

# Ember's Take on Creative Storytelling



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# Introduction

Across the world, community-based mental health initiatives (CBMHIs) carry a depth of knowledge that global mental health systems rarely acknowledge. Their understanding of care is shaped by lived experience, community trust, and years, sometimes decades, of responding to complex realities. Many are the only accessible sources of mental health support in their regions.

**CBMHIs are doing some of the most transformative work in providing care to their communities, and hold rich, lived expertise from their day-to-day practice. They do not lack stories – they lack the infrastructure, resources, time and spaces to share them.**

**The sector continues to underfund storytelling in community mental health, underestimate it, and undervalue its long-term catalytic power.**



In global mental health, storytelling is often treated as a luxury that sits outside the “real work” of care. Outputs, metrics, and models are often prioritised by various stakeholders, but they rarely invest in one of the most strategic assets a community-based organisation can possess: its ability to articulate its own story.

# Challenges of CBMHI storytelling

In Ember's five years of supporting **100 CBMHIs** across *Africa, Asia, Latin America* and *MENA*, we consistently observe the following challenges CBMHIs face when it comes to storytelling:



✦ **Programmatic care always comes first:** The work of caring for communities supersedes everything else. Storytelling naturally falls to the bottom of the priority list because survival, safety, and service delivery come first.

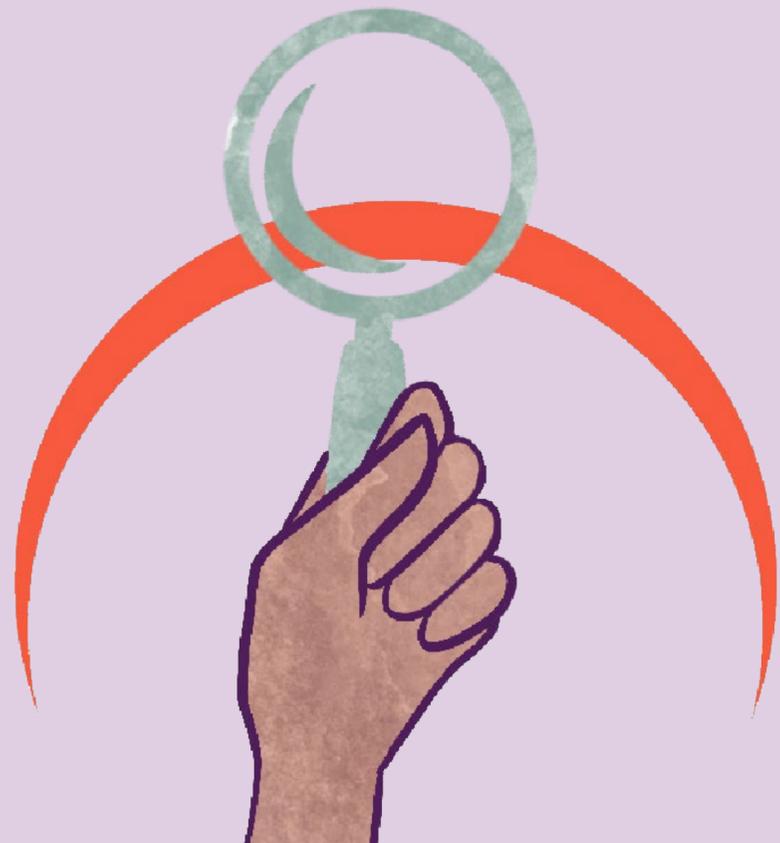
✦ **Trusted by communities, questioned by stakeholders:** Their work is validated daily by the people they serve – not through logframes, but through safety, belonging, recovery, and dignity. Yet when it comes to funders, policymakers- the same CBMHIs are asked to produce polished proposals, articulate theories of change, maintain websites and social media.

All while juggling counselling sessions, crisis response, administrative work, supervision, community visits, and endless operational responsibilities.

✦ **Storytelling perceived as luxury by overstretched teams:** CBMHI teams are small, overstretched, and performing a stunning array of roles – counsellor, administrator, fundraiser, manager.

**Over 20% of CBMHIs who applied to the Ember 2024 Call-Out reported struggling with heavy workloads and overstretched team members.** In such contexts, creative work is seen as indulgent. The sector reinforces this by rarely funding storytelling explicitly.

✦ **Lack of language and digital skills support:** The sector assumes English writing skills, academic training & rigour, digital literacy, resources to access internet – vital tools required for storytelling work. However, this may not necessarily be a given for many CBMHI teams.



✦ **Operating on shoestring budgets limits investment in storytelling:** Most CBMHIs function with fragmented funding. **Interviews with CBMHIs during Ember 2024 Call-Out revealed that 34.2% have no annual income and over 25% cannot pay staff due to lack of funding.** Even simple creative expenses (editing tools, photography, printing) are unaffordable. No matter how powerful their work is, they lack the resources to articulate it.

✦ **The pressure to make complex work look neat:** CBMHIs are often dealing with multiple issues at once: working with people from diverse backgrounds, responding to shifting community needs, and running several programmes in parallel, and it can be a struggle to fit the “neat” story many grants require.

