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Development:
Micronarratives as a Tool for
the Localisation of SDGs**

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are universal and applicable to all countries. They both set a global agenda and are included in national strategies and programmes. However, the actual achievement of the SDGs takes place at the local level. Therefore, it is necessary to adapt the global agenda to local conditions, as well as to create local monitoring and evaluation tools. To solve these problems, we propose the use of micronarratives on the basis of a very general question – "How are you doing?" First, it allows one to cover all aspects of the SDGs and focus on the specific interrelated issues that are faced by people. Second, such breadth allows it to be used for various groups, thus identifying specific problems. Finally, since the proposed tool will also be applied in several countries, the opportunity arises to exchange experiences and translate the results from analysis into specific experiments for finding solutions.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), localisation, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, participatory methods, micro-narratives, leave no one behind (LNOB)

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which were adopted by every country in the world at the UN General Assembly in 2015 – set ambitious global goals for sustainable development. An essential principle of the SDGs is “leaving no one behind,¹” which not only focuses on the progress achieved “on average,” but also on the opportunity to enable the progress of all, including the least privileged. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, these goals are universal and applicable to all countries, and both set a global agenda and are included in national strategies and programmes.

However, the actual achievement of the SDGs occurs at the local level. Three important issues should be noted here. First, in the case of the SDGs, we are dealing with *complex* and *complicated* (and often *chaotic*) domains.² This means that we cannot use (or only to a limited extent) approaches for simple systems aimed at identifying best practices. For a *complicated* domain that is characterised by *known unknowns*, the relationship between cause and effect is not entirely clear, and there may be a number of correct answers.³ That is, this is the domain of good practices, which requires a “sense–analyse–respond” approach. In the case of a *complex* domain, we are faced with *unknown unknowns* and new practices that are emerging as a result of the movement, thus forming a series of new variants of correct answers.⁴ In this case, a “try–sense–respond” approach is required.⁵ Micronarratives represent an excellent tool for the “sense” stage in both cases, as they allow researchers to capture the *known knowns* and the *unknown unknowns* and are not limited to the predefined study framework (as in the case of the *simple* domain). Secondly, an integral part of the SDGs is the “leaving no one behind” approach. While average achievements can be impressive, individual groups of people can be left out of this progress due to various circumstances. Moreover, experience shows that this lag is caused by related and intersecting deprivations (UNDP, 2011). The situation is complicated by the fact that many groups are heterogeneous,⁶ which requires additional consideration of the inequalities faced by people. Conventional statistical tools require extensive efforts to obtain all possible disaggregations and their combinations (Peelah, 2015).

Finally, the achievement of the SDGs is only possible with the participation of all parties involved. This is a task not only for the government, but also for the parliament, local government bodies and civil society. Involving all parties requires an understanding of their experience, opportunities and interests. The preferences and opinions of people play an essential role here. For example, researchers from the OECD (Balestra, Boarini and Tosetto, 2018) used the OECD Better Life Index⁷ to estimate preferences for a set of 11 indicators of well-

¹ The principle is noted in several places in the Declaration, especially in p.4 and p.48:

4. *As we embark on this great collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind. Recognizing that the dignity of the human person is fundamental, we wish to see the Goals and targets met for all nations and peoples and for all segments of society. And we will endeavour to reach the furthest behind first.*

48. [...] *Quality, accessible, timely and reliable disaggregated data will be needed to help with the measurement of progress and to ensure that no one is left behind. Such data is key to decision making. [...]*

² The Cynefin conceptual framework (Snowden and Boone, 2007) proposed the classification of decision making contexts into four domains – “obvious” (until 2014, it was called “simple”), “complicated”, “complex”, “chaotic” – to help managers determine how they perceive situations and behaviours, both their own and other people’s. The conceptual scheme is based on studies of the theory of systems, complexity theory, network theory and learning theory.

³ For example, in the case of preschool education, there is a range of functioning models – government institutions, private kindergartens and public and neighbourhood organisations – that can be viewed as good practices. There is no best practice, and the choice of a particular model depends strongly on the context.

⁴ For example, the proliferation of new social interaction practices based on mobile technologies. In many countries, there are groups of parents and teachers that exchange information about homework and school activities. Specific forms of interaction and technology can only be selected through trial and error, as they are influenced by many factors.

