

Youth**Action**Net®

CASE STUDY SERIES

EPIX:

*Nurturing Empathy Through
Storytelling*

A partnership between:



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

School of Foreign Service
Global Human Development Program



Introduction

This is one of a series of case studies produced by students enrolled in the Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University through its partnership with the International Youth Foundation. Students enrolled in a course exploring the role of social enterprises and social entrepreneurs were paired with young leaders of social ventures identified through the IYF's YouthActionNet® program. The students were given the assignment of analyzing the venture's assets, successful methodologies, and opportunities for investment to increase impact. Through this experiential learning process, the student consultants gained hands-on experience and exposure to the needs of social enterprises. The ventures, too, benefited from student insights into their strengths, areas for growth, and recommendations for enhancing their impact and sustainability. The Georgetown practicum is part of YouthActionNet's larger efforts to partner with institutions of higher learning around the globe to integrate social change into the academic experience and career interests of students.

International Youth Foundation

The International Youth Foundation (IYF) invests in the extraordinary potential of young people. Founded in 1990, IYF builds and maintains a worldwide community of businesses, governments, and civil society organizations committed to empowering youth to be healthy, productive, and engaged citizens. IYF programs are catalysts of change that help young people obtain a quality education, gain employability skills, make healthy choices, and improve their communities.

www.iyfnfnet.org

YouthActionNet®

Since 2001, YouthActionNet, a program of the International Youth Foundation, has provided founders of social ventures, ages 18 to 29, with the training, networking, coaching, funding, and advocacy opportunities they need to strengthen and scale their impact. These young social entrepreneurs have pioneered innovative solutions to critical local and global challenges, resulting in increased civic engagement, improved health, education reform, economic opportunity, environmental protection, and more inclusive societies. Our work is carried out through a network of 23 national and regional youth leadership institutes that collectively support over 1,350 young social entrepreneurs globally.

www.youthactionnet.org

Global Human Development Program at Georgetown University

The Global Human Development Program of Georgetown University is home to one of the world's premier master's degree programs in international development. An innovative, academically rigorous skills-based graduate program, the Master of Global Human Development degree prepares the next generation of development professionals to work with public sector agencies, private businesses, and non-profit organizations that advance development. Through coursework, extracurricular activity, and practical fieldwork experiences, our graduates develop the insights, skills, and experiences necessary to become leaders in development and make a difference in our global community.

<https://ghd.georgetown.edu>

INTRODUCTION

Meet Ignacio Rodriguez, Founder of EPIX

Ignacio Rodriguez is an entrepreneur, photographer, engineer, and consultant with a history of community engagement. Rodriguez founded the online discussion platform Fremu to enhance connection and coordination between community-based organizations and networks of youth leaders in the Philippines, Nepal, and India. He also spent three years in France as an education and technology consultant, working on projects in Latin America, the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Africa. He has been invited as a speaker and facilitator at high-level conferences including as an opening speaker at the Education World Forum in 2011. He won the New Media Consortium's Emerging Leaders Award in 2012 and has made a series of media appearances in the past two years discussing how Venezuela's current challenges contribute to frayed societal bonds.



Rodriguez uncovered his passion for storytelling in India while on assignment with Fremu in India, as he worked to capture images that would help represent local cultures. Eager to apply his knack for storytelling in Venezuela, Rodriguez returned home. His venture, EPIX, aims to generate empathy as a tool for social justice.