**As a result, organisations are forced to constantly repackage their work to meet external expectations, rather than honouring the multidimensional and complex nature of what they do. When programmes evolve in response to communities, the model can appear “messy” or hard for funders to understand.**

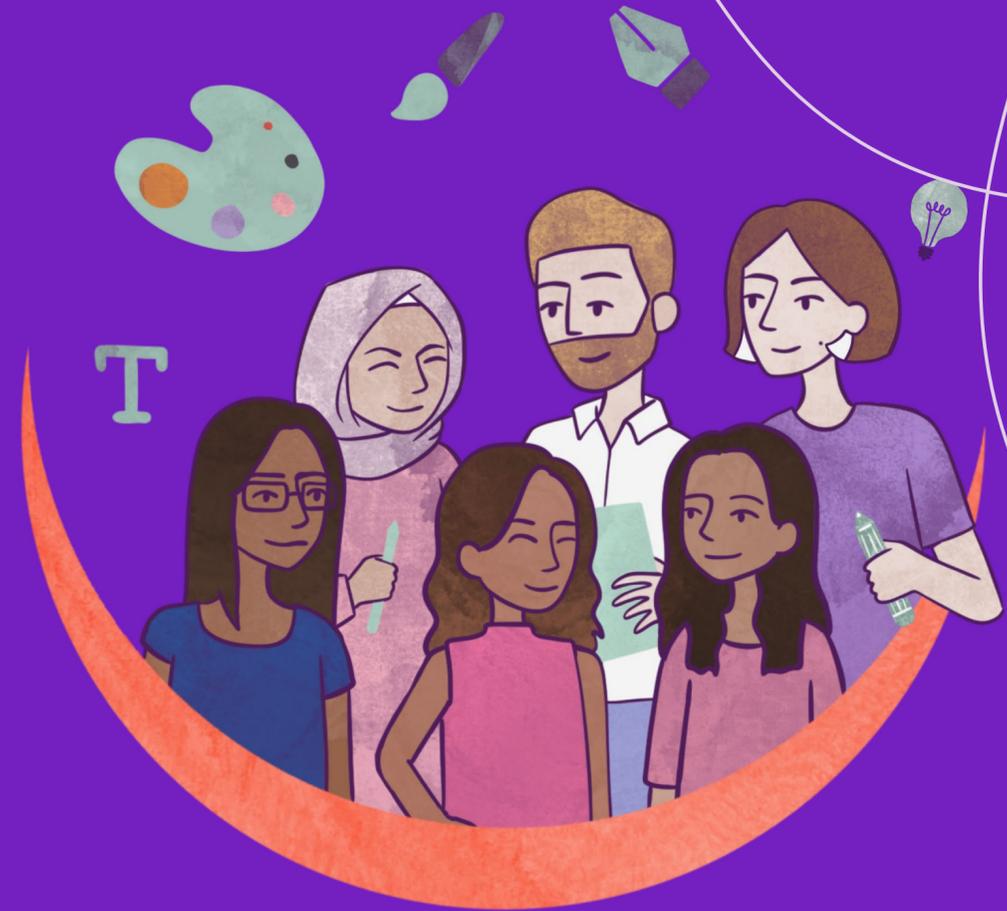
# Ember's Creative Team

CBMHs already know who they are, what they do, and why it matters. The stories are there; what has been missing is an environment where the space, skills, and tools for sharing their stories can flourish in ways that makes sense to them.

CBMHs are not empty vessels waiting to be “taught” storytelling. They are knowledge-rich organisations functioning under constraints.



Behind-the-scenes of our creative team across four countries making a stop-motion film



Ember's Creative Team brings together a global, multidisciplinary group of practitioners who care deeply about stories, communities, and the power of thoughtful design and storytelling.

With backgrounds spanning art, branding, illustration, UX, storytelling, mental health, strategy, and community-centered communications, **Jara, Josh, Ranwa, Rini, Sanskriti** and **Tanya** bring together decades of local and global experience to this work. At their core, they are an endlessly curious team, always eager to learn, experiment, and take on new challenges.

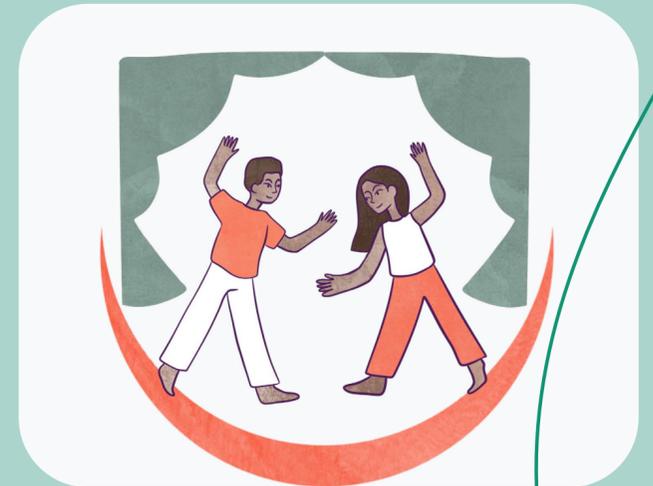
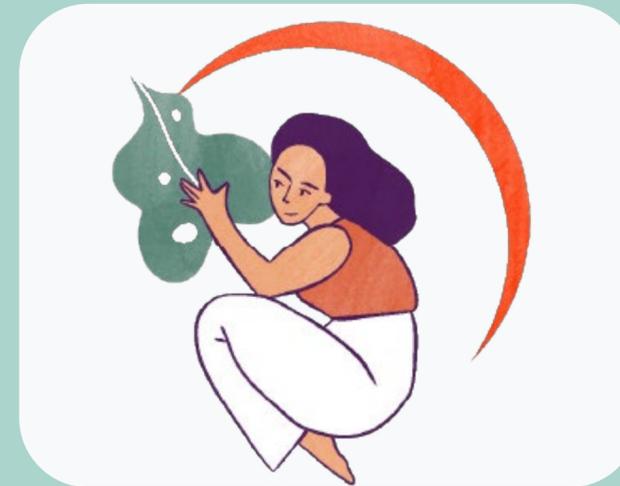
Together, they implement Ember's creative guiding principles that honour the insight CBMHs already hold, helping teams feel seen, supported, and equipped to share their stories on their own terms.

