

DDOKE **DRONE**

***HOW THE NONPROFIT AND
PHILANTHROPIC SECTORS ARE
TALKING ABOUT POVERTY—
AND HOW WE CAN DO BETTER***



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Despite considerable grassroots energy and a body of tools and resources on progressive economic justice communications and organizing, our research shows that organizations in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors are reinforcing repressive, victim-blaming narratives that shift fault and responsibility for poverty from greedy corporations and unfair laws to ordinary people. These are stories that designate some poor people as more deserving than others, and that use exploitative images and descriptions of poor people of color to engender pity but falls short of justice and meaningful action.

In the 21st century, in the eye of the fourth industrial revolution, our mandate is to communicate about class, socioeconomic status (the combination of class, status, and power), labor, deservingness (a kind of worth that is directly tied to social definitions of who has value and who does not), wealth, and quality of life in ways that do not continue to advantage one group or one type of work over another. In addition, we reject false solutions that protect corporate interests and throw away good, socially democratic public programs that would otherwise benefit millions of people.

In this report, we share insights from our research to identify harmful narratives perpetuated by well-meaning organizations in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, primarily in the United States. We also celebrate organizations telling transformative stories of poor people navigating and changing broken systems, challenging problematic narratives, organizing collective action to drive change, and creating economic alternatives. We focused our attention on these sectors to explore how we are telling stories about poverty and wealth, where we are doing it well, and where we can do better.

A SHORT AND RECENT HISTORY OF THE FIGHT FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Over the last 20 years, organizers and advocates for economic justice have introduced and advanced imaginative campaigns to **expose economic exploitation**¹, **redistribute wealth**², **repair harm**³, and **restore dignity**⁴ to working-class people across the U.S. We fought to keep more corporate cash infusions out of elections in the aughts. We dissented mightily when greedy corporate interests **stole billions in Black wealth** in the 2008 subprime mortgage scandal.⁵ In the tens, we occupied public space in the name of corporate accountability and a new economic paradigm, and we later marched in the streets and demanded a long-overdue raise in the minimum wage with the Fight for \$15.

Today, the **grassroots fight** for fundamental labor rights, such as a living wage and safe working conditions for the labor forces of Amazon, Frito-Lay, and other people working in American factories, rages on.⁶ At the same time, we deploy mutual-aid networks to protect our communities from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, stepping in where capital and government have failed.

Central to these fights are the stories of exploited people and their demands for a better, fairer world. “Protest movements cannot be understood independent of the rhetoric of those who resist challenges to established power,”⁷ so activists and organizers use stories and **counter-narratives** sourced from the margins to make explicit the implicit tyranny of dominant narratives that control and regulate our lives.⁸

Valuable analyses of poverty narratives exist within the nonprofit sector, **like this one** from the Frameworks Institute.⁹ ¹⁰ Likewise, there are tools to aid social-change advocates in developing well-framed campaigns for economic justice, **like this one** from Opportunity Agenda.¹¹ There are also strategies, such as the one from Demos on **messaging about race and class**,¹² that mobilize instead of ostracize. Podcasts like **Upstream** detail the history and significant hazards of capitalism.¹³ Meanwhile, progressive think tanks, academics, organizers, and ordinary people weigh the likelihood and risks of **the death of capitalism**,¹⁴ the tenets and mores of a post-capitalist world, and the **foundational relationship between capitalism and racism**.¹⁵ Finally, there are **networks** advocating for a **solidarity economy** or a **gift economy**^{16, 17, 18} to replace capitalism when it dies. Even in times of despair, stories help us first imagine a better world and then mobilize us to build it.


The contemporary labor movement started during the Industrial Revolution when late 19th-century robber barons like Cornelius Vanderbilt, James Fisk, John Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and Andrew Carnegie maximized production and profits at the expense of human lives. Their employees—including

children—were expected to work 12 hours a day 6 days a week without a fair wage, workplace safety, workmen’s compensation, or bargaining rights. Although their efforts were not without challenges, labor organizers made great inroads toward better pay and conditions for workers. More than 150 years later, the labor movement’s demands flourish in modern nonprofit, philanthropic, and charitable organizations—but they’re tangled up in stories of meritocracy, deservingness, and liberation through charitable acts.

Nonprofit and philanthropic infrastructure is limited in its power to transform economic systems. As Sarah Jaffe, author of *Work Won’t Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted, and Alone*, explains, “Charity is necessarily asymmetrical and reproduces inequalities. The problems of today’s nonprofit sector are outgrowths of this necessary inequality. Nonprofits exist to try to mitigate the worst effects of an unequal distribution of wealth and power, yet they are funded with the leftovers of the very exploitation the nonprofits may be trying to combat.” But even before this infrastructure existed, exploited people resisted and sought to remake systems to meet their needs, grounded in cooperation and collaboration.

Our task is to take our work as far as it can go, break through the ceiling, and develop new systems and processes to advance social justice. To measure success in terms of **happiness** instead of stakeholder profits.¹⁹ To normalize that “less is more” by **rejecting economic growth** as more fundamental than the physical, mental, and collective health of communities.²⁰ And to make relationships—not transactions—the axis on which our togetherness turns. This project is one small step in that direction.

Watch the **cinematic trailer here** and visit the **website** to learn more about the story behind *BROKE*.

Early on, we decided to focus on both poverty and wealth narratives to tell a complete story—because poverty and wealth are two sides of the same coin. 

WHAT WE SET OUT TO DO

In 2019, the Center for Public Interest Communications and the Radical Communicators Network co-applied for the Gates Grand Economic Challenge and earned a small grant to collaborate on a project focused on narratives about poverty. Early on, we decided to focus on both poverty and wealth narratives to tell a complete story—because poverty and wealth are two sides of the same coin. Joined by Milli, our project, *BROKE*, combines the science of storytelling—applying what research tells us makes stories more memorable, inspiring and actionable, narrative power— a framework for social movements to take advantage of political opportunities, construct narrative interventions, disrupt hegemonic thinking, and intervene to expand the collec-


tive perception of what is socially, economically, and politically possible— crafting resources for activists and communicators that are easy to use and incorporate into their work.

With these tools, we provide the nonprofit and philanthropic communities with an easy-to-use reference for communicating accurately and justly about how the rich got rich and why the poor stay poor, as well as how to use the science of storytelling to advance economic justice for all. It is also an opportunity for the nonprofit sector to confront the harmful narratives it perpetuates and to do better.

Campaigns and organizations like Fight for \$15 and Coalition of Immokalee Farm Workers target economic exploitation that rests on racialized stories and narratives manufactured to **inspire white panic**,²¹ promote racial hatred against Black people and other people of color, and protect the capitalist class's wealth and power at the expense of everyone else. By telling stories of individual willpower and personal drive on one hand, and “lazy” and “undeserving” communities on the other, even people who this system is failing rationalize poverty and inequality in ways that blame the poor for being poor and that absolve the state, corporations, and the wealthy of any responsibility. These important campaigns set the stage for a new century of economic-justice activism and progress, complete with worker-centered storytelling and demands that expose the faulty logic of neoliberalism, counter-narratives that help us imagine a new way of being, and infrastructure to share those stories widely.

The language we use and the stories we tell play a significant role in shaping our views of the world, the people in it, and the policies we support. However, while narrative power can inoculate us against false solutions, it cannot alone change the



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material conditions under which oppressed people live—and we must be aware that it is often co-opted and weaponized against us. For example, a recent docuseries on Amazon Prime **exposes**²² a billionaire family who exploited a message of women’s empowerment to ensnare thousands of women in a pyramid scheme. Women’s empowerment is a perversion of feminism, and an individualist solution to gender oppression that does nothing to change structural notions of patriarchy and sexism.

Economic systems from feudalism to capitalism are propped up by belief systems that normalize and justify inequality. Our beliefs tell us how to categorize people, and can either help us normalize and justify social stratification, or reject it. Therefore, it’s not enough to transform how we communicate; we also have to change what we believe. If we’re not careful, we’ll carry the ideological and narrative albatrosses of America’s past into our future. Thus, aside from narrative power, social movements for economic justice require community-based organizing, revolutionary policy making, and electoral justice and representation to be effective.

Economic life—that’s to say, our lives—are moving in a new direction. **The Great Resignation** presents us with even more human resilience stories rejecting 19th- and 20th-century work norms and requiring the ceiling—as opposed to the floor—when it comes to compensation, benefits, and healthy work boundaries.²³

As we march onward in this new century, we need look no further than organizations like the Immokalee Farm Workers, Southerners on New Ground, and Action Center on Race and the Economy for models on how to advance new economies with stories that respect and value our differences rather than using them to categorize and rank us into a hierarchy of deservingness. Such models promise a future that values connection over consumption, relationships over transactions, and people over profits—and it starts with how we understand and talk about each other today.



ABOUT THE PROJECT

BROKE is an opportunity for all of us to examine the stories we tell about poverty and wealth, and to work together to build new narratives rooted in the wisdom of lived experience, narrative power, organizing for economic justice, and social science. The insights from *BROKE* help us understand where and how we can grow and transform as a community of activists, communicators, storytellers, and strategists dedicated to building a free and just world in which all people can live authentically and with dignity.

urban DICTIONARY

broke



Broke is what something becomes when it **stops working**. The same is true of people. If you are not working, you will soon be **broke**.

I can't **buy a** new house, because I'm no **longer working** and am as a result, broke.

by **qrios** August 9, 2009



BROKE, a colloquialism we use to describe when we're out of money, has become a stand-in for not having enough. And while it is often used flippantly, it distracts us from the broken systems shaped and reshaped to advantage some and oppress others, as well as the stories that protect those systems—stories that insist both poverty and wealth are the result of individual choices.

