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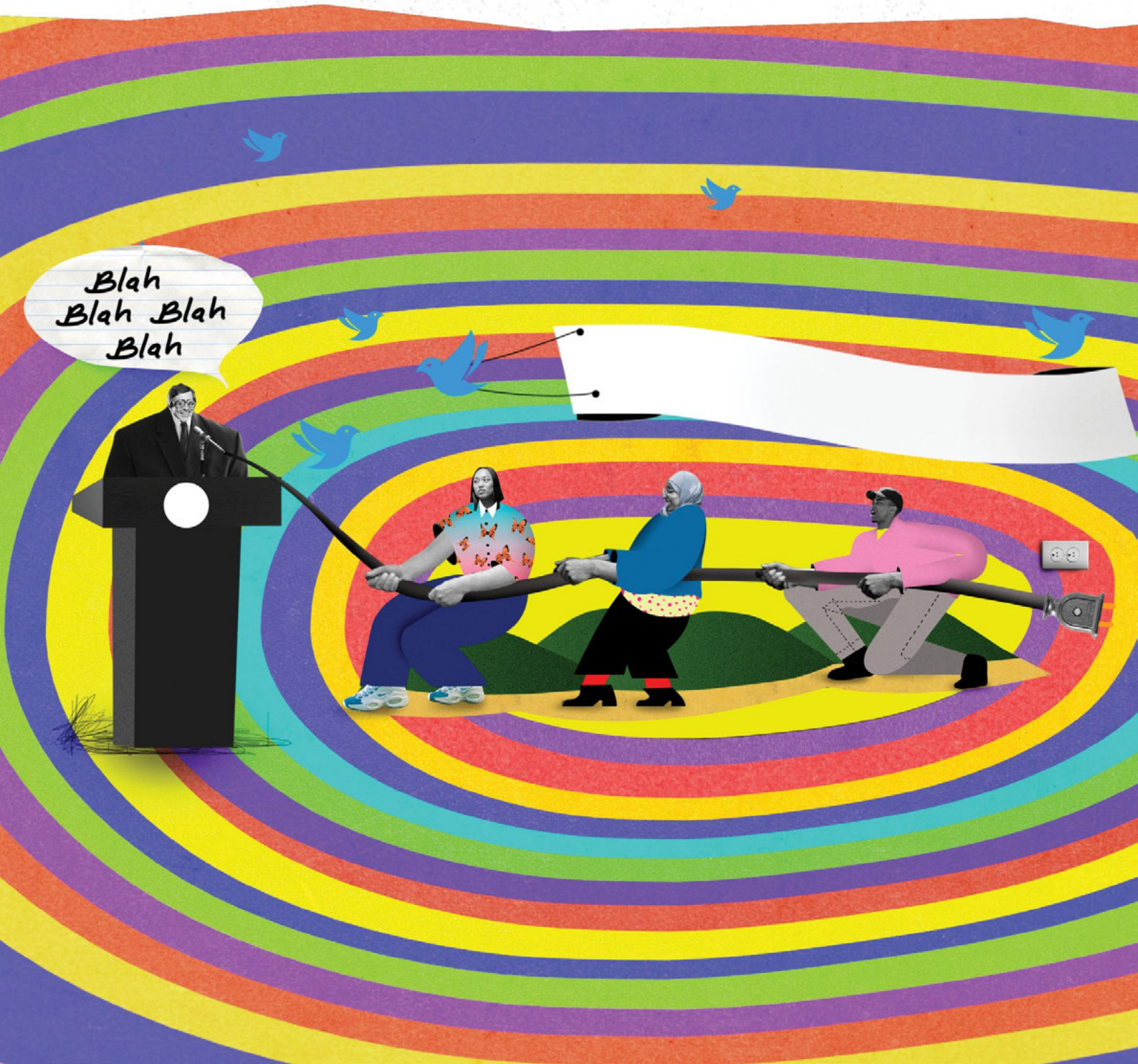
THE POWER OF NARRATIVES



Narratives are collections of stories that convey certain values, norms, and beliefs that shape our perceptions of the world and how we think and act. Often operating subtly and without our full awareness, narratives mould our understanding of how society works and our place in it.

These stories can normalise the status quo and all its inequities; they can be manipulative and dangerous, creating social conflict, fear, confusion, and doubt. Such stories, which we refer to as *dominant narratives*, serve to consolidate *power over*. But narratives can also reflect and spark positive visions of the society we aspire to. These, we call *transformational narratives.*

Narratives have always been central to power struggles, but we are now paying closer attention to them. It is increasingly important for activists, movements, and organisations to be aware of how dominant narratives reinforce and justify inequality and polarise us, and to understand how narratives can be contested and transformed.

Tapping into values, emotions, and prejudices, organised interests use dominant narratives as political tools to shape people's thinking about:

- What is true or false.
- What is possible.
- Who is to be trusted and who is to be feared.
- What is 'fake' news and what is not.
- Whose rights count and whose do not.
- Which solutions and ideas are significant and practical, and which are not.

Digital tools and social media make it easier than ever to disseminate narratives that shape public debate and attitudes. This presents both perils and possibilities for our work for social change.

We have the power to 'unmask' the interests behind dominant narratives. Activists can put forward transformational narratives that articulate a more inclusive, just, and life affirming view of the world and vision of the future.

For example, the rallying cry 'Black Lives Matter' is a simple, emotive phrase that both asserts the humanity of black people and unmasks the systemic nature of racialised violence. Narrative change work is not the same as strategic messaging or communications. Its strength lies in the deeper work of understanding how invisible and systemic power shape meaning and how we can express transformational narratives that connect to what people care about and long for. Shaping meaning and discourse is an energised point of conflict in social and political change work.

> One cannot divorce the combat for culture from the people's struggle for liberation.
>
> *- Frantz Fanon*[1]

Dominant narratives can be used as forms of control and soft coercion to consolidate power by:

- Sowing distrust in one another, politics, science, etc.
- Legitimising repressive actions and polarising communities.
- Discrediting, isolating, and silencing dissent and social justice movements, portraying them as anti-national, anti-development, elitist, corrupt, and even as terrorists.
- Inflaming prejudice, fear, and violence against particular groups of people, for example labelling women activists as bad mothers or whores, LGBTQI+ people as deviant, outsiders and predatory, and indigenous land defenders as backward and marginal.

Transformational narratives seek to build a larger, more inclusive 'we' toward a more deeply democratic and regenerative future by:

- Exposing violence and corruption.
- Amplifying otherwise silenced stories and perspectives about human connection and the possibilities for change.
- Inspiring alternative visions and versions of reality.
- Affirming our shared desire for human connection, belonging, mutuality, and our common desire for a better future.
- Inspiring and galvanising others to action.

Narratives, like invisible power, are always fluid and contested. They do not always fit neatly into categories of 'negative vs. positive' or 'dominant vs. transformational'. For example, some oppressive narratives may not be dominant, even as powerful groups use them to normalise beliefs that support their interests. Likewise, transformational narratives for positive social change, and the values and beliefs behind them, may over time become dominant.

This chapter is organised in five themes.

Theme 1: What Are Narratives?
As a dimension of strategy, narratives can be used for or against positive social change. This theme introduces and demystifies narratives as a contested dynamic.

Theme 2: How Do Narratives Affect Us?
Narratives both shape and are shaped by our times, contexts, movements, and activism

Theme 3: Narratives and Invisible Power
Narratives are rooted in invisible power and can either challenge or legitimise systemic, visible, and hidden power.

Theme 4: Unmasking and Transforming Narratives
We look at how to unpack and analyse dominant narratives and how to contest them with transformational narratives.

Theme 5: Creating Transformational Narratives
We introduce examples and methods for sourcing and strengthening transformational narratives that are grounded in values of social equity and justice.

Theme 1:
What Are Narratives?

Narratives direct our attention and understanding in a particular direction. Stories about government, climate, Covid-19, gender, race, and the economy all influence our sense of possibility, and how we see and address societal problems and each other. Narratives are always being contested and mobilised – whether to perpetuate and disguise dominant interests or to challenge and transform oppressive forces and beliefs.

