



**Title >> The Story Perspective - The Use of  
Individual Life Narratives in Understanding  
Development Effects and Processes**

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## Contents

p 2	Biographical Details
p 2	Abstract
p 3	1. A Different Perspective
p 7	2. The Illumination of Development Stories
p 12	3. A Storied Understanding
p 14	Bibliography

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## Abstract

Life as lived is personal. There is no other way to experience life except from the perspective of and from inside the body, heart and mind of a person. Development, and everything to do with development, is also personal. And there is no other way to experience development except from the perspective of and from inside the body, heart and mind of a person. What I have called 'the story perspective' draws on the personal, flesh and blood, life as lived, individual stories of people's lives in development situations in order to see more clearly the true nature of development effects and processes. The unique combination of emotional and rational knowledge contained within life stories can give us a broader perspective on the human face of development, a perspective that I believe is needed to compliment and balance the facts of 'the measurement perspective', and the insights of 'the theory perspective'. This paper, which is based on a dissertation written for the Kimmage Development Studies Centre, argues that 'the story perspective' contributes an essential, and often neglected, human and personal dimension to development work and debates.

*"Shared stories are not easily walked away from."*  
Daniel Taylor (2001, p.133)

*"The human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to... the problems of the individual life."*  
C. Wright Mills (1970, p.226)



## 1. A Different Perspective

In a world teeming with over seven billion (Kunzig 2011) life stories we begin with one story – Zachary’s story<sup>1</sup>:

*I came here for marriage. Because of the maternal system of marriage [in Southern Malawi], a man stays at his wife’s place, so I came here for marriage, and my wife died, and my children are also here, even though I don’t live with my children...*

*I have three children living, others died... The one who died [was because] I was ignorant of the health rules that I have to [follow] when HIV positive. So the younger child would breast feed and got the virus from the mother, so I know that my child died of HIV from the mother and the mother died too.*

*In this village we were just staying without any help, we did not know how to do... we were discouraged... At that time, it was a time when in this village there was no food, there was nobody, even our relatives they didn’t have any food. We were dying of hunger. We were very weak. At the same time we were taking ARVs [Antiretroviral drugs for treating HIV], we were taking the medicine but there was no food.... These people [from the Madziabango Livelihoods Project] gathered us together... they also conducted a needs assessment, to see the actual problems that we have. So hunger was the main issue, so they gave each one of us a bag of maize weighing 50kg, so these people helped us so much because when we ate the food we could be able to take the medicine well. And they also gave us fertilizer... From that we have produced the same maize that we are eating up to now, the maize we produced from our own hands.*

*These things are very new things in this area, because ever since there is nobody who has ever come to help people, especially people who are living with HIV /Aids. People were neglecting us, they would just pass by us... Ever since I was living in hunger, but [now] I am able to eat, I am happy, my meat [weight] has come back to normal, and when you visit my home you find I have a lot of vegetables, I am able to have enough food, enough maize, enough vegetables...*

*I came here a long time ago; I’ve never seen maize growing where there is no rainfall... It’s wonderful. I’m seeing maize growing even now [during winter]... Which is very strange... It’s very new... It makes a big difference. There is a very big difference, a very big improvement from the past until now.*

This is an extract from a life story interview with Zachary that I conducted in August 2009 as part of the primary research for an MA in Development Studies at Kimmage Development Studies Centre. Zachary is a large-hearted, big-voiced man, whom I interviewed on a concrete step overlooking the new water bore hole beside the Madziabango School, just north of Blantyre in Southern Malawi.

1. The transcription style used here is one which generally uses commas to reflect the flow of the story and it uses the precise words spoken by the story teller



I went to Malawi to explore what listening to and documenting people's life stories could tell about their experiences of development work – in particular the Irish Aid funded Madziabango Livelihoods Project – and how these stories could illuminate the changes that development experiences have the potential to bring to people's lives. What I discovered is that looking at development processes through the lens of storytelling can add a different perspective, perhaps a more human, and humane, perspective than other perspectives on development.

