

# Narrative, Power and Polarisation: The Role of Influential Actors

In societies marked by deep social divisions, powerful individuals and organisations play a key role in building up narratives which promote either peaceful engagement or polarisation that can lead to violence. This paper discusses the wide range of actors who have the power to shape narratives at the national level, elaborating them to advance their goals. It proposes practical strategies on how diverse stakeholders – civil society, policy makers and donors, among others – can work with, as well as around, these influential actors to ensure that the narrative landscape advances peace instead of deepening conflict and polarisation.

The paper expands on original ideas and recommendations in IFIT's [narrative framework](#), which uses the analogy of the '[narrative tree](#)' to explain narrative dynamics. Grounded in consultations with IFIT [brain trusts](#) in Libya, Colombia and Zimbabwe, IFIT's [Inclusive Narratives Practice Group](#) and other leading experts in narrative and politics, it shows that influential actors' ways of elaborating narratives depends on the structural and institutional factors in each national context. The paper challenges the view that imposing a new unifying narrative is an effective way to counter polarisation, instead advocating for work that illuminates narrative biases, changes narratives from within and amplifies smaller stories to encourage social engagement at scale.

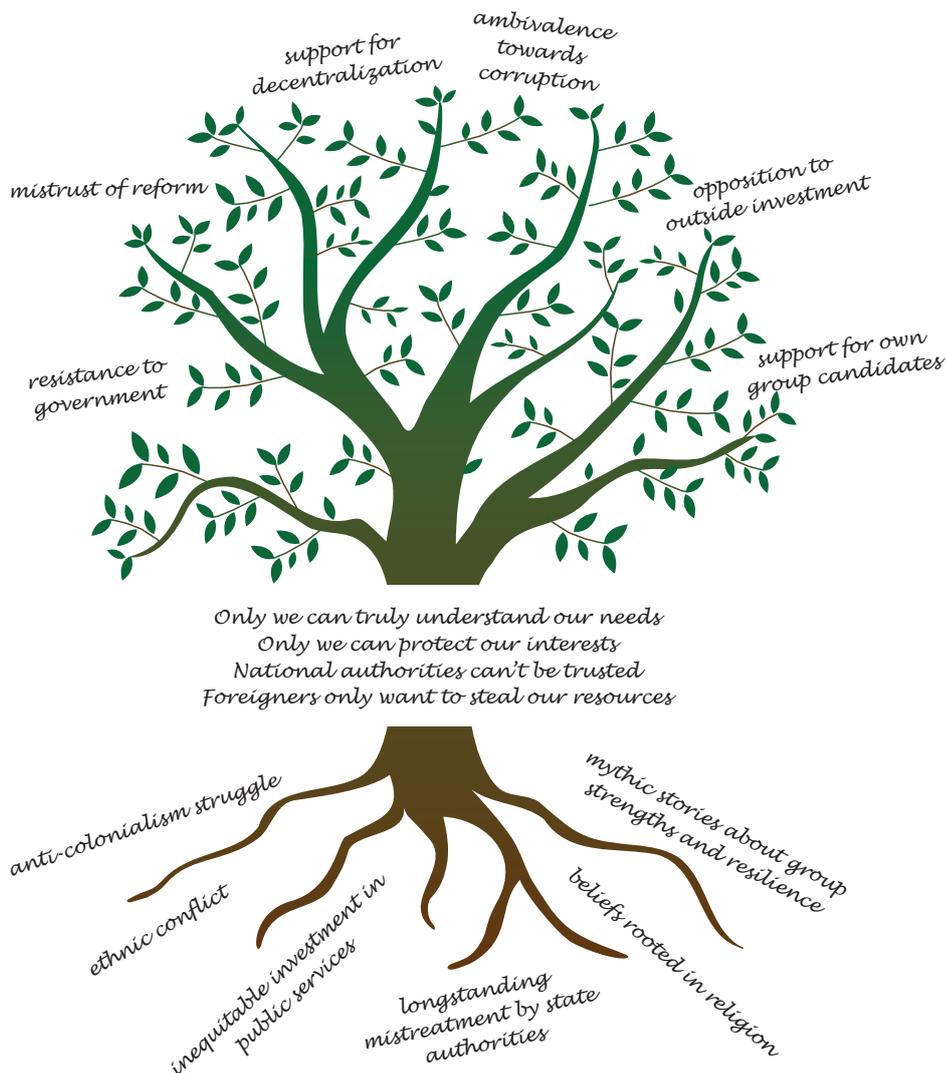
## Narrative and Conflict Management

Narratives are systems of stories that shape how we understand ourselves and our relationship to our social group and others, as well as the way we mobilise for social and political action. For this reason, narratives are central to how we manage the conflicts that normally come up in any society. At the national level, conflicts tend to emerge from group grievances rooted in structural elements, such as historical legacies, political geography and economic conditions. They are also rooted in institutional elements, such as the inclusiveness of state organs and how elites use them.