Narratives are …

- Collections of stories, messages, and explanations about how our world operates, based on certain assumptions about who counts, what matters, what is normal, and what is to be feared.
- Grounded in deep, internalised, and often unconscious beliefs, values, and norms (invisible power) and support the operating logic of our societal institutions and structures (systemic power).
- Always contested and shifting, either in favour of dominant actors and systems of power over, or in support of resistance and social transformation.
- Not the same as messages or communications.
- Narratives draw on the power of the beliefs and deeply embedded logic that shape our assumptions, feelings, lives, institutions, and societies.

Dominant narratives

Now a popular buzzword, narratives are not new. We know about propaganda, socially coded advertising, ideological and cultural battles, the manipulation of prejudice, and the framing of news stories in ways that blame the victim or reinforce prejudices. The machinery and practice of dominant narratives have always been here, upholding values, norms, and systems of *power over*.

Powerful state and non-state actors are skilled at controlling narratives to mobilise certain beliefs and prejudices to create fear and a sense of scarcity, discredit opposition, close democratic space, disguise their interests, and legitimise their actions – polarising and inflaming politics to divide people and consolidate political and economic power.

Digital technology and social media have greatly amplified and accelerated the ability to promote misinformation, distort facts, incite fear and hate, plant seeds of doubt, and delegitimise certain groups and agendas.

Transformational narratives

Activists and social movements can contest 'official truths', unmask the destructive interests behind dominant narratives, crack open the status quo, and elevate new narratives. Transformational narratives are more than 'counter-narratives' – they tell a different story about what's wrong, what's possible, and who we are, grounded in values and practices of equity, care, inclusion, and justice.

Transformational narratives play an important role in cultural strategies to enlarge a sense of possibility, build shared vision and understandings, and create the collective will and courage needed to challenge and shift power in all arenas of struggle. Digital and social media strategies can also be mobilised around transformational narratives.

ACTIVITY 1:

Demystifying narratives

This activity introduces and demystifies narratives as a strategy to contest for power. Participants reflect on:

- The ways in which narratives have shaped their own lives and perspectives.
- The impact that narratives have had on them.
- The messages, stories, and explanations within particular narratives.
- How narratives are communicated.
- Whose interests narratives serve.
- The deeper values, beliefs, and explanations they build on.

Materials: Handouts: What are narratives? and Dominant narratives, flipchart paper, markers

Step 1: What does the word 'narrative' mean?
Plenary: We hear the word 'narratives' quite a bit, but what does it really mean, especially for social change and organising? Narratives are stories, explanations, and messages that make sense of and shape how we see the world and how we act in it. These stories may be positive visions of the politics, society, and future we hope for, or they may be manipulative, hateful, and dangerous, blocking change, distorting facts, provoking conflict, and reinforcing inequity and discrimination.

Introduce the activity with key points from the handout: *What are Narratives?* Brainstorm together in response to two questions:

1. What does the term 'narrative' mean to you?
2. Can you identify two examples of narratives that have shaped your view of the world and of your life, or the views of those around you?

Write meanings on one flipchart and examples on another. You could add prepared examples and definitions. Ask the group if they would like to add anything. Keep the flipcharts to use later.

Step 2: What narratives have we experienced in our lives?
Small groups: In groups of five or six, participants brainstorm narratives that have shaped their lives, positively or negatively. Reflect together on the following questions and create a visual presentation on flipchart paper.

- What two or three narratives have shaped your own lives, positively or negatively?
- Choose one narrative that has been a *positive force or inspiration for change* in your lives, and one narrative that has been a negative force or obstacle to change.

For each of these two narratives, discuss:

- What impact has this narrative had on your lives?
- What are the key stories, messages, and explanations in this narrative?
- How have they been communicated and by whom?
- What deeper values, beliefs, and behaviour are they based on?

For one or both of these narratives, create a simple drawing or graphic, including keywords, to address the four questions.

Step 3: Sharing experiences of narratives
Plenary: Groups post their flipcharts around the room. Everyone walks around to see what others have done. Invite a short presentation and discussion around each group's work. Ask:

- How did different groups respond to the four questions? Any similarities or differences?
- Is there a contrast between the positive and negative narratives?
- What other narratives did groups identify (if you did not present both)?

If groups shared all positive or all negative narratives, select and discuss a contrasting one.

Distribute the Dominant narratives handout. Adapt it to the context or make your own handout. Allow time for people to read it individually or in small groups. Invite discussion:

- Do any of the narratives shared by the groups resonate with those in the handout?
- Which of these dominant narratives do you experience in our lives, and how?
- Did you identify any positive or transformational narratives?
- If so, which dominant narratives do they challenge? How?

Conclude by clarifying together how we understand narratives; review definitions of narratives from the introductory brainstorm; and write down the group's agreed definition as a final output.

Dominant narratives

> The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion but allow very lively debate within that spectrum – even encourage the more critical and dissident views. That gives people the sense that there's free thinking going on, while all the time the presuppositions of the system are being reinforced by the limits put on the range of the debate.
>
> *- Noam Chomsky*[2]

Narratives are rooted in larger belief systems and worldviews. For example, the systemic logic of white supremacy and patriarchy 'validates' the inequitable hierarchies embedded in institutions that devalue and subordinate some people based on gender, ethnicity, and skin colour. Dominant narratives legitimise and activate those underlying belief systems – systemic power – to protect the interests of those who benefit from them. With vast commercial media conglomerates that dominate news, information, and culture, together with the explosive power of digital and social media, narratives are a central battleground for any change work.

Dominant narratives tap into prejudices that have shaped our societies and institutions for a very long time – for example, that 'bad women' get involved in politics rather than tend solely to their duties as mothers and wives, or that indigenous peoples are 'backward' in relation to modern culture. Powerful actors activate these narratives to reinforce prejudices, confirming their 'naturalness' and 'rightness'. When we want to shift such narratives, we need to engage not just with the words but also with the deeper beliefs, emotions, and systemic logic that find expression in the narrative.

Dominant narratives also shape people's understanding of themselves, perversely leading many people to internalise those prejudices. Self-doubt, marginalisation, discrimination, and violence are then reinforced and justified on that basis. Similarly, beliefs about the supposed efficiency and superior role of business to solve problems legitimise the privatisation and reduction of government services, and thus the growth of corporate power and the curtailment of the state's capacity as safety net and defender of human rights. Economic projects that generate money and wealth – no matter that they benefit privileged elites – are seen as positive and modern 'development'. Those questioning such projects are portrayed as backward, narrow-minded, or anti-development, their concerns mocked and treated as unrealistic and outside the mainstream.

Capitalist narratives

As workers, consumers, and citizens, we are all embedded in a globalised capitalist system of mass resource extraction, commodification, production, commerce, consumption, and waste. these have become so naturalised that we seldom question the underlying logic or consider alternatives as realistic. This extractive, carbon-intensive economic system is reinforced by individualism.

- Dominant narratives play a role in perpetuating norms and beliefs such as:
- Free-market capitalism is the only viable model.
- If people work hard, they can succeed. People living in poverty have only themselves to blame.
- Inequity is inevitable but wealth trickles down.
- Progress and growth are built on the exploitation of resources.
- Global investors help 'underdeveloped' countries exploit their resources to become more modern.
- Taxes and government intervention in the economy are ineffective and bureaucratic; the private sector is better at providing health, education, energy, and other public goods.
- Technology can solve most problems and save us from environmental catastrophe.
- Work in the labour market is 'work', work at home is a family obligation.

These narratives help to normalise global financial and extractive industries based on fossil fuels, mining, logging, large-scale farming and fishing, retail and digital monopolies, and mining of personal data. At the same time, these narratives prevent deeper investment in regenerative economic models and public discussion of energy alternatives.

Contemporary capitalism turns everything from water to DNA into commodities to be exploited and traded for profit. Dominant narratives frame and endorse neoliberal policies, regulations, property laws, resource concessions, and corporate subsidies, while justifying poverty wages, privatisation of public services, and shareholder profits as all in the public interest and necessary for growth and progress.