This article, which is based on the research in my dissertation “*Storied Lives, Developing Lives: Encounters with Life Stories and Development Experiences in Madziabango, Malawi*”, briefly explores the meaning and importance of stories to humanity and some ways that a ‘story perspective’ can deepen our understanding of the effects that development processes can have on individual human lives.

## 1.1 Storied Lives in a Storied World

“Stories are far more potent than ideas... ideas come and go, stories stay” (Taleb 2007, p.xxvii). This is because stories are how we live life, not just how we understand or think about life. Our stories are our lives. Each of our individual lives is a lived story – a story as complex, and as sublime, as anything Shakespeare or Tolstoy at their very best could write. Life is a story with a beginning, a middle, and, sooner or later, an end. And each of our individual stories is lived amongst, and affects and is affected by, the stories of others.

As stories are the way through which life is lived, so then ‘a story perspective’, or what the novelist Jonathan Franzen refers to as “a narrative understanding” (Eskin, 2001), is essential to understanding the ebbs and flows of any given life, and also the movements and changes of the world within which that life is lived. Because life and stories are so intimately connected, stories, and storytelling, call the attention not just of our minds, but of our hearts and of our souls as well. I once heard the novelist Richard Ford give a public interview where he talked about the importance of “paying attention” to what is going on around us in the world. Listening to people's life stories is one of the best ways of “paying attention” to what is going on in the world. People's stories can tell us much about what we need to know about the effects of politics, economics, disease and poverty on their lives, and about the societies, both local and global, that those lives are lived in.

However the stories of people's lives are much, much more than a source of information or insight. Stories can lead to a profound sense of empathy with other lives, as within the stories of others we can identify similarities between the stories of others and our own story and through this we can catch sight of how our lives would be different if the circumstances we lived in were different.



## 1.2 Data With a Soul

'The story perspective' is not the only perspective we can take when trying to understand development. There are other important ways of looking at development, two of which I will summarise as 'the measurement perspective' (e.g. statistics, economics etc) and 'the theory perspective' (e.g. ideology, discourse etc). These are necessary perspectives that provide important data and insights into what is happening in development.

But I observe that measurement (e.g. with the emphasis on economic growth as 'development' and S.M.A.R.T. – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Timebound – criteria in project management) and theory (e.g. ideas of modernisation and globalisation amongst others) often become the central perspectives in development processes and thinking. It seems to me that these perspectives are not enough, even within all their variations and complexities, to get to a complete perspective on development without including the human stories that are lived within and around what these measures and theories tell us. Lives cannot be reduced to a numerical measurement – and many, if not most, forms of measurement are numerical – and lives are not theories. Statistics divorced from stories can become cold and distant, and theories divorced from stories can become vacuous. "Stories" as Brené Brown says, "are data with a soul" (2010).

This "data with a soul" (Brown, 2010) – people's stories – can help shape our underlying understanding of development. The combination of rational (data) and emotional (soul) knowledge that a storied understanding brings can humanise the information and insight that measurement and theory bring to development.

It is true that one of the main strengths of life stories – that they are individual and specific – can also be seen as a weakness. Indeed, the seeming contradiction that our greatest strengths as human beings can often also be our greatest weaknesses, is a truth that life stories frequently demonstrate. These limitations to 'the story perspective' are real, which is why the perspectives of measurement and theory are necessary. But yet, if we pay close attention to what individual life stories have to say, within those stories we will discover a huge amount about the overall structural shape of economic, political, and educational inequality (data) as well as the lived out effects these social and economic structures have on individual lives, families, generations and communities (soul). Indeed, one of the main things that life stories have to tell us is that everything is interconnected - the global and the local, the political and the personal, the public and the private. Through this deep interconnectedness, as Sara Pait has observed, "out of the specific and personal it is possible to learn much about society" (Slim and Thompson 1993, p.142).