# Ember's Creative Storytelling Values

A Capacity-Strengthening Approach

## ✦ CBMHI first, always

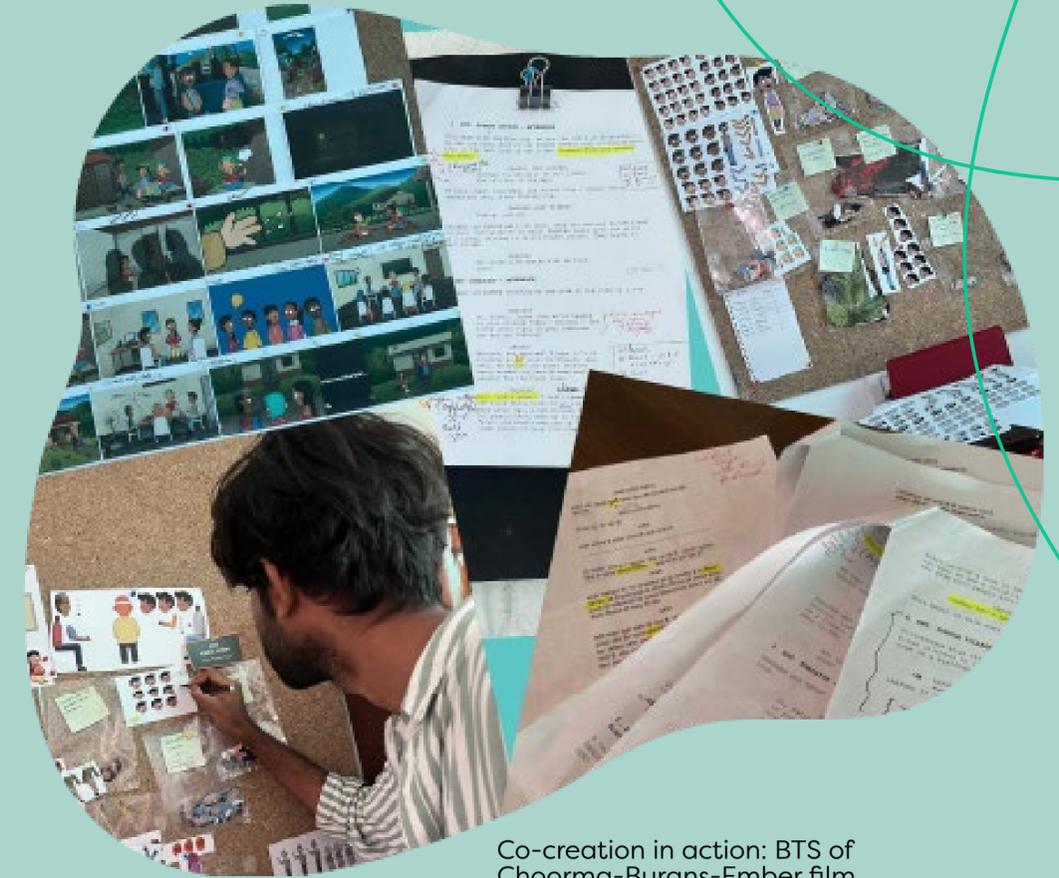
Stories begin and end with the people doing the work. Ember's role is to listen, ask questions, hold space, facilitate reflection- whether it is through workshops online, or in-person visits, and find ways to creatively express what the CBMHIs stand for.



Every innovator has its own 'Ember style' illustration created on the basis of hours of listening about their work.

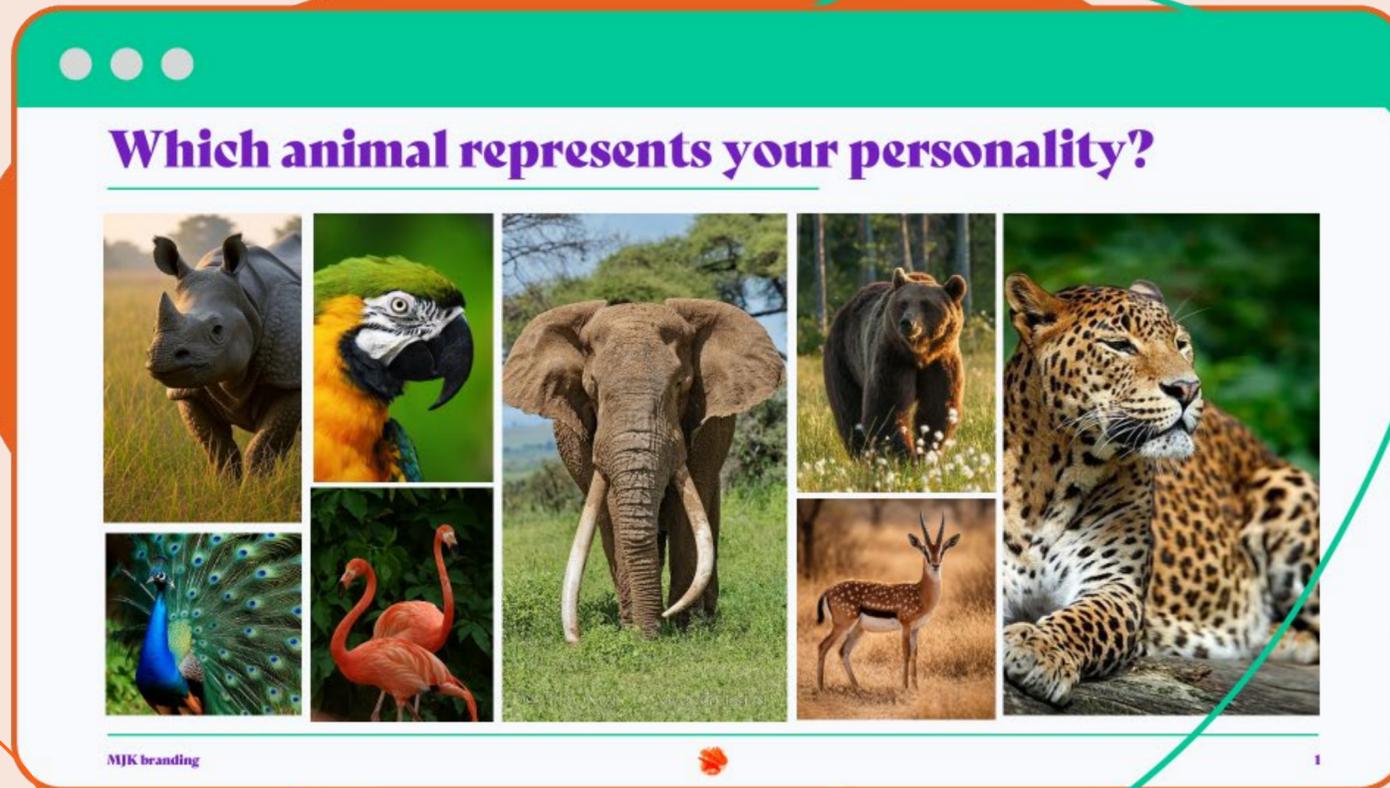
## Creative work is done with innovators, not for them