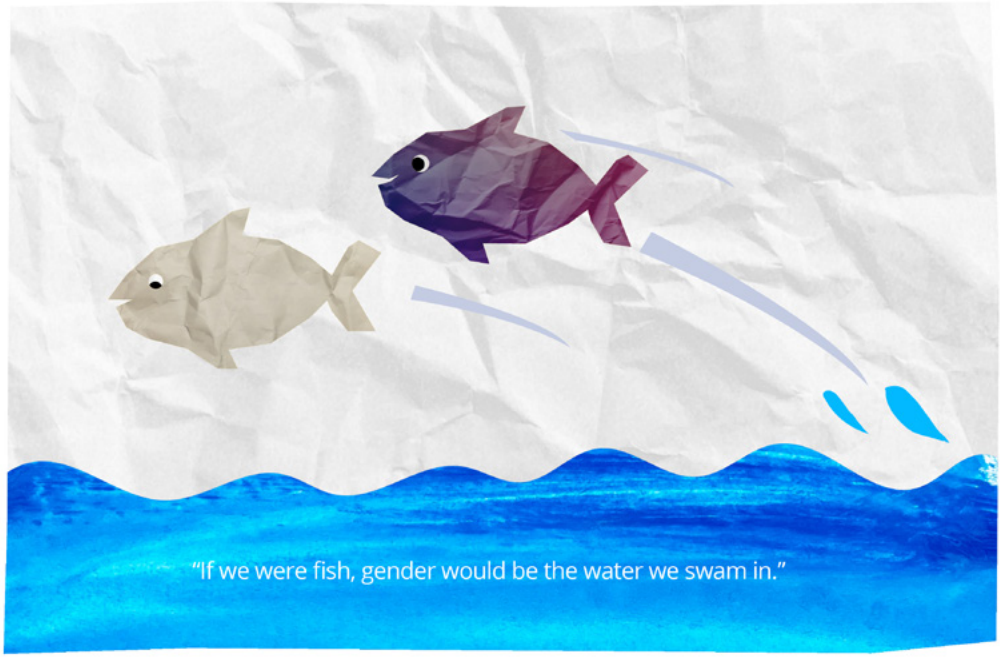
Neoliberal economics are taught in prominent universities to the exclusion of other approaches. Efforts to soften capitalism with ideals of sustainability, corporate responsibility, and ethical investment can sometimes reinforce dominant narratives, because they do not question the underlying logic of the system. These narratives also reinforce values of individualism, consumerism, and material possessions as key to success and happiness.

Patriarchal narratives

Patriarchy is everywhere, expressed in different ways, in nearly all institutions and structures. It systematically discriminates against women and LGBTQI+ people. Patriarchy is socialised through our families, culture, religions, and the media and is embedded in all our laws and political institutions. It shapes our most intimate and family relationships as well as our organisations. Patriarchy is actively upheld by dominant narratives, for example that:

- Gender roles are biologically determined and natural.
- Women's place and value are in the home and in the family.
- Women's primary role is to give birth, raise children, and care for others.
- Sexual/reproductive rights – giving women the power to make decisions about their bodies – are subversive, anti-family, and encourage sexual promiscuity.
- Heterosexuality is normal and other sexual identities are deviant.
- Gender is binary – men or women – and any other identity is deviant and threatens the social order.
- Women are less capable than men and do not deserve the same pay and opportunities.
- Women are soft, emotional, and unable to make tough choices.
- Women and LGBTQI+ people bring sexual violence on themselves by challenging social norms and the rightful authority of men.

Backlash – against women's and LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive and sexual rights, and feminism – is both a legal and narrative battle. Conservative forces claim to be 'pro-life' and 'pro-family' and depict gender, women, and feminists as immoral and selfish, narratives that tap into and exploit old prejudices and patriarchal values.



> If we were fish, gender would be the water we swam in. Gender is a set of behaviours and processes handed down to us by peers, relatives, and authority figures; it's the substance that surrounds us, with the power to alternately buoy us or drag us down. Asking people to change how they engage with gender is tantamount to asking a fish to think critically about its fishbowl—how can it, when it's never known anything else? The fish has probably lived its entire life without noticing the water at all.
>
> *- Dominique Dickey, "Gender is a story we tell ourselves", The Narrative Initiative*

Racist and white supremacist narratives

Racism and white supremacy are deeply embedded in the structure of most societies. As with patriarchy, dominant norms and beliefs about race, skin colour, and ethnicity are socialised through family and culture, reinforced by religious and educational institutions, and reproduced in politics, government, the private sector, the media, and civil society. Narratives are key in propagating norms of white supremacy and racism, for example that:

- Race is biologically based and fundamentally determines who we are.
- Whiteness and white people are superior, people of colour are inferior
- Black men and boys are dangerous, criminal, and immoral, and Black women are aggressive and hyper-sexual.
- Racial inequities are natural – people of colour have less because they lack skills, intelligence, or a strong work ethic.
- White culture is 'normal' and 'universal,' whereas non-white cultures are 'exotic' or 'different' – and borrowing from them is appreciative not appropriation.
- White people today are blameless for historical genocide, forced and enslaved labour, colonisation, and other forms of violence against non-white people. That's all a thing of the past.

> Anti-Blackness is the exclusion of Black people from social, political, and cultural belonging. It is core to white supremacy and rooted in histories of slavery and colonialism. Alicia Garza describes "the fulcrum around which white supremacy operates ... an organizing principle for access and for power and for influence, and that impacts everybody.... The closer you are to Black, the worse off you are. The closer to white, the better off you are."

In their extreme forms, white supremacist and racist narratives are used to justify systemic citizen and police brutality and the murder of Black people. For decades, narratives criminalised Black men as 'super predators', and depicted them as bad fathers, and poor Black women as 'welfare queens'. White nationalist movements have developed narratives to undermine anti-racist work and promote conspiracy theories such as what they describe as 'white replacement' and fears of immigration and the population growth of Black and Brown people. Right-wing populist leaders frequently use narratives that portray the 'real people' (coded as white people) as being threatened by 'others' or 'foreigners', meaning people of colour or refugees.

Around the world, racist and white supremacist narratives, entrenched in social norms and education by colonialism, shape how and what is taught, particularly about history, culture, and human rights. Narratives that involve critical discussion about race are said to promote censorship and cancel culture. White people who do not think of themselves as racist use more insidious, everyday 'denial' narratives that reinforce racism and white supremacy.

Colonial and imperialist narratives

Racism and colonialism are intertwined. Narratives are a central part of the story of conquest, exploitation, extraction, and wars. Capitalism and the competition for geopolitical domination drive colonialism and imperialism, but colonial narratives mobilise racism to justify occupation, genocide of indigenous peoples, and the wholesale robbery of the natural and human resources that 'developed' the industrialised countries of the Global North.

To this day, racist narratives of colonialism and imperialism are perpetuated by corporate media, religions, and international development and security, for example, by:

- Depicting Africa as a place of exotic cultures, animals, and primitive people who suffer from endless wars, corruption, and poverty, and who are in need of aid.
- Depicting Latin America as a place of narcos, cartels, and communist uprisings, in need of security and stability.
- Depicting indigenous peoples as backward, primitive, and simple – and whose ancestral lands and territories are better put to use by others.
- Using the terms 'Third World' or 'undeveloped' to describe the non-Global-North world.
- Imposing expertise and solutions that are not appropriate or beneficial to countries and indigenous peoples in the Global South in the name of modernisation and development.
- Continuing to extract resources from poor countries, leaving land and water depleted and poisoned.

Colonial domination devalued non-Western culture and knowledge as 'primitive' and imposed Christianity as a 'civilising' measure – despite the fact that many of the colonised or occupied peoples had much older and advanced civilisations. 'Science' validates Western knowledge, and, in many cases, seeks to erase knowledge and ways of knowing from people and places deemed 'primitive'. The legacy and continued influence of colonial education can be seen around the world.

Demands to decolonise knowledge, conservation, aid, culture, philanthropy, and civil society are rooted in a long history of anti-colonial and liberation struggles. Activists and progressive academics seek to upend the assumptions at the heart of unequal structures in order to recognise and value multiple ways of seeing, doing, and thinking in different contexts and cultures.

Theme 2:
How Do Narratives Affect Us?

> Negative narratives portray activists as backward, anti-development, and dangerous. They frame civil society as elitist and unaccountable or as foreign agents seeking to undermine national sovereignty and traditions and subvert popular will, as per Turkey's authoritarian, populist president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, in addressing his critics: *'We are the people. Who are you?'*"[5]

The battle for hearts and minds is not new in political history, but social media and digital information technology amplify and intensify it. Misinformation is used to polarise societies, create doubt and sow confusion, and lay the groundwork for authoritarian demagogues like Trump, Putin, Modi, Duterte, Bolsonaro, Orban, and Lukashenko. However – despite global trends, common patterns, and even an explicit playbook shared by a loose network of actors – narratives are context specific.