When unaddressed, group grievances weaken social trust and institutions, creating rifts and incentivising violence as a viable option for resolving conflict. Narratives in turn provide the moral architecture that justifies and spurs people’s actions, either towards positive engagement concerning their grievances or towards further polarisation and eventually violence. While the terms ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ suggest fiction, many narratives refer to established facts and real events, even if other narratives do not. Narratives are all around us, describing and shaping our world with different degrees of veracity and visibility. Many narratives are so normalised or internalised that we cannot see how they influence our worldview and what we do.

As laid out in IFIT’s [narrative framework](#), narratives can be visualised as trees that together create the national (or subnational) narrative landscape. The roots of each narrative tree are facts, events, parables and stories about the collective past. These roots grow out of each society’s structural and institutional soil, anchoring people’s identity and providing a moral foundation for their worldview. The trunk is the visible narrative, which forms from shared roots and serves to justify people’s actions. The branches are the actions, policies and other outcomes that emerge from the trunk. Figure 1 offers an invented example of how roots, trunk and branches may interrelate.

FIGURE 1. EXAMPLE OF A NARRATIVE TREE



In societies that manage their conflicts effectively, the narrative landscape looks like a ‘mixed’ forest, with many kinds of narrative trees growing together and intermingling. By contrast, in highly polarised societies, two or three narrative trees come to dominate the landscape, overshadowing and blocking other trees. As an increasing number of individuals pick up, repeat and elaborate divisive narratives within the networks of people to whom they are connected and organisations in which they are embedded, as well as in public and via traditional and social media platforms, these narrative trees grow so large and rigid that they seem like the only way to describe what is happening in politics and society.

These dominant narratives reduce complex social realities into simple, self-reinforcing stories, which promote the legitimacy of one group’s grievances while portraying others as villains and drivers of conflict. In this ‘us versus them’ context, extreme views begin to eclipse moderate views in the public eye and people tend to reject or attack narratives other than their own. The trunks of dominant narratives are so big that they prevent other narrative trees from gaining ground, and so strong that they resist challenging facts or attempts to change them from outside.

Thus, changing the narrative landscape into a mixed forest calls for a combination of strategies. First, it requires working with people to transform their narrative trees from within, avoiding the rigid trunks and focusing on the more malleable roots and branches. Second, it requires growing the visibility of the many smaller trees in the narrative landscape so that they reflect a plurality of views and the complexity and interconnectedness of society. Because narratives exist in a single ecosystem, a change in one narrative tree leads to changes in others over time, which in turn enables narrative work to shift the landscape away from polarisation towards diversity and engagement.

## Sources of Narrative Power

To engage effectively in narrative work, it is important to understand the dynamics by which different actors – particularly powerful ones whose stories are highly visible and influential – contribute to the growth of dominant narrative trees and the role this plays in conflict management. Powerful actors use narratives to protect their interests, promote their ideas and pursue their goals. By building up narratives, they bring people together for a common aim and legitimise their decisions and actions. The narratives influential actors elaborate within their networks and organisations, and in public and through the media, affect the national narrative landscape, often determining which narrative trees flourish and which are blocked. They thereby either promote constructive social engagement or contribute to polarisation. Insights from IFIT brain trust members in Zimbabwe, Colombia and Libya, summarised in Boxes 1–3, illustrate the diversity of powerful actors and how they contribute to the growth of two or three dominant narratives around major events, deepening social divisions.

While politicians are commonly known for their use of narratives, it is important to account for the many other types of influential actors who shape narrative landscapes. They vary significantly depending on the national context. For example, influential actors in

Zimbabwe can be identified as politicians in the ruling party, security forces leaders, liberation movement veterans, traditional authorities, traditional media content producers, young people and cultural figures. In Colombia, they include presidential candidates and their opposing parties, civil servants, religious leaders, businesspeople, ex-combatants and civil society associations. In Libya, meanwhile, they include politicians in rival governments, subnational authorities, tribal leaders, businesspeople, religious authorities and violent extremists. This paper is focused on national actors, but regional and international actors – operating within states, multilateral organisations, donor agencies, diaspora groups, transnational crime networks, extremist groups and multinational corporations, among others – also participate in moulding dominant national narratives, usually in concert with different domestic actors.