This report synthesizes what we learned from the research and offers a set of recommendations grounded in the science of storytelling. To arrive at these recommendations, we conducted a literature review focused on understanding prevalent narratives about poverty, a content analysis zeroing in on the storytelling of anti-poverty organizations on social media, and interviews with practitioners who are doing it well. Altogether, we highlight bright spots, and we answer the questions:

- What are the narratives about poverty and wealth coming from the nonprofit and philanthropic sector?
- Do these narratives demonstrate the best of what we've learned from research and practice about how to tell stories that transform systems?

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*There is a crack, a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in* 

— LEONARD COHEN, “Anthem”

WHY WE'RE EXAMINING STORIES AND NARRATIVES FOR ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Wealth hoarding and unchecked monopolies during the Industrial Revolution and the first Gilded Age manufactured unprecedented inequality that gave rise to strong unions and socially democratic policies like the New Deal and Great Society programs in the first half of the 20th century. For the first time in U.S. history, policies expanded public support for the poor, aging, and ill. Due to mounting pressure from ordinary people, this era in U.S. history articulated an important story: that the government is responsible for providing basic yet important public services—like affordable medical care, food, and social security—to all its people.

Still, many Americans—especially Black and Indigenous people and immigrants—lived in dire conditions with little money and few of the resources that provide access to opportunities, many of them directly linked to the legacy of **slavery** and **land theft** in this country.^{24, 25} In the 1960s, a wave of uprisings erupted in almost every major American city in response to poverty wages, dilapidated housing, and anti-Black repression imposed by state actors such as police and policymakers.

Progressives of all backgrounds united around civil rights, including anti-poverty measures like **universal basic income**,²⁶ ending the war in Vietnam, abortion access, feminism, and other people-led movements that questioned the tenets of American democracy and capitalism. These individual non-conformists became a collective voice against globalization, state violence, unfettered capitalism, corporate greed, and traditional values and norms that excluded many people.

As it always has been, when ordinary people rise up against the ruling class to organize our lives for better conditions, the old-world order resists. Power protects itself. In addition to increasing law enforcement in most cities with uprisings to criminalize protestors and protect private property, a caucus of neo-democratic politicians such as Bill Clinton and Al Gore exploited waning union support and political upheaval. They adopted a new economic philosophy that would determine

the way we relate to and understand each other for the next half-century.

Since the 1970s, economic policy in the U.S. and public opinion have been dominated by a conservative economic philosophy known as neoliberalism. Neoliberalism holds that the free market can solve problems the government can't. It redefines citizens as consumers and prizes privatization, deregulation, and individual freedom. Neoliberalism has led to massive tax cuts for the rich; the crushing of trade unions; and the privat-



ization of public services such as energy, water, transportation, healthcare, education, and prisons. Corporations now run these services and charge rents either to people or the government for their use.

Under the new narrative of neoliberalism, our lives would be organized by the market and each of us would become **"bits of human capital"**²⁷ learning only to expand our own capacity to earn more. Stories that supported this narrative promoted hard work and employer fidelity, and lifted up the myth of the American Dream—the fabrication that success is simply a matter of perseverance and grit, and if you wanted it bad enough, you could have it.

It followed naturally from these ideas that the market was king; that there was no need for public programs, societies, neighbors, or relationships. A whole set of supporting narratives were deployed to continue to erode broad support for such programs, and most of these narratives were racist, misogynist, and classist by design. Although Black communities often received less access to social programs, they were used as a scapegoat of the new liberal order and pathologized as deficient, lazy, and undeserving—justifying poverty as the outcome of Black culture and ineptitude.

"This narrative draws from and perpetuates white supremacist ideology. It otherizes and dehumanizes Black individuals and communities. It also perpetuates the idea of Black dependency on and misuse of the system and the idea that poverty among Black people is intractable," **Frameworks** writes.²⁸


This gave rise to the welfare queen narrative, which branded Black women as taking advantage of social programs and misappropriating the tax dollars of hardworking Americans. "The 'welfare queen' is portrayed as a pathologically greedy,

lawbreaking, deviant, lazy, promiscuous, and 'Cadillac-driving' Black woman who cheats the system and defrauds the American people. The character of the 'welfare queen' was injected into the American 'collective memory' of welfare as a central image of its supposed failure," Frameworks continues.

BROKE analyzes these narratives and lifts up new, more accurate, nuanced narratives. In this analysis, class is an unnatural system of power based on perceived social and economic status that sorts people into neighborhoods, schools, and jobs; an unnatural system that determines lifespans, quality of care, social networks, and acceptance.

Social mobility—the potential for members of one generation of a family to "rise above" the economic position of the previous generation—is a tool for keeping the rich rich and the poor poor—because it obscures the fact that systemic barriers exist to prevent people from moving up and the fact that it's wealth, not income, that determines social mobility in America. Wealth is a combination of assets a family owns, like a house or a savings account, and the large and persistent disparity in wealth endures because of centuries of racist stories and policies that have systematically disadvantaged Black Americans' ability to build and pass on wealth.

Narratives have the power to shape solutions, public opinion, and even the way we feel about ourselves. When we share narratives grounded in truth, a belief in the humanity of all people, we create more just solutions, build empathy, and change culture. This is why we have focused both on understanding the history of narratives around poverty and wealth and helping new narratives emerge.

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WHAT IS NARRATIVE?

NARRATIVES ARE ABOUT INVISIBLE POWER: HOW PERCEPTIONS, BELIEF SYSTEMS, AND IDEOLOGY SHAPE THE WAY PEOPLE DEFINE WHAT IS ‘RIGHT’ AND WHAT IS ‘WRONG.’ THE POWER TO DETERMINE WHAT IS ‘RIGHT’ AND WHAT IS ‘WRONG’ IS ESSENTIALLY THE POWER TO DECIDE WHO LIVES AND WHO DIES. IT’S THE POWER TO DETERMINE WHO CAN ACCESS THINGS, WHO CANNOT, AND WHOSE VOICE COUNTS.

**SOUTH AFRICAN, BLACK, QUEER, FEMINIST,
INTERNATIONALIST PHUMI MTETWA**

In order to understand how narratives are used, we need to understand what narratives are. We look to the **Narrative Initiative** for an expansive definition:

Narratives are often described as a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief. Unlike individual stories, narratives have no standard form or structure; they have no beginning or end. What tiles are to mosaics, stories are to narratives. The relationship is symbiotic; stories bring narratives to life by making them relatable and accessible, while narratives infuse stories with deeper meaning. . . . Stories can be told, while narratives are understood at a gut level and activated by simple words, sounds, signals and symbols.²⁹

A narrative reflects a shared interpretation of how the world works. Who holds power and how they use it is both embedded in and supported by dominant narratives. Successful narrative change shifts power as well as dominant narratives. Narrative change rests on the premise that reality is socially constructed through narrative, and that in order to bring about change in the world we need to pay attention to the ways in which this takes place. An ambitious scale is inherent in the strategy of narrative change.

Framing expert **Trabian Shorters** tells us that our minds load familiar narratives instantly and automatically³⁰ This is not a conscious choice—it is part of the 95 percent of mental functioning that precedes conscious thought. And when we encounter facts that don’t fit our narratives, our minds typically reject those facts. In this way, “narrative actually ends up mattering more than facts because narrative determines which facts you will credit and which facts you will ignore.”

Culture Hack Labs reminds us that narratives are complex, adaptive, and dynamic.³¹ They can evolve, mutate, disappear, and converge—which means we can change the current narratives around poverty and wealth, but we’ll need to expect backlash and to be persistent.

POVERTY AND WEALTH NARRATIVES

A panoply of repeatedly shared stories construe poor people as deficient, mentally ill, or frauds, and have created a narrative that has resulted in harmful **policies**,³² tropes on our **TV screens**,³³ and a focus within the nonprofit and philanthropic sector on providing aid rather than addressing the underlying causes that keep people in poverty.

In 2018, the Center for Public Interest Communications conducted a “Living Literature Review”™ to look across academic disciplines to understand why stories are powerful, and what makes some stories more compelling, memorable, and inspiring than others.

6 REASONS WHY STORIES ARE POWERFUL

- 1 They can make issues that are new to communities familiar through the use of familiar plot structures, and they can also overcome story fatigue by making well-known and understood issues feel new.
- 2 They can make abstract and complex ideas like structural racism, capitalism, and homelessness understandable by anchoring these systems in the lives of individual characters and by using visual language.
- 3 They capture our attention. People don’t binge reports filled with data—they immerse themselves in the lives of characters. Unlike any other form of communication, stories hold our attention, increase understanding, and inspire action.
- 4 When we enter the world of characters, we take their perspective, which increases our empathy for them and can shift how we feel about the issues they face because their experience feels like our own.
- 5 **Research** suggests that when people lead with personal stories about harm, rather than facts, it can increase people’s willingness to engage with ideas that might conflict with their beliefs.³⁴ Personal stories, particularly about harm, are often rated as being more true than facts. When people share personal stories with those who disagree with them, it can increase their willingness to listen and respect.
- 6 When stories transport us into the world of characters, we are less likely to disagree on social issues that directly affect them. Researchers say this is because we are in a cognitive state in which we do not think someone is trying to persuade us of something. Because of this, storytelling is powerful for opening us up to ideas we may disagree with.



BASIC
INCOME
MARCH

7 PRINCIPLES FOR BUILDING COMPELLING AND PERSUASIVE STORIES FOR CHANGE BASED ON THE RESEARCH

The stories we read and experience influence our perception of social norms. Social norms are our beliefs about how people we see as similar to us act. And powerful stories can—and do—shape everything from interpersonal interactions to media, policy, and culture. Below are some important principles for constructing powerful stories, supported by narrative research.