ACTIVITY 2:

How narratives shape context, history, and struggles

How do narratives affect our contexts and movements over time? How do they contribute to fear, insecurity, and risk? Use the timeline you created in Chapter 2: Naming the Moment to explore the role of narratives in shaping power and social struggles. Alternatively, create a timeline now, with a focus on narrative trends.

Materials: Historical timelines from Activity 4 in Chapter 2: Naming the Moment; flipchart paper, cards or post-its, markers

Step 1: How have narratives shaped your contexts?
Plenary: Introduce the activity. Ask for brief examples of dominant and transformational narratives affecting people's lives and struggles over time. Tease out the historical origins and evolution of these narratives and their effects on political dynamics.

- What narratives have been dominant in shaping your context and struggles over time, and where did they come from?
- What positive or transformational narratives have existed, in contrast to the dominant ones? Where did they come from?

Step 2: What narratives have shaped your history?
Plenary: Post the group's historical timeline on the wall, or do the timeline exercise, now with a focus on the relevant questions.

Plenary or small groups: Identify both the dominant narratives behind key events in the timeline and any transformational narratives that contrast or compete for attention with the dominant ones.

For each of the key periods or moments in this timeline, discuss the questions below. Create a graphic or add notes to the timeline. Use different coloured pens, shapes, or sticky notes for each question.

- What were the dominant narratives during this period, moment, or event?
- What transformational narratives did other groups or movements articulate?

Choose one dominant and one transformational narrative, and discuss for each in turn:

- What were the narrative's main stories, messages, and explanations?
- How were these stories and messages communicated, and by whom?
- What values, beliefs, or unconscious behaviour were behind the narrative?
- Who or what interests benefited from this narrative?
- What impact did the narratives have on people?
- How did this narrative portray people working for change?

Step 3: How did narratives shape your struggles?

Plenary: Invite each group to share briefly. Draw out real examples of slogans, images, and memes that expressed narratives from this event or moment. Add examples. Identify the differences between dominant and contrasting narratives (if these differences are not obvious). Stimulate discussion and analysis. Ask:

- What differences do you see between dominant and transformational narratives?
- How did these narratives shape key moments or events?
- Whose agenda or interests were served by dominant narratives?
- What ideas or beliefs did the dominant narrative attempt to silence?
- How were dominant narratives contested, by whom, and with what success?
- How do these narratives from history affect the contexts in which we work today?
- How do they influence our activism and movements?

Conclude with a discussion of everyday narratives that affect our lives and movements (for example, narratives of racism and sexism).

Theme 3:
Invisible and Systemic Power in Narratives

Narratives build directly on invisible and systemic power. They align with socialised norms and beliefs and with the underlying systemic logic of societal institutions and structures. For this reason, a key social change strategy is to 'unmask' oppressive and polarising narratives and contrast them with a different way of seeing things. This enables us to develop critical awareness, common ground, and justice-oriented political choices.
To be effective in challenging a negative narrative, we must do more than contradict it. We must dig into the beliefs and ideas about inclusion, empathy, and fairness that exist in all societies and bring these to the forefront.

Invisible and systemic power in narratives
Operating across three, related dimensions, invisible power is...

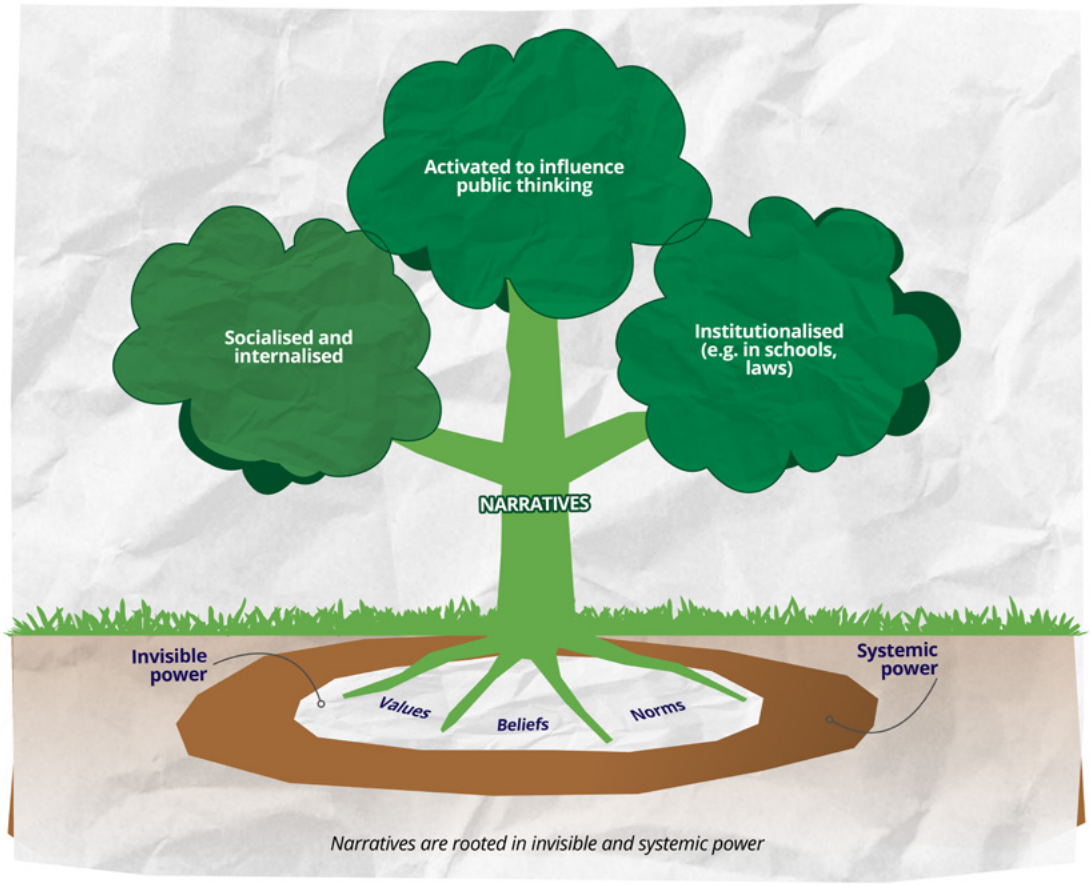
Socialised. Values, norms, and beliefs are reproduced through everyday socialisation, often unconsciously, by all actors (for example, those of patriarchy). Here, invisible power is the collective internalisation and embodiment of values about ourselves and others and what is good, right, or normal.

Institutionalised.These same values, norms, and beliefs are reflected and embedded in the logics and hierarchies of many social structures and institutions – from families and education to laws and economics. Building on and reinforcing socialisation, here invisible power is the pervasive reproduction of deep structures in society.

Mobilised. Dominant narratives are used consciously and intentionally to shape and manipulate beliefs, reinforce social hierarchies and inequalities, and uphold the power, legitimacy, and privilege of some groups over others. They seek to explain what's wrong and what needs to be solved and who and what's to blame. Here, invisible power is wilfully exercised at the service of political interests and often accompanied by a legal and policy agenda. Although narratives operate in this dimension, they are grounded in the other two.

In all three dimensions, these norms and beliefs are underpinned and reinforced by systemic power – the logic and codes that define all relationships, such as patriarchy, structural racism, extractive capitalism, and colonialism/imperialism. Like invisible power, systemic power is a contested arena in which alternative logics and codes – expressed in contrasting narratives – compete with the dominant ones. For example, identity can be both a cause of oppression and a source of connection, community, and liberation. Because invisible and systemic power are socialised, institutionalised, and mobilised, many strategic entry points exist for activists and movements:

- Affirming positive norms and beliefs.
- Reforming and rebuilding institutions.
- Creating and mobilising transformational narratives.



Narratives are rooted in invisible and systemic power

ACTIVITY 3:

Power and narratives

Explore how narratives are part of invisible and systemic power, shaping and reinforcing norms, beliefs, and ideologies through socialisation, cultural traditions, and behaviour – and through the systemic power of patriarchy, structural racism, extractive capitalism, and colonialism. In narratives, invisible and systemic power meet visible and hidden power. Powerful actors can leverage the power of beliefs and prejudices to achieve their ends. (This activity and approach to narrative analysis and change is inspired by the work of David Mann and the Grassroots Power Project, USA.)

In this activity, groups apply a framework to delve into the various layers that make up a narrative (stories, messages and explanations, communication, values and behaviour, and who benefits).