Through collaborative brainstorming, co-owned decisions, encouraged "no's," and full transparency in every creative choice.



Co-creation in action: BTS of Choorma-Burans-Ember film



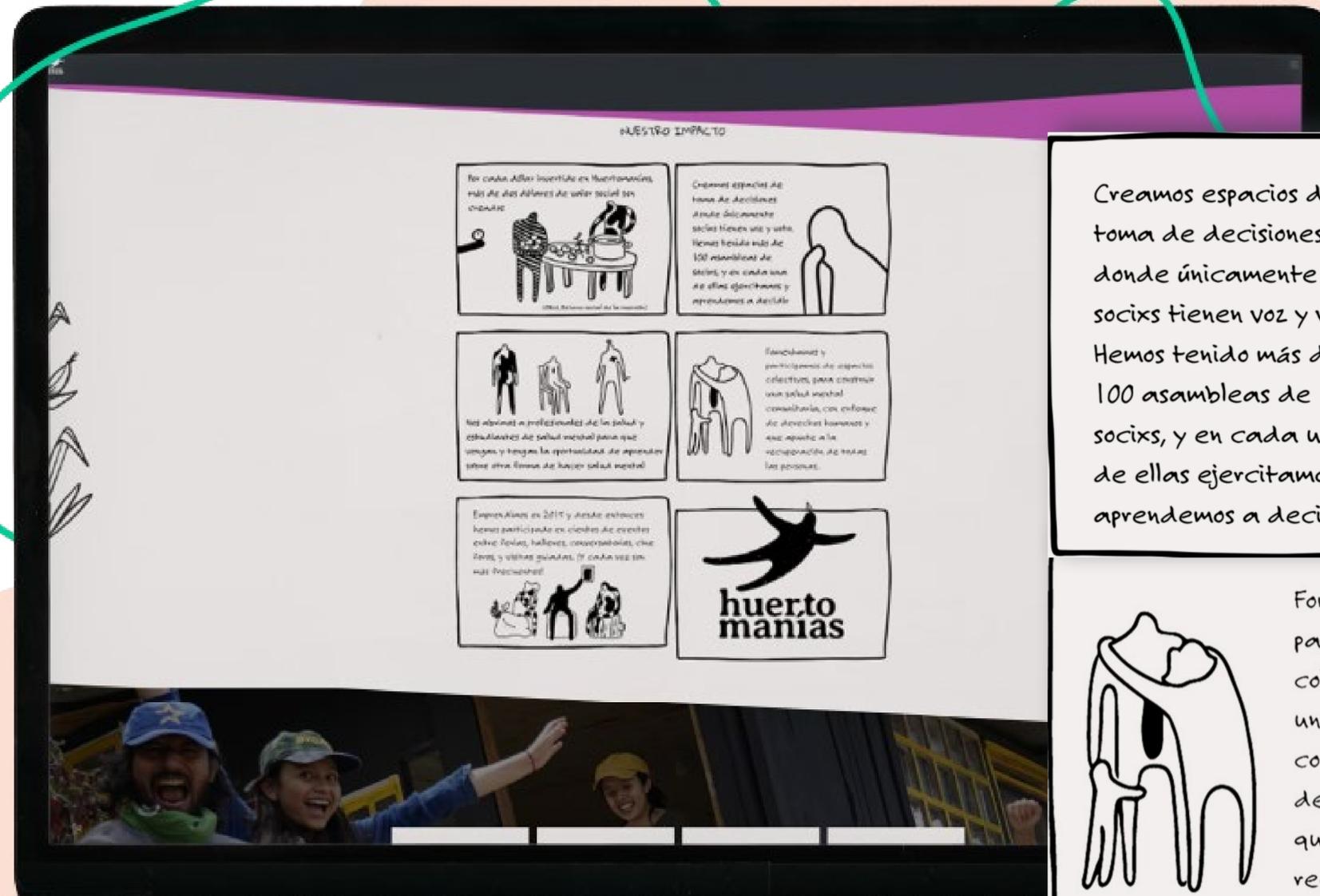


★ **Creating safe, reflective spaces**  
Creative thinking is usually impossible under the pressure which CBMHIs face. Ember builds space to step back, imagine and redefine stories.