Individual actors tend to derive their power from institutions and networks. Institutions are stable rules, norms and practices, both formal and informal, which facilitate cooperation and shape social behaviour. They range from broad institutions such as religion and family to specific self-sustaining organisations such as traditional authorities and the military. Networks of individuals and organisations, meanwhile, structure social interactions and guide the flow of information, goods and influence. This means that it is not just individuals who are part of formal institutions traditionally associated with power, such as state organs, who are influential actors. Depending on the context, they may include cultural figures, youth leaders, academics, social media influencers or members of social movements, for example.

There is no simple way to model forms of power, as power is the ability not only to coerce others against their will but also to structure their available choices, and even their preferences. Yet, four broad categories can be identified: 1) political power and the arena of governance; 2) security-related power and the arena of physical violence; 3) economic power and the arena of business and resource distribution; and 4) status-based power and the arena of cultural recognition and production.

Influential actors tend to draw on more than one source of power, as the lines between these categories are often indistinct. In addition, because they are diverse, actors with different forms of power, and even the same form of power, may use it in contrasting ways. For example, while both are major actors with similar forms of power in Zimbabwe, military leaders operate across the arenas of physical violence, business, governance and cultural recognition differently from members of the pro-government Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association. This affects the means they use to build up conflict narratives, with veterans typically using more extreme rhetoric than military leaders and aiming it at different, if overlapping, networks and target audiences. Business leaders, cultural figures and other individual actors have their own way of using their influence and growing narratives in pursuit of their specific interests.

Power is itself a major topic of stories in circulation, which everyone responds to and tells. All broadly political narratives speak about power, with stories usually taking the form of main characters being subjected to injustices by villains who use their power in an abusive way. In polarised contexts, various group and individual grievances are amalgamated into a few dominant narratives that portray the other side as villains. Certain

influential actors adopt or are given the role of representing either abusive power or legitimate grievances, depending on the teller's perspective, as in the case of Juan Manuel Santos and Álvaro Uribe during the 2016 peace plebiscite in Colombia. But while all influential actors feature in narratives through their forms of power, they are publicly visible to different degrees. This narrative prevalence in turn strengthens their power and narrative influence.

Different forms of power are also held within specific organisations, such as political parties, the military, religious institutions, academia, traditional authorities and media outlets. These organisations invest in building up certain narratives to legitimise their aims and practices in the long term, with agendas that extend beyond those of individual members. Organisations both enable and constrict the type of power actors have and how they use it, and therefore how they build up narratives in response to socio-political developments over time. Influential actors may also create, co-opt or cooperate with organisations, or arrange collaborations and coalitions among organisations, to advance their chosen narrative.

### Box 1: Zimbabwe

In 2017, factional struggles within the ruling Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front (ZANU–PF) party and attendant threats to the interests of high-ranking military officials incentivised elements in the armed forces to oust Robert Mugabe and elevate Vice President Emmerson Mnangagwa to the presidency. Rival narratives emerged portraying the change as, on the one hand, a coup d'état orchestrated by a corrupt and authoritarian arm of the ruling elite securing their political and economic influence and, on the other hand, a military-assisted transition motivated by restoring the legacy of the liberation movement and the duty to maintain stability and security in the face of deteriorating national conditions.

A few examples of influential actors who have promoted the military-assisted transition narrative illustrate their diversity and contextual specificity. They include members of the dominant ZANU–PF faction and state agents who have adopted its line, often linked with members of the Zimbabwe Defence Forces, the Zimbabwe Republic Police and the Zimbabwe National Liberation War Veterans Association. They also include members of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches and formal and informal religious leaders in the Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic and a range of Charismatic Evangelical churches. Influential actors can also be found in the state-recognised Zimbabwe National Traditional Healers Association and among traditional leaders from different ethnic communities.

Traditional media, which have the widest reach among media outlets in the country, also tend to elaborate the transition narrative, particularly the state-owned Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation and the pro-government dailies *The Herald* and *The Chronicle*. So do many public and cultural figures, such as media mogul Trevor Ncube. Accounting for more than 60% of the population, young people below the age of 25 likewise played a major role at times in building up the transition narrative among their peers. External actors with economic and political interests in Zimbabwe have also supported this narrative, particularly Chinese state and corporate actors with trade and investment ties to ZANU–PF and military figures going back to the liberation struggle. Zimbabwe's long-time ally and trading partner South Africa and its ruling African National Congress party have taken a similar approach, with an eye to maintaining stability in Southern Africa.