Materials: Flipchart paper, markers, handout: Invisible and systemic power in narratives

Step 1: How are narratives related to invisible and systemic power?
Plenary: Refer to, repeat, or do two activities:

1. *Arenas of Power* framework in Chapter 3: Making Sense of Power
2. *The Master's House* activity in Chapter 4: Identity, Intersectionality, and Power

Review the concept and meaning of invisible and systemic power. Ask participants what they remember from *The Master's House* activity.

We can track invisible and systemic power working through different narrative strategies.

- Narratives that divide – causing fragmentation among allies, weakening movement unity, exploiting existing faultlines and prejudices
- Narratives that de-legitimise, stigmatise and criminalise activists and movements – undermining community leadership, fomenting distrust
- Narratives that distract – focusing attention elsewhere, away from actual issues
- Narratives that promote despair – reiterating powerlessness and oppression.
- Narratives that drive danger – creating fear, criminalising people, justifying violence

Individually: Looking at the handout Invisible and systemic power in narratives, each person reflects on their own experience of these different kinds of power.

Plenary: People share reflections on the impact of dominant narratives. Discuss how these narratives reinforce one another.

Step 2: Applying the framework

Plenary: Referring to the handout: Invisible and systemic power in narratives, discuss how invisible and systemic power are socialised, institutionalised, and mobilised or activated. Ask:

- How are the stories, messages, and explanations in dominant narratives mobilised to serve the interests of particular groups?
- How are these narratives institutionalised in the family, law, education system, religions, economic and political structures, and social systems?
- How do these narratives build on – and reinforce – deeper layers of socialised values, beliefs, norms, and habits? How are they related to the systemic logic behind relationships?
- What is the impact of narratives on people's lives? How do these narratives serve the political and economic interests of those who promote them?

Step 3: How do invisible and systemic power underpin a narrative?

Explore one example together, using the questions below, before applying the framework in plenary or small groups. One example is the narratives about LGBTQI+ people. You could choose another example.

Plenary: To understand how invisible and systemic power underpin a narrative, focus on the example of LGBTQI+ people. Unpack the stories, messages, and explanations in the dominant narrative, and then examine how this is enabled by – and reinforces – invisible and systemic power. Discuss personal experiences of this narrative.

What are the main **messages, stories, and explanations** in the dominant narrative? Think about the difference between the messages you hear and the stories behind them. For example:

- Messages: "LGBTQI+ people put our kids at risk."
- Stories: "LGBTQI+ people are immoral and outsiders, not part of our families, and prey on our children."
- Underlying beliefs: "Non-heterosexual relationships are evil, sinful, and unnatural."

How are these messages **communicated**, and by whom? For example:

- In conservative religious communities (sermons, literature, school lessons, informally), by religious leaders, educators, community members
- In political messages, speeches, and campaign materials, by politicians, party officials and activists, conservative media outlets, party supporters.
- In social media, everyday language, parents with their children.
- in symbols, images, cultural activities, social and body cues.

What **actions** or **impact** do these messages produce? **Whose interests** do they advance? For example:

- Everyday exclusion, prejudice, and discrimination against LGBTQI+ people.
- Violence, hostility, and harassment.
- Laws and policies that discriminate against LGBTQI+ people, such as marriage rights.
- Conservative and traditional explanations of an unequal social order and strict gender roles with males as dominant fathers and women as mothers and carers.
- Patriarchal control of sexuality for the purpose of reproduction only.
- Domestic violence as a private matter.

What is the **dominant narrative** created by the above? For example:

- LGBTQI+ people are outsiders, immoral, not normal human beings, not part of our families and communities; they don't belong in society and pose a threat to our children.

What kinds of institutions and structures in society give strength to – or are strengthened by –
this narrative? For example:

- The 'traditional family' is the centre of society; marriage is for the purpose of raising children; sex is for reproduction, not pleasure; any sexual or gender expression or identity that does not conform to these values is a threat to society.

What kinds of **socialised values, norms, and beliefs** are behind this narrative? For example:

- Beliefs and ideologies: conservative religious beliefs, traditions and teachings about sex and sexuality, families, gender, women's roles, and marriage.
- Social norms: patriarchal views about marriage between a man and a woman only (heteronormative) emphasising that there are only two genders – male and female – with their 'proper' roles in society – masculine and feminine – (binary-gendered as 'normal').
- Embodied habits: gendered behavioural norms of masculinity, femininity, sexuality; how we reproduce these norms in our everyday speech, behaviour, and actions.

Plenary or small groups: Explore another dominant narrative of interest to the group, using the same questions and drawing on the example above. Alternatively, small groups work on different narratives. If working in small groups, share highlights in plenary.

Step 4: Transforming narratives and invisible power

Plenary: So how can we break this cycle and transform the dominant narratives?

Invite a quick brainstorm of ideas, without going into depth on specific strategies. List ideas on cards or flipcharts, and cluster into categories if helpful. Raise or emphasise the following key points in the discussion:

- A starting point for shifting a dominant narrative – and the invisible and systemic power behind it – is to identify and express our own positive narratives and visions of society.
- We call these positive narratives 'contrasting' or 'transformational'. If we use the terms 'alternative' or 'counter-narratives', we are still centring the dominant narratives which give them power. Positive narratives have always been there.
- We reveal and elevate positive narratives that are already there – grounded in long-standing progressive values and beliefs – rather than talk about 'creating' new ones.
- Exploring the emotional resonance of narratives is a good starting point for identifying positive narratives. Notice how the dominant narrative makes you feel. Which of your own values or beliefs do you feel are challenged by this narrative? Which of your values or beliefs contrast with this dominant narrative?

What are some examples of positive and contrasting narratives and messages? For example:

Narrative: LGBTQI+ people are loved and loving parts of families.
Message: love makes a family, love is love, we all belong.

Narrative: all black, indigenous, and people of colour have as much value and significance as any other human being
Message: Black Lives Matter

Small groups: All work with the same dominant narrative, or each group works on a different one. Each group has ten minutes to reflect on the questions and five minutes to prepare a creative drawing or dramatic presentation. Start by reflecting individually on one of the dominant narratives we explored today with these two questions:

- How does the dominant narrative make you feel?
- Which of your values and beliefs does the narrative contradict?

On pieces of paper or cards, write short, simple statements that express your own values and beliefs on the theme. Write from the heart, and don't worry about exact words.

Take turns each sharing one or two statements that you feel very strongly about.

Cluster the statements into categories, and choose one cluster to discuss together:

- Which values and beliefs do you hold that lie behind these statements?
- Where do they come from?
- How do you live and express these values and beliefs in daily life?

Prepare a short, creative presentation – a diagram, drawing, symbol, message, dramatic scene, or body sculpture – to show what the dominant narrative looks like and what your own contrasting values, beliefs, and behaviour look like. Be creative and expressive, and feel free to use images, symbols, or metaphors to convey your values, beliefs, and ways of being.

Step 5: Bringing our values to life

Plenary: Ask each group to share their creative representation of the dominant narrative and the values and beliefs of the group. After each presentation, invite a quick round of reactions:

- What did you see or hear? How do you feel?
- What values and beliefs are being expressed?

Values, norms, and beliefs are in constant flux and are contested. In every moment, they can be affirmed or resisted, complied with or rejected, through words and behaviour. Invisible power shifts and evolves, sometimes slowly, sometimes quickly, sometimes passively, sometimes due to proactive agency. It can at times be strategic or safer for activists to remain silent and 'comply'. How and when do we resist or comply with dominant narratives?

Share the handout Resisting dominant narratives. Discuss how we resist or refuse to comply with a dominant narrative. Ask:

- What are some examples of strategic resistance to narratives?
- What values and beliefs give strength to our position?
- Where do these values and beliefs come from?
- Who has upheld them over time? Who or what has inspired us?
- Is there a transformational narrative that flows from these values and beliefs? If so, what is it?

> **Institutional change is often easier than at the personal level... Most people resist changes to their personal space, even when it involves extending their horizons. It is not easy for people to reach critical consciousness in their personal lives due to an intrinsic need to belong. In Africa or less developed countries, insurance from a sense of belonging takes over social welfare functions of the state, therefore imposing major barriers on people's consistency in political consciousness. Particularly for marginalised groups such as women, what one does within an institutional setting is often different from the compromises made in private lives in order to belong. This should not be labelled as inconsistency, because the ability to recognise power and its uses and to act within one's context for self-preservation is actually 'strength'.**
>
> *– Hope Chigudu*[6]

Resisting dominant narratives

We might remain silent or passive in the face of a dominant narrative, perhaps because we have internalised the narrative's values. But silence can also be strategic: the moment may not be right or the risks too great to speak out or resist. We may choose to express resistance less directly.

