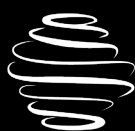




# COUNTERING EXTREME RIGHT NARRATIVES:

Learning from experimentation

March 2025



Global  
Narrative  
Hive



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# Background & Context

In 2022, before publicly launching in September 2023, the Global Narrative Hive (then still named “Narrative Network Initiative”), disseminated a one-off call for proposals for financial support under the “Common Cause” grant programme. The call was aimed at movement actors who wished to test and develop their own answers to the key questions identified in the many individual and collective conversations we held in shaping and setting up what ultimately became the Hive. Over and over again, we heard the need to better understand and experiment with how to more effectively build “common cause” across movements and regions when it came to narrative change, to enable us to more effectively resist fascist and fundamentalist narratives and build a more just world. Building such infrastructure would allow movements to develop solidarity, and to create and disseminate powerful shared narratives. We invited groups to submit proposals that sought to answer the following questions.

## What is needed for movements to:

- Create and experiment together around narratives?
- Dream together and create shared visions or metanarratives?
- Look ahead, scan the horizon and develop narratives for the future?
- Coordinate their work on narratives and/or effectively counter or prevent anti-rights narratives?

Through a collective selection process led by a working group of members of “The Connective” (our movement steering-group) a total of 9 applications were selected for support. These included:

**Honoring Our Guardians**, a project of **Whose Knowledge** centering Indigenous movements  [@whoseknowledge](https://www.instagram.com/whoseknowledge)

**LatFem** in Argentina  [@latfemnoticias](https://www.instagram.com/latfemnoticias)

**Udruženje za kulturu, afirmaciju i savjetovanje “KAS” Banja Luka** in Bosnia & Herzegovina  [UdrusenjeKASBanjaluka](https://www.facebook.com/UdrusenjeKASBanjaluka)

**Rede Transfeminista de Cuidados Digitais** in Brazil  [@rtcuidadosdigitais](https://www.instagram.com/rtcuidadosdigitais)

**Égides** in Canada and Francophone Africa  [@egidesalliance](https://www.instagram.com/egidesalliance)

**Mutante** in Colombia  [@mutanteorg](https://www.instagram.com/mutanteorg)

**HuMENA for Human Rights and Civic Engagement** in the MENA region  [@humenaorg](https://www.instagram.com/humenaorg)

# Navigating power dynamics & design of virtual learning spaces

We reflected deeply on how we wished to engage with, support and learn from the grantee organisations we resourced.

We knew that funder/grantee relationship involve power dynamics that we would need to navigate - particularly keeping in mind that this would be a one-off funding round and that we were not planning for the Hive to remain a funder beyond this.

We were acutely aware that often reporting requirements, deadlines and demands from donors can put enormous amounts of pressure on grantee organisations that take away energy, resources and time from being able to focus on their work.

We aimed to keep reporting as light as possible, be available and transparent and allow for the maximum amount of flexibility.

However, we realised that the power relationships embedded in funder/grantee relationships are inevitable despite the best intentions and must be navigated with continuous care, transparency and a good dose of self-reflection.

The aim of the Common Cause grant programme was ultimately to support experimentation and learning, so we knew that documentation would be an essential part of this process.

At the same time, we felt aware of not placing additional burdens and demands on our partner organisations with extensive documentation and reporting requests.

Initially we developed a set of 10 brief reflection questions in multiple languages, and grantee organisations were asked to respond one or two paragraphs per question in writing, video, on a call or in other formats that worked for them.



*Elena De Santi for ArtistsForClimate.org*



We soon realised that even this simple format embedded a one-directional reporting dynamic, where our partner organisations would be required to share information back to us rather than directly with each other.

In the spirit of experimentation, we decided to design virtual learning spaces, where representatives of the groups could collectively share insights and learnings with each other.

We offered the option to join one of these learning spaces as an alternative to any other form of reporting. Participating in a virtual exchange with other grantees was the report.

Almost all the resourced groups decided to choose this option and we received positive feedback to this proposal.

In July and September 2024, eight of the nine organizations supported came together to reflect on the work they had done, share experiences and learnings.

This took place through two 3-hour long virtual sessions, as described below. The virtual learning spaces were designed based on feedback gathered from groups regarding what they wanted to learn from each other and share back with the group.

*Izabela Markova*



They offered space for connection, deep reflection, learning from each other's contexts, what worked, what failed and what funders can do to better support movements and the creation of narrative infrastructure.

This report is a result of what we heard in these exchanges.

We are incredibly grateful to all of the organisations that participated and who shared so openly, honestly and generously with us and each other about their projects.

