



Narratives x Civic Space Convening

Learning - Connecting - Strategizing
New York City – November 2019
Hosted by Oxfam @ Ford Foundation

During 19-20-21 November, Oxfam convened a creative, diverse and wide-ranging group of organisations, networks and movements, experimenting with the idea of using narratives to open civic space. Some people came with a narrative change, framing, communications starting point, others from a mobilisation, movement-building and bridging perspective, others looking at this challenge through a civic space and human rights defence lens. From these different starting points, the convening enabled us to step out of our usual perspectives, learn from each-other's work and meet somewhere in the middle, by grounding future work in principles of shared feminist leadership; together in positive creativity; and we made a promise to hold onto the diversity of perspectives. Our conclusion is that together we are stronger and we need to work together to be the biggest 'US' we can be. Reflective, purposeful collective narrative and framing work can be a way to open space for a different conversation, it can be a way to reflect on our own values and practices as well as strengthen our activism and our organisations. This is a synthesis of our discussions, for more information please get in touch with [Isabel Crabtree-Condor](#).

This paper is divided in 4 parts:

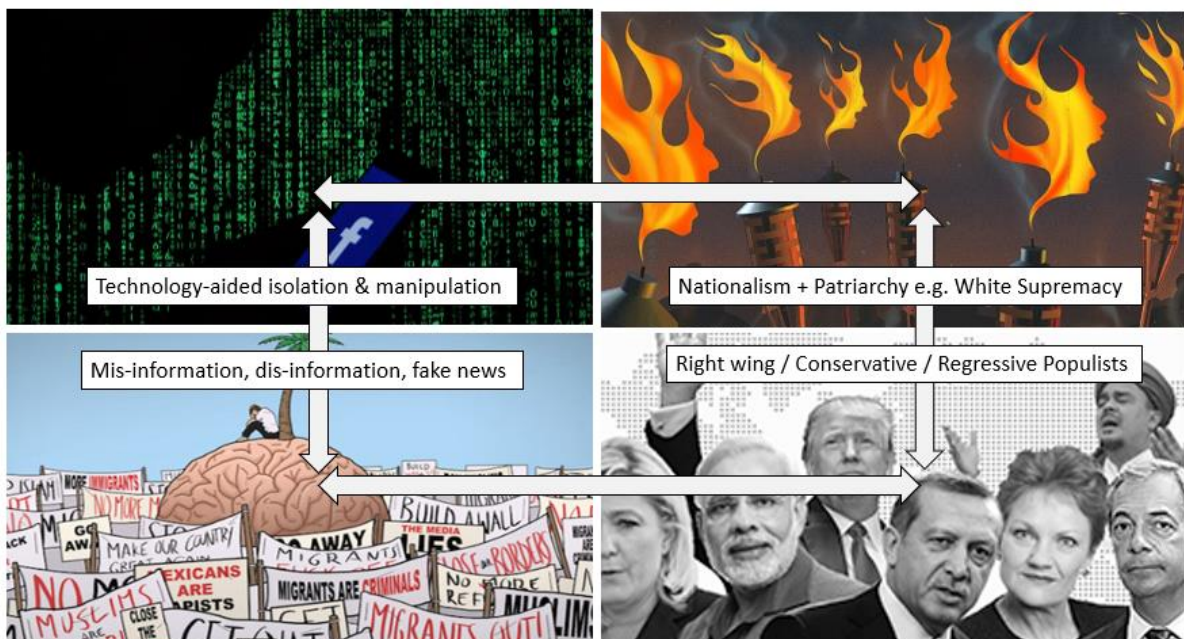
[Part 1 The challenges we face](#)

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Part 1 The challenges we face: Activism undermined from outside and inside



External challenges: We talked about the pressing challenges that populism and the organised right pose. Fear, polarisation, isolation, individualisation are all things which existed pre-tech revolution but in the last 5 years technology is playing a larger and larger role in hollowing out the middle. It is harder

and harder for people with different perspectives to connect. We see political capture everywhere. The fierce protection of *the free market* and *business is best* ideas when business and community interests collide. The resonant attacks we encounter are those thrown at young activists, women activists, rights defenders, journalists, networks and organisations, that question or challenge or hold power holders to account. In these attacks, we see common themes emerging: against development; against progress, against stability, against security, against the national interest. Not all civil society is like us or agrees with us, active citizenship is also the white supremacist, alt right tikki torch bearers in Charlotte, USA and its pro-democracy student-led mobilisations in the Hong Kong. We need to work with a broad understanding that civic space is not just for organisations and we need to understand why the dominant narratives are so compelling to more and more people.