- 1** Powerful stories have **structure**. They follow a narrative arc. They have a beginning, middle, and end; conflict and resolution; characters and setting. They feature different plots, including: overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy, tragedy, and rebirth
- 2** Impactful stories use **emotion** with intention. Different emotions make us act in different ways. Great stories use a mix of emotions to capture the attention of an audience and pull them into the story. Emotions can include: sadness, anger, awe, pride, love, and hope. Hope, awe, pride and parental love are most associated with action.
- 3** Compelling stories include **surprise**. Great stories keep us on the edge of our seat and keep us wondering what will happen next. Stories have twists and turns, deceptive cadences that provide those eyebrow-raising moments.
- 4** Immersive stories transport audiences into the world of the characters. Scholars refer to this experience as **narrative transportation** and describe three essential elements for facilitating transportation: vivid imagery that helps the audience imagine being in the character's world, characters the audience likes and identifies with through shared experiences, and similar background or shared interests. And finally, stories that allow us to enter the mind of the characters let us feel what they feel and experience the world as they do.
- 5** Powerful stories use **empty space** and **full space** with purpose. Empty spaces in storytelling are the spaces where you don't provide detail, allowing people to fill in the blanks with their own experiences. For example, you might leave out details about a setting such as school, so people can insert their own experience of school into the story. In contrast, full spaces provide lots of rich details to overwrite what an audience knows—or their existing biases. For example, if you wanted to change how an audience thinks about school, you would include lots of information about a specific school to overwrite what they believe.
- 6** There are **pervasive narratives** that shape how people think about any given issue and what they believe are the appropriate solutions. These narratives are so common that people believe them to be facts. In order to shift these narratives, we need to **tell stories that transform** how people see an issue. We need to share lots of different stories with different characters, emotions, and plot structures, to create new narratives and avoid enforcing and creating harmful, pervasive ones.
- 7** Lastly, for stories to be compelling, they must feel **authentic**—meaning they need to come from people in communities directly experiencing the issues described in the stories. They can come from people who experience oppression, but they can also come from the loved ones of those people, or those who are working every day to transform systems like activists and organizers. Research tells us that when we hear directly from people who lived a story, their stories feel more true. And, of course, these stories of direct lived experience are likely to be free of harmful tropes because people lead complex lives that don't easily conform to stereotypical narratives.

WHY OUR SECTOR

The nonprofit and philanthropic sectors have embraced storytelling and narrative shift as part of our efforts to address systemic problems, including poverty. A narrative shift means that we're telling different stories about why people are poor—moving from stories in which people are rich or poor because of their hard work and character to stories that show that both are the result of systems. Although there are many organizations advancing liberatory narratives, other well-intentioned organizations invoke harmful tropes as a way of demonstrating their organizational effectiveness. They tell stories about how their organization has contributed to the end of individual poverty. When this happens, people with lived experience—the people who lived the stories—lose control over when and how their stories are used. Stories of individual triumph or success crowd out stories that help people see the ways systems are designed to privilege the few over the many. As a result, we come up with the wrong solutions.

We reviewed research that examined these narratives produced across media, politics, and the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. We found that in politics and media, there are three pervasive, harmful, inaccurate narratives about poverty and wealth:

- 1** Narratives about poverty and wealth frame individual actions as the cause of poverty and wealth. These stories suggest that people are poor because they are mentally ill, they have some sort of deficit, they don't want to work, or they are trying to defraud services provided by the government. These stories focus on individual decisions and experiences, rather than systemic forces.
- 2** Narratives define poor people by a single aspect of their lives connected to their economic positions, and what is lost is the complete and nuanced view of poor people as *whole* people. Their humanity is erased, and they are defined solely by struggle.
- 3** Poverty is assumed as an inevitable fact and a byproduct of society, while wealth is a result of individual hard work and ingenuity.

To counter these harmful narratives, some nonprofits and foundations tell stories in which poor people are shown as in need of saving—while those who make their way out of poverty are constructed as exceptional individuals who “make it” through sheer perseverance and grit. These stories reinforce the meritocratic narrative that if someone wants to “move up” badly enough, they can. They also overlook long-established systems created to disadvantage some over others; absolve

the state and the wealthy of acknowledging and repairing the damage they've done; and position nonprofit and philanthropic organizations as the answer to poverty through training services, charity, and self-improvement programs.

We also found that organizations are telling stories about themselves, and how they successfully lift people out of poverty through services or advocacy. These stories are used to build credibility for the organization and demonstrate their relevance as a resource for ending poverty. Organizations are competing against one another for dollars, voice, and prominence. These stories are intended to paint poor people as entrepreneurial and exceptional, but they reinforce existing neoliberal and meritocratic narratives about poor people that:

- 1** Emphasize individual actions as both the source of the problem and the solution to poverty
- 2** Narrowly define and celebrate poor people when they move out of poverty and into the middle class, and limit our ability to imagine an alternative system to capitalism
- 3** Do not critically interrogate the systems that have created these conditions



DRIVING QUESTIONS FOR OUR RESEARCH

To start, we asked two fundamental questions to identify the narratives about wealth and poverty from our sector:

- 1 What kinds of stories are the nonprofit and philanthropic sector (nonprofits, foundations, NGOs, charities, community-based organizations) telling about poverty and wealth?
- 2 If narratives are made up of stories, what narratives are emerging from the stories being shared by nonprofit and philanthropic sector?

OUR APPROACH

In order to answer these questions, we conducted a literature review of existing, peer-reviewed research published in academic journals. We surveyed two large networks of people working in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors to identify organizations working toward economic justice.³⁵ From this list, we conducted social listening to identify which of these organizations had the largest voice on social media relative to their size. Social listening is an approach to research that identifies what is being said about a topic on social media and by whom. We identified ten organizations that fit this description. In social listening, we tracked social-media platforms for mentions and conversations related to our area of research; we then analyzed them to identify organizations and people with the most engagement relative to their size.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

In Fall 2021, we selected ten organizations from our list for our content analysis. We pulled the three most recent pieces of content that each organization published under the “Stories” or “Blog” sections on their websites or social media (Twitter and Instagram) pages. We only pulled stories that were explicitly related to poverty, wealth, or economic justice. In total, we conducted a thematic content analysis of 27 pieces of content from ten organizations: three foundations, three nonprofits, two charities, and two community groups. We kept their names anonymous because this report is not meant to be a critique of specific organizations. Instead, we are interested in how this small sample of organizations—ranging in size, type, funding models, and theories of change—are telling stories that advance economic justice or that inadvertently reinforce inequality.

To analyze these stories, we created a rubric with a set of questions informed by **critical race theory**,³⁶ **intersectionality**,³⁷ and the **science of effective storytelling**.³⁸ The rubric pushed us to consider whether white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy were present in the stories as settings in which characters were making decisions. We examined whether problems were portrayed as a result of individual actions or systemic factors, and whether solutions emphasized systems change and collective action.



OUR FINDINGS

Below, we start by sharing the findings from our content analysis, followed by our interviews with organizations. We synthesize this original research into an actionable set of recommendations. Following those recommendations, we share insights from our review of existing literature that supplemented our analysis.

CONTENT ANALYSIS

The content analysis included 27 pieces of content, mainly short and long-form articles and videos on the respective organization's website.³⁹ In the analysis, we sought out the following:

- 1** Whether organizations were telling stories that follow a narrative arc
- 2** Which plot structures were or were not being used based on journalist Christopher Booker's 2019 book ***The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories***⁴⁰
 - A** Overcoming the monster
 - B** Rags to riches
 - C** Rebirth
 - D** Quest
 - E** Voyage and return
 - F** Comedy
 - G** Tragedy
- 3** Whether stories included systems as a setting in which characters had to make decisions
- 4** Whether people were represented in culturally authentic ways, and in ways that acknowledged their power, agency, and full humanity
- 5** Whether stories acknowledged structural factors like racism and patriarchy, and economic systems like capitalism, or whether these systems were absent

ARE THE NONPROFIT AND PHILANTHROPIC SECTORS TELLING STORIES?

We examined each piece of content for a narrative arc, which requires a story to have a beginning, middle, and end; conflict and resolution; and characters and settings.

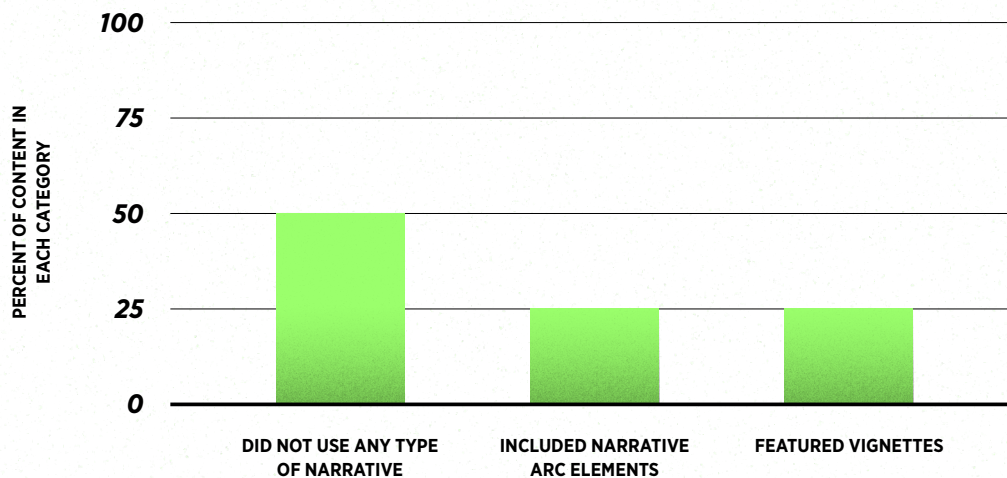
Only 25 percent of the content sampled included elements of a narrative arc. Of the remaining stories, 25 percent featured vignettes (evocative descriptions that lack all the elements of a story), and the final 50 percent did not use any kind of narrative arc. We know from research that stories are most powerful when they follow a narrative arc. Yet, we saw that **75 percent of the organizations were not telling stories**. Instead, they shared vignettes, profiles or blurbs. That is they did not follow

the narrative arc. There is great opportunity for organizations to shift narratives on poverty by telling compelling stories.