# The Common Cause Virtual Learning Exchanges

The Common Cause project supported nine organizations (including Honoring Our Guardians, a project of Whose Knowledge centering Indigenous movements; LatFem in Argentina; Udruženje za kulturu, afirmaciju i savjetovanje “KAS” Banja Luka in Bosnia and Herzegovina; Rede Transfeminista de Cuidados Digitais in Brazil; Égides in Canada and Francophone Africa; Mutante in Colombia and HuMENA in the MENA region) to experiment with different strategies to build narrative infrastructure to confronting anti-rights narratives in their contexts. In July and September 2024, eight of those nine organizations came together to reflect on the work they had done, share experiences and learnings. This took place through two 3-hour long virtual sessions, as described below:

## First Session

(July 29, 2024)

Attended by members of:

- LatFem (Argentina)
- Mutante (Colombia)
- Udruženje za kulturu, afirmaciju i savjetovanje “KAS” Banja Luka (Bosnia & Herzegovina)
- Whose Knowledge? (Honoring our Guardians)

## Second Session

(September 11, 2024)

Attended by members of:

- Rede Transfeminista de Cuidados Digitais (Brazil)
- Égides (Canada, Francophone Africa)
- HuMENA (MENA region)

Note: Citations from participants are in quotes. Everything else is our own elaboration based on the notes taken and the recording from the session. A first draft of this report has been shared with the participants who had the opportunity to add comments and suggestions for editing.





# Some learnings & reflections shared

A topic that attracted a lot of interest was a discussion on why/when anti-rights narratives work and do not work. The facilitators opened this conversation by sharing examples (the popular anti-migrant narratives in Europe and, in contrast, the failed campaign to repeal the Gender Identity Law in Uruguay in 2022).

## Successful anti-rights narratives

Play into people's fears: of the Other, of change.

Play into the feelings of insecurity that people have during economic, political or other crisis.

Play into the need for people to feel superior to others.

Benefit from people's dissatisfaction with democracy and how inequalities have not been sufficiently addressed. They are inserted in a broader individualistic, neoliberal narrative.

Instrumentalize anti-colonialist narratives: "the individual is the new colony and the family is the last fortress".

## Failed anti-rights narratives

When people have enough direct experience of the Other, when they can build relationships with those Others, they are less receptive to narratives of fear. Everything that is done to develop intersectional approaches, to bring together people who normally wouldn't even talk to each other, helps to counter narratives based on fear of Others.

Some people are genuinely curious to understand issues they don't know much about and don't feel comfortable with discourses that are violent and close down dialogue.

Having alternative narratives available may not be enough in and of itself but it can help some people to think twice about the anti-rights discourse they heard.

When anti-rights narratives rely too much on doom and despair, it can be counterproductive. Hope-based narratives of empowerment can work well to counter them.

When asked what the Common Cause project as a whole shows about the value of experimenting with narrative power, participants responded:

*"We have done enough trying to convince each other; now it's time to get to know each other".*

*"There are few places that support this (kind of) coming together and there are few times 'in the struggle' where we have the time and space to do this in community with others: building collective power".*

*"It is essential that we reclaim our stories rather than merely defending ourselves against harmful narratives".*

# The Failure Workshop

In the survey that preceded the sessions we asked participants if they were interested in discussing something that had failed in the course of their work, in order to learn from it. Most participants volunteered to do this and we selected one specific experience for each session that was presented by the activists involved and then discussed by the entire group. To help create a safe and open atmosphere, we opened this moment by sharing a failure from the Hive itself.

Some conclusions from the discussions held:

- **Challenging the sacred cows of democracy:** Narrative change work is needed that confronts anti-rights narratives and forces activists to face the uncomfortable limitations of notions that are very dear to mainstream journalism/human rights, like “neutrality” or “freedom of expression”. Activists have started to unpack and rethink these notions in the light of their lived experiences as part of marginalized communities and of the opponents they are facing.
- **Trying to make community times fit into donors’ frames:** There is still a disconnect between the mainstream model of what is funded (short term, tangible activities, easily publicized results) and the ways communities and movements operate. Some failures are born out of the attempt to reconcile these two very different logics – more dialogue with funders and more flexibility on their part are needed to get real, long-lasting results.
- **Staying with the frustration:** “We always talk about our mistakes/challenges as an opportunity to learn. We can’t deny our frustration, of course, but try to see them as a process for improvement”. Embracing the frustration and staying with it, without jumping right away into “making it positive” can help for the learning from failure process to be more genuine.

These discussions were very respectful and rich in both cases. An example of feedback provided and widely shared:

“Having the possibility to share this Failure Café with you is amazing, we feel very safe here to share our journey”.