Internal challenges: The threats we face are not just external to ourselves. We discussed how we are also part of the problem. We talked about how we need to be a lot clearer about what we as activists, networks, organisations and movements are for, rather than always what we are against. Now more than ever there's a need to be propositional, to bridge between groups, to make the biggest "us" we can be. These kinds of connections require communication and facilitation. Without that it is hard to collaborate. We also spoke of the challenges of legitimacy and who the legitimate actors are in different contexts. We discussed the challenges of NGO-isation of movements and project-isation of development which run counter to the long term nature of this kind of more collaborative work. As a sector, we have not always been inclusive and held diversity well. Narrative work related to civic space and human rights can help us to open space for those who were left out but doing that requires careful, humble facilitation and support.

Why narratives x civic space?

"Agents of foreign white monopoly capital in South Africa"; "against the national interest and a destabilising force in Niger"; "feeding off the poverty of the people in Peru"; "anti-development and briefcase NGOs in Uganda" – these are just some of the resonant attacks we've been encountering. If stories and narratives are used to close down conversations, undercut activism and undermine social movements, can stories and new narratives, woven in a collective inclusive way be a way to open space for debate, support activism and create space for a different conversation? This is the central idea we want to explore, and ask ourselves: where do we want to go with this? And how are we going to get there?



Part 2: Our Panel

We invited four thought leaders, also representing different organisations, networks and collectives to share their insights from their work to advance narratives that open civic space for collective action. It was great to listen and learn from others who are pushing the boundaries of collective action, digging deeper into power and challenging long held beliefs of our sector! [View the full panel here.](#)

Narrative work is how we craft and resurface our world views and unpick the structural oppressions that undermine us. Narrative work helps us to claim space and challenge the more conservative mainstream narratives that contribute to closing space and oppression.



Jee Kim, Executive Director [The Narrative Initiative](#), view the [segment here](#).

Jee explores the distinction between stories, narratives and deep narratives, reinforcing some of the concepts that can be found in their groundbreaking publication [Toward New Gravity](#). Narrative change is multi-disciplinary. He explores the current political moment, asking if populism is a narrative opening, opportunity and even imperative and what the implications might be for traditional rights-based approaches.



Julia Roig, President [PartnersGlobal](#), view the [segment here](#).

Julia focuses on PartnersGlobal [Engaging Narratives for Peace](#) research and approach. She explains that social change agents must acknowledge their own cognitive biases and mental models. This affects how social change agents engage effectively with narrative change, and/or can further polarization and isolate potential allies by how issues are framed. She also explores how narrative engagement can contribute to *Restorative Advocacy* when our goal isn't to change others' narrative understanding or identity, but rather when we seek to "complexify" narratives, especially in the public sphere.



Thomas Coombes, Founder [Hope-Based Communications](#), view the [segment here](#).

Speaks to [Be the Narrative](#) a new report brought to you by JustLabs and the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR). Be the narrative lays out bold steps for building new narratives about human rights. He explores how the activities of NGOs need to create the stories that create new narratives and makes practical recommendations for the communications infrastructure they need to build proposals for a human-rights friendly meta narrative. JustLabs is working with 12 human rights organizations to produce new narratives that not only respond to those of populists, but that provide an alternate vision of what human rights are, where they take place, and who they are for.



Shereen Essof, Director Just Associates (JASS), view the [segment here](#).

Explains how narrative work forms a critical part of JASS's long-time movement organizing work with grassroots women in difficult contexts. As feminists, their work has always centered [a power analysis that looks at ideology and socialization](#) as a key "battleground" and in more recent years, bringing that analysis to the challenges of ["defending rights in hostile contexts"](#) pointing to how sexism (racism, etc) are the fault lines that power exploits to polarize and silence. The growing recognition of misogyny at the heart of rising authoritarianism makes the centering of gender (and sexuality, race, class) more urgent in narrative work. She shares questions and insights about how to balance smart narrative work with organizing and political, popular education.



Part 3: Learning from experimental approaches to narratives x civic space

We asked different people to share their experiments and work in the arena of narratives and civic space. These are different areas of work, where different actors bring different things to the collaborations. The underlying idea is that you need to think about all areas of work to do effective narrative work, on any topic. That doesn't necessarily mean doing it all yourself or organisations

becoming a one stop shop for everything on narratives and civic space but partnering up with those most capable and credible for the different elements of the work.