⁵ In the case of a “chaotic” domain, the relationship between cause and effect is unclear, and the study of patterns is impossible. Events in this area are too confusing to wait for a knowledge-based response. The first and only way to find an adequate response is action, that is, an “act–sense–respond” approach is required.

⁶ One can look at it from the other side. Our identities are multiple, they are combined, and, in addition, some of them are quite fluid. Thus, the group “single parents” becomes more heterogeneous when considering gender, place of residence, ethnicity, the presence of chronic diseases, etc.

⁷ The OECD Better Life Index is an interactive composite index that aggregates the average indicator of a country’s welfare assessment based on eleven topics reflecting material living conditions (housing, income, jobs) and quality of life

being. The results showed that health, education and life satisfaction are the most relevant aspects to Index users in OECD countries. In this case, certain differences were identified. Men give more value to income than women, while women value community and the balance between work and life more than men. Health and safety, housing and civic participation become more important with age, and life satisfaction, the balance of life, jobs, income, and community are particularly important for young people.

Obtaining such information for making decisions and implementing SDG actions at the local level presents obstacles in both quantitative and qualitative research. Qualitative methods can provide in-depth analyses but present problems of representativeness or at least a reliable estimate of the frequency of such stories. In addition, it's the researcher – not the people – who carries out the interpretation of data, which can introduce subjective elements that strongly influence the results. On the other hand, quantitative studies are often not able to give the desired disaggregation and reach the groups of people that are of interest. In them, representativeness prevails over rationality, and the questions and hypotheses formulated by researchers may not correspond to the real experiences of people or include incomprehensible definitions.

Micro-narratives are a convenient tool that combines the advantages of both qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative part collects people's stories relating to the research question. Researchers use various questions or visual aids, such as drawings and photographs, as a start for such a story.⁸ These stories should not be very long and should relate to the problems directly addressed, while being sufficiently general for productive analysis. The second part of the study – a quantitative one – gives the narrator the chance to answer a few questions about his or her story. This is important in two aspects. First, the classification of histories is not made by the researcher, through the prism of any theories and preliminary hypotheses, but directly by the narrators themselves. Secondly, the use of quantitative indicators (derived from multiple-choice questions, dyads or triads⁹) allows the clustering of stories in some meanings that are important from the point of view of the researcher and/or of actions. This makes it possible to understand how typical such stories are,¹⁰ which contributes to further analysis. An important point is organising the collection of stories (especially in the case of sensitive questions). These stories should be collected by those who are trusted by the storytellers. Embedding such stories into feedback systems seems to be the most productive, since they can be further used for monitoring and not just for researching problems. For example, parliamentarians (if they have the adequate technical support for analysis) can use micro-narratives in their work with voters, allowing them to offer more systemic solutions without disregarding problems of specific groups of people. Finally, we can present the collected stories of the storytellers, highlight a cluster of success or problem stories and pose the

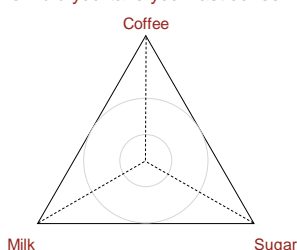
(community, education, environment, management, health, life satisfaction, safety and work, life balance). OECD allows users to determine weights that reflect the importance of each area. The study analyses the weights presented by 130,000 users since 2011.

⁸ For example, for the study of women's entrepreneurship in Tajikistan in 2016, the UN Aid for Trade programme used the following question:

Imagine that you happen to meet your [woman] friend or acquaintance who is thinking about doing business or entrepreneurship. What specific situation from your personal experience, or from the experience of any of your friends, will you share with her in order to support her idea or warn her about possible obstacles?

⁹ Dyads are questions providing scale for answering, i.e. from "best" to "worst." Triads are questions providing triangular scale with three options. For instance:

How did you take your last coffee?



¹⁰ The micronarrative method does not try to obtain representative data, however an assessment of the prevalence of stories allows us to understand whether we are dealing with a single case or a systemic problem. In addition, the identification of positive deviations, atypically successful stories, allows you to search for *unknown knowns*.

question “How can we make such stories happen more often?” This question can be directed at successful stories and *positive deviations*, thus triggering the development of local decisions on the basis of existing “good” or “new practices.”