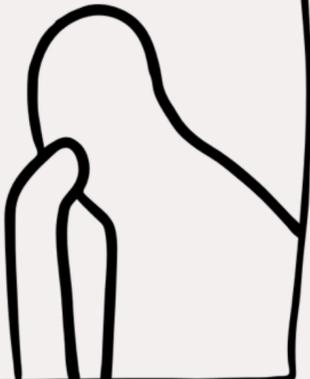
Snippets from our creative storytelling sessions with partner Ember innovators

✦ **Focus on local languages, local contexts, local creatives**

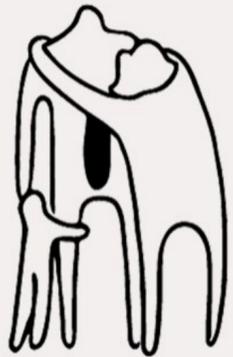
Using community-rooted words, creatives, and culturally natural formats first, with English and external translation following only as a second step.



Creamos espacios de toma de decisiones donde únicamente socixs tienen voz y voto. Hemos tenido más de 100 asambleas de socixs, y en cada una de ellas ejercitamos y aprendemos a decidir



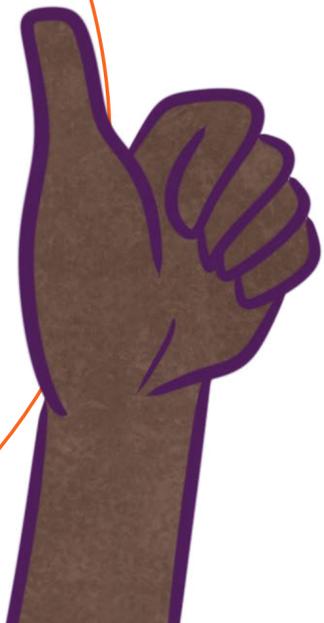
Fomentamos y participamos de espacios colectivos, para construir una salud mental comunitaria, con enfoque de derechos humanos y que apunte a la recuperación de todas las personas.



Ember and partner innovator Huertomanias' team co-produced their website in Spanish, ensuring that their sense of humour, which is key to their values, is captured throughout.

✦ **Safeguarding is not a checkbox**

It involves continuous informed consent to ensure that stories are shared safely, with due consent, and with dignity.



**Our role is to shine a light on what is already there, and find ways to creatively express it.**

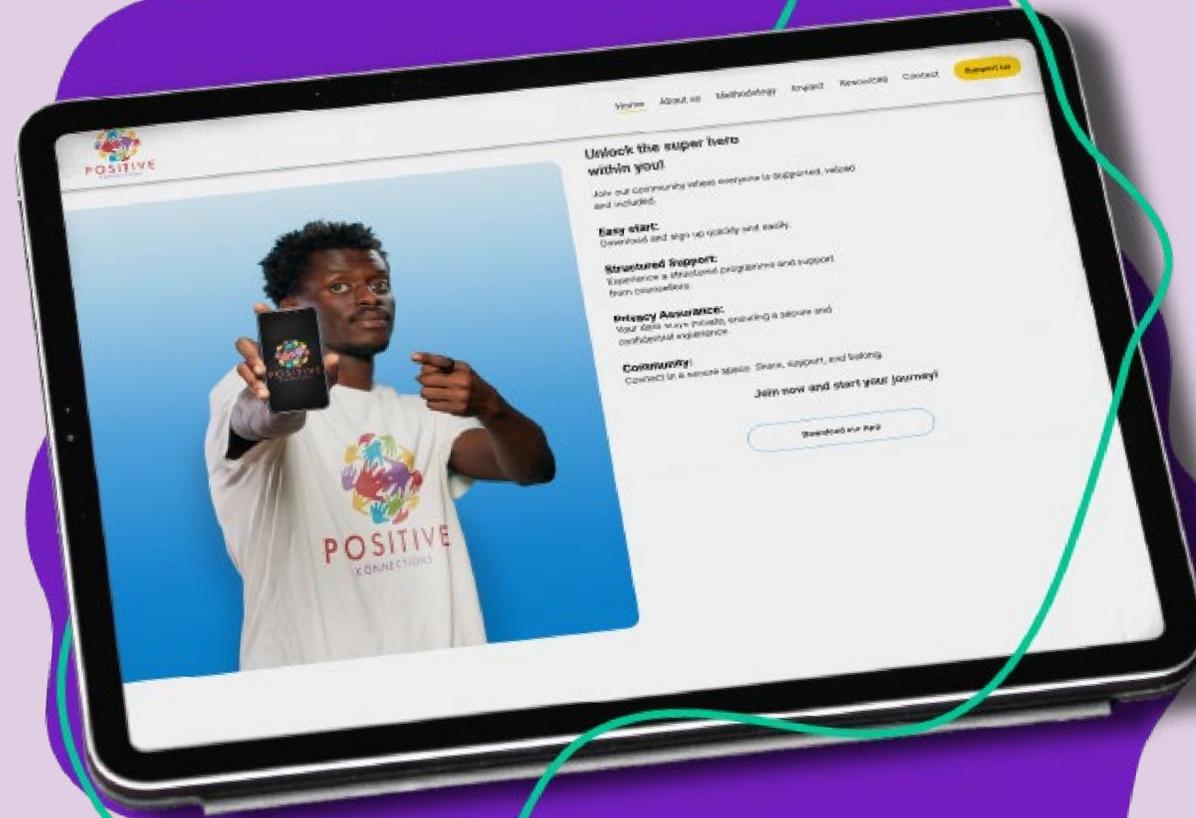
✦ **Spotlighting existing storytelling and creativity**

Most organisations are already storytelling – they simply haven't recognised it as such.

Ember helps uncover informal documentation, moments of creativity already embedded in their work. Our role is to shine a light on what is already there, and find ways to creatively express it.

## ✦ Build capacity, not just outputs

A photo essay, a pitch deck, a film are all important visible visual assets. What happens during the process is *confidence, clarity, articulation skills, the ability to communicate with stakeholders*, and most importantly, *a shift in how team members see themselves*.