## Influential Actors and Simplified Conflict Narratives

Influential actors and organisations operate as constellations within the national narrative landscape. Their agendas may be in opposition, as they are between the rival governments and militias currently in Libya. More often, however, actors' agendas overlap to the extent that they cooperate in growing a narrative for joint advantage, as do certain politicians, officials in the armed forces, traditional authorities, youth and media content producers in Zimbabwe. At the same time, the consistency of the narrative they build can mask the differences between these actors and changes in their relationships, including fragmentation, power struggles or shifting alliances.

These alliances put influential actors in contact with multiple networks, which allows their central narrative to be picked up by new groups of people, contributing to its increasing dominance. As detailed in IFIT's [media and narrative](#) paper, the rise of social media, digital content platforms and big tech algorithms – driven by a business model that produces filter bubbles and rewards tailored content and sensational messaging – has enabled actors to reach unprecedented numbers of people, many of whom are already primed to elaborate these actors' narratives within their extended networks. Cultural production also plays a role, with television programmes, oral histories, books, art installations and other diverse products both building up narratives over time and modelling certain forms of storytelling, often relating to villains and abusive power, across networks. Since narratives are part of a single ecosystem, shifts in one influential actor's narrative lead to shifts in others' narratives as the story spreads.

While they may occasionally introduce narratives, influential actors tend to work with narratives that are already in circulation, which have deep narrative roots. They consciously nurture a narrative in pursuit of a particular goal, by repeating that narrative so often that it appears as a given and eclipses other narratives. They may also try out different narratives until they hit upon one that elicits a strong response and broadens their base, which they then elaborate until it grows into a dominant narrative. In some cases, they work to grow these into official narratives, actively attack or suppress other narratives, and even promote legislation and policies that silence alternative narratives.

Some actors may actively build up a narrative in a polarising manner to secure their influence, either because deeper social divisions broaden their support base within a group bound by certain grievances, or because they are aware that stories which provoke outrage bring them more attention than moderate stories. Others deliberately spread misinformation, disinformation and 'fake news', or use social media surveillance and spyware to target opponents, even promoting dehumanisation of others, violence and destabilisation. It is important to note, however, that most actors choose to promote narratives they consider not only strategically valuable but also morally valid, as they see themselves and their aims and actions as legitimate.

Influential actors may also *unconsciously* amplify a narrative that reflects or justifies their worldview. Narratives shape everyone's understanding of themselves and others, including powerful actors, who are not always aware of their narrative biases. In

addition, narratives initially nurtured by an influential actor can acquire a life of their own, beyond the intentions of that actor, as they are taken up by others. For example, Islamist narratives in Libya in 2011 have since been elaborated by a growing number of violent extremist groups in unforeseen ways. Powerful actors are not always in control of the narratives they build.

Despite their visibility, the narratives of influential actors may not be taken up by the populace. Divisive political narratives only grow significantly polarising when they are deeply rooted in society. People hear political discourse and assume that a country is polarised, but this may not reflect the reality on the ground. For example, while the dominant narratives in the public eye in Zimbabwe stand in opposition and are buttressed by divisive rhetoric, many citizens are disengaged from the main narratives and more focused on the deteriorating economic situation in the country. In general, polarising narratives tend to exaggerate the level of social conflict and obscure the continual co-operation and compromise occurring in daily life.

## Box 2: Colombia

Seeking to affirm a proposed peace agreement with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Colombian government held a plebiscite in 2016, which was unexpectedly rejected by a small majority after less than 40% of the population voted. The plebiscite was marked by rival narratives, framed as ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns. The ‘yes’ narrative asserted that the peace agreement would end decades of violence and displacement, while addressing social and economic exclusion, the urban–rural gap and other long-standing problems through transformative measures. The ‘no’ narrative asserted that the agreement would reward terrorism by offering impunity, political participation and monetary packages to FARC members, and would open the possibility of Colombia becoming like Venezuela. Both strongly vilified supporters of the opposing campaign.