Why do we sometimes remain silent or passive when faced with a dominant narrative? Think of specific examples.

- Is compliance automatic or unconscious?
- Do we sometimes consciously comply with a narrative, even if we don't agree with it?
- When, and why, would we choose to comply with narratives we don't like? (for example: for safety, for fear of being shamed or excluded by those around us.)
- When might it be strategic to remain silent or comply with a dominant narrative?
- If we notice others complying, is it always okay to 'call out' or shame them? Give examples.

Calling out or shaming people publicly for going along with a dominant narrative can be strategic, particularly if powerful people are advancing the narrative. But in everyday life, this can alienate people. We may not understand the reasons for their compliance. Black feminist activist Loretta Ross advocates dialogue with those we disagree with, or *calling in, rather than calling out.*

> The work of narrative is just one extension of the overall work of power. Narrative 'product' is not narrative power. We do not need more ways to get our ideas on the record and archived online. Narrative power is not born of great content that no one watches, nor content we ourselves enjoy and think is right but has no social or political effect. Narrative builds power for people, or it is not useful at all.
>
> *- Rashad Robinson, Color of Change*[8]

Theme 4:
Unmasking and Transforming Narratives

Narratives have an enormous impact on our politics, civil society, activism, and journalism, and social media has the power to galvanise and polarise people on an extensive scale. New and powerful narrative strategies emerge from social movements.

- The Movement for Black Lives
- Pro-democracy movements in many parts of the world including Guatemala, Thailand, Poland, Hong Kong, Belarus, Nigeria, Senegal, Sudan, Chile, and Myanmar.
- Women's movements challenging impunity for sexual assault and pressing for full reproductive rights.
- Indigenous land defenders, the Buen Vivir movement, and others calling for life in harmony with the earth.

People approach narratives in different ways. They draw on, for example:

- The evocative emotional power in what we stand for (power for) to inform smarter campaign messaging.
- Longer term cultural work to shift worldviews.
- Humorous and creative expressions of resistance in dangerous contexts.
- Actions that communicate meaning in embodied and symbolic ways – often without words.

In this Guide, we approach narratives through a power and intersectional analysis that centres context and culture and looks at the connection between messages, narratives, and the mobilisation of the invisible power of beliefs, values, and ideas.

Laura and Bertita washing in the river © 2016, Daysi Flores

> Women's entire lives revolve around the river – it's where they gather water for cooking and drinking, wash their clothes, bathe their kids, wash their hair, share stories, cool off and just relax, not to mention the river being the source of water for their gardens and fields."[13]

Guardians of the River: The power of narratives

Competing narratives are at the centre of the power struggle and conflict around the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Gualcarque River in Lenca territory that led to the murder of Berta Cáceres. The quotes, headlines, and examples in the case study illustrate these competing narratives and the distinct worldviews, values, and interests they embody.

Dominant narratives

These examples (among many) highlight the framing, messaging, and underlying narratives that were mobilised to discredit, dehumanise, and criminalise COPINH and Berta Cáceres.

In April 2010, soon after a right-wing coup, the Honduran government held an international investment convention, "Honduras Is Open for Business". The government relaxed the country's mining regulations, repealed a moratorium on new mines, and granted 41 concessions for hydroelectric dams across the country.

On July 15, 2013, COPINH staged a peaceful protest at the dam company's office that turned deadly. When soldiers opened fire on a peaceful COPINH protest against a new dam in 2015, killing community leader Tomás García and wounding his son, the Honduran national TV station blamed García's death on COPINH: "Protesters from COPINH also have blood on their hands … Members of COPINH should not have entered onto private property that was guarded by the army. The army provided security to the private company working on the hydroelectric dam."

Aline Flores, from a Honduran business coalition, said publicly, "[COPINH] are invading us and making us look bad, hurting our international reputation." The coalition denounced Berta for "impeding renewable energy projects … with the support of Amnesty International and the Human Rights Commission," implying that these were not home-grown struggles but rather externally driven.

"DESA's (Desarollo Energetico Sociedad Autonomo) press statements claimed the community members violently entered the company compound, leading to Tomás García's killing, and that the crowd then entered Cristian Madrid's home and killed him. Milton Amaya Coello, commander of the First Battalion of Engineers, whose troops were stationed inside the DESA compound, echoed the company's explanation of events. He claimed that, after entering the compound, three people then proceeded to attack the heavily armed soldiers with machetes, so Sergeant Jasser Sarabia fired in self-defense."

Between 2013 and 2015, DESA used its influence to push the government to refocus policing and surveillance on COPINH and, particularly, on Berta. WhatsApp messages obtained by lawyers investigating the murder (GAIPE) revealed coordination between

company executives, staff, security, police, and local officials to track and harass COPINH leaders. For example:

> "I'm going to hire a sniper."
>
> "Pile a bunch of 'indios' in a car. Berta, Aureliano, and Tomás, 3 ring leaders... I've spent a lot of money and political capital to get these three arrest warrants."

In September 2013, a magistrate ordered that Berta be held in pre-trial detention for "endangering the internal security of Honduras."

FMO, the Dutch investment company that co-financed the construction of the Agua Zarca dam, posted a video about it on their website (removed after Berta's murder), depicting the dam as a small-scale, people-centred, sustainable development project to benefit the community. They failed to mention the fact that the community had rejected the project, as is their right under ILO resolution 169.

After her murder, and against the evidence, the police initially blamed the murder on a COPINH leader. Mainstream Honduran media cast the incident as a "crime of passion" in the news and in the investigations.

Strategies to unmask the dominant narrative

These examples highlight some of COPINH's strategies.
A 2013 protest in Río Blanco, Honduras, exposed the corruption behind the project and called on allies to join the protest.

In 2015, Berta said: "I never doubted I would continue the struggle despite the threats; they even gave me more resolve. Today, we are receiving death threats not only against me but against other compañeros."[14]

In an interview with The Guardian in the same year, Berta asserted: "The political, economic, and social situation in Honduras is getting worse, and there is an imposition of a project of domination, of violent oppression, of militarization, of violation of human rights, of trans nationalisation, of the turning over of the riches and sovereignty of the land to corporate capital, for it to privatise energy, the rivers, the land; for mining exploitation; for the creation of development zones."[15]

"It is not easy being a woman leading processes of indigenous resistance. In an incredibly patriarchal society, women are very exposed, we have to face high-risk circumstances, and sexist and misogynistic campaigns. This is one of the things that can most influence a decision to abandon the fight." (Berta Cáceres, Open Global Rights).

COPINH radio stations broadcast regular updates to expose and counteract inflammatory and sexualized attacks on Berta by the company and the government, accusing her of being "a devil's whore" and portraying COPINH as a terrorist organisation. Sectors of the Catholic Church joined in the attacks – a cardinal prohibited Catholics from joining COPINH or listening to its radio broadcasts – but these were countered by a prominent priest with public support, Padre Melo, on a popular radio station, Radio Progreso.[16]

Transformational narratives

"In our worldview, we are beings who come from the earth, the water, and the corn. The Lenca people are ancestral guardians of the rivers... [taught] that giving our lives in various ways to protect the rivers is to give our lives for the well-being of humanity and of this planet."[17] — Berta's speech for the Goldman Environmental Prize in early 2015. After she was murdered, COPINH and Berta's daughters communicated hope and continuity. "Berta no se murió, Se multiplicó!" / "Berta did not die. She multiplied!"

"Without our cosmovision, we wouldn't exist as Lenca people. It gives our resistance energy and force." — COPINH Instagram)

"We must undertake the struggle in all parts of the world, wherever we may be, because we have no other spare or replacement planet. We have only this one, and we have to take action." — Berta Cáceres

Berta Cáceres receiving the Goldman Environmental Prize © 2015, Goldman Environmental Prize

ACTIVITY 4:

Narratives in action

Powerful interest groups use dominant narratives to manipulate public opinion and shape the terms of debate. They mine and mobilise existing prejudice, beliefs, ideologies, and fears. We can unmask dominant public narratives by unpacking their messages and exposing the forms of invisible power they draw upon.