EPIX melds social ties among Venezuelans

The Problem

Detached from culture and identity, Venezuelans have become remarkably disconnected from each other, and fail to acknowledge the hard work and strife among their fellow citizens. The EPIX team notes that Venezuelans have become disengaged and overly reserved. A spate of personal encounters and testimonials gives insight into the estrangement and fragmentation that now characterizes a once-united and communicative society.¹ EPIX acknowledges the social and economic collapse, political turmoil, and spike in violent crime across Venezuela as contributing factors to the emotional and cultural detachments they observe. Moreover, a battery of criminal activity and widespread violence has led experts to rank several Venezuelan cities as among the world's most dangerous. A National Quality of Life Survey conducted by the Universidad Católica Andrés Bello indicates an estimated 87 percent of people in Venezuela are living in poverty.² The EPIX team's firsthand accounts dealing with hyperinflation and food and medicine shortages corroborate reports of the humanitarian crisis in the media.³ Regular demonstrations have been occurring for years, frequently blocking major highways and thoroughfares.⁴ These demonstrations are increasingly concentrated in small towns as protesters express their concerns over food scarcity, the availability of health services, and access to electricity.

¹https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=180&v=6HzmnTV322U

²<https://www.ucab.edu.ve/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2018/02/ENCOVI-2017-presentación-para-difundir.pdf>

³<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/venezuelans-suffer-deadly-scarcity-food-medicine>

⁴<https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/venezuela-crisis/venezuela-protests-roads-blocked-anti-maduro-demonstrations-persist-n759516>

Rodriguez and his team have observed how Venezuelans have become increasingly isolated in the face of these persistent challenges. The EPIX team believes that connecting individuals through their personal stories can promote widespread empathy—a powerful tool as so many people persevere through these hard times.

Along with EPIX, a variety of artists, journalists, and storytellers have taken to sharing the experiences of ordinary Venezuelans in the hopes of engendering empathy. Creative self-expression projects are popular among artists, not to mention journalists who share individuals' stories. *Piedra Angular* is one such media project that Carla Angola of Venezuela TV Miami hosts to showcase individuals breaking barriers that seek to limit civil liberties. Donaldo Barros' *Historias de Un Vecino* (Stories from a Neighbor), recently featured on CNN, draws on a broad spectrum of sweet, difficult, friendly, and sad stories. One online newspaper, *Prodavinci*, highlights topics that are substantiated with hard data, third person narration, and testimonials alongside photographers. EPIX is unique in its approach, as it is an anthropological project that captures how individual experiences, the ongoing crisis, and other meaningful moments are changing Venezuelan culture. While formed in response to the crisis, the stories EPIX curates are not solely defined by the social, economic, and political circumstances of the day. Rather, they are shaped by the individual's lived realities, and encompass a correspondingly wide range of experiences. The stories aim to address the hopes and possibilities of communities and what will remain after the crisis ends.

“EPIX focuses on maintaining and creating a strong connection amongst Venezuelans. It is a long-term project that does not directly respond to Venezuela’s current political, economic, and political crisis. It doesn’t intend to. It does however tackle the spirit, hopes, and possibilities in our community by bringing people together in a moment and place where everything else is falling apart. Our aim is that these connections help create a trigger a [domino] effect for action.”

Ignacio Rodriguez, Founder of EPIX

The Solution

In an effort to promote empathy among its people, EPIX uses storytelling to address the disconnection and isolation felt by Venezuelans. Why stories? Rodriguez explains: “[In Venezuela,] the struggles are real and the challenges massive, but choosing how we tell the stories of our reality can have a significant impact on fighting for social justice [and increasing empathy].”

The EPIX team uncovers, produces, and tells personal stories of Venezuelans. The stories, which are published in collections online and in print, highlight shared experiences, emotions, and values from people of diverse backgrounds. Rodriguez explains that while EPIX stories sometimes respond to the effects of Venezuela’s crises, the story production does not depend on the continuation of those crises. Sharing stories can nurture communities with hope and foster new connections.



EPIX photographer and writer capturing a story

The EPIX storytelling process is elaborate and methodical. It is divided into three phases: pre-production, production, and post-production. *Pre-production* begins with a database of roughly 600 interviewee candidates, complete with background information about each candidate’s story and demographics. The EPIX team selects and calls the interviewee, then dispatches a writer-photographer team to meet the interviewee and to “bear witness” and record their story.