To close the sessions, we asked participants **what made them proud about the work done**. Here is what they said:

- **Creating community:** “A proactive and empowered hub for the new generation of feminists”; “a community of non-activist women in WhatsApp who share pro-democracy and anti-radical Right content”; “a safe space to share vulnerabilities”; “participants appropriated the training and developed their own projects locally”.
- **Opening new paths:** “Bringing conversations into public and activist spaces”, “being intergenerational stretched our conversations in new directions”; “the narratives we collectively create spread hope and transform despair into hope”.
- **Flexibility:** “How we and those who participate in the project were able to adapt and show up”; “We found a way despite all the difficulties”.

“ All participants have now become facilitators in their territories and they have put in practice what they learned but with their own narratives, reshuffling everything and creating something new. ”



# 5 Key Lessons for Activists

Based on these rich, honest and generative discussions with the organisations that participated, we've distilled 5 key lessons from activists and funders to absorb and learn from. We hope these will provide points of reflection on the reader's own practices and organising in the space of narrative change, to enable us to effectively support our movements and sharpen our tools in confronting anti-rights movements and building the worlds of justice and liberation that we envision.

## 01 **Know Thy Enemy**

Anti-rights movements and actors are shameless, unethical and have no moral restraints. When dealing with them, assume and plan for the worst, trust no agreement. Being realistic about who they are does not mean that you will act like them, just that you will be better able to protect yourself and your community while still being effective. Do not romanticize them or think that they can be transformed just because they are exposed to facts or by simply treating them in an empathic and respectful way. Remember that engaging with extremists may sometimes backfire and give them an even bigger platform for their messages.

*"We were so convinced of the beautiful dimensions of the methodology we had created that we did not prepare ourselves for the backlash".*

## 02 **Know (And Don't Fear) Thy Funder**

Do not assume that your funder will not understand if the context changes or you realize after some time of implementing the work that you'll need to cancel, modify or postpone your activities. Talk to your funder - they are human beings after all and some are even activists too!

## 03 **Know (And Trust) Thy Community**

Before building your project check if your community has enough interest and availability to be part of it; even better: build your project with them, and not just around what your organization needs/want to do, or what has been successfully done elsewhere. And if they tell you No/Better Not, trust them - they know.

*"I am proud of having believed in the power of connecting people who are different.*

*I will keep puncturing the filter bubbles so we can keep creating a diverse and loving world".*

*"Because the first step toward change is not to lose the ability to dream and imagine other worlds".*



Naandeyé García Villegas

## 04

### **Always have (and budget for) a Plan B**

Activists in the Global South work in contexts where the unpredictable is always ready to emerge – this goes from power cuts to violence erupting or environmental catastrophes. Anything and everything can fail or become irrelevant. Plan and budget for alternative venues, activities, channels (and talk to your funder about it).

*“There is value in experimentation. The only way to find solutions to problems – for those who don’t have established formulas – is to define a hypothesis and try it without fear of failure. The failure contains information that helps to adjust the hypothesis”.*

## 05

### **Dare, And Dare Again**

Forget the trodden paths, what always has been done; forget what you know does not work but seems to be in favour with donors: put aside the jargon.

Ask yourself “why not?” Dare, and dare again, and dare more. Check how much you are doing defensive work vs shaping and putting forward your own messages - if needed, change the proportion to center the latter!

*“Because the first step toward change is not to lose the ability to dream and imagine other worlds”*



Luciana Hoerlle



# 5 Key Lessons for *Funders* Common Cause Virtual Learning

01

## **Know Thy Enemy**

More often than not, life does not operate within an strategic/annual plan framework. Be as flexible as possible and trust that your grantees know their own context, communities and capacities best. There are many valid reasons why grantees may need to modify, cancel or postpone activities. They need to know that they can talk to you about this and that you are open to hear from them. They won't assume it, you need to make it explicit as a way to build trust. Your flexibility will allow them to respond better to their communities.

*"Openness to failure reduces fear, anxiety and burnout. We live in times where the neoliberal command to 'achieve and be successful' prevails. A lot of our burnout comes from not allowing ourselves to be ok with things not working out".*

02

## **Ask Questions (even difficult ones)**

Many funders are reluctant to "interfere" but asking informed questions to make sure grantees won't set themselves up to failure can be helpful. In the next points there are some examples of areas you could safely ask about. Grantees may be asking themselves those same questions and it may be helpful to discuss them with you.

*"Why are respect and empathy not enough to transform a polarized conversation?"*

03

## **Understand What You Are Funding**

Each context and each grantee are unique. Projects have their own logic - forcing them to fit into a ready-made model (length, flow of activities, 'results') creates unnecessary stress for activists and may lead to artificial, ineffective activities. Let us say it once again: support movements/groups in the long term, commit to growing and learning with them and supporting their growth. Change can take years/decades and not just the period of a grant.