In the Europe and Central Asia regions, there are already successful examples of using micro-narratives to develop and safely test solutions based on an analysis of specific problems. In Moldova, this method was used to understand youth unemployment. Several solutions were developed based on the analysis of the collected stories and their clustering. The analysis revealed that one of the key problems in the labour market for young people is the discrepancy between the skills obtained and the requirements of the labour market, making it difficult to get a job after graduation. One solution currently being tested in Moldova is providing internships for young people in specific industrial clusters, which supplements knowledge with practical skills. Another solution found is a youth-centred skills observatory to assess the skills mismatch and inform policy makers.

In Belarus, the micro-narrative approach was used to study the distribution of energy-efficient products and solutions. In particular, we analysed stories to reveal how people make decisions about the use of energy-efficient products and choices. The analysis revealed that centralised information programmes have virtually no effect on behaviour. At the same time, we found that the neighbours had a clear influence on consumption behaviour.¹¹ This made it possible to form several solutions, including those using behavioural economics, which are currently being tested. One of these solutions is to include information on average consumption among neighbours based on electricity bills. This pushes people to explore and actively use existing energy-efficient solutions. Our experience shows that a key aspect of the practical application of research is transforming the findings obtained from the analysis into a series of experiments that allow you to test possible solutions.

The proposed micro-narrative tool for SDGs has a vast scope and asks the very general question “*How are you doing?*”. Such a broad question may have several advantages. First, it allows researchers to cover all aspects of the SDGs and focus on the specific interrelated issues faced by people. Secondly, this breadth allows it to be used with various groups, thus identifying specific problems. Finally, since the proposed tool will also be applied in a number of other countries,¹² the opportunity arises to exchange experiences on translating the results from the analysis into specific experiments for finding solutions. The tool may include the items described in detail below.

The initial question for acquiring a story should be fairly general, covering all aspects of people's lives. The first option is “Think about the recent changes that have occurred in your life or in the life of your settlement. It may be changes for the better, for the worse, or just a matter of new ways of doing ordinary things. What exactly are you thinking now? What happened then?”

¹¹ Similar results were obtained in Kazakhstan, although the technique of micro-narratives was used in limited form.

¹² Currently the instrument is in the testing phase in Moldova and Tajikistan.

S1. From the story you have told, what different kinds of impact do you think will occur arising from the events you described? Please move the kinds of impact you think are relevant from the left and place them on the canvas on the right.

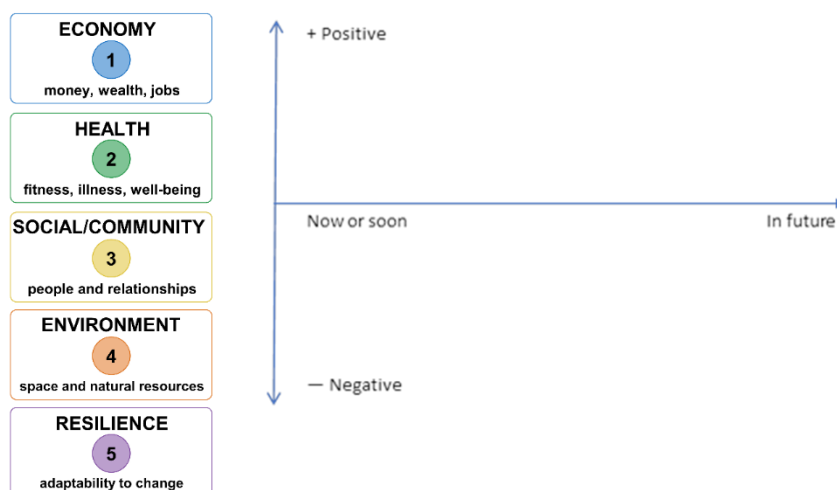


Figure 1. Map for the location of the expected exposure to the stories.

Additional questions may concern attitudes towards people, decision-making processes and the dynamics of a situation. For example, a triad with the question “In my story, people are treated ...”, possible options as an answer are “Like equals,” “Just as they deserves” and “Every man for himself.” Another example is the triad with the question “Local leaders in my history had ...” and possible options as a response include “The authoritative approach – confidently called for change,” “The analytical approach – supported their decisions with arguments” and “Consultative approach – asked the opinion of people.” Finally, dyads according to welfare areas can be used for a general assessment of the situation, for example, as in Figure 2.