### 1.3 The Power of Stories

“Stories can change the context of our understanding” (Frank 2010). They can help us to see society in a way we couldn’t without stories. My love of storytelling, which grew out of my work as a writer in the film industry, drew me to researching how the life stories – the interconnected sequence of events and relationships that make up the ongoing journey of an individual life – of people living in the nine villages of Madziabango in Malawi have been shaped by the work of the Madziabango Livelihoods Project. I discovered, as Zachary’s story extract illustrates, that people’s lives have been changed, even transformed (and I do not use that word easily), by a reduction in hunger, through increasing levels of health, and by greater access to education. Change can be complex, multifaceted and often double sided, but I found that at the level of basic, primal needs – our need for water, for food, for health – that the changes that the Madziabango Livelihoods Project brought were life story enhancing and expanding.

Looking for this ‘story impact’ – how something shapes and changes individual life stories – of development, which is what my research was about, can help to demonstrate the potential life long effects of development on people’s lives. Also, the telling of stories in development situations can also have an impact on a political and policy level. Doug Reeler tells a story about a group of women who went to the United Nations to meet a committee that was reluctant to grant funds to help women who were abused in African countries. Instead of arguing logically and rationally for the release of the funds, these women instead told their stories of abuse and survival. When hearing the women’s stories, the hearts of the members – fellow human beings – of the committee were “melted by the stories of pain and hope” (Reeler 2004), data and soul came together, their perspective was changed, and the funds were granted.

This is what makes stories so powerful. They connect individual experience with our common humanity in a way that makes them very hard to turn away from. David Mamet once wrote that “what comes from the heart goes to the heart” (1998, p.63) and this heart-to-heart connection is a central part of what ‘the story perspective’ can bring to development work.





## 2. The Illumination of Development Stories

The ancient Greeks had two ways of looking at, and for, truth. One they called 'logos', which we understand as logical, objective, factual truth. The other they called 'mythos', which encompasses a story way of looking at truth. Both viewpoints are needed to see clearly, however, as noted previously, the tendency in life and in development work can be to edge towards logical and empirical ways of seeing things. Yet, given that "everything that happens, happens in story form" (Atkinson 1998, p.22) we also need the story perspective – 'mythos' – to throw light on the aspects of development that 'logos' - knowledge - does not illuminate well. This "narrative knowing" (McAdams 2006, p.77) is necessary, allied with 'logos' knowledge, to get closer to seeing the truth about what it means to be alive in the world and what it means for people to be involved in development processes.

### 2.1 More than Measurement

Albert Einstein said that "not everything that counts can be counted. And not everything that can be counted, counts" (Reeler 2006, p.28). Yet we tend to lean towards things that can be counted. William Easterly emphasises some of the limitations and consequences of this "bias towards observable actions" (2006, p.253) in development work. He highlights the lack of investment in trying to prevent the HIV/Aids pandemic in Sub-Saharan Africa, mainly for the reason that it is very hard to 'measure' success in preventing something happening, rather than reducing the incidence of something that already exists, as a very serious example of the limitations of 'the measurement perspective'.

This is where 'the story perspective' can help, as stories can counteract our tendency to measure rather than to understand. 'The story perspective' can 'see' some of the many ways that development impacts upon lives that more quantitative methods of measurement can't reach. Hugo Slim points out that "real human development concerns more intangible factors that relate to the quality of change in people's lives, as well as the quantity of change" (1995, p.144). This "quality of change" (ibid), as well as the whole life impact of the changes that development can bring, is something that 'the story perspective' can capture.