Forty-eight percent of the stories included no plot from the list of seven plots based on journalist Christopher Booker's book *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, which we used to assess plots. Thirty percent of the sample that included a narrative arc used the plot type "overcoming the monster." The other types of plots were under 7 percent for each category in all the content we collected.

MOST SAMPLED CONTENT DID NOT USE A NARRATIVE ARC

Only 25% of the content sampled included narrative arc elements.
Another 25% featured vignettes.



Note: Percentages are from our sampled content.

WHAT NARRATIVES ARE BEING SHARED?

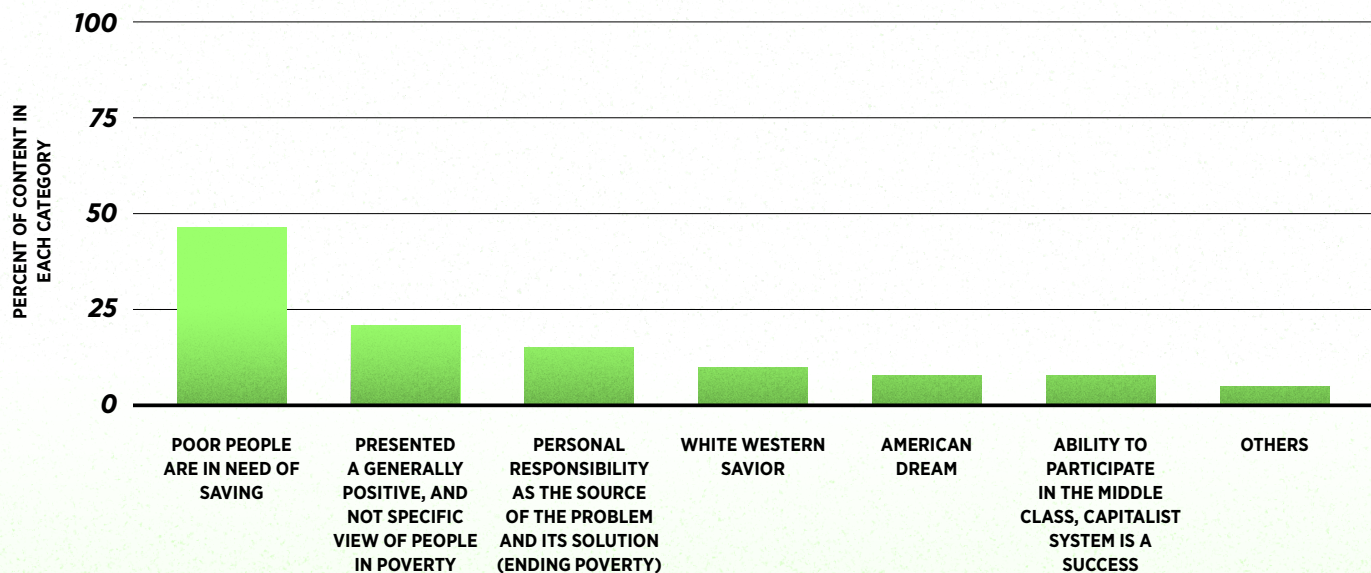
We investigated the narratives being created and shared by organizations working in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. We analyzed the stories to see if the content upheld any pervasive tropes. Specifically, we assessed whether the stories contained references to:

- Poor people in need of saving
- Poor people as a monolithic group
- Poor people made responsible for poverty
- The presence of white Western savior(s)
- Success defined as achieving the American Dream
- The ability to participate in the middle class, with the result of capitalism being deemed a success

“Poor people are in need of saving” was by far the most prevalent narrative. The other popular narratives offered non-specific views of the people in poverty, a focus on personal responsibility, and narratives displaying a white Western savior. The American Dream trope and the ability to participate in a middle-class capitalist system were also used.

PERCENTAGE OF NARRATIVE TYPES ABOUT POVERTY BEING SHARED BY THE SECTOR IN OUR SAMPLE

Poor people are in need of saving was the most used narrative in our sample at 44%



Note: Numbers add up to more than 100 percent because there was a “check all that apply” option. Percentages are from our sampled content.

HOW ARE CHARACTERS REPRESENTED?

We examined whether the content included authentic representations of characters. We asked the questions: *Did the story feature the experiences of poor people authentically? Were representations culturally authentic? Were representations general? Were there oversimplifications?* Content reviewers answered yes or no.

Twenty-two percent of the content featured the experiences of poor people authentically. Another 48 percent somewhat featured poor people as authentic, while 30 percent did not feature poor people authentically

For example, a story about seniors living in poverty struggling to make decisions about whether to buy food or medicine describes the group simply as “seniors” who “suffer in silence.” We do not know their names, faces, or anything about them. In contrast, another story features a woman who shares why she got involved in housing and immigration issues. She shares her experience as a woman in this country, working multiple jobs, and how she suf-

fered. We see this as more authentic because the story is unique to her and includes more context for her experience.

The sector must tell more stories that feature individuals as complex and multidimensional and who contribute to our world beyond their paid labor. These stories must display the complexity of the human experience, including aspects of who the characters are outside of their poverty.

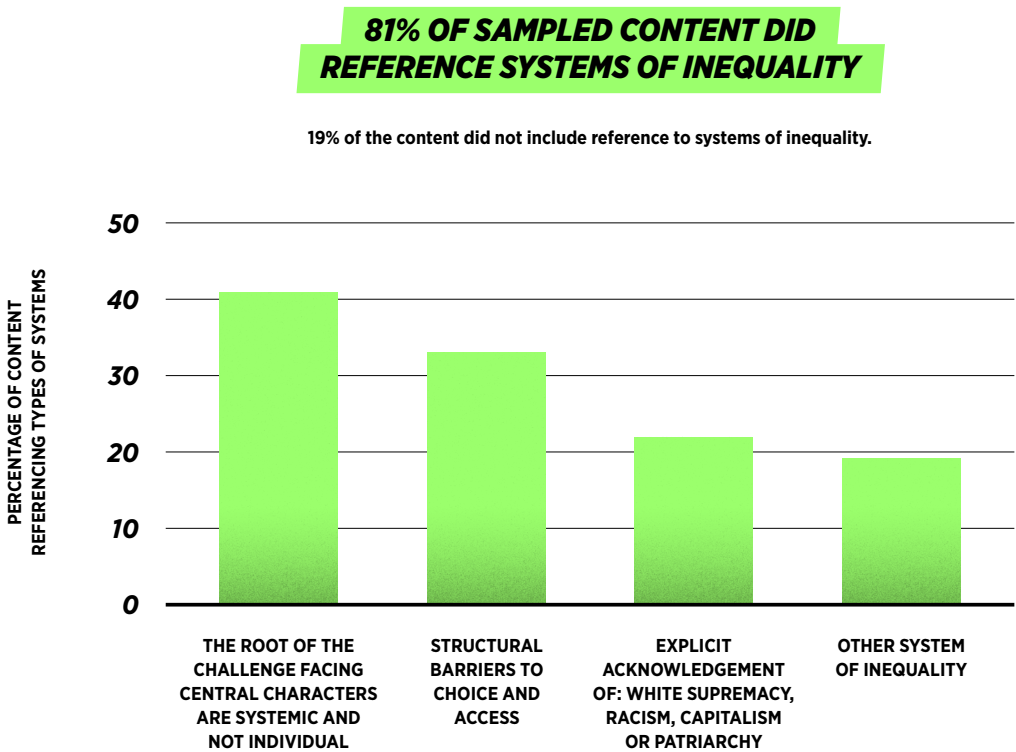
We think of these as “empty spaces” and “full spaces” in storytelling. Empty spaces apply to the deployment of tropes or stereotypes that reinforce what people already believe. Or they may simply make use of abstract ideas that leave the reader to fill in the details from their own lived experience. Full spaces make room for rich detail and complexity that can override a reader’s assumptions or biases.



NARRATIVES HIGHLIGHTED SYSTEMS OF INEQUALITY

We examined whether stories featured systems and structural barriers in the setting and plot structure. We asked ourselves: *Were systems of inequality, and how they operate to oppress poor people, central to the story?*

Of the content we sampled, 19 percent did not include any reference to systems of inequality. The remaining 81 percent of the content did, with the following breakdown:



Note: Numbers add up to more than 100 percent because there was a “check all that apply” option. Percentages are from our sampled content.

We see from this data that when stories include systems, they do so without discussing race, white supremacy, and the role of the wealthy in creating poverty. Furthermore, when analyzed with the following question, “*Were race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination made explicit and central to the story?*,” we found that 56 percent did not make race and racism central to the story, 26 percent somewhat did, and only 19 percent centralized these issues.

An example of a story that included racism was one that highlighted the journey of immigrants from Central America moving through Mexico and who experienced mistreatment there because of their ethnicity.

We further analyzed whether or not content featured systems that shape the characters’ experiences and found that 30 percent of the stories included systems as a central part of the story, another 37 percent somewhat featured systems, while 33 percent featured no systems. For example, the story mentioned above about the journey of immigrants from Central America through Mexico included systems as central to the story by showing how people’s race/ethnicity led to mistreatment. Other stories did not include any mention of systems of any kind.