The standard areas of well-being (no more than two or three options can be used) include factors such as living conditions, employment and work, money and income, community, education, environment, participation, health, life satisfaction, local and central administration and security. To assess the type of emotional load we used the question “How do you feel about the story?”– “sad,” “happy” and other gradations. Alternatively, the question “Why are you telling this story?” can be used with the options to “criticise,” “inform,” “encourage” and “inspire.” To assess the consequences of these stories, you can suggest the narrator to place various aspects of this story on a two-dimensional map, with the coordinates Impact (positive/negative) and Period (short-term/long-term consequences).

NOW JUST SOME SIMPLE QUESTIONS AROUND HOW YOU FEEL ABOUT THE FOLLOWING ASPECTS OF LIFE IN YOUR COMMUNITY. AS ALWAYS, IF IN DOUBT, GO WITH A GUT FEEL...

5. Thinking about my satisfaction with quality of my own life, I am rather happy or unhappy in the areas of (duad):...



Figure 2. Assessment of satisfaction with the various aspects of the quality of one's life.

Reaching the different population groups can be done in two ways. Firstly, the socio-demographic profile included in the questionnaire provides the necessary information for primary disaggregation. Secondly, researchers can conduct an additional analysis of a targeted collection of stories from groups of interest (for example, "single parents" or "women entrepreneurs") by flagging such stories in a database.

The micronarrative approach has been already tested in Chişinău, the Republic of Moldova, between September and November 2018.¹³ Overall, more than 1,000 stories were collected. Preliminary sense-making was performed with practitioners, urban developers, representatives of civil society and the private sector. It revealed several interesting findings (the charts are provided in Annex 1).

First, most of the stories were related to two or more aspects of city life (see T1 in Annex 1). Most respondents marked their stories as related to the entire city, rather than to certain neighbourhoods (Chart 8a in Annex 1). This suggested the need for integrated approaches to solve city problems, combining economic, social and environmental elements.

Second, there is massive unrealised potential for action in cities. The two main reasons narrators told the stories were the desire to influence (active) and desire to complain (passive). At the same time, people saw that most stories are about things being governed in outdated or incorrect ways. Stories told by people were very much self-centred, as they were trying to find solutions to their problems, counting on themselves much more than on communities, families or the government. This is very interesting and has potential implications on the way programmatic interventions are implemented. We are often focused on collaborative or cooperative interventions that look at communities and not individuals. At the same time, there is little done to build new communities and revitalise existing ones in which egoistic and self-centred approaches are predominant.¹⁴

Third, most people were concerned with negative long-term impacts, virtually in all dimensions. Overall people were mostly unhappy in many various dimensions of life. But some stories that revealed the opposite –

¹³ Organised by the Municipality of Chişinău, @Business Innovation Lab, @Green City Lab.

¹⁴ This could be partially explained by widespread mistrust based on negative experience of the past decades. The Public Opinion Barometer (IPP, 2018) showed that public trust in the majority of institutions is very low, while mayoralty (primărie), with a 47 per cent rate, is the third-most trusted institution in the country after the church and the army. However, in Chişinău trust in the primărie is much lower, at 24 per cent.

a more optimistic and constructive perspective. We want to better understand and make sense of such positive narratives and ways we can make the best use of such experiences for sustainable urban development.

Overall, micronarratives proved to be a very useful tool for shaping the dialogue about sustainable development in Chişinău. During the next stage, we will use this approach to understand how to use “How is life in Chisinau?” for evaluating the achievement of SDGs at the local level, but also use it as measurement mechanisms for urban interventions and experimental work.