Experimental collaboration means working in creative partnerships that make use of the different knowledge and resources that different actors bring to the table: the skills, experiences, networks, connections and funds which we need access to.



Thinking of these elements as critical components, ingredients and often overlapping work that should help to build out your narratives work regardless of specific focus. The examples we learnt about over two days shows us that in practice you have to blend these strategies, stagger and sequence them based on the capacities you already have and the partnerships you might need to get you to the next level of impact, reach, resonance and connection.

**Experimental Areas #1
Research & Analysis**



**Experimental Areas #2
Communications & Framing**



**Experimental Areas #3
Mobilising & Bridging**



People shared their experiments and approaches...



“The space for civil society depends on 3 factors: social cultural values, capacity and agency of civil society and the state’s interventions”

Le Quang Binh, (Former) Director iSEE now chairperson of PPWG [Access the ppt](#)



“Understanding is frame dependent, old thinking is: any story will do, new thinking is: what will this story do?”

Marisa Gerstein Pineau, Researcher and Senior Associate, [Frameworks Institute](#) [Access the ppt](#)



“Alliances to empower change - how can we be more than just ‘us’? By connecting new & old activisms”

Alejandra Alayza, Program Manager, Oxfam in Peru [Actua.peWebsite](#) [Access the ppt](#)



“A first step towards creating narratives that build power *with* and power *for* transformative change is to use narrative analysis tools to unmask the narratives used to marginalise and foster hate and violence”

Lisa Veneklasen & Shereen Essof, Outgoing and Incoming Directors of JASS [Access ppt](#)



“Communications is critical and so are communicators. That’s why we work with journalists across the globe. We want to contribute to positive narratives about protests and protestors”

Patricia Melendez, Head of Civic Space, [Article 19](#) [Access the ppt](#)



“Not only is hope a powerful force for progress, it is a smart strategy for social change.

Hope is the key to connecting to people with positive emotions like joy, humour, compassion and empathy. *Thomas Coombes, Founder [Hope Based Communications](#)*



COLLECTIVE REFLECTIONS: Together we came to the following key reflections on the sessions

On Power: Power is not static. If you seek to shift the balance, expect and prepare for the backlash, this is what civic space closure is about. Facts and feelings are important for building collective power.

On frames: Understanding is frame dependent: you say, they think. Don't repeat and reinforce the oppositions frame. Create new fresh frames and narratives with the power of telling an aspirational culturally resonant story that goes towards hope, the future, a vision that people want to be part of.

On Stories: Weigh pros and cons of 'hero' vs 'collective' stories, there are civic space implications. Set up creative partnerships for diverse and "unexpected" messengers, media or channels, can help stories to land and spread.

On research: Should blend values + that speak to feelings + resonant facts. Research must underpin narrative or frame choice, it tells you where people are at, what they might need and connect with.

On framing and narrative strategies and alliances: Be clear about the purpose: what do you want to accomplish. Work as an orchestra, be an onion alliance, where everyone has a layer and role to play. Be committed to inclusivity at all levels and work with people who don't think like you.

On Culture: Culture is a non-violent form of resistance. It's a means to connect. We can support cultural acupuncture by connecting and working with artists, musicians, writers, illustrators. Working in this way can strengthen credibility, legitimacy as well as diversity of messengers and mediums.

On emotions and values: These can cut through the noise. Empathy can be a means to surprise and disarm. Can we use empathy as a means strengthen connections? The conservative movement got big because it connects to deep values, stokes fear, offers a solution to insecurity: safety and control.



Part 4 Strategizing: collective principles, values and actions

We agreed we need to work together, as the scale of the challenges we face related to civic space & rise of right wing, patriarchal, populism is going to require all the creativity, collaboration and grit we can muster. The good news is that we have concrete assets and actions for *Supporting Open Source Knowledge*; *Common Strategy for elevating voices*; and *Strengthening capacity on digital marketing and the narrative infrastructure required to be effective*.