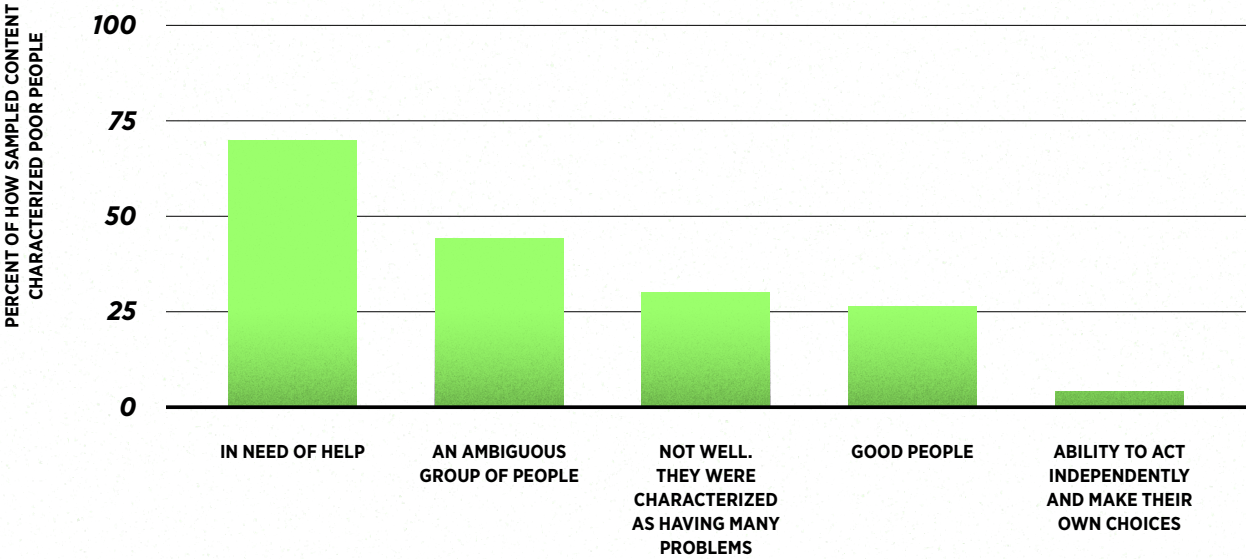
HOW ARE POOR PEOPLE CHARACTERIZED?

The following chart displays how poor people were characterized in the stories. They were rarely shown as having agency or the ability to make their own decisions.

We can see from this data that the pervasive narrative is that poor people are “in need of saving,” don’t have much agency on their own, and are characterized by their struggle—with the implication that we, the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors, are here to help them.

HOW POOR PEOPLE WERE CHARACTERIZED BY PERCENTAGE OF THE SAMPLED CONTENT

Poor people were characterized by “in need of help” in 70% of the sampled content



Note: Numbers add up to more than 100 percent because there was a “check all that apply” option. Percentages are from our sampled content.

WHO IN THE STORY HAS POWER?

We also evaluated how power was being discussed in the sample. We found that in 70 percent of the content, the organization had power. Only 44 percent of the stories included characters who had power. Just 11 percent of stories featured the audience—the people reading or experiencing the story—having power.

For example, one story demonstrates power through the experience of a character that identifies as a woman, immigrant, and tenant. She shares why she is organizing and participating in marches for immigrant rights. She is inspired to help those who experience injustices.



BRIGHT SPOTS FROM OUR INTERVIEWS, CONTENT ANALYSIS, AND LITERATURE REVIEW

While we have some room to grow as a sector, there are also organizations telling stories that counter and transform how communities think about capitalism, poverty, and wealth. We want to lift up their practices. Based on our content analysis using our narrative-change rubric and additional review of the sector, we identified six organizations telling stories about poverty and wealth in ways that challenge pervasive harmful narratives and replace them with transformative ones. We know there are many, many more.

- **Coalition of Imokalee Workers**, a worker-based human rights organization internationally recognized for its achievements in fighting human trafficking and gender-based violence at work
- **Southerners on New Ground**, a home for LGBTQ+ liberation across all lines of race, class, ability, age, culture, gender, and sexuality in the South
- **Migrant Justice**, an organization working to build the voice, capacity, and power of the farmworker community and engage community partners to organize for economic justice and human rights
- **Invisible People**, a nonprofit dedicated to educating the public about homelessness through innovative storytelling, news, and advocacy
- **Action Center on Race and the Economy**, a campaign hub for organizations working at the intersection of racial justice and Wall Street accountability
- **Economic Security Project**, an organization that serves as convener, strategist, and funder, that disburses grants, identifies gaps, develops communications research to inform the movements, and coordinates events and convenings to encourage investment and action from others

We conducted one-hour interviews, with representatives working on communications and strategy from each of these organizations. We asked questions about their approaches to strategy and storytelling.

We identified **nine principles for generating and telling stories** that can shift how we communicate about poverty and wealth.

Below, we describe each of these themes. We follow with case studies shared by organizational representatives during our interviews.

HOW TO TELL STORIES ABOUT POVERTY AND WEALTH TO DRIVE SYSTEMS CHANGE

- 1** Tell compelling stories by applying the science of story-building
- 2** Tell stories about individuals navigating systems and engaging in collective action to disrupt power
- 3** Create space for people to come together and talk about systems
- 4** Problematize the current narrative
- 5** Use justice frames in storytelling
- 6** Build the capacity of communities to share stories
- 7** Use visual images to engage communities
- 8** Be intentional with the language you use
- 9** Amplify stories—ethically



TELL COMPELLING STORIES BY APPLYING THE SCIENCE OF STORY BUILDING

In our content analysis, we saw an opportunity to improve how we communicate about poverty and wealth by telling stories. Stories should include:

- 1** A narrative arc, with characters, setting, conflict, and resolution
- 2** Intentionally evoked emotions to capture attention and move us to action
- 3** An element of surprise, with twists and turns that keep us on the edge of our seat
- 4** Characters we like and identify with, as well as vivid imagery; these elements aid in narrative transportation
- 5** Empty spaces in the story for the audience to insert their experience, as well as full spaces with rich details to overcome existing assumptions and stereotypes
- 6** Awareness of the harmful, pervasive narratives about poverty and wealth
- 7** Intentionality around the plots, emotions, and characters being featured, to avoid reinforcing harmful, pervasive narratives
- 8** Willingness to work with communities to tell their stories so they are more authentic and effective to their audiences

For example, Invisible People models these principles well with the **personal testimonies**⁴¹ they regularly share on YouTube and their website featuring people who are unhoused. We hear directly from unhoused people about their experiences. They share stories about how they found themselves houseless, the systemic barriers they face moving out of poverty, and vivid details about their experiences that help audiences understand their perspective.





NARRATIVE POWER ANALYSIS

Narratives, which emerge when stories are shared over and over again and refined over time, can be weaponized to rescind public services intended to buoy poor people facing economic hardship. For example, such narratives are deployed by politicians and ideologues who advocate for smaller government and fewer programs for the poor—and who spread anti-Black, stereotypical myths about people who “cheat the system” or “don’t want to work.” This messaging has allowed politicians to vilify poor people as lazy, unwilling to work, undeserving of help, and socially and morally inferior—all for the purpose of winning elections. This has also led to policies that have exacerbated poverty.

On August 22, 1996, President Bill Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), Republican-written legislation that obliterated

the social safety net created by the New Deal decades earlier and hurled millions of Americans into poverty and hunger.

Mutations of these stories surfaced during the pandemic, when people who refused to return to dangerous working conditions and demanded basic labor protections were accused of being lazy or taking advantage of resources distributed by the government precisely for times like these. Similarly, storied solutions have emphasized individual responsibility to change personal circumstances, including entrepreneurship incubators or programs to work through personal challenges. These stories have created a narrative environment that blames the poor for being poor and demands that they find their own way out of poverty rather than focusing on neoliberalism, capitalism, and other systems that stratify communities along economic lines and constrain choices and opportunities.

TELL STORIES ABOUT INDIVIDUALS NAVIGATING SYSTEMS AND ENGAGING IN COLLECTIVE ACTION TO DISRUPT POWER

To transform this narrative environment and make systemic social changes, change agents must understand the histories and institutions that underlie contemporary social systems, as well as how these histories and institutions shape culture and collective meaning-making. All projects must include deep **narrative power analysis** that examines the history of ideas and how they have come to infiltrate systems past and present.⁴² This analysis can be included in the stories we tell about systems.

Narratives have a genesis and an emergence, and we can expose them by applying a narrative power analysis. As a reminder, “narratives are often described as a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief.”

According to the Center for Story Based Strategy, a narrative analysis of power is “a systematic line of inquiry for examining the stories that abet the powers that be in order to better challenge them.” If you have ever done a **power analysis**,⁴³ this is in the same family, but we focus on the stories that prop up power structures in order to better challenge them.

A narrative analysis of power encourages us to ask: *Which stories define cultural norms; where did these stories come from; whose stories were ignored or erased to create these norms; and most urgently, what new stories can we tell to help create the world we desire?*

Narrative power analysis gives us the tools not to reverse-engineer narratives—given that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (Audre Lorde)—but to expose the genealogy and mechanics of entrenched oppressive stories in order to de-platform them. A narrative power analysis can also supplant oppressive stories with stories that advance a world in which we’ve dismantled capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and white supremacy—and replaced those systems of oppression with systems of cooperation and collaboration. Transforming the narrative environment means sharing stories that reveal systems as the root cause of poverty over and over again. Characters in these stories face conflicts that are the result of racialized capitalism, neoliberal mythology, and systematic oppression, all of which make upward mobility nearly impossible. These stories should show individuals navigating these systems, because **complex systems are best illustrated through the stories of those experiencing them.**⁴⁴ Solutions and ideal change scenarios should feature the collective action of poor, working-class people and their allies to transform systems and corporations that are designed to keep people in poverty.

Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE) tells stories that focus on disrupting power by specifically naming the way that corporations perpetuate poverty by hoarding profits.⁴⁵ For ACRE, the root cause is always present in the narrative, and the organization explicitly focuses on the way corporations hoard profits and extract resources from the poor. This flips the narratives we usually hear on their head; instead of examining the way the poor behave, we are made aware about the way the wealthy take.



PROBLEMATIZE THE CURRENT NARRATIVE

Building powerful counter-narratives is not just telling different stories, but concurrently problematizing the dominant narratives that many of us might simply believe as “conventional wisdom” because they are so prevalent in our cultural waters. In other words, problematizing a narrative involves taking something that might seem to be true to show that it, too, is a story that has been constructed; it isn’t necessarily true, or the only truth.

For example, ACRE problematizes prevalent narratives around housing in many ways. First, by pointing to the foreclosure crisis, they challenge the prevailing narrative that housing is an investment vehicle that builds wealth and allows access to basic amenities. They emphasize that, instead of building wealth for homeowners, housing investment led to the loss of housing and wealth. They also used the slogan *Banks got bailed out, we got sold out*, highlighting that instead of helping those who lost their homes, the government supported *banks*, who were responsible for making exploitative loans in the first place. ACRE also takes the often-cited barriers to getting housing—affordability, accessibility, ability to pay—and emphasizes how

people get excluded based on ability, immigration status, race, and criminal record.

In a different way, organizations employed the narrative of essential workers that became commonplace during the pandemic to get stimulus payments from the state of Vermont for immigrant families who were not eligible for federal stimulus payments. By using the phrase *Essential, but excluded or Essential, but disposable*, they problematized the idea that people could be called essential but not cared for by social safety-net programs.

USE JUSTICE FRAMES IN STORYTELLING

As we have seen in our research, stories that prioritize profit over people frame the problem as individuals who have a deficit. Such stories lend themselves to the idea that the solution is for organizations to provide resources to individuals to change their situation (e.g., job training, food donations, etc.). The first and best solution posited is often that we can help poor people through donations/charity. While resources are important for people struggling in the short term, the stories and the solutions they point to do nothing to change what causes people to be poor in the first place.

In contrast, stories that use a justice framework go directly to the root: They define the problem of poverty as the result of actions by powerful corporations or decision-makers; this framing is a markedly different solution from charity. In this frame, the solution is collective action by communities and their allies to transform the systems that allow corporations to pay low wages and require inhumane working conditions, all while hoarding profits. This lens takes the focus off of individuals, which brings the problem and solution to the structural level.

The **Coalition of Immokalee Workers** starts from an orientation that working conditions and low wages across the industry are fundamentally unjust.⁴⁶ This framing forms the root of their storytelling strategy. For example, in the context of COVID-19, workers who did not receive paid time off were not able to stay at home when they were sick; they simply could not afford to lose any income. When workers came to work despite being sick, it affected their whole community. COVID underscores that corporations focusing on profit above all else leads not only to working conditions that are fundamentally unjust, but in this case, illness that impacts the whole community.



BUILD THE CAPACITY OF COMMUNITIES TO TELL STORIES

Organizations can support people with lived experiences to share their stories in ways that are ethical, human-centered, and considerate of the impact that telling one's story can have. **People should be able to share their story in the way they want**; for example, **Invisible People** curates and collects many stories from individuals experiencing houselessness and shares them on YouTube unedited.⁴⁷ Through first-person testimony, mini-documentaries, and scripted stories, Invisible People shares stories that bring to life the human toll that lack of housing has on both individuals who are unhoused, our society, and the individuals most affected. Rather than directing people to talk about a specific experience, Invisible People allows the storyteller to share aspects of their experience that are important to them. They ask open-ended questions and let the storyteller go where they would like.

Not only should organizations allow those who share their stories to maintain control over the way they share their stories; **people should also own the rights to their stories**. When collecting stories, Invisible People makes sure the storyteller has control over their story. The storyteller is informed about how the story will be shared and has the right to request that it not be shared at any time.

Another practice that centers those who are telling their stories is that of building repositories of stories, which can be used for campaigns, in media, to educate target audiences, etc. One of the key purposes of this practice is **to prevent the storyteller from being overburdened with requests for their stories**. This is something the Economic Security Project (ESP) did with participants in the Stockton Economic Empowerment

Demonstration (SEED) study. Those stories were available to the media in a restricted way.

Lastly, organizations can support community members to tell their stories, which can look many different ways. For example, for the SEED study, the ESP supported those who opted to share their stories of receiving guaranteed income by building a cohort of storytellers. They created the space to build

community with others who had received guaranteed income. They also provided media/press trainings. Migrant Justice is another organization that uses the tool of popular education to support individuals to analyze their circumstances through a structural lens, which informs the way they ultimately share their stories as activists.

USE VISUALS AND VISUAL LANGUAGE

The language used to engage people in economic justice and anti-poverty work is often abstract and specific to the philanthropic sector. But this language also leaves a lot of people out. Furthermore, when we use terms like *poverty*, *social determinants*, *systems*, *capitalism*, and *racism* with people who may not be familiar with what these terms mean or look like outside of a textbook, we leave a lot of space for people to insert what they think we mean. This is particularly important when we are trying to build relationships and knowledge with audiences who are not familiar with how systems shape our lives.

Many of the organizations we interviewed were intentional about being inclusive and accessible with the language they used, employing visual language that paints a picture of what inhumane conditions and systems of inequality look and feel like. For example, to build support for farmworkers and their campaigns, Migrant Justice shares stories that illustrate the conditions workers are working and living in, avoiding potentially inaccessible language like *oppression*, *injustice*, and *inequity*, in favor of showing what it means to live without water, heat, internet, or phone.

BE INTENTIONAL WITH LANGUAGE

We found that the organizations we interviewed typically do not use the terms *poverty* and *wealth*. Instead, they talk about the *poor*, *working class*, *corporate hoarding*, and *material conditions*.

For example, organizations that grounded their work in the view that poverty is a result of a set of policies and decisions that keep the poor poor and the rich even richer use language that emphasizes the role of exploitative and inhumane systems. For example, Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE) uses action words that convey how the poor are made poor: Their labor is *exploited*, their resources are *extracted*, and they are *trapped in debt* through extractive practices. They have similar active words for how the wealthy get wealthier: They *hoard* their wealth, they *accumulate* resources, etc.

rooted in Black liberation movements, as well as the belief that poverty is a function of racist policies. Overall, ESP knows that viable solutions must have racial justice at the center.

Language should be shaped by the communities who are most affected. For example, in our interview with Lupe Gonzalo and Marley Monacelo, from the Coalition of Immokalee Farm Workers, we asked if they had any language they deliberately tried to use or avoid. In response, they shared that in the communities they work with, they choose to use the term *language* rather than *dialect*, because many Indigenous languages have been treated as if they are not fully formed languages. Calling them *languages* rather than *dialects* is a way of recognizing their legitimacy and history.

The Economic Security Project (ESP) also uses specific language to talk about the work they do, describing their work as being about building power rather than using the term *anti-poverty work*.⁴⁸ ESP avoids the use of the term *anti-poverty* because it is often connected to solutions that involve charity, self-improvement, and individual-level solutions. They use *guaranteed income* rather than *basic income* because it is

AMPLIFY STORIES—ETHICALLY

To effectively change the conditions that help the rich get richer and the poor stay poor, we have to amplify stories from communities whose stories do not often get heard—stories that illustrate systems at work and call all of us into collective action. To do this, communities must lead the way in story-telling. However, these communities need to be treated with respect and dignity during that process. As communications practitioners, we need to make sure that we:

- Don't exploit or retraumatize storytellers
- Don't define storytellers solely by a particular experience
- Don't expose storytellers to targeted violence from the opposition
- Provide storytellers with full information about the emotional and financial toll sharing their story may have, so they can make an informed decision about whether and how to share their story

Define American, a culture-change organization, provides **recommendations for doing this work** that we think should be standardized across the philanthropic sector.⁴⁹ They suggested asking the following questions:

- Is now a good time to share your story?
- How have you been since we last connected?
- What do you feel comfortable sharing now?
- Have you shared your/this story before?

Define American also shared standards that we think all advocacy organizations should adopt:

- **We will** offer a scope of work, compensation, and a timeline for involvement, and ask if it feels in line with your expectations.
- **We will** design ways of seeking feedback and suggestions for nurturing storytellers' mental health and well-being within our work.
- **We will** hold others we work with, particularly in the media, accountable for honoring your contributions.
 - For pronouncing and spelling your names correctly
 - For honoring your gender identity and pronouns
 - For being forthcoming and transparent about when conversations are "on the record" or "off the record"
 - For including you in the decision-making process around your stories
 - When possible, sending you a draft of the story write-up before it publishes or being open to edits after a story has published if you, as the storyteller, feel uneasy about story details
 - For following up with a link to a written/recorded story once it is published
 - For simply thanking a storyteller for their time and vulnerability when sharing their story



CASE STUDIES

To illustrate what these recommendations look like in practice, we highlight two campaign case studies from Migrant Justice and Invisible People. Each story uniquely represents the principles for telling stories about poverty and wealth for systems change we identified from our research.

MIGRANT JUSTICE

In a talk given at the frank conference in 2019,⁵⁰ Enrique “Kike” Balcazar tells his story of joining Migrant Justice and organizing as part of two initiatives to secure rights for dairy farm workers. His speech exemplifies the principles of telling transformative stories for economic justice.

Throughout the speech, Kike tells stories about how farm workers took **collective action** to disrupt inhumane practices at dairy farms. He shares his own story of participating in a campaign in Vermont with other workers to pass a law allowing undocumented people to hold driver’s licenses. He also shares how workers and allies organized to free him and other leaders of the farmworkers movement from ICE detention, where they spent 11 days behind bars. The narrative that emerges through the many stories Enrique tells throughout the speech is one in which collective action is used to resolve conflict and secure wins.