Production involves active listening—a tenet of the EPIX storytelling process. During the 30-minute interview, the writer will first ask “meeting point questions,” which are open-ended questions designed to begin conversation and spur the interviewee into sharing his or her personal reflections. For example, the writer may ask, “What is a smell from your childhood?” or, “If you could see yourself through a peephole in a closed room, what would you see?” As the writer and interviewee connect and build trust, the writer will ask further questions to elicit the interviewee’s personal story. During the conversation, the photographer takes both candid photos and a portrait photo of the interviewee.

“A really good friend just shared one of his most recent EPIX stories on his Facebook wall, and I realized this as I stalked him. I should say that I froze when I saw it. The work that they’re doing is excellent, and it’s a project that I fervently desire to collaborate. It’s the magic that envelopes Caracas and each one of the people that inhabits it give it life and color, which allows me to have a small piece of happiness even at the height of the crisis.”

Testimony from an EPIX Reader

Back at the EPIX office, *post-production* starts with transcribing and reviewing the recorded interview. Building and telling the story is left to the discretion of the writer. The interviewee and the EPIX editorial team then review and edit the completed story, after which they publish the story and photos on the EPIX website and in print form.

To date, EPIX has produced over 200 stories, recruited and trained 40 artists, attracted more than 150 volunteers, and has worked with 100 collaborators and 42 partner organizations to produce its stories. In addition, the organization has established an online and offline community of readers and supporters—EPIX has over 900 subscribers to its mailing list and 7,000 followers on social media sites, and has received extensive media coverage by local press, radio, television stations, and celebrities. EPIX has also received several awards for its work.

THIS IS HOW WE UNCOVER STORIES



OPERATIONAL MODEL

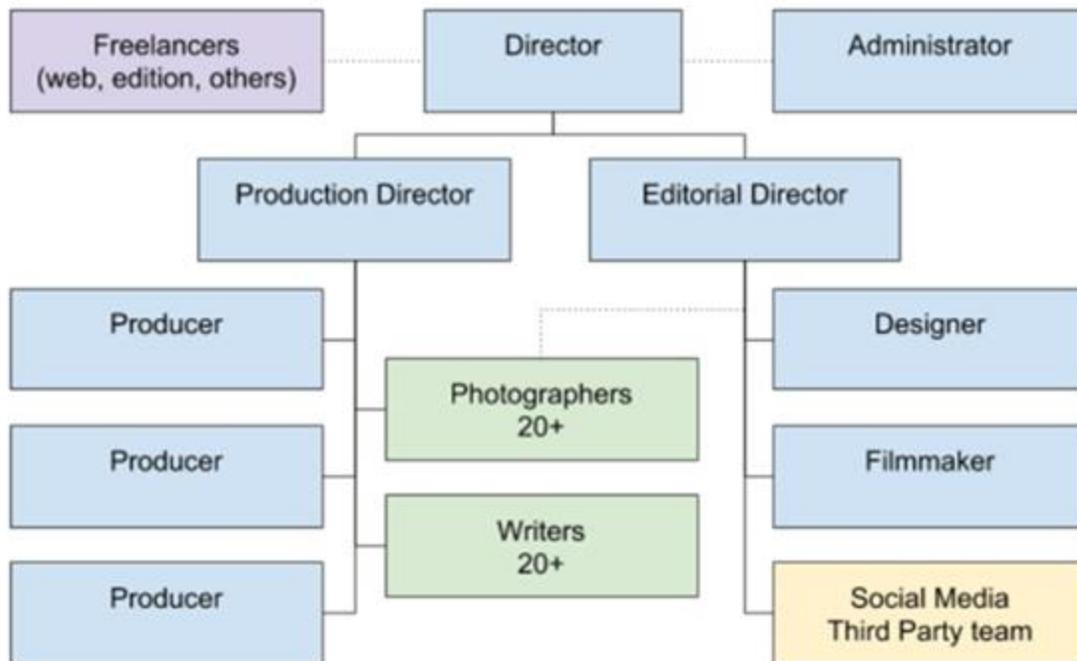
EPIX is a small organization founded and led by its Director, Ignacio Rodriguez. The social enterprise is registered as both an NGO and for-profit business in Venezuela. EPIX has two legal entities: a corporation and a civil association (the foundation). The corporation is responsible for most of the company's core business, including consulting services for other organizations. The newly launched foundation handles its forthcoming photography and writing workshops for teenagers living in poorer communities within Caracas.