Materials: Handout: *Guardians of the River*: The power of narratives

Step 1: Compare the narratives

Small groups: You may want to re-read the case study: COPINH: *Guardians of the River in Honduras,* as well as the handout *Guardians of the River: The power of narratives*. Compare the dominant narrative with COPINH's transformational narrative.

Dominant narrative

- What were the main stories and messages in the dominant narrative?
- How were these messages framed and communicated?
- What values and norms did they represent?
- Whose interests were served by the dominant narrative?
- What was the impact of these narratives on the activists and their struggle?

COPINH's transformational narrative

- What messages and stories were communicated by COPINH and Berta?
- How were they framed and communicated?
- What values and norms did they represent?
- What was the primary interest and strategy of this narrative?
- How did COPINH's narrative advance its agenda?

Step 2: Unmask the dominant narrative

Plenary: Draw out the groups' observations, starting with the dominant narrative. Ask for new responses to the questions rather than full reports from each group. Points for deepening discussion:

- Stories and messages
- Framing and communication
- Values and norms
- Interests served
- Impacts

Step 3: Explore COPINH's transformational narrative

Plenary: Draw out groups' observations about COPINH's narrative. Stimulate discussion with examples from the handout *Guardians of the River*: The power of narratives.

- In what ways did COPINH and the movement against the dam expose and resist the dominant public narratives that were mobilised in favour of the dam and against the movement?
- What contrasting or transformative narrative was advanced by the movement and its supporters? What values, beliefs, or worldviews did this narrative build upon?
- How did COPINH go about sharing their narrative? What stories and messages were shared, and how were they communicated?
- What effects did COPINH's contrasting narrative have on public opinion and support? What were the strengths and weaknesses of their narrative?
- What other contrasting or transformative narratives, if any, do you think would have helped the movement and contributed to its safety and protection from violence?

Plenary: Beyond exposing and criticising a dominant narrative, a key strategy is to articulate a transformational narrative that contrasts with the dominant one.

Reflections

COPINH's struggle illustrates the importance of organising and action in creating and communicating narratives for social movements and communities who may not have access to courts, mainstream media, and public opinion. The peaceful protests involving families and Lenca symbolism, and the many rituals that affirm the common story and worldview of the Lenca people, are a narrative strategy in themselves.

Berta's leadership centred her community, COPINH, and her family, and this helped to humanise her struggle in the face of slander and criminalisation. It was only after her murder that COPINH's social media – in the hands of a new generation of leaders and activists in pursuit of the powerful interests behind the murder – was able to frame and sustain a narrative about justice.

Without the added pressure from social media strategies continuously inviting allies to step in, it is unlikely the case would have progressed. COPINH's strategy was both to unmask the dominant narrative and articulate their own values and visions through their transformational narrative.

COPINH exposed and named the real interests and collusion of the investors, elites, and officials behind the dam project. They unmasked the logic and costs of the exploitative, corrupt, violent colonial system that the dam project represented and perpetuated.

ACTIVITY 5:

Unmasking and transforming narratives

Adapt these steps and questions to other case studies or issues of concern.

Step 1: Unmask the dominant narrative
Plenary: Introduce the case study or issue and distribute useful resources (such as a handout or audio or video clip).

Review the resource materials and discuss:
- What do you see or hear? (messages, symbols, images)
- What is the narrative designed to make you think, believe, feel, or do? What is the narrative here?
- What are the key stories and messages in the narrative?
- What does it say about those in opposition or resistance?
- Who and what does it value or devalue? What does it say about who or what is 'normal'?
- What social norms, values, or beliefs underpin the narrative?
- Who is promoting the narrative, and what is their primary interest?

Step 2: Share insights and observations
- Did anything surprise you? What, and why?
- What are the more obvious messages and stories in the narrative?
- Which messages are more hidden and manipulative (based on biases and prejudices, for example, those that may be racist, sexist, neo-colonial)?
- Which messages may be designed to create division or fear, or draw on biases and innuendo to shape perceptions?
- What values, norms, or beliefs underpin the narrative?
- Whose interests does the narrative promote?
- In what ways do these narratives exclude or negate certain people or create fear or increase the risk of violence for specific groups (such as women, LGBTQI, indigenous, opposition activists)?

Step 3: Mobilise transformational narratives
A transformational narrative is most effective if it:
- Is based on positive values and beliefs that already resonate with many people.
- Offers the positive choice of a different story from the one that is being told.
- Is not framed as a 'counter-narrative' or 'alternative' to the dominant one.
- Provides a source of hope and strength, linked to values of care and connection, and a concrete vision and pathway to a desired future.
- Includes humour, popular expressions, and common cultural references – particularly for provocative or controversial perspectives.

Plenary: What do you reveal by unpacking or analysing a narrative in this way? What connections can you make between narratives and power? Did you experience any 'aha' moments?

Summary

If we look at narratives through a lens of power, not just communications or messaging, we see that they are part of a larger dynamic in which powerful interests use certain values and beliefs to construct and promote narratives that exclude other perspectives and advance their own narrow interests.

Narratives are used to "manufacture consent" : to shape public opinion and not only legitimise but also normalise underpinning ideas and values: *That's the way things are and should be, and they should determine policy.*

Unpacking narratives is vital to open a space for critical reflection to expose and challenge those interests.

Dominant narratives can be resisted most effectively by not only unmasking them but also identifying and elevating transformational narratives that are grounded in other values and beliefs.

Theme 4:
Creating Transformational Narratives

> In this and like communities, public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment, nothing can fail; without it nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed.
>
> *– Abraham Lincoln, 1858, in a debate with pro-slavery Senator Stephen Douglas*

A transformational narrative makes it possible for people to imagine new possibilities. A transformational narrative dares to ask, 'What if?'

- What if you are just as powerful as those at the top of the social and political ladder?
- What if you claim that power alongside others in your community?
- What if the unjust systems that operate in our society were changed?
- What if you could give birth to the liberated and beautiful world of your dreams?

> A transformational narrative calls upon individuals to change the world as it is into the world as it should be. We build power when we shift the current dominant narrative to a narrative of transformation.
>
> *- Mary Lim-Lampe, Executive Director of Genesis*

In addition to unmasking dominant narratives, we need to affirm our own transformational narratives. Activists working on narrative change have shared the following reflections and lessons:

Dominant and oppressive narratives often prevail within our own communities, organisations, and movements. Transformational narratives are not only about projecting our values into the wider world but also embody values, norms, and visions within the spaces of our own lives, actions, and activism. Transformational narratives are grounded in our specific context and culture – which may be virtual, organisational, and geographic.

Invisible power is always contested and so can also be transformative. Invisible power is not just an oppressive form of power over. Social change cannot happen without transforming invisible power: mobilising our own narratives – offering people a positive narrative that contrasts with the one they are used to – is a key strategy for doing this.

ACTIVITY 6:

Transforming narratives

This process is a first step in creating and mobilising our own transformational narratives.

Materials: A selection of visual images that represent resistance to dominant narratives or that express transformational narratives from social-change struggles and movements. Compile a selection of images with which participants are familiar. Include the images in this chapter if they are useful.

Step 1: What are transformational narratives?
Plenary: How can we challenge dominant narratives? As we have seen, when we unmask and de-normalise a dominant narrative, we show that it is not 'natural'. Because it is shaped by people, it can also be transformed by people. Ask

- Can you think of any limitations to unmasking as a way of changing the narrative? Is it enough to expose and critique? Can you think of cases where doing this had limited effects?
- Think of oppressive or dominant narratives that have been present within your communities, movements, or organisations.
  - In what ways have these narratives been exposed and challenged, or not, and why?
  - Has the community or organisation also put forward transformational narratives?

When we criticise a dominant narrative, **we need to be careful not to reinforce it** by allowing that narrative to define the boundaries of debate. For example:

- "We can provide health care for all without raising taxes" supports the narrative that "paying taxes to the government for public services is bad, and privatised health care is good."
- "We want to encourage best practices when it comes to extractive industries" validates the narrative that "extractives are not in and of themselves a problem, they just need to be improved."
- "All politicians are corrupt" is a narrative that undermines public trust in any and all public officials, even those who are honest and accountable.

Brainstorm examples of transformational narratives from people's own experience or from current or historical struggles. Discuss how these narratives go beyond saying no to the dominant ones and how they celebrate other values, norms, and beliefs.