When I was in Malawi, Samuel, an effervescent man with a shining sincerity, who was in his sixties, told me something about what increased levels of food security meant for him:

*You can't live without eating, but for a few years I've been starving. If a drought [comes] sometimes we go starving. [Drought comes] many years, people don't really die, but they starve. The most difficult months for food are from December to February. January and February are very difficult months [when] most people go starving. The rainy season is from late October until sometimes March. December, January and February are the months when our crops are not yet ripe; so many people during these months go empty.*



*If the rains don't come the streams and the rivers we've got here go dry. So if the rain won't come I think things won't go well, because of scarce water. But if water is available and the irrigation system goes on I think there will be enough food for people to eat. If one has got enough food, for themselves and some for selling, it means then that will make great change in food security. But if the rains come and the system of supplying farm inputs [from the project] continues I think that there will be a great change in food security. I think in the future starving will be history.*

This is just a very short extract from what Samuel had to say about the difference that not “going empty” for three or four months of the year meant for him and his family. Food security, when seen from ‘the story perspective’, is not just a concept or a development goal to be aimed for, it is a life story changing, life story transforming, thing.

Statistics, which are a big part of ‘the measurement perspective’, do, as I have noted, have an important place in development work, and in helping us to understand life. But the telling details of life stories can draw us into deeper ways of comprehending the effect of development on individual lives. Stories can fill in some of the gaps that statistics cannot reach. For example, Roger Riddell observes that “it is exceedingly difficult to accurately trace the relationship between aid and broad development outcomes” (2007, p.110). But people’s life story experiences can make the connection between aid – the farm inputs and irrigation systems from Samuel’s story – and development outcomes – what increased food security means for Samuel and his family – in a clear and very human way.

Arthur W. Frank says that “no one is convinced by statistics, but stories can touch and move people” (2010 no page available). I think the things that touch and move people – the human effects of development that ‘the story perspective’ can tell us about – is what Amartya Sen was hinting at when he wrote that “we must look well beyond” (1999, p.14) economic growth rates as a measure of development. Sen goes on to say that “it is important to see human beings in a broader perspective” (1999, p.198) and stories are a way that can provide this “broader perspective” (ibid) that Sen desires. In this way, the story perspective can be seen as the “art” partner of the “science” of the measurement perspective within development practice.

## 2.2 The Complexity of Experience

Every life is lived out in a constant interplay of micro and macro forces. The sociologist C. Wright Mills describes the way “that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues” (1970, p.247). This interaction between the public and the private is often even more pronounced within development work. One of the strengths of stories is that they can capture this “interplay of macro and micro in change processes” (Merrill and West 2009, p.41). ‘The story perspective’ can draw different elements of life together in a way that grasps how “the most intimate of



private troubles” (West and Carlson 2007, p.151) are connected “with the health of communities and the wider economy and culture” (ibid).

The ways of seeing that I have summarised as ‘the theory perspective’ tend towards capturing the macro forces at work in development, and this is important. However macro forces cannot be separated from micro effects. ‘The story perspective’ can hold the relationship between them both together in one form, as life itself does. Theory may be stronger at observing the macro alone, but stories can enable us to see and understand more clearly the deep and complex connections between macro and micro forces within life as it is actually experienced.

When telling me the story of his work as a teacher Jason talked about the connections between hunger and educational attainment:

*Because of the shortage of food in different areas around the school some pupils come to school without taking anything... any porridge in their stomach in the morning, so they feel hungry when they come to school... so their understanding will also become low. Because they think about hunger they cannot concentrate.*

*Now when they come here and they enter into class and before time for break time, they may tell you “Teacher, I’m not feeling well in my stomach”, “Are you sick?”, “No, I haven’t taken anything”. Sometimes a pupil may fall down, so if you, a teacher, have got some money, say fifty kwacha, you say go [to some other pupils] and buy some food and give him, or let him make a porridge and give him... The power will restore again, after taking that food they may feel there is energy.*

*When they [other pupils] see that thing [fainting from hunger] some they may say “Oh, I’ll not go to school because of the hunger”. So they may not come to school for maybe two, or for a day, because of hunger. So absenteeism is a big problem, if half the class is absent, you may go over [what you have been teaching] with those who have come to school... Those who were absent they may hear during the revision time, but you will not go back again because such number were absent, that is a waste of time, no, you go forward, you go forward. At the present there is a change, the number of absenteeism has been decreasing, just because there is provision of food in areas around the school.*