Structure

EPIX started as a small team in 2016 and has since grown to include nine permanent staff and a team of 20 photographers and 20 writers. The majority of EPIX photographers and writers are freelancers. The venture is headquartered in Caracas, Venezuela.

The EPIX management structure is organized into two levels. The top level includes the Director, the Production Director and the Editorial Director, supported by the Administrator, and several freelancers. The second level consists of the production staff which includes producers, a designer, a filmmaker, a large team of photographers and writers, and a social media team. The organization relies largely on its young, emerging photographers and writers.

EPIX relies primarily on selling its services of storytelling to other organizations. In the past, the venture has also generated revenue from a crowdfunding campaign and from grants. EPIX is planning to provide storytelling workshops to clients as another source of revenue.



Accountability & Governance

EPIX has an advisory board of 10 board members who play a pivotal role in the growth of the venture, both through networking and influence. Although the board has no formal or scheduled monthly meetings, board members advise on topics ranging from business and social impact to filmmaking and production. Members of the advisory board include:

- **Carlos Ayesta**- Photographer, Biologist, Photography Teacher, Science Faculty-UCV; Advises on photography and the photography workshops
- **Claudia Valladares**- Founder and Director of Impact Hub Caracas; Advises on business and social impact
- **Diana Vilera**- Anthropologist, Founder of Casa Editorial La Cueva; Advises on editorial process and prints
- **Marianna Schiavino**- Marketing; Advises on marketing and communications
- **Marianna Gomez**-Journalist; Advises on communication as well but more on the speech side of things
- **Nelson Garrido**- Photographer, Founder of the Nelson Garrido Organization; Advises on culture, values and Venezuela from a photographer’s perspective

- **Willy Mickey**- Writer, Editor and Social Agitator; Advises on culture, values and Venezuela from a writer’s perspective
- **Roberto Gutierrez**- Audiovisual Director’, El Living Producciones; Advises on filmmaking and production business
- **Salomon Raydan**- Philosopher, Social Entrepreneur, Founder of Bankomunales; Advises on social entrepreneurship
- **Vanessa Boulton**- Designer and Illustrator; Advises on prints and designs.

Systems and Processes

EPIX has a defined process for story production, which involve pre-production, production, and post-production, as well as prescribed roles and responsibilities for writers and photographers. Weekly planning meetings help to establish an agenda and goals for each week. Sales process development is still underway, and some structured finance procedures are in place. Strategic decisions are made with the directors’ team. EPIX’ performance management processes are focused on story production.

Ways of Working

EPIX prioritizes professional growth and development for its staff and team, despite budgetary constraints. According to Rodriguez, all staff, photographers, and writers are trained and paid, and salaries hover at around 30USD per month. To foreigners, that figure may seem unusually low, but it is about ten times higher than the minimum salary in Venezuela. EPIX is currently unable to pay higher salaries to its employees, but it compensates by focusing on providing professional development opportunities. It also offers bonuses when new clients are on-boarded,



“One of our strongest cultural habits is sharing, a lot. It is also a weakness for individual work.”-Ignacio Rodriguez

and team members are sometimes paid overtime when EPIX is hired for storytelling projects. Workshops and in-depth training are required for storytelling teams. The culture at EPIX can be best described as welcoming and informal while personal, professional, and emotional development is prioritized. Rodriguez describes the EPIX work space as a single, open, shared office space where team members work and even eat together. Active listening, a passion for art’s communicative power, and a relentless commitment to the EPIX mission by staff members are a few of the cultural norms that characterize the organization.