Principles for our work together →

**Shared Feminist Leadership
Togetherness in positive creativity
Hold on to the diversity**

Three areas of collaboration →

	1 Working together & open source knowledge	2 Narrative capacity & infrastructure	3 Collective strategy for amplifying each other
On what	Facilitating open accessible access to different types of knowledge across borders. Ensuring our movement is able to share experiences, borrow and adapt ideas & collaborate	Strengthening capacity ensuring our movement is tooled with ways of working digital marketing + research + tools + framing + civic space for activism	Elevating voices and messengers; amplifying each other. What are our geographies of collaboration in different regions to amplify and connect?
Key Assets	Network of relationships and collaborators , building on geographies of interconnections started here. There's huge power in creating a shared space. What we know from experiences & expertise	We know a lot collectively, we have a lot of tools collectively how can we help each other to understand, adapt and make use of each others work, expertise and experiences?	Collective power analysis and narrative analysis together will show us entry points for action. Creative partnerships that are all about doing things differently.
Our Principle	#sharedfeministleadership Using narrative work to claim space collectively for "us" and be the biggest most inclusive "us" we can be using feminist practice to help us hold that space in an inclusive open way that supports " different ways of knowing "	#holdthediversity By enabling narratives effectively through more effective collaboration No 1 size fits all Continuous construction between research and practice Always show up	#nosilos We want to work together in positive creativity to connect across the silos and optimise the resources we have by coming together to do more things together and amplify each other. Connect, connect, connect
Top Actions	Start where the energy is and collaboration is already happening. What are the questions we have and can we share resources to answer those? We don't need a formula to come together to listen and learn but we do need to make time to connect and that requires institutional backing, and support and resources. Its easier to collaborate now with a better collective understanding of each other. Knowledge sharing is part of resource sharing and we need to share resources better (ideas, people, \$)	Identify/Share/ Create 1) tools to analyse and understand existing narratives (dominant and our own) to know what we are dealing with (externally & internally) 2) tools to connect analysis to the values part to understand the implications for creating engaging narratives Organise ourselves to help others to use the tools with their existing resources and networks. Think of this work as continuous construction between research and practice Make lighter pilot collaborations + support	Invest in understanding our narrative glue. The narratives that bind all of us. E.g. umbrella narrative or the narrative journey which enables to understand the narratives of the people we work with. Untold narratives that civic us, untold narratives about civic space. Identify the meta narratives that cut across different contexts, the core ones which are adapted and given a specific contextual flavour. Identify the new narratives we want to develop (with contextual grounding). This is complex.

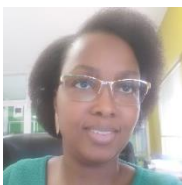
	Support a networked approach connection and collaboration for inter-institutional and inter-collectives learning, exchange, experimentation, co-creation and collaborations.	regular connection between them and where possible integrate working together. We need to avoid continuing to do collaborations in separately and without connecting with other initiatives and the existing knowledge.	Focus on positive entry , if you don't understand how people think you won't be successful in creating meta narratives. Start with where people are, hook into that and where you want them to go? Role of journalists is key.
	(Flip charts here)	(Flip charts here)	(Flip charts here)

To round us off Sophie Kyagulanyi, Governance & Accountability Manager for Oxfam in Uganda and Elvira Matsinhe, Active Citizenship and Governance Coordinator in Mozambique shares some reflections from their perspective.



Sophie leads Uganda's civic space work. Oxfam in Uganda is exploring how to unpack negative narratives towards civil society as part of their work to protect and open civic space (which includes strengthening accountability of civil society, protection of partners and influencing work). They have been researching the value that civil society brings to development in Uganda from different vantage points.

We need such moments to hear how others are experimenting with narratives on civic space and human rights and to reflect on the work we do. Its interesting to see that different perceptions are drawn from how we do our work. These perceptions often will determine if whether our work can contribute to a bigger transformative change. These moments of reflections help in shaping our interventions to connect with the people in the different contexts where Oxfam works. I was able to use the enormous knowledge I obtained from the practitioners to redefine and strengthen the Uganda Civic Space strategies and reinforce the narrative component of our work.



Elvira leads the civic space work in Mozambique. Although there have been narratives against CSOs in Mozambique for some time now, little has been done to address this. On one hand, some organizations respond directly to these narratives, others remain silent. There is a need to bring this issue more into the dialogue and bring organizations together to discuss and think of effective ways to face this scenery. She's interested in working with diverse partners in developing new positive narratives at a time when these actors are heavily under attack.

Around the world, narratives have increasingly been the weapon used against civil society to silence and inhibit it from fighting for people's civil rights. There is a need to ensure that society reorganizes itself to face this challenge. Civil society must know how to tell its own narrative, but more than that it must transform itself so that it is an agent and exemplary and relevant in society so that anyone can transmit a positive narrative about CSOs. It is necessary to develop and use transformative tools that can shift the current narratives that discriminate against organizations. One of these tools is working together to have a collective impact. Additionally, to counter the narrative that is widespread about civil society being ineffective, we need to tell and live our own narrative and show how we are effective.