

Oui Nous Pouvons: Subverting the Single Story of Sustainable Development Executive Summary

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We have a sustainability communication problem. Of the few sustainability stories that manage to break through the noise of political squabbles and pop culture diversions, even fewer are able to spark real change. The majority only end up depressing audiences into a state of hopelessness or placate them by offering up easy but overly simplistic solutions to relatively minor problems. Climate journalist Karen Hjulmand argues that the pessimistic approach consistently used by most environmental journalists may have delayed political action on climate change by 10-15 years. And a study by Catherine Gyldensted (2014) found that environmental news stories that focus on solutions and end on a hopeful note were more likely to leave readers with the energy to take action. Though organizations like the Solutions Journalism Network are pushing newsrooms to do more solutions reporting, the practice is not yet widespread. Furthermore, it is not enough to tell just any solutions stories. For sustainability practitioners and communicators, it is important to share the right stories.

As a Peace Corps Volunteer in Togo I saw firsthand the harm that telling the wrong story can do. Globally – but particularly in Togo – there is a single story of sustainable development. This dominant narrative foregrounds citizens from the global North sacrificing the comforts of home to “make a difference” in poorer countries. In Togo, this story has had a dampening effect on grassroots development efforts. At the same time that it encourages citizens in developed countries to ignore their own problems to try to solve those in another country, this single story discourages people in Togo from trying to create their own solutions to local challenges. And this perceived lack of agency hinders the creation of locally-appropriate solutions. My project attempted to shift these perceptions of agency by using documentary filmmaking to highlight Togolese solutions to sustainable development challenges.

I worked with Aposto Atcham, a Togolese sociologist-turned-artisan, who runs an ever-growing list of youth programs in his community that focus on education, empowerment and entrepreneurship. He started a library for kids in his community by trading handmade fabric for books and has organized summer workshops that gave students the chance to learn from local craftspeople. Aposto’s vision for his community involves youth having the tools to become service-minded entrepreneurs who aren’t forced to wait in limbo for government jobs to open up. Youth who feel empowered to solve problems in their communities. With Aposto’s help and editorial guidance, I created a short-form documentary to share his story with American and Togolese audiences.

In order to evaluate the success of my intervention, I needed to know whether or not my project communicated my partners' stories well enough to shift audience perceptions. To test this, I solicited feedback from 3 virtual focus groups, consisting of between 2 and 7 members each. Participants were shown the full film, *Banc d'Amour*, and then asked to answer questions about its main themes and their emotional responses. I also attempted to determine the film's effect on different audiences, in particular on American and Togolese audiences. The first two focus groups were held with American participants, and the third was held with participants from the Togolese diaspora.

The findings of these initial focus groups, though limited by a small sample size, were encouraging. Participants expressed a range of key takeaways from the film, including that the film: promoted grassroots, community-based solutions; showed a solution that was robust, layered and empowering; disproved common myths about development (that higher education is the only path to wellbeing, for example); and was a call to action for similar communities in Togo. All Togolese participants reported feeling proud after watching the film. Several noted that they've always wanted to help their communities back home but haven't known how, that sharing ideas like this is helpful. All American participants reported feeling inspired and/or hopeful after watching the film. Though it remains to be seen whether these feelings will lead to behavior change – and it could be difficult to link any concrete change to the feelings evoked by one short film – available evidence suggests that hope is a more effective motivator than fear or sadness. And both American and Togolese participants expressed an increased motivation to help their own communities after watching this film.

Though I was not able to get feedback from a larger, more diverse sample, this initial evaluation suggests that my intervention is on the right track. By telling a sustainability story that focused on solutions, I was able to elicit a hopeful response in the audience. And by centering a Togolese protagonist, I was able to provide an alternative development narrative that shifted audience members' perceived agency. Responses from the Togolese focus group showed that sharing stories about Togolese-led development can inspire pride, new ideas and a renewed motivation to help one's community. American citizens also felt inspired by the film, but they felt inspired *by* the Togolese protagonist to help their own communities here in the U.S., rather than inspired *to help* the Togolese protagonists. This shift in agency may seem slight, but were it to take place among the American population at large, I believe it would profoundly change how we address sustainability challenges.

Aposto and his teams have already achieved a lot when it comes to communicating their work and sharing stories of their sustainability solutions. But it is not widely known among the general population outside of their local community. And it should be. The solutions developed by Aposto and his teams are inspiring because they are locally-initiated and feasible to modify and replicate. Aposto is already a role model for his community. Now he should strive to be a role model for the rest of Togo. My primary recommendation to Aposto and his team was to find new methods to share their story with new audiences in the country. In particular, to address poor internet connectivity, I created a much shorter video profile and have recommended that they turn it into a WhatsApp chain message. This way it could reach a much wider audience in Togo.

Ultimately, this project served to inform my practice as an aspiring journalist. The feedback I received was encouragement enough for me to continue seeking out stories of sustainability solutions, especially those that challenge harmful and disempowering narratives. My experience throughout this project convinced me that stories that say, "Yes we can," are the most useful to our pursuit of sustainability.