These narratives were largely led by influential politicians, with the ‘yes’ narrative represented by then President Juan Manuel Santos of the Partido de la U, who was instrumental in the peace negotiations, and the ‘no’ narrative by previous President Álvaro Uribe, with his leading opposition party Centro Democrático and the support of other conservative political actors. Some leaders of conservative Evangelical churches mobilised their congregations, largely in support of the ‘no’ narrative. Likewise, conservative civil servants who support traditional Christian values, particularly around gender identity and family, such as then Inspector General Alejandro Ordoñez, played a significant role. The same applies to a group of businesspeople who financially supported the ‘no’ campaign, a group of renowned lawyers and former judges who feared the implications of legal decisions related to the peace agreement, and some FARC victims’ organisations.

Meanwhile, the ‘yes’ narrative was supported by many civil society organisations, peasant associations, labour unions, student movements, much of the traditional media and a robust group in the business sector. Members of the Military Forces and the National Police of Colombia contributed to both narratives. The narratives that dominated the national landscape during the plebiscite in one way or another influenced the country’s political discourse for years to come.

## Contextual Factors Shaping Actors and Narratives

While the ability of influential actors and organisations to articulate narratives that push people to adopt extreme positions politically or socially contributes to polarisation, structural and institutional factors are important contributors. Narratives do not develop in a vacuum. History, demographics and political structures, and the way institutions are set up or operate, determine the degree of influence of different actors and the way they wield power, constituting the context in which conflict spreads and polarisation can take hold.

Structural factors are slow to change – they are embedded elements that determine a society’s essential organisation, the actors who gain influence and their decision-making processes. These actors’ narrative biases and strategies, as well as those of their networks and audiences, will differ if their country is, for instance, marked by colonialism, dependent on natural resources, characterised by unequal distribution of income and opportunity, ethnically fragmented, geographically splintered, or hampered by transnational illicit markets. Such structural elements are the ground in which the roots of narrative trees are formed, as illustrated by colonialism (combined with other factors) giving rise to the narrative roots of the liberation struggle that maintain ZANU-PF’s influence in Zimbabwe (eg, Figure 1). This accounts for some of the diversity of actors and their narratives in the cases of Libya and Colombia as well.

Institutional factors, meanwhile, provide the ‘rules of the game’ that govern actors’ behaviour and shape their expectations regarding how grievances are addressed and conflict is managed. Powerful actors’ influence and corresponding narrative dynamics are shaped by the degree to which national institutions are, for example, captured by elites, inclusive of diverse social groups, responsive to grievances and/or respected by other actors. Powerful actors are more likely to flout ‘rules’ in cases where institutions are weak, divided or exclusionary, which affects the rhetoric they deploy and the narratives they elaborate, as seen in the case of Libya.

In addition, certain institutional frameworks can be said to facilitate polarisation, while others defuse it. The political system of a given country naturally has a strong effect. For example, an electoral system dominated by one or two political parties can deepen social divisions, with candidates competing for attention and support by highlighting certain group grievances and promoting extreme views, as suggested by the case of Zimbabwe. A multiparty system where many parties compete and must form a coalition to win tends to favour more centrist candidates over time. The degree of centralisation also has an impact. In countries heavily divided by geographic factors, contesting social identities, unequal resource distribution and elite capture, a highly centralised government can be ineffective in addressing group grievances and may contribute to polarisation, as has been the case in Libya. Decentralisation, devolution or federalism, if instituted in an inclusive manner, can accommodate greater political diversity and address centre–periphery tensions.

Political systems, security sector configurations, corporate governance arrangements, media regulations and a range of other institutional and policy frameworks all play a role. As such, changes to their design may provide entry points for shifting narrative landscapes towards greater complexity and less polarisation in the medium to long term. At the same time, changes to address structural and institutional factors will not have lasting impact without efforts to address the narratives around them.

### Box 3: Libya

Since an international military intervention ousted Muammar Gaddafi's regime, there have been multiple dominant conflict narratives in Libya, characterised by political fragmentation and a multiplicity of influential actors with shifting loyalties. Following the liberation of the capital Tripoli in October 2011, one narrative – promoted by the National Transitional Council, the newly elected General National Congress (GNC) and revolutionary brigades in Misrata, Zintan and Benghazi – held that victorious cities should lead the transition and dictate the constitution. The rival narrative – promoted by affiliated cities and tribes loyal to the former regime – held that the state and army had been destroyed by NATO and the rebels, and that Libya's 'glory' could only be regained through a return to *al-Jamahiriyah* (Gaddafi's republic).