KEY ASSETS & SUCCESSFUL METHODOLOGIES

An extensive network of collaborators, a diverse cohort of interviewees, empathetic staff, and its de facto role as a national records keeper all differentiate EPIX from its competition. EPIX now has hundreds of contacts, spanning across divisions of age, gender, socio-economic classes and geographic region.

Extensive Network and Diversity of Subjects Interviewed

In its early days, the EPIX team endeared themselves to people they met while roaming Caracas. As word spread and its online platform became more popular, the venture gained traction in different areas around Venezuela. EPIX now boasts an extensive network. The storytelling platform EPIX.com.ve hosts hundreds of stories already in circulation. Others are undergoing curation for future release this year. The team does its own research, engages with collaborators, artists, interviewees, and advisors about people to interview. EPIX also focuses on representing a diversity of experiences inclusive of women, youth and children, the elderly, and people from regions outside of Caracas.

EPIX envisions itself as a national recorder of Venezuela's history. The team is still compiling key metrics on figures to undergird these perceptions with data. Nevertheless, in the past several months EPIX has received a multitude of congratulatory messages and the organization is continuing to develop strong name recognition across the nation.

Empathetic Photographers and Writers

Combined, photography and writing are crucial to EPIX's storytelling. The collaborative dynamic between artists that stems from the mutual respect of each other's craft enriches the stories. Rodriguez notes how photography captivates people's immediate attention, while writing delivers deep insights about the experiences of the people interviewed. When recruiting, EPIX leadership seeks young and motivated individuals with strong track records of experience. The artists themselves are assessed by their ability to demonstrate empathy—a characteristic that outweighs even technical expertise. Photographers must have experience in portraiture, are required to shadow senior writers and photographers before being brought on board. EPIX prides itself on both the unique interpretation of the stories that it produces without using a formal editorial guide and the fact that it is currently capturing these stories at a time as Venezuela is evolving through crisis.

Recording National Memoirs

EPIX is the only project in Venezuela currently leveraging writing and photography to capture the experiences and testimonies of hundreds of citizens. As such, it positions itself as a national story collector with a critical eye to how Venezuelan culture is evolving, even as the crisis escalates. The team believes in the years following the crisis, the content will serve as an important documentation of national history.



*Capturing personal stories during turbulent times. Read Luzmaris Vanegas' story [here](#).
Photo credit on right: Natasha Lashly.*

CONCLUSION

The EPIX team recognizes the disconnection and isolation resulting from Venezuela's ongoing and multi-layered crisis. It believes that beyond the direct causes, the solutions to these problems start by enabling Venezuelans to reconnect with one another. EPIX uses a distinct curating process to capture and share people's stories. The process begins with interview selection and ends with the writer-photographer team's unique style of retelling the interviewee's testimony centering on sensory and emotional experiences. The organization is recording these stories at a pivotal time in Venezuelan history. EPIX prioritizes the development and growth of its staff and team, especially its emerging artists and writers. Venezuela's current political, economic, and social crisis poses challenges to EPIX's operations—both financial and logistical. Mass migration of skilled artists further reduces the talent pool from which to hire.

FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT EPIX

- [EPIX Website](#)
- [EPIX Facebook Page](#)
- [Twitter: @epixve](#)
- [Instagram: epix.ve](#)
- [YouthActionNet Fellow Profile of Ignacio Rodriguez](#)
- Press: [EPIX: A Space for Meet-Ups and Connection](#)
- Press: [EPIX: Join to Connect with Venezuelans](#)
- Press: [EPIX: Everyday stories that connect a country](#)
- Video: [Madrid Talk](#) by Ignacio Rodriguez
- Video: [Globovisión discusses EPIX—a new entrepreneurship platform](#)
- Video: [Ignacio Rodriguez – Interview on Alo Buenas Noches](#)
- Video: [Nurturing Empathy Through Storytelling](#) with Fellow Ignacio Rodriguez
- Publication: [Be Social - 30 jóvenes emprendedores sociales que mueven el mundo](#)
- Publication: [How Storytelling is Fighting for Social Justice](#)

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