Enrique also uses a **justice frame** throughout his talk, highlighting the issue as inhumane living conditions for farm workers, and the solution as work with dignity. He shows what this looks like by using **visual language**—depicting the reality of living without drinking water, as well as the intense heat and long working hours, all for poverty-level wages. He applies this principle to telling stories about collective action as well, describing marching under the hot sun after a long day of work.

Enrique also emphasizes the **role of systems** in shaping the experiences of farm workers. For example, in telling the story of coming to work in Vermont, he highlights how his material conditions were exploitative. He emphasizes language barriers, long hours, low wages at \$3 to \$4 an hour, and no access to communication through a phone or internet. He does this again when he describes the inhumane working and living conditions farm workers face, as well as ICE’s criminalization of workers. In the stories, the workers, allies and corporations who join the Milk With Dignity program are the heroes.

In a different way, the person we interviewed from Migrant Justice highlighted how systems of racism influence people’s beliefs about Latinx immigrants as uniquely suited to do this type of farm work under challenging conditions. They chal-

lenge this story with a reframe that points to supply chains that push farm owners to drive down costs and shape the working conditions. In this analysis, both the farmers and the workers are actors within a broader system whose rules are determined by corporations.

Migrant Justice takes care to avoid the pitfalls of **personal testimony** that can feel exploitative; that is, they refrain from using stories only to show how awful a farm or someone’s living conditions are. Instead, stories are used to demonstrate the power workers have.



INVISIBLE PEOPLE

Invisible People is a nonprofit media organization that shares the stories of unhoused people. **Storytellers have control** over whether their story is shared or not. All stories are shared on YouTube and the Invisible People website.

In another **story** about a collective of neighbors in Koreatown, we encounter multiple voices of community members engaging in **collective action** to help their unhoused neighbors.⁵¹ This story was designed to inspire regular people to help their unhoused neighbors. We learn about the challenges that people living on the streets face as they work toward housing. One man tells the story of being handcuffed and ticketed for having a tent, which is not his. A woman shares the story of having sanitation come do a sweep and take all her belongings and clothes. She has to ask sanitation workers to leave her food. These **stories illustrate a broken system at work**. The conflict for the characters is not an individual deficit, but a system that makes it hard for everyone to have basic amenities.

Another story focuses on a person named Theo Henderson and follows his journey moving in and out of houselessness.⁵² He goes to college and finds his calling to be a teacher. An economic crisis makes it hard for him to find work, and he ends up unhoused. He is loved in his community because he provides education and child care for children at a local park. His story **challenges stereotypes** of unhoused people as dangerous people in need of saving. It shows us the agency and sense of community that can exist among those who are unhoused, and it illustrates how houselessness could happen to those of us who have gone to college and have had housing, paid work, and a place to live.



LITERATURE REVIEW: FIVE CASE STUDIES FROM ACADEMIC RESEARCH

We sought out academic research that was focused on poverty and wealth narratives in the nonprofit and philanthropic sector. Few studies focused on poverty narratives from the nonprofit and philanthropic sector, either in the United States or internationally, and no studies examined wealth narratives.⁵³ We identified five case studies that offer insight into storytelling practices and poverty narratives for single organizations.

THE CASE STUDIES

PAPER	ORGANIZATION(S)	CITATION
"Portrayals of the poor on the cusp of capitalism: Promotional materials in the case of Heifer International"	Heifer International	Clair, R. P., & Anderson, L. B. (2013). "Portrayals of the poor on the cusp of capitalism: Promotional materials in the case of Heifer International." <i>Management Communication Quarterly</i> , 27(4), 537-567.
"NGOs, communicative labor, and the work of grassroots representation:	Grassroots International, a pseudonym for an environmental justice NGO (anonymous in the paper)	Dempsey, S. E. (2009). "NGOs, communicative labor, and the work of grassroots representation." <i>Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies</i> , 6(4), 328-345.
"Poverty and the controversial work of nonprofits" and "Connecting poverty, culture, and cognition: The bridges out of poverty process"	Bridges Out of Poverty, a nonprofit organization	Jindra, M., & Jindra, I. W. (2016). "Poverty and the controversial work of nonprofits." <i>Society</i> , 53(6), 634-640. Jindra, I. W., and Jindra, M. (2018). "Connecting poverty, culture, and cognition: The bridges out of poverty process." <i>Journal of Poverty</i> , 22(1), 42-64.
"Change the Narrative: Poverty Discourse and Frontline Work in Community-based Organizations in Post-Welfare Los Angeles"	Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) and Strength-Based Community Change (SBCC).	Wells, R. B. (2021). <i>Change the Narrative: Poverty Discourse and Frontline Work in Community-based Organizations in Post-Welfare Los Angeles</i> (Doctoral dissertation, UCLA).
"'You start with the youth': Narratives of deservingness and dissent at a homeless service organization"	West Coast Youth, a pseudonym for an organization serving homeless youth	Yarbrough, D. (2021). "'You start with the youth': Narratives of deservingness and dissent at a homeless service organization." <i>Sociological Perspectives</i> , 07311214211019431.

Collectively, these papers suggest that organizations are sharing poverty narratives that characterize individuals as the cause of poverty. For example, social-work scholars Ines Jindra and Michael Jindra **write in their review** of anti-poverty organizations:

These programs unjustly blame the poor for their predicament and put the onus on them rather than on structural conditions (e.g., the lack of good-paying jobs, poor schools, racism) that cause poverty in the first place. The focus on behavior, work, and self-sufficiency end up “punishing” or “disciplining” the poor in order to decrease their reliance on government benefits or other aid.⁵⁴

The solutions these programs promote are individualistic, emphasizing poor people's ability to pull themselves out of poverty through entrepreneurship and personal and professional development. Jindra and Jindra also write that organizations tell stories about particular types of poor people whom they present as deserving, exceptional, or hardworking. In all five cases, organizations tell stories about poor people that define them solely by their experience with poverty.

Here are the themes we saw across the papers.

POOR PEOPLE ACHIEVING SUCCESS AS ENTREPRENEURS

Portrayals of the poor are often tied to entrepreneurship, whereby organizations define success as helping people become productive members of society. The stories they tell feature people in poverty trying to gain control of their lives through work and entrepreneurship.

In a study of one U.S.-based environmental-justice organization communicating about poverty, communications scholar Sarah Dempsey found that the organization relied on “good stories” of their grantees working in their communities for fundraising appeals. These stories illustrated “social entrepreneurialism as a tool for community development.” Dempsey writes:

Stories of social entrepreneurship position grantees as autonomous subjects taking bold risks to determine their own strategies for change... this particular configuration of the grassroots is also potentially problematic in that it may divert attention from the need for wider societal and structural changes in the allocation of resources. In addition, “good stories” emphasized individual responsibility and the entrepreneurial spirit, both seen as flourishing at the local scale.⁵⁵

By emphasizing individual responsibility and entrepreneurship rather than larger systemic issues driving poverty, we erase the role of systems in producing poverty and put the onus of responsibility on poor people to change. For instance, resource allocation focused on building more public housing financed

by taxing the rich at higher rates could eliminate forms of poverty driven by the cost of housing.

Communications scholars **Robin Clair and Lindsey Anderson** found in their study on Kiva, an organization that offers small loans to people to build businesses, that the organization tells stories about poor people who are healthy, working-aged, and skilled entrepreneurs starting or running businesses to improve their lives.⁵⁵ These stories typically do not feature people without a plan to start a business; the focus of the loans is solely on recipients who are looking to make their livelihood through business. These stories do not feature other aspects of the recipients' lives, nor do they describe their experiences repaying those loans.

Clair and Anderson also examined the communications materials of Heifer International and find that their content emphasizes “self-sufficiency” and “prosperity” in their fundraising materials' calls for donations to families. The authors write:

The characterizations (or attributes) of the loan recipients (e.g., self-sufficient, healthy, able-bodied, skilled adults of average age with some means, etc.) support a partial view of who the poor are and what constitutes poverty. This metonymic view features an attribute (the enterprising side) rather than the whole person (Clair, 2013; Novak & Harter, 2008). One might be an enterprising person, but when that is all that is portrayed, the portrayal lacks depth.

INDIVIDUAL CHANGE

Many organizations that provide services primarily to individuals and advocate for systems change secondarily or not at all share stories that focus on actions individuals are taking, rather than structural or systemic changes needed to prevent people from living in poverty.

Jindra and Jindra look at the community-support work of anti-poverty nonprofits to end poverty and homelessness, including an organization called Bridges Out of Poverty.⁵⁴ This work includes mentoring, coaching, and one-on-one classes designed to help people “move out of poverty.” Their programs are meant to empower clients to achieve stable and self-sufficient lives. The authors write, “One could say that nonprofits are trying to shift from services for the poor to services *with* them.” The underlying belief is that individuals—with help—can transform to become productive members of society. Jindra and Jindra write about Bridges Out of Poverty:

Success in U.S. institutions often demands a certain middle-class daily practice that can be learned, for example, by college students from the working class who made adjustments to be successful. The ‘Getting Ahead’ classes of Bridges Out of Poverty help people better navigate this middle-class world by focusing on the implicit rules of middle-class behavior that one needs to follow to thrive in the dominant culture.

At these organizations, the focus is not on how circumstances hinder you from getting anywhere, but on how one can make positive changes. This is meant to ensure that residents start thinking of themselves, not as victims who dwell on their situations, but as active agents with a sense of control over what happens, through their understanding of past hurts, problems, and maladaptive patterns.

“DESERVING” POOR PEOPLE

Organizations share stories about people they serve in a positive light to counter stigma. **Based on her ethnographic work,**⁵⁸ sociologist Dilara Yarbrough argues that these stories create a narrative of deservedness— that there are deserving and undeserving poor people.