After civil war erupted in 2014 when members of the GNC and allied Islamist militias sought to take power from the newly elected House of Representatives, one dominant narrative – promoted by former exile General Khalifa Haftar and his newly formed Libyan National Army, aligned with former members of the House of Representatives, federalist groups and Madkhali Salafi groups – held that the *al-Karama* (Dignity) military operations against Islamists and affiliated local governance structures in Benghazi, other eastern cities and, eventually, Tripoli were necessary for cleansing the country of terrorists and returning it to security and political stability. The rival narrative – promoted by the Muslim Brotherhood organisation and a range of Islamist organisations and militias, aligned with the GNC – held that the responding *Fajr Libya* (Libyan Dawn) military operations would return the country to the path of the 2011 revolution and prevent a return to *Taghut* (dictatorship) through sharia rule.

Over the past few years, diverse actors have engaged with these narratives in a highly dynamic political environment, particularly at the subnational level. Political actors have included senior leaders in the United Nations-backed Government of National Accord and the High Council of State in Tripoli, backed by Italy, Turkey and Qatar, who have been challenged by leaders in the rival House of Representatives in Tobruk and the parallel Transitional Government in Baida/the east, backed by France, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Russia.

Additional influential actors include leaders in the Muslim Brotherhood, its Justice and Construction Party and sympathetic independents, and affiliated Islamist armed groups such as the Libyan Shield Militia. The Islamist influence has been extended by more hardline groups and al-Qaeda linked jihadists, such as Ansar al-Sharia in the east, the Benghazi Defence Brigades and, increasingly, ISIS militias with local and foreign fighters. A range of leaders from Libya's main tribes are also influential, shaping subnational and thereby national narratives. At the same time, senior figures in the Central Bank of Libya, the Libyan Investment Authority and the National Oil Corporation have contributed to conflict narratives, driven by business elite interests and support for the Tripoli government, as well as influence from foreign state and corporate actors with economic interests in the country.

## Power and Narrative Enrichment

In a rich national narrative landscape – a mixed forest – there are many diverse narratives that demonstrate the complexity of social groups and the conflicts that arise among them. These narratives acknowledge the validity of different groups' grievances and moral values. They encourage people to see others as legitimate actors, share responsibility for how a conflict is managed and constructively engage across divides. In this environment, influential actors still further their aims by building up certain narratives, but these tend to be more complex by drawing on many shared narrative roots and standing alongside or intertwined with numerous other narrative trees.

Experience shows that in deeply divided societies with impoverished narrative landscapes – featuring a couple of dominant narrative trees – getting to a richer landscape requires tailored narrative work, implemented in concert with other conflict management and peacebuilding efforts. For this work to be effective, it needs to be based on a detailed understanding of 1) who the influential actors are, 2) their forms of power, 3) their networks and the constellations of influential actors they engage with, and 4) the structural and institutional factors that constrain and enable them to promote polarising narratives. Any stakeholder who embarks on narrative enrichment work to address powerful actors' role in polarisation would need to start by mapping these elements.

Stakeholders can then engage with influential actors who are actively nurturing dominant narrative trees, as well as people who are drawn to them in the absence of alternatives, to change the shape of those trees from the roots up and the branches down. Because narratives are socially constructed through many interactions over time, the rigid trunk of a dominant narrative is unlikely to respond to new narratives from outside challenging it or competing for support. Attempting to confront a dominant narrative directly can also lead to backlash, including repression or violence. It is more effective to work with people to find indirect ways to complicate simplified linear plots, for example by introducing more actors, events and subplots into existing narratives. Stakeholders can also encourage the growth of diverse small and marginalised narratives that were previously overshadowed, nurturing a mixed narrative forest.

With narrative roots, stakeholders can create spaces for groups and individuals to reflect on and discuss the events and mythic stories that have fed dominant narratives, looking for bundles of roots that have been ignored or connect dominant trees to each other. They can encourage the growth of new narrative tendrils from these roots to change the shape of existing trees or promote the growth of more trees, elaborating old collective stories to match people's lived experience and socio-political developments in the present. With the actions, policies and other outcomes that comprise the narrative branches, stakeholders can contribute to pruning existing branches while encouraging the growth of new branches that intertwine across narrative trees. The branches also provide insight into the institutions and networks incentivising actors to elaborate a certain narrative in response to key developments such as an election, protests, incidents of violence or the signing of a peace agreement – which developments then provide windows of opportunity for further narrative work.