Share and discuss unmasking using images that represent resistance to dominant narratives or that express transformational narratives, such as those in this chapter.

Creative and symbolic images and memes can be one powerful way of disrupting and transforming dominant narratives. Show a selection of visual images that represent transformational narratives from social-change struggles and movements with which participants are familiar. Start with a brainstorm without the images, then bring the images in as narratives are named. Or use the images after the brainstorm to stimulate discussion. Add to this list or substitute others that are relevant to your context.

Pick one example of a transformational narrative to deepen discussion. Ask:

- In what ways does this narrative contrast with the dominant one?
- How does this narrative reflect its context and culture with its use of images, humour, and emotion?
- What values, norms, and beliefs underlie the narrative?
- How has this narrative been historically expressed over time?
- What images, symbols, stories, or messages are associated with the narrative?
- How does the transformational narrative make you feel?
- Does this narrative offer an appeal or choice to at least some of those who follow the dominant narrative? In what way?

Step 2: What values and visions underpin transformational narratives?
This step works best if people are all working on the same issues and dealing with similar dominant narratives. If not, form groups around similar interests.

Plenary: Introduce the next two steps as a process in which we will:
Identify our shared values, beliefs, and visions of society.
Shape these into statements and images to form the foundation of a transformative narrative.

Naming our values, beliefs, and visions of society may seem obvious, but reaching a common understanding of these – beyond the specific issues we are working on – is not always easy. The first step is to clarify our shared philosophy and the kind of world we hope for, starting with individual reflection:

- What is it that you really hold in common and would like to see?
- How can you best express this among yourselves?
- What long-term hopes and visions should underpin our messages?

Individually: For a key issue you are working on, think about what you value, believe in, or would ideally like to see in society:

- Write three or four brief statements or draw symbolic images on cards or slips of paper.
- Write just a few words, not full sentences, with one idea (or picture) per piece of paper.
- Write or draw in large letters with a marker, so it will be easy to read.

Small groups or plenary: Spread out the pieces of paper. Everyone helps to cluster them into similar sets of values, beliefs, or visions. Once there is general agreement, discuss the clusters. Give each cluster a short title and write each title on a different coloured sheet of paper.

If people worked in small groups, they return to plenary and post the results of their discussions on the wall for the full group to read and discuss in a gallery walk. Note similarities and differences between groups' conclusions.

Step 3: What are the elements of transformational narratives?
Plenary: Turn each cluster of values, beliefs, and visions into a short statement: a phrase or sentence in simple language. The statement should reflect what these values and beliefs look like in practice, what the world looks like when they are fulfilled, and what the desired future is.

Small groups: Each group works on one cluster of cards and writes one statement on the top of a flipchart sheet.

Plenary: Take turns sharing and discussing the statements. Write any reactions and suggestions below the statement, or post the statements around the room and invite people to write suggestions below the statements. Refrain from wordsmithing – focus on the meaning.

Small groups: As an option, work in small groups to improve the statements based on the feedback. Alternatively, each group creates a short scene or body sculpture to represent the transformational narrative. Another option is for a small team to work on the statements to share in the next session.

Plenary: Post the final statements on the wall. Announce: we have created the foundation of our transformational narrative. There is more to do to mobilise and communicate it – creating stories and messages for different audiences – but this will come later. For now, this is for us, an internal resource to feed our hopes and inspire our dreams. Pause and reflect on what you have created.

Invite participants to read the statements out loud and to perform scenes or body sculptures if they prepared these. After each statement or performance, allow a minute of silence for quiet reflection. In pairs, share reactions or feelings, then have a round of one-word reflections:

- How do you feel after hearing these statements or seeing these performances?

Small group: Ask for three or four volunteers to shape these elements into a synthesis of the transformational narrative – a short document, one or two pages, perhaps with images, to use as the foundation of narrative strategies. This may involve, for example, re-ordering the statements and images, editing the wording, or combining or separating some elements. The synthesis should keep the essence of the elements created by the group.

Plenary: The small group brings the synthesis back for feedback and suggested changes. Explain that this will not be a public document but a grounding resource to guide and inspire strategies.

Examples of transformational narratives

Students John Salter, Joan Trumpauer, and Anne Moody sit in at the downtown Woolworth's in Jackson, Mississippi © 1963, Wisconsin Historical Society

- The sit-in tactic initiated by young Black activists in 1960 in the South of the US during the Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) embodied a powerful narrative both exposing the brutality of racism and lifting up what desegregation could look like.
- #BlackLivesMatter
- We Walk, a nationwide action in Thailand that enabled people to meet each other face-to-face and walk together as a way of organising, and to communicate that unity would be an effective strategy against the military dictatorship.
- In protests against the military dictatorship in Myanmar, the nationwide pro-democracy movement adopted a simple three-finger gesture from a TV series, the Hunger Games, to communicate, "We are in this together. We may seem small, but we will win."

Protestors raise three fingers, Hledan Yangon, Myanmar © 2021, Maung Sun

- A Chilean feminist protest song and coordinated dance – The rapist in your path – went viral around the world, naming the state and the public as the problem.
- #LoveWins, "love makes a family".
- "We are the 99%" – a simple message and tactic from the Occupy Wall Street movement in the USA in 2011 – helped shift the narrative on inequality and focus attention on the economic elite.
- COPINH's slogan – "We are the guardians of the river; we are stewards of nature" – conveyed a narrative about each one of us taking action to protect the earth.
- At Standing Rock in the US, Native American activists proclaimed their role in preventing an oil pipeline through their territories and called for global solidarity: "We are not protesters, we are water protectors – we are protecting life. Stand with us."

Standing Rock © 2016, Alexa Bradley

- A Climate Justice Charter from the Climate Justice Movement, South Africa – a comprehensive future-oriented political, economic, cultural change agenda grounded in a transformational narrative that aligns people and the planet.
- Choose Earth, a platform to resource indigenous-led solutions.
- "Caution: Women Crossing the Line", JASS' slogan, derived from a literal and provocative translation of Observatorio de la transgression feminista, an action strategy in Mesoamerica to expose violence and make feminist resistance visible. The tongue-in-cheek image and message centred the importance of resistance at a time when policy advocacy was the dominant change strategy.

Crossing the line – JASS activists in Malawi, in alliance with faith leaders © 2013, JASS

1 The Wretched of the Earth, 1961
2 The Common Good, 1998
3 Director of Strategy and Partnership of the National Domestic Workers Alliance
4 Alicia Garza, "What Future of Black Lives under a Kleptocracy?" (video)
5 Power and Protection. Defending rights in Hostile Contexts. JASS, Fund for Global Human Rights.
6 A New Weave of Power, People and Politics, 2002, p. 53.
7 For more information, see Loretta Ross TEDTalk, "Don't call people out, call them in".
8 https://nonprofitquarterly.org/changing-our-narrative-about-narrative-the-infrastructure-required-for-building-narrative-power-2/ July 17, 2020
9 For resources on strategies for narrative change, see: Grassroots Policy Project: https://grassrootspolicy.org/featured-essays-on-narrative/ and the Narrative Initiative – https://narrativeinitiative.org/.
10 https://www.banktrack.org/download/the_agua_zarca_dam_and_lenca_communities_in_honduras/130920_earth_rights_rpt_130920_rioblanco_final.pdf – an insightful, comprehensive and historical 2013 analysis of the conflict over the Gualcarque River, revealing who was behind the dam, the ways that laws and courts were manipulated to serve local elites and investors, the role of the World Bank and IMF as well as the US Embassy.
11 Honduran indigenous rights campaigner wins Goldman prize | Honduras | The Guardian
12 The Grupo Asesor Internacional de Personas Expertas (GAIPE) includes specialists in international human rights law, international criminal law, and comparative criminal law, was created in November 2016 at the request of the family of Berta Cáceres and COPINH after the government and international human rights bodies failed to launch an in-depth investigation.
13 As reported by Daysi Flores from JASS who was present and interviewed people at the scene.
14 For Indigenous Peoples, Megadams Are 'Worse than Colonization', Terra Justa, 2015
15 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/apr/20/honduran-indigenous-rights-campaigner-wins-goldman-prize
16 Guardians of the River Case Study, Just Power: A Guide for Activists and Changemakers, JASS 2023
17 Berta Cáceres's Goldman prize acceptance speech in 2015 (video)
18 Noam Chomsky, Edward Herman. " Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media"