

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.