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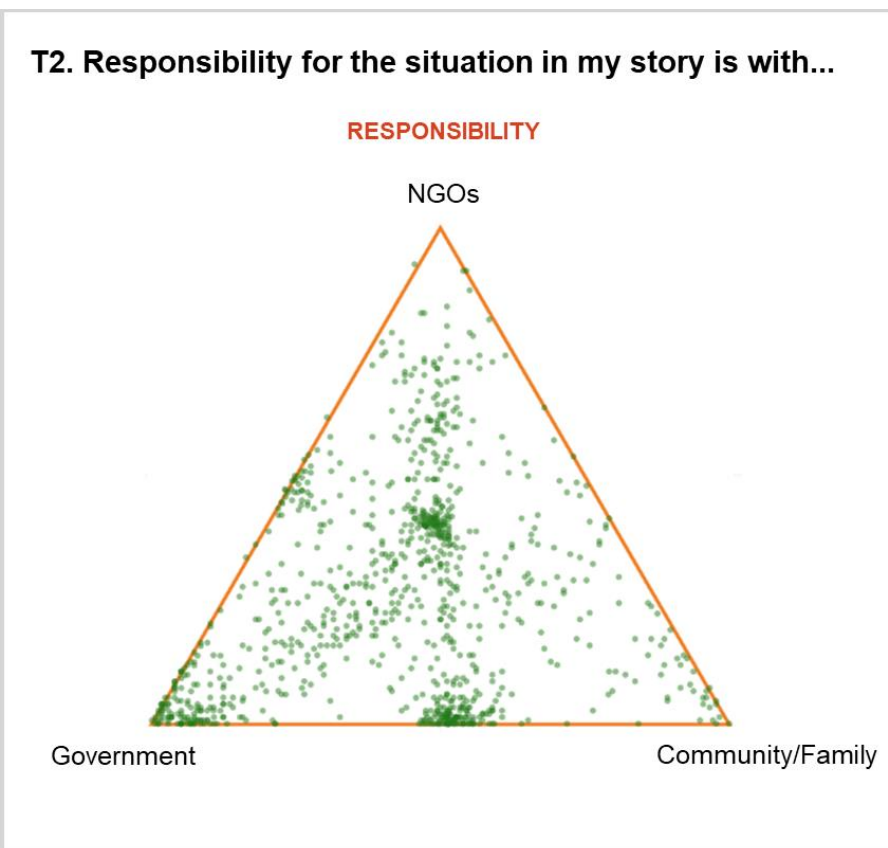
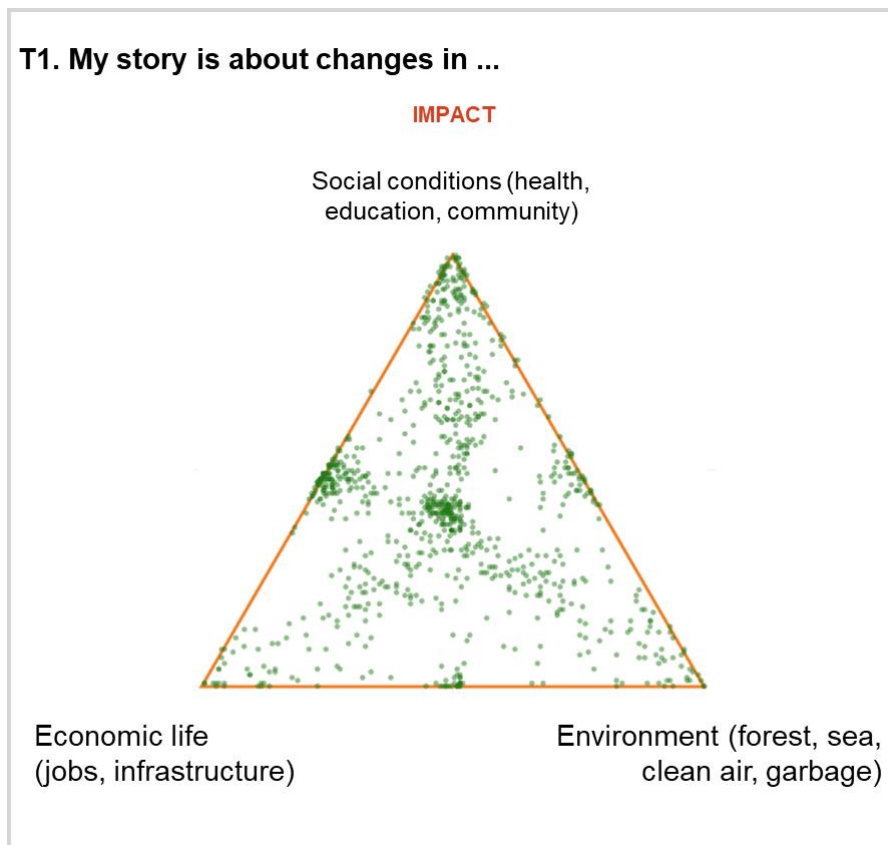
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Annex 1. Preliminary results of “How is life in Chişinău?”