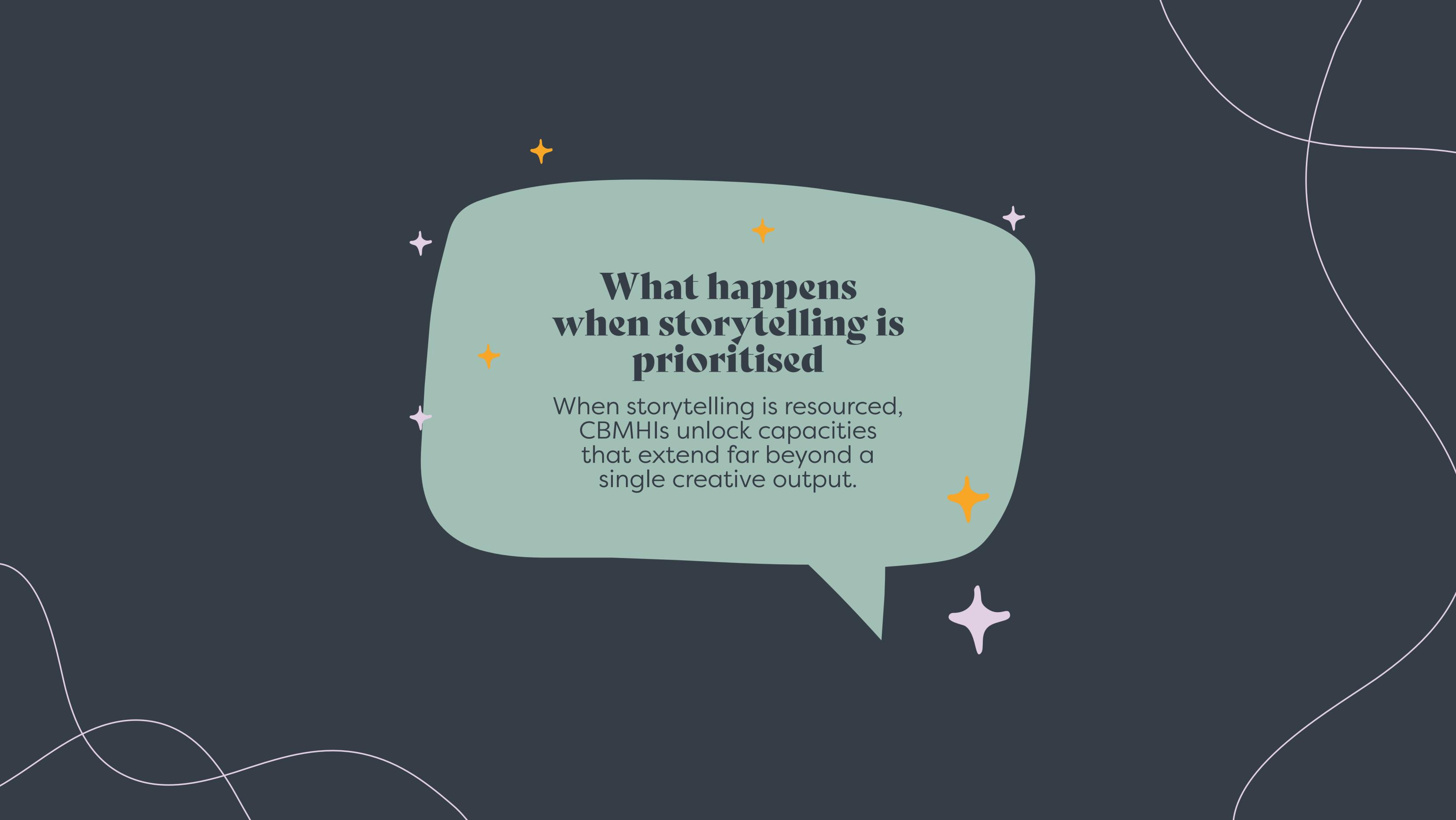


Ember's mentorship helped designer of partner innovator Positive Connections navigate the complexities of web development, building the skills needed to create a website that truly reflects their mission.

**We see storytelling as something that is interlinked with an organisation's wider goals.**

## ✦ Storytelling isn't a standalone piece of work, it has to be linked with CBMHI's strategic goals

We see storytelling as something that is interlinked with an organisation's wider goals. Storytelling offers many possibilities- it can clarify impact, support team wellbeing by offering reflective space, and directly contribute to fundraising- demonstrating its value far beyond a single output.



## **What happens when storytelling is prioritised**

When storytelling is resourced,  
CBMHs unlock capacities  
that extend far beyond a  
single creative output.

### ✦ **Visibility and Recognition for Community-Led Work**

Storytelling brings much-needed visibility to the work CBMHs are doing, often quietly and at the margins, both locally and globally.

### ✦ **Sharing their stories can be empowering for those who run these CBMHs, some of them for decades**

We've seen through the 900+ interviews conducted during Ember Call-Out 2024 that storytelling can be empowering for those who run CBMHs.

Having the space to speak openly about their work and experiences matters. At its core, storytelling is about being heard—and we all need that space.



### ✦ **Stronger Organisational Identity**

It gives teams space to breathe and rethink: What do we stand for? What do we want to be known for? What part of our story has been invisible? This clarity sits alongside stronger visual tools that help them articulate their work.