For example, West Coast Youth shares stories that emphasize the deservingness of youth to fight the stigma that young people are unhoused because of their individual deficiencies or illnesses. The narratives do not incorporate how race and gender differences affect people’s experiences. West Coast Youth describes its clients as “fragile, vulnerable, in need of protection and care. In transition. Filled with potential, and capable.”

Yarbrough writes:

[These] narratives do not challenge the structural conditions that create racialized and gendered poverty. Instead, they posit that young people, by virtue of their age, deserve resources and training to assimilate into the U.S. labor and housing markets. For liberal assimilationists, the problem is not that capitalism invariably produces mass housing deprivation but that young people need support to navigate housing and labor markets (2021).

She writes that this narrative does not criticize “racial capitalism and heteropatriarchy as systems that create mass ‘housing deprivation.’”

POVERTY PORN IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND HUMANITARIAN SECTOR

Scholars studying the development and humanitarian sectors, particularly in the U.K., have coined the term *poverty porn* to describe harmful narratives that use sad images of poor people—primarily people of color—to encourage others to give to an organization.⁵⁹ Many times, poverty porn is the result of deficit-based frames rather than asset-based frames used by those in the sector.

Scholars are critical of this representation of poverty because it frames poor people as an undifferentiated “other” group of people in need who are far away.⁶⁰ In this light, charity is the only solution. People who provide donations are portrayed as saviors and heroes, and ultimately, the ones who are empowered in the narrative.

Social-psychology scholar Catherine Thomas and her co-authors **say** that this type of narrative reinforces harmful, stigmatizing views of poor people.⁶¹ They write:

Narratives accompanying aid often reinforce stigmatizing views of those in poverty as deficient in their circumstances or ability. We find that typical deficit-focused narratives risk undermining the very goals of aid—to empower recipients to pursue their goals and experience dignity rather than shame. In contrast, narratives crafted to counter stigma and leverage culturally resonant forms of agency enhance recipients’ beliefs in themselves and investment in their skills, without reducing donor support.

In their analysis of mission statements from 30 of the largest cash-transfer programs in Africa, the scholars found that 97 percent portray poverty as a deficiency. Poor people are portrayed as helpless, living in scarcity, and vulnerable. Of those mission statements, 60 percent include the resilience and potential of recipients.

BRIGHT SPOTS FROM THE LITERATURE

The literature we reviewed suggests that, as a sector, we have a lot of room to grow. However, we saw some bright spots we can learn from.

In Yarbrough’s fieldwork with West Coast Youth, she found that discussions and critiques of capitalism and homophobia were happening at the organization in physical spaces. Clients were able to share stories and ideas that were more radical than those espoused by the organization publicly.

Providing physical space for communities to come together is important for building and sharing critical narratives of wealth and poverty. Practitioners should design strategies that bring community members, activists, and practitioners together to talk about the role of systems and what needs to happen to transform them. These spaces can be powerful in shaping the theory of change for strategic initiatives.

For her dissertation,⁶² social-work scholar Rachel Wells conducted an ethnography with two community-based organizations in Los Angeles that provide services to poor people and do community organizing, Los Angeles Community Action Network (LA CAN) and Strength-Based Community Change (SBCC). Both organizations also **provide space for organizers and community members to plan actions and create new ways of understanding poverty together.** For example, Wells describes just one of the regular meetings held by LA CAN:

LA CAN had bi-monthly residential organizing committee (ROC) meetings on Friday evenings where community members learned about different events and actions, heard a speaker or presentation on a particular topic connected to LA CAN’s work, and enjoyed food and conversation. ROC meetings could include time to plan for upcoming events or actions... Community members also learned about various topics from challenging police brutality to upcoming ballot initiatives. In addition, community members led parts of the agenda so these meetings were a way for community members to be involved with organizing and planning. (Wells, 2021).

Staff and clients at both **organizations emphasize community in the stories and messages they share when organizing.** SBCC emphasizes community members leading change to counter stigma against low-income communities as deficient. LA CAN shares abolitionist messages and stories that emphasize systems and structural problems, and the responsibility of state institutions to address those problems.

These organizations emphasize **building the power of their clients by creating space for their stories, perspectives, experiences, and learning.** The organizations emphasize community leadership and frames that include systems of inequality at work—like racism, criminalization, and economic systems.

WHAT TO DO NEXT

As practitioners working directly with poor communities on issues affecting poor people, it is our mandate to tell better stories. We hope this report provides guidance on how to do that.

We have resources to support you as you incorporate these principles into your practice. **Use these worksheets** as you tell stories or work with communities to share their stories. Our approach to storytelling takes practice. You will be working against the habits of an entire sector.

Share this work with your colleagues and friends. If we can all tell stories from this shared understanding, together we can transform culture and systems to create a world in which everyone's needs are met—and where new stories are grounded in truth, liberation, and transformation.

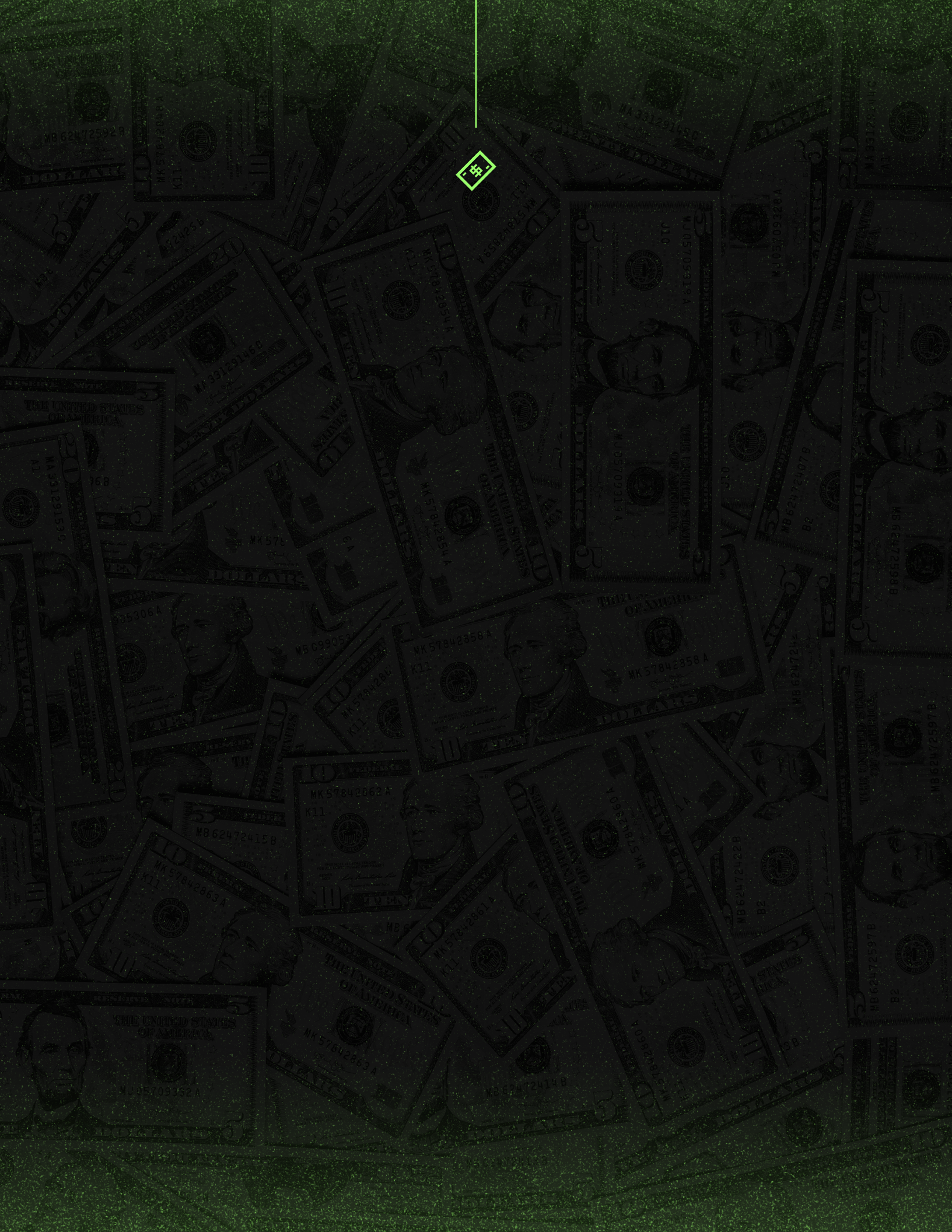
WE ENCOURAGE YOU TO USE THESE PRINCIPLES:

- 1 Tell compelling stories by applying the science of story-building.
- 2 Do a narrative power analysis.
- 3 Tell stories about individuals navigating systems and engaging in collective action to disrupt power.
- 4 Problematize the current narrative.
- 5 Use justice frames in storytelling.
- 6 Build the capacity of communities to share stories.
- 7 Use visual images to engage communities.
- 8 Be intentional with the language you use.
- 9 Amplify stories—ethically.

We are calling on our community of activists and communicators at nonprofits, charities, and foundations to tell more accurate and liberatory stories about poverty and wealth. To reject propaganda that promotes assimilation into the middle class by way of meritocracy. To reject saviorship and embrace collectivism and collaboration. And to place blame and accountability where they belong—on the state, bad-faith policymakers, and corporations.

Historian and scholar Robin D. G. Kelly reminds us that “there are no utopias”; we should not strive for perfection but for progress in our fight to transform our beliefs, narratives, and economic systems. What is born must die or transform. So, brick by brick and arm in arm, we can use storytelling, narrative power, and organizing to design an economic framework that advantages the many instead of the few.





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