The connections between a pupil fainting in class and absenteeism, with the regular hunger and starving that Samuel described earlier, with the educational achievements of his pupils, are things that Jason lives with every day, in his tin roofed, concrete floored classroom. ‘The story perspective’ can make all these connections in one form, showing how “the interaction between the personal and political, between public and private lives” (Merrill and West 2009, p.89) plays out in a human life story.

‘The story perspective’ can also demonstrate – and help us to, in a way, pre-imagine – the consequences of poverty on the long-term



outcomes of a life. As Van Gogh stated: “poverty stops the best minds in their tracks” (1996, p.80). Irene, another of my interviewees in Madziabango, told me “that the only way of getting out of poverty is through education”. Given the importance of education to the future of their stories, it does not take a huge act of imagination to see how life story contracting and limiting the effects of hunger will be on the educational attainment, and therefore on the vocational prospects, of Jason’s pupils. Poverty is the biggest limiter of people realising their potential (Gladwell 2009). It is one thing to know that as a fact, another thing to know it in theory, but a deep understanding of the limiting effect of poverty in people’s lives requires looking at people’s lives from a ‘story perspective’.

### 2.3 Expanding The Heart

‘The story perspective’ can also play a role in circumventing the numbing response we often feel when faced with the overwhelming human needs that development seeks to address.

Stalin once said, famously, “that while every death is a tragedy, the death of a million is a mere statistic” (Amis 2002, p.277). Of course, as the novelist Martin Amis goes on to observe, “the second half of the aphorism is... wholly false: a million deaths are, at the very least, a million tragedies” (Amis 2002, p.277). Every person involved was conceived, was born, was loved, had hopes, fears and dreams. Everyone had a story.

But yet we are more like Stalin than we know, for we do not always react to huge tragedies, such as the numbers of daily deaths from poverty, or hunger, or malaria, in the ‘developing’ world as if they truly are tragedies. This “collapse of compassion” (Slovic 2007, p.86) in the face of hardship, heartache and death, has been called “psychic numbing”, which is a term coined by Robert Lifton to explain our individual and collective loss of empathy, our “turning off of feeling” (Slovic 2007, p.87), when we are faced with pain and suffering on such a scale. In short this “numbing” of feeling lets us off the hook. It means that we don’t feel the need to react fully to the daily death toll from poverty. It means we can tolerate living in a world of such huge inequality and injustice and it enables us to walk by on the other side of the road.

Amartya Sen has spoken about how “a response to deprivation is a requirement for every human being” (2009), but statistics alone, which have been called “human beings with the tears dried off” (Slovic 2007, p.86), do not always produce the response our common humanity requires. This “mental deadening” (Singer 2007) that affects us all may be, according to the psychologist Paul Slovic, “a protective mechanism to keep us from exploding from grief” (ibid). ‘The story perspective’ can become an effective antidote for this, as “stories can break through” (Frank 2010) this defence of mental numbing. Stories are human beings, tears and all. Mother Teresa once said that: “If I look at the mass I will never act, if I look at the one I will” (Slovic 2007, p.80). Looking at “the one” is to look from ‘the story perspective’.



This more complete – tears and all – view of others that ‘the story perspective’ can give, can then enable us to recognise the value, the truly equal value, of another’s life to our own. “Numerical representations of human lives do not necessarily convey the importance of those lives” (Slovic 2007, p.86), but hearing people’s life stories does convey the depth and the importance of those lives. For when looking through ‘the story perspective’ at the life story of a fellow human being, for example at the story of the death of Zachary’s wife and child at the beginning of this article, it is impossible not to feel – and it is based in feeling – compassion and empathy and care. The expansion of the heart that comes from these feelings of empathy has the potential to change us and the way we live in the world. Daniel Taylor has written that “no matter how much our heads know, if our hearts are not persuaded, we are not fully convinced, certainly not enough to act” (2001, p.35). Listening to stories can persuade both our hearts and our heads, possibly even moving us towards action.