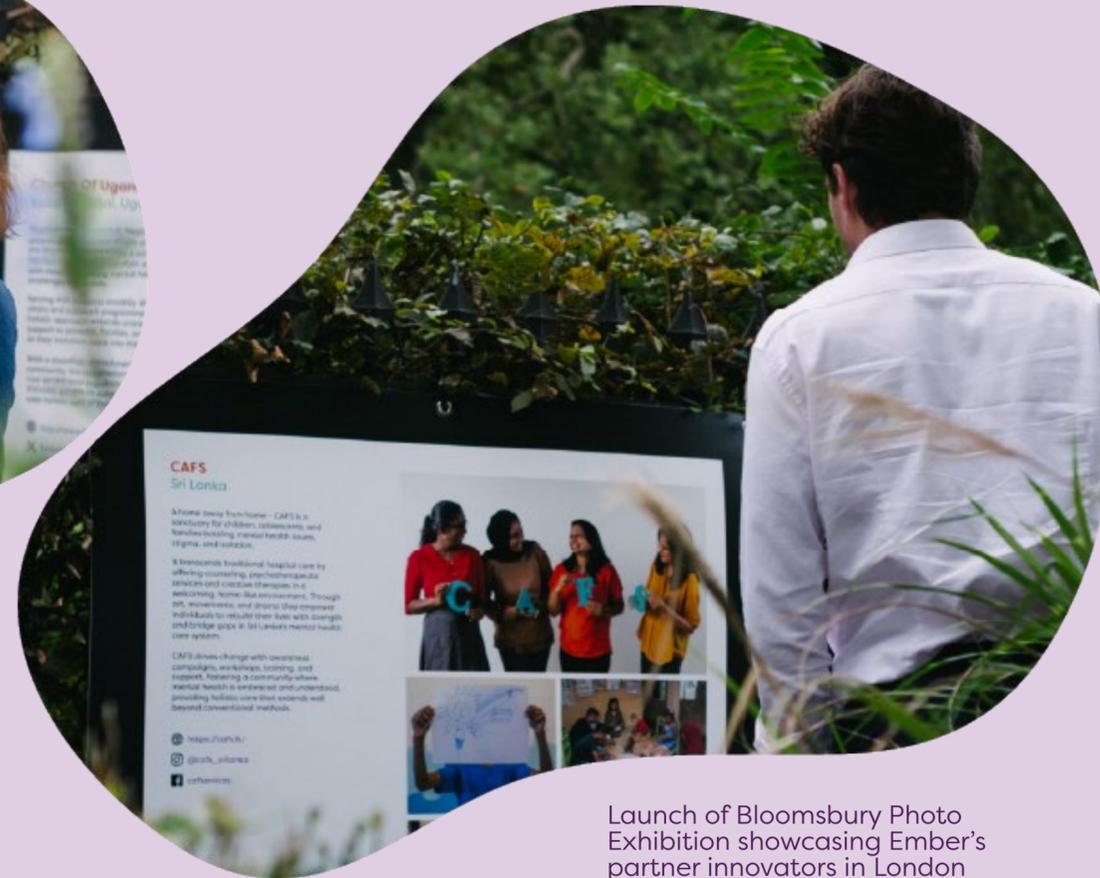


Logo of Aves Mental Health



Logo of Ahumuza Centre, Church of Uganda Kisiizi Hospital

**Storytelling is about being heard—and we all need that space.**



Launch of Bloomsbury Photo Exhibition showcasing Ember's partner innovators in London



✦ **Visibility That Compounds Over Time**  
A photo essay, a pitch deck, or a brand identity doesn't transform an organisation overnight, and we are honest about that.

**But these assets create a slow-burn ripple effect: more funders understand their work, more partners reach out, more communities feel proud and represented, and more doors open.**

[Explore the photo exhibition](#)



Innovator Burans team member Sharon Stanly presenting their work at University of Edinburgh through an animated film made in collaboration with an India-based creative studio, facilitated by Ember as part of the partnership.

[Click to watch the animation film](#)

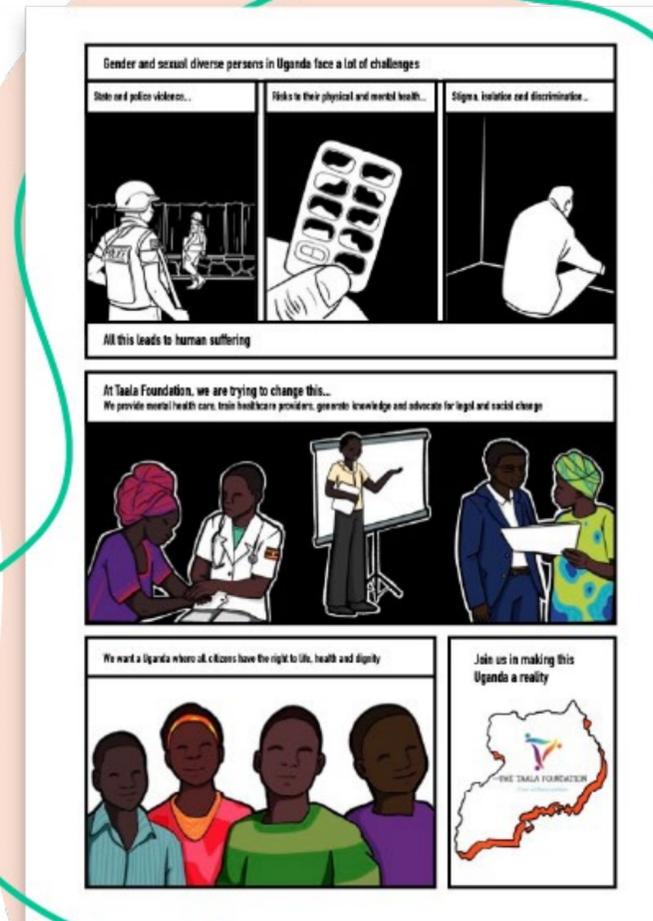
### Greater Confidence and Clarity

Teams articulate who they are, not who they think funders want them to be – unlocking their own unique stories and strengthening their narrative confidence.

They recognise the value of the work they have been doing for years, seeing it reflected back to them with dignity and accuracy.