To promote narrative change at scale, stakeholders can begin by working with people within specific networks to shift their narratives, and then work with individuals who straddle multiple networks to spread these shifts to others and transform the ecosystem. They can share examples of people changing their narratives in public and via the media, demonstrating that it is possible and how to do it. Sharing credible examples also shows how narratives shape our worldview and justify our actions, which helps increase narrative competency among the public, build awareness of narrative bias, encourage critical thinking regarding stories powerful actors seek to elaborate, and show that certain narratives are not endemic but the result of a series of social interactions and choices. This type of complexity moderates the impact of polarising narratives.<sup>1</sup>

## Strategies for Narrative Change

This paper proposes four approaches different stakeholders may use to understand and address the role of influential actors in promoting polarising narratives, with a timeframe covering the short to long term. These include mapping and strategic planning; enabling narrative transformation from within; amplifying diverse and complex narratives; and promoting institutional and policy reform. This section adds to the detailed guidance and narrative tools already offered in IFIT's [narrative framework](#) and follow-up discussion paper on [media and narrative](#).

**Mapping and strategic planning** entails sketching out the links between influential actors and the narrative trees in the national landscape to identify entry points and develop an adaptive strategic plan for narrative engagement. Steps could include to:

- Convene diverse participants, ideally from all sides of a conflict and key sectors of society, to map the national narrative landscape and the influence of powerful actors. The diversity of the participants will help provide a more accurate map, while demonstrating that social groups are not monolithic and individual members subscribe to different narratives or change among them as the national situation develops.
- Map the dominant trees in the narrative landscape, and then smaller and marginalised trees, with the aim of sketching 7–10 narratives and labelling their roots, trunks and branches. To avoid narrative bias, the process should reflect how people would label the parts of their own narrative tree, looking beyond political rhetoric to the foundational stories coming from people's everyday lived experience.
- Identify the range of influential actors contributing to each narrative tree and detail their forms of power, the networks they access and the constellations of actors with whom they engage. Because influential actors are diverse and derive their power from both formal and informal institutions and networks, identifying a wide range of actors helps with determining their incentives, discerning entry points for engagement and pinpointing variances in their reasons for promoting the same narrative. The latter can provide ground, among other things, for locating similarities with stakeholders who subscribe to different narratives.
- Identify the structural and institutional factors that are the soil in which the dominant narrative trees have grown. This helps with looking beneath voiced political and social views to get to the events and stories that have given rise to conflict or polarisation.

- Develop a strategic action plan that takes account of the mapping, provides a time-frame linked to entry points, and engages inclusively with a range of actors in a sequenced manner, starting small and expanding over time. The strategy should be iterative, adapting to successes or setbacks and responding to changes in the national context.

**Enabling narrative transformation from within** involves creating spaces for influential and other actors, within and across networks, to reflect on and shift their narratives and thereby promote change in the national narrative ecosystem. The steps could include to:

- Introduce ideas of narrative change in discussions with influential actors. This includes highlighting the value of 1) narrative complexity, 2) promoting narrative change not from outside but from within, 3) amplifying marginalised narratives, and 4) acknowledging others as legitimate actors with valid values and grievances. While this approach will not have an impact on all interlocutors, it may spur reflection and adjustments among some actors and thus broader narrative change through their subsequent interactions.<sup>2</sup>
- Organise meetings or workshops with actors who have different forms of influence within a network or institution, using the narrative tree analogy and specific narrative tools to 1) generate recognition of narrative bias, 2) introduce new elements and narrative tendrils to complicate a simplified narrative about self and others, 3) identify differences among people who subscribe to that narrative to destabilise it, and 4) encourage actors to elaborate these new, more complex narrative strands within their networks. The following narrative tools, in addition to facilitated mapping processes, have proven especially useful for this work:
  - Positive connotation: Attribution of positive intent (for self or other or both) towards a more complex narrative.<sup>3</sup>
  - Circular questions: Questions that call for a comparison between people or time periods, to support the introduction of new terms and comparisons that increase narrative complexity.<sup>4</sup>
  - Externalisation: A process for locating problems outside of the self, to allow people to gain control or agency regarding those problems.<sup>5</sup>
  - Scaffolding: A set of sequenced questions that enable reflection and reclaiming of agency.<sup>6</sup>
  - Immunity to change: Processes for identifying competing commitments and overcoming resistance to change.<sup>7</sup>
- Expand these meetings and workshops to actors with influence in multiple networks and organisations, bringing them together to build trust and strategise on spreading narrative changes across networks to effect change at scale.<sup>8</sup>
- Encourage influential actors to advocate for marginalised narratives, in collaboration with marginalised groups, to make the national narrative landscape more complex and support the legitimacy of people whose stories have not been adequately heard.