### 3. A Storied Understanding

Life is not abstract. It is personal, and it can only be lived and experienced from the perspective of a person. Poverty is not abstract. It is personal, and it can only be experienced as a person, a person with a heart, a mind, a body, and a soul. Development is not abstract. It is also personal and experienced as such. “Development is about people and not about objects” (Max-Neef 1991, p.16), but sometimes amongst all the statistics and targets and conferences and theories and debates it can be forgotten that development is about people, about individual lives, about individual stories. Development is indeed personal, often as profoundly personal as life and death.

Taking ‘the story perspective’ – “data with a soul” (Brown 2010) – when talking and thinking about development can help us to keep the fact that it is personal at the centre of development processes. Bill Williams writes that “human data takes precedence over paper data” (1998, p.19) and the story perspective is about elevating this “human data” (ibid) to its rightful place at the very centre of everything to do with development.

#### 3.1 Gathering Stories

Our encounters with the stories of others will change us in ways both small and large. My experience in Malawi, listening to stories about “the everyday kind of heroism” (Springsteen 1995) that makes up so many people’s lives, changed me and my views on development in a way that demonstrates the truth of Daniel Taylor’s observation that “shared stories are not easily walked away from” (2001, p.133). Once you know someone’s story you become part of it, and they become part of yours.

The stories I heard reminded me what the essence of development work is: to help provide the basic material, physical and mental necessities needed to give people the opportunity to realise as much of their potential as possible.

Generally, I found, that people welcome the chance to tell you their story if they sense you are truly interested in learning from them. Paying attention to people’s stories in this way means listening more than talking, it means letting the stories speak for themselves, it means trusting the process of storytelling to lead to insights and ideas for development that a more results orientated approach may possibly miss. It means embarking on a path of “mutual discovery” (Zeldin 1994, p.467) that leads “people to care for each other as much as for themselves” (ibid). This care for each other comes from being able to “imagine ourselves in other people’s shoes” (Taylor 2001, p.133). This act of imagination, and of empathy, only becomes possible when seeing people’s lives from ‘the story perspective’.



### 3.2 A Different Perspective Redux

The 'story impact' of development work can be profound. In ending as we began, through taking 'the story perspective' on development, here is an extract from another development influenced life story. Ruth told me her story as her son Simon played hide and seek around the Madziabango project office:

*I live in Mgawa village, it is my homeland, I was born in Mgawa village, I stay in Mgawa and I learn school in Ng'onga School. In the past our parents draw water from the river so when [the Madziabango Livelihoods Project] is coming here, we have one borehole in Mgawa village and another at Ng'onga School. So last year people were enjoying good water, so diseases like cholera people will not suffer. People will not suffer cholera when they take good water. My uncle was attacked by cholera [in the past], he go to hospital and they assist him, and he has got a life up to now. Another uncle last year was attacked [by] cholera here because of bad water. Cholera nowadays is a history...*

*People were ill from hunger, but now when we plant maize it grow, and [then] we plant again, now we have food for the whole year. Now people know how to grow maze in this [winter] season, they know how to plant maize two or three times a year...*

*My son, he is seven years, he is in standard two [in school]. In our village education will go well because most people in our village they learn at Ng'onga School and Ng'onga School, now it is improved so children are attracted to go to school each and every day... I want my son to continue education, to go to [visit] Ireland, as you come from Ireland to come here in Malawi. So I want my son to continue school [so he can] go to visit another country to chat with other [people]...*

*The coming of [the project] is the most tremendous thing I have seen in my life... [and] when the project is ended our village will continue with what [they] have been teaching here.*



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**Notes:**



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