to manage their work and facilitate its development.

Promote published work

Erato and Tracy stated that promoting published work could be achieved through authors participating in literary conferences, readings, platforms and work showcases.

Getting stories into radio spaces

Gabrielle felt that getting stories into radio spaces is an effective way to get more stories heard. This could happen through collaborations with radio stations or through sponsors and would enable the message to get out to the widest, most democratic media to amplify small stories from far places.

Providing work spaces and support for mothers

Erato proposed creating a room/space for authors to work and be separate from their busy lives. For example, stipends for writers to escape for one week from home to write would lead to higher efficiency. If an author gets funding from the Foundation and writers can show capability of producing good work, then the Foundation could help the author to ease into the publishing world. In addition, Perhaps the Foundation could initiate a project to identify what are the resource needs of mothers who write so that they can find a balance between childcare and writing.

Long-term funding commitment

In Lisa's view, long-term funding would ensure that initiatives are sustained and built upon. The Foundation can fill in the funding gaps, not to create a dependency but rather to show countries what is possible and encourage them to set up their own infrastructure for the purpose of sustainability.

Podcasts

Tracy recommended that podcasts should be explored.

Annex 1

Biographies

Demere Kitunga (Tanzania) is a feminist activist, publisher and writer. She is currently the Executive Director of E&D Readership and Development Agency, a non-profit which runs Soma Book Café. She is well-known for poems such as *Whack!* and *Siasa gani hii?*

Erato Ioannou (Cyprus) is a writer living in Nicosia. She writes in both English and Greek. She is the associate editor of *In Focus* magazine, an Anglophone journal on literature and the arts in Cyprus. Erato is well-known for publications in Cyprus including her contributions in the anthology, *So Many Islands*.

Gabrielle Hossein (Trinidad and Tobago) is a writer, activist and lecturer. She is Head of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies. She has been involved in Caribbean feminist movement building over the past two decades. She also writes a weekly column, *Diary of a Mothering Worker*, for the Trinidadian *Guardian*.

Gloria Kiconco (Uganda) is a poet, essayist, editor and zine-maker based in Kampala. She has written articles for journals such as *Start- A Journal of Arts and Culture*, *The Forager*, and *ArtAfrica* and has been published in *Adda*, *Brittle Paper* and *Femrite*. She premiered her first solo poetry performance, *RETURN TO SENDER* in 2018.

Kendel Hippolyte (Saint Lucia) is an award-winning poet, playwright and director. His poetry has been published in journals and anthologies regionally and internationally, including the anthology, *So Many Islands*. His latest book, *Fault Lines*, won the OCM Bocas Lit Prize in poetry in 2013.

Lisa Harewood (Barbados and UK) is a filmmaker with a passion for storytelling. She wrote and directed the short film, *Auntie*. She is currently working on an interactive digital story archive about migration and separation, and a virtual reality project entitled *Love and Seawater*. www.barrelstories.org

Tracy Assing (Trinidad and Tobago) is a writer, editor and filmmaker. She is known for films such as *The Amerindian's* - a pioneering work exploring Trinidad and Tobago's indigenous community and Assing's own identity. Her writing has appeared in *Caribbean Review of Books*, *Encyclopaedia of Caribbean Archaeology* and *So Many Islands*.

Annex 2

In your view, what are writers in your country writing about?

In **Tanzania**, storytellers are writing about every issue related to the human predicament, particularly issues surrounding voice in terms of ownership of their citizenship, world or country. This could be either women, young people or citizens struggling to get ahead and to make their governments accountable or looking at issues of globalisation, neoliberal capitalism and western democracy.

In **Cyprus**, for many years, writers have been writing about The Cyprus Problem¹, and this is still a contemporary issue. For many-many years, violence, war, displacements refugee issues, missing persons, were central to the literature of Cyprus. These issues persist today through the inherited trauma and through every day experiences since Cyprus is still a violently divided island. They still persist today in our neighbouring countries and around the world. Contemporary Cypriot writing is an exploration of psyche; it's a brave take on social issues; it's a provocative attitude toward the wrongs of our modern world; it's local writing with global expanse.

In **Trinidad**, writers are telling community-level stories and like other Caribbean writings, this is stimulated by regional writing festivals and the younger generation. They tell stories of crime, violence, underemployment, corruption, love, family and sexuality. The oral story-telling tradition is being reproduced in the region and in Trinidad specifically. Writers are also dealing with women's issues, child abuse and especially destruction of the environment.

In **St Lucia** storytellers are raising awareness about the friction between traditional values, ways of life and modernity. There are different degrees of concern that culture is being lost and therefore an urgency and concern over where the country is heading.

In **Uganda**, writers are writing about the language debate². There is a big focus on fiction and not a huge focus on non-fiction and poetry.

¹ The Cyprus Problem refers to the ongoing issue of Turkish military occupation of the northern third of the island since 1974. Formal negotiations continue between Greek and Turkish Cypriots to resolve the 'Cyprus Problem.'

² *English rules in Uganda but local languages shouldn't be sidelined* <http://theconversation.com/english-rules-in-uganda-but-local-languages-shouldnt-be-sidelined-49381>