- Improve public narrative competency through information campaigns, broad-based dialogues and educational offerings on what narratives are, how they function and how to identify one's own narrative biases, enabling people to see through how narratives are built up by specific actors, particularly powerful ones, to drive conflict or polarisation.<sup>9</sup>

***Amplifying diverse and complex narratives*** entails building up the many non-dominant narratives circulating in society to add complexity and encourage engagement among individuals and groups that subscribe to opposing dominant narratives. The steps could include to:

- Document and publicise examples of powerful actors changing their narratives from within or validating their adversaries, modelling narrative transformation at scale.<sup>10</sup>
- Build up and disseminate side-lined and silenced narratives that demonstrate social complexity and undermine simplified narratives, for example via social media campaigns, cultural products and storytelling initiatives, particularly in collaboration with marginalised groups. This requires taking account of contextual factors such as the degree of freedom of movement, assembly, media and expression and the quality of the information and communication technology infrastructure.
- Highlight the lived experiences being described via different narratives in circulation, demonstrating that narratives come from old roots while responding to contemporary realities and events.
- Encourage and work with traditional and social media content producers to de-emphasise polarising narratives and amplify more diverse voices and narratives.<sup>11</sup>
- Promote the use of positive connotation and messaging to attribute positive intent and legitimacy to 'others' in influential actors' responses to key developments and windows of opportunity, such as an election, protests or introduction of reforms.<sup>12</sup>

***Promoting institutional and policy reforms*** includes advocating for context-specific changes that address group grievances at the root of conflict narratives, which are linked to structural and institutional factors, and lessening influential actors' ability to advance polarising narratives. The steps could include to:

- Promote reforms that render national institutions more inclusive, which may include a revised electoral system, security sector changes, increased media freedoms and updated educational curricula.
- Advocate policies that address group grievances, which may include decentralisation, budget reallocation and reformed corporate governance.
- Implement legislative and financial regulatory actions that, in conjunction with non-state actors' initiatives, curb the spread of polarising narratives, particularly via traditional and social media, without impinging on press freedom and liberty of expression.<sup>13</sup>
- Incorporate components of narrative competency training into peacebuilding and conflict transformation initiatives at the community, subnational and national levels.

## Conclusion

Based on practical experiences from IFIT brain trusts in Zimbabwe, Colombia and Libya, and from IFIT's global work more generally, this discussion paper has shown that a wide range of powerful actors draw on different, intersecting forms of power to shape national narrative landscapes in deeply divided societies. The influence of these actors, the networks and constellations in which they operate, and the extent to which their narratives are adopted by the populace are in turn shaped by contextual factors. Outlining the ways influential actors elaborate polarising narratives in pursuing their goals, the paper proposes strategies for enabling narrative transformation from within, amplifying diverse and complex narratives, and promoting institutional shifts to improve national conditions for countering polarisation and enabling peace.

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## Endnotes

1. For more on this approach, see Sara Cobb, *Speaking of Violence: The Politics and Poetics of Narrative in Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
2. Eg, IFIT staff and brain trusts have been doing this with young members of Congress in Colombia in all their meetings.
3. See Ana Brígida Umbelino, "Positive Connotation", *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* 14, no. 2 (2003): 13–29.
4. See [https://wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/expanding\\_questioning.pdf](https://wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/expanding_questioning.pdf).
5. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqMc8giEaTo>.
6. See Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).
7. See <https://hbr.org/2001/11/the-real-reason-people-wont-change>.
8. See <https://ncase.me/crowds>.
9. Eg, <https://www.partnersglobal.org/newsroom/narrative-competency-the-power-of-intentional-communication>.
10. Eg, IFIT's intervention here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG\\_vlOBxhR8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SG_vlOBxhR8).
11. Eg, <https://sanef.org.za/about-us>; <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/explainers/about-the-project>.
12. Eg, an inclusive campaign for Chile's 1988 referendum on Augusto Pinochet's presidency: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFAMpWohPNY&t=os>.
13. For concrete suggestions, see <https://ifit-transitions.org/publications/media-and-narrative-managing-conflict-in-polarised-societies>.

Founded in 2012, the **Institute for Integrated Transitions** (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering comprehensive analysis and technical advice to national actors involved in negotiations and transitions in fragile and conflict-affected societies. IFIT has supported negotiations and transitions in countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, El Salvador, Gambia, Libya, Nigeria, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.