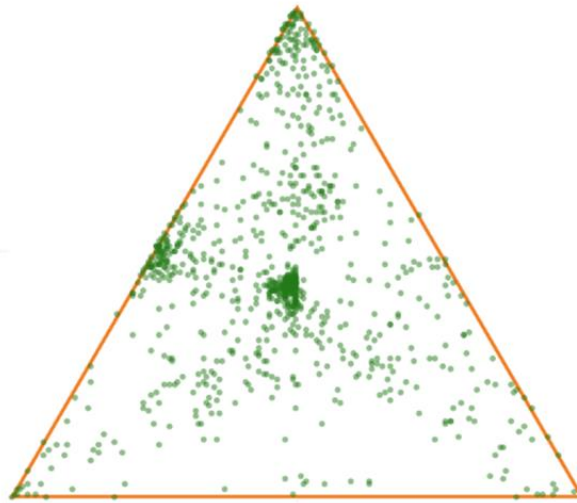
Each point represent one story.



T3. In this story, people are influenced by ...

TIME

Preoccupations and present conditions
(present)



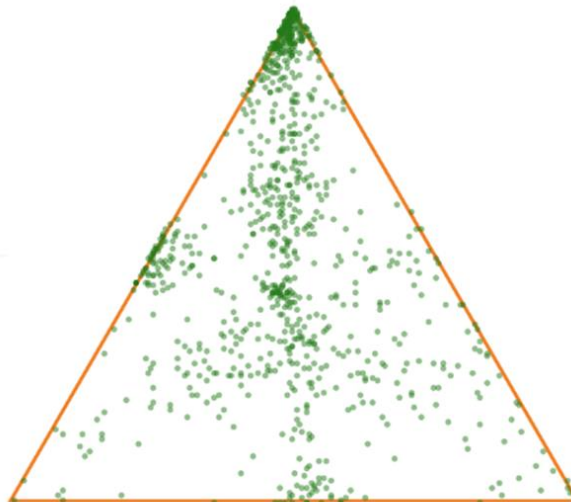
Usual routines and
traditional mentality (past)

Their vision of the
future (future)

**T4. The people in this story were particularly
concerned about ...**

IDENTITY

themselves



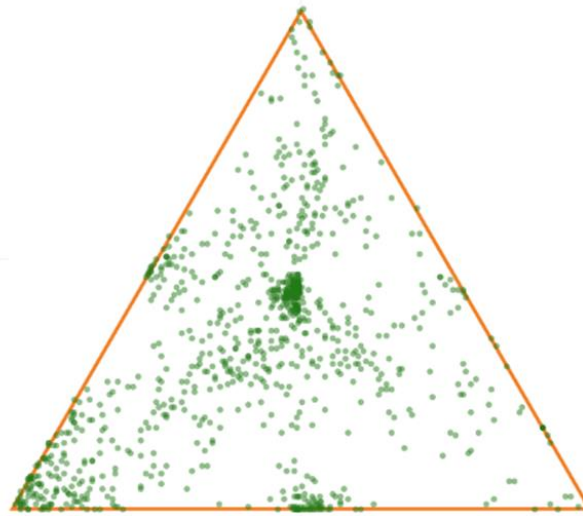
family / community

society

T5. My participation in the decision-making process was determined by ...