### Storytelling x Impact

Effective storytelling strengthens how impact is communicated by making evidence more accessible, relatable, and persuasive to partners, funders, and communities.



A comic strip format to showcase the work of Ember innovator Taala Foundation in an accessible format.

## ✦ Using creative work to unlock funding avenues

A collection of visual assets give Ember a compelling way to convince funders to invest in CBMHs, with photos and films clearly illustrating the depth of their impact.



Watch the full film

### ✦ Connections with Local Creatives

Partnerships with local creatives help CBMHs broaden their reach and share mental health awareness more widely beyond their communities.

These collaborations have often left a deep imprint on the creatives themselves, deepening their understanding of mental health, and restoring hope as they work with CBMHs from their own regions.

Working with Al-Malath Charitable Society for Youth with Intellectual Disabilities was a deeply meaningful experience for me.

On the first day I arrived, the children didn't quite know how to react to me. I had a large camera and tripod, and it was clear they saw something new, fascinating, maybe even a little scary. Some were curious, some shy, and some just ignored it. **But there was this one boy that kept watching the camera, fascinated. Sometimes he would stand behind me, completely absorbed by the process of filming. By the last day, he was standing right next to me, watching what I was capturing through the lens, I felt as if the camera opened a little window for him into another world.**

*- Anna-Maria Hawa, Director of the film on Al-Malath, one of the CBMHs featured in 'What Makes You Proud' film*



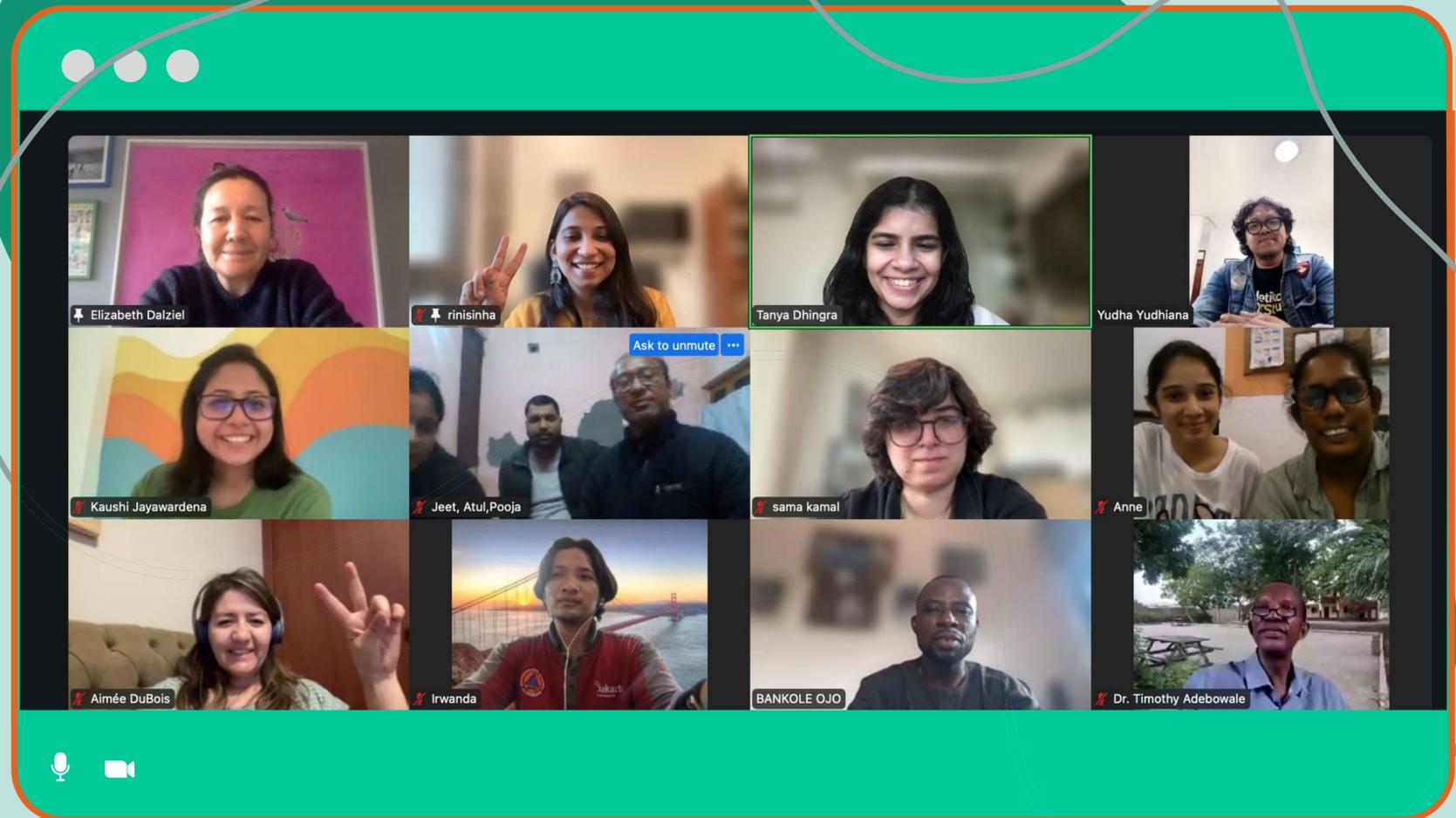
# Ember's Commitment to Storytelling

At Ember, we build environments where teams can reflect, imagine, breathe, and tell the stories that have always lived within them.

The work may start with a story. But what stays is confidence, clarity, because the organisation finally has the tools to do it on its own terms.

**When stories go unseen, innovations go unsupported. Storytelling is not an add-on. It is a strategic asset.**

**If we want better evidence, better outcomes, better innovation, we must invest in the very tools that makes them possible.**



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