

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.