DECISIONS

Decision makers (primărie)



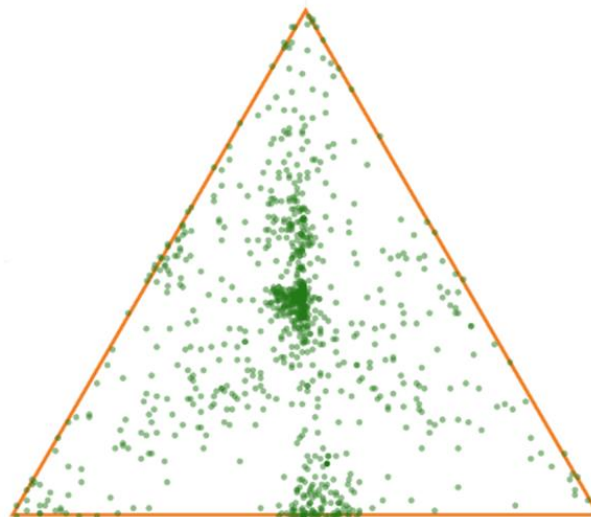
Own decision

Community / family

T6. My contribution to problem solving was in the form of ...

CONTRIBUTION

Money



Time/efforts

Knowlege / connections

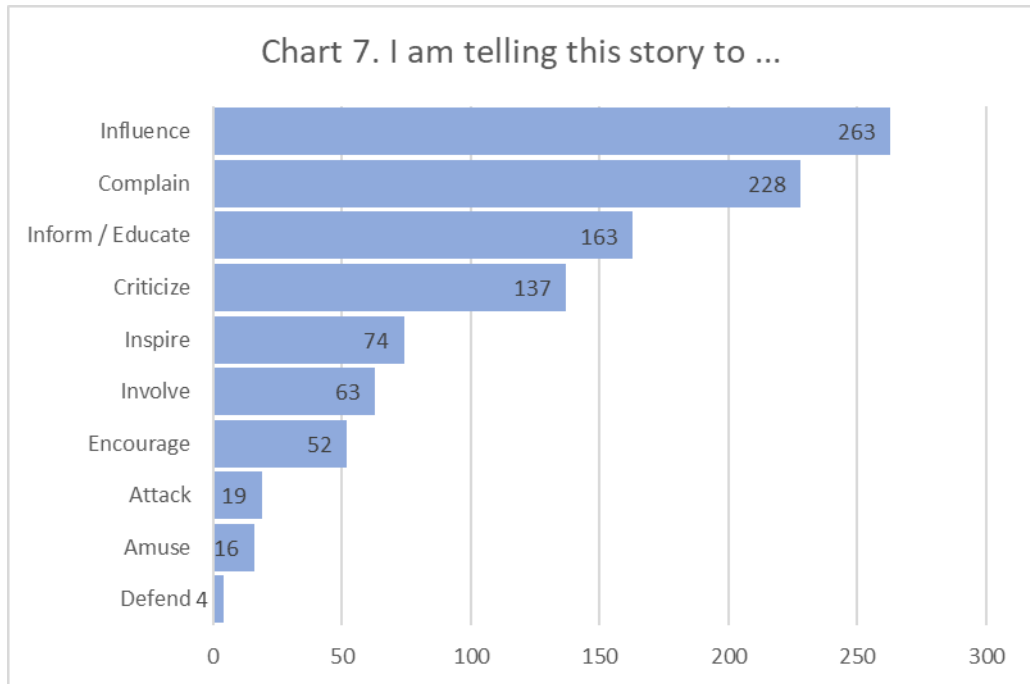


Chart 8a. The problems encountered are more related to ...

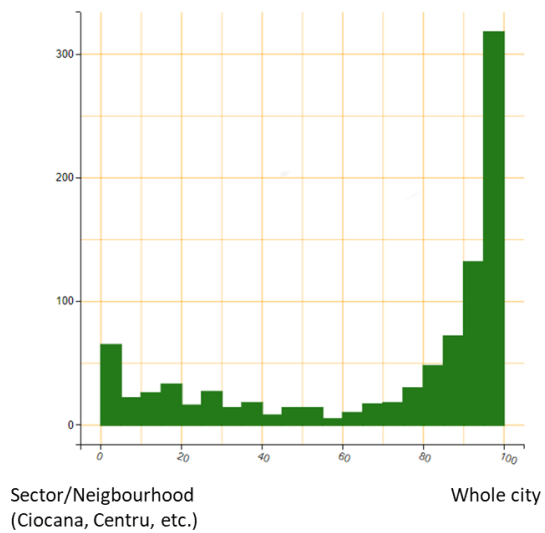


Chart 8b. The situation in my story is ...