*"The words I would say to funders are: We are able to come together, share, dream, vision, strategise. There is power and magic that results when we have time and space to do all that in community with others".*

## 04

### **Please Do Not Underestimate the Enemy**

Anti-rights actors are shameless, unethical and have no moral restraints. Grantees bravely face them but it is hard for highly principled activists to even imagine the traps set for them. Ask difficult questions that may help them take the measure of their enemies and protect themselves. Provide support and flexibility for grantees to receive payments and other forms of support, i.e. using communication channels aligned with digital security.

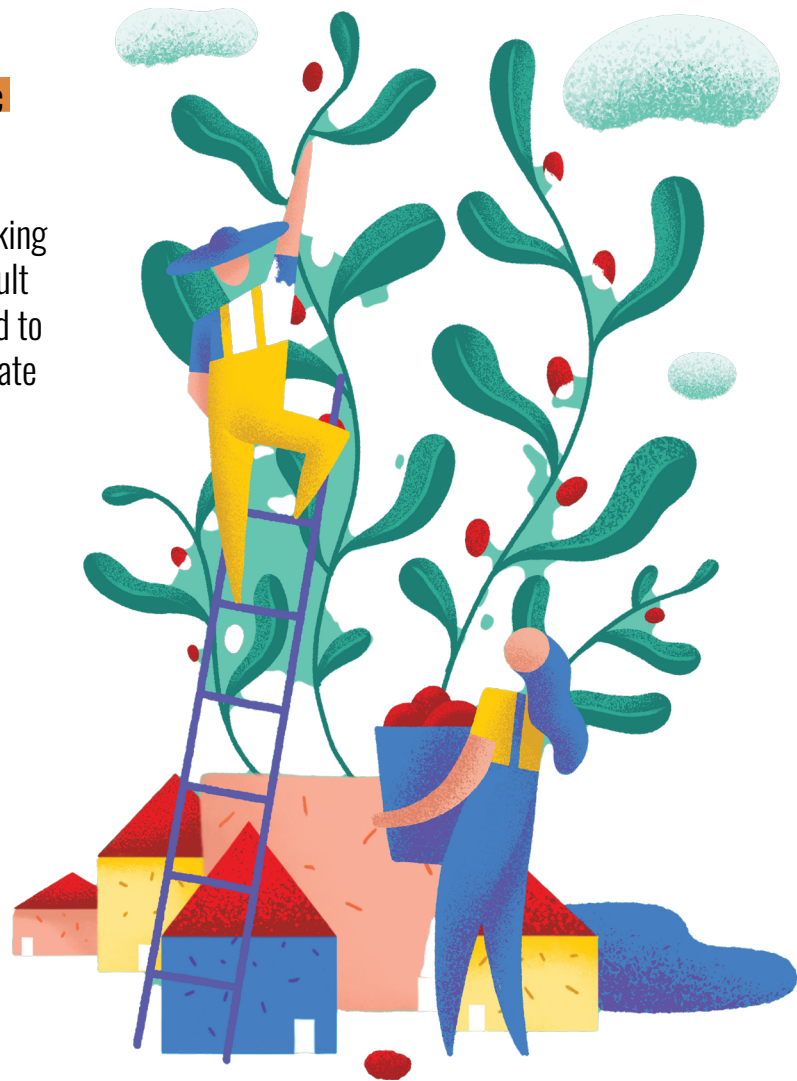
*“Antigender, antifeminist, racist, anti-environment rights are all within a broader narrative that is neoliberal and individualistic. They are not born of some essential hatred but from a deep dissatisfaction with democracy and how inequalities have been managed. These are not crazy, irrational narratives - there is a kernel of truth in them and that is why they work”.*

## 05

### **Do Encourage Grantees to Be Realistic**


Often grantees feel pressured to overestimate themselves to respond to funder expectations. So, if a project involves more-than-human working hours, achievements or goals, please ask difficult questions and tell grantees that they don't need to be superhuman to be funded. They will appreciate it! Encourage grantees to ask for and receive extensions if necessary and support them in making this an easy and fast process.

*“Believe in our dreams and support us to build infrastructures of affection”.*



Marko Jovanova





The Global Narrative Hive is a network founded in 2023 to connect and grow the global ecosystem of activists and campaigners, communications workers, researchers, artists, journalists and others who are using narratives to advance their visions of a more just world.

To find out more about the Global Narrative Hive, to join one of our virtual sessions or simply to say hello, please email us at: **[narratives@global-dialogue.org](mailto:narratives@global-dialogue.org)** or visit our [blog](#).