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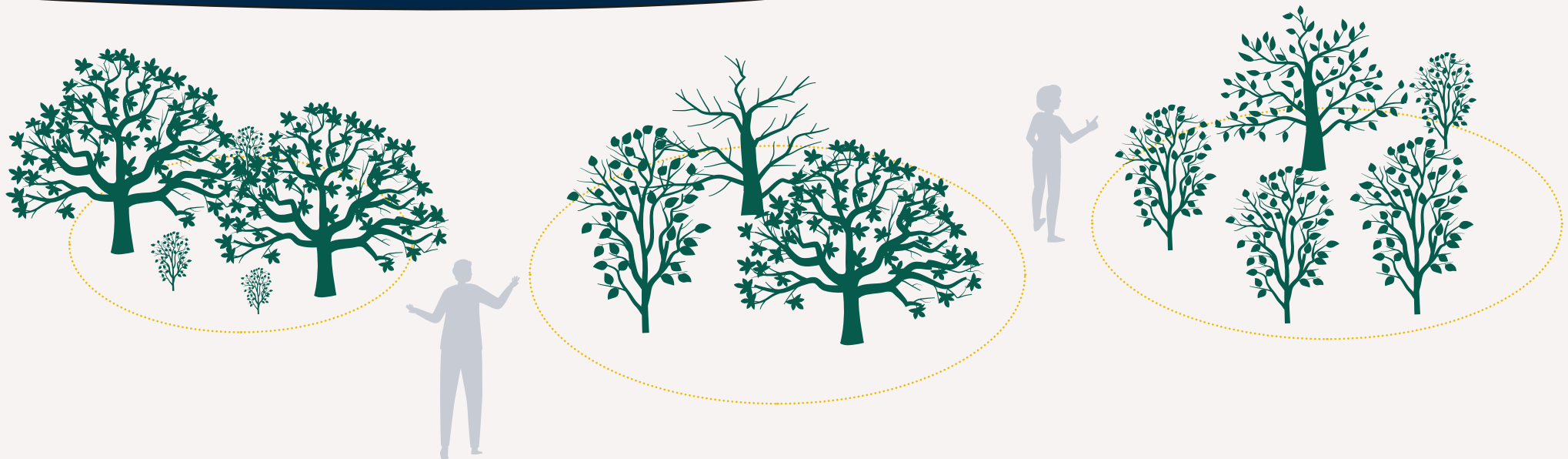
Beyond One Story: Enriching Narratives for Peace

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Narratives are key to advancing peace and addressing polarisation at scale in fragile and conflict-affected countries. As narratives shape how we understand ourselves in society and how we mobilise for action when conflict arises, narrative strategies and tools are an integral part of peacebuilding.

Challenging the view that promoting a unifying narrative is the way to address conflict, IFIT advocates for raising societal awareness of narrative dynamics, changing conflict narratives from within, and amplifying less prominent stories to encourage peaceful engagement.

Based on consultations with IFIT's [brain trusts](#), [Inclusive Narratives Practice Group](#) and a large community of specialised experts, our narrative approach offers guidance gleaned from practical experience to support groups working for peace, including civil society, policy makers and donors.



Why are narratives important for advancing peace?



Narratives are complexes of stories that shape how we understand ourselves and our relationship to our social group(s) and others. They influence the way we mobilise for action, and for this reason they are central to how we manage the conflicts that can come up in any society or political system.



When unaddressed, group grievances weaken social trust and institutions, deepening divisions and incentivising violence as a response. Narratives in turn provide the moral architecture that justifies people's actions in such contexts, either towards positive engagement around their grievances or towards polarisation and eventually violence.



At the national level, conflicts tend to emerge from group grievances rooted in structural elements, such as historical legacies and economic conditions. They can also be rooted in institutional realities, such as the degree of inclusiveness of state organs and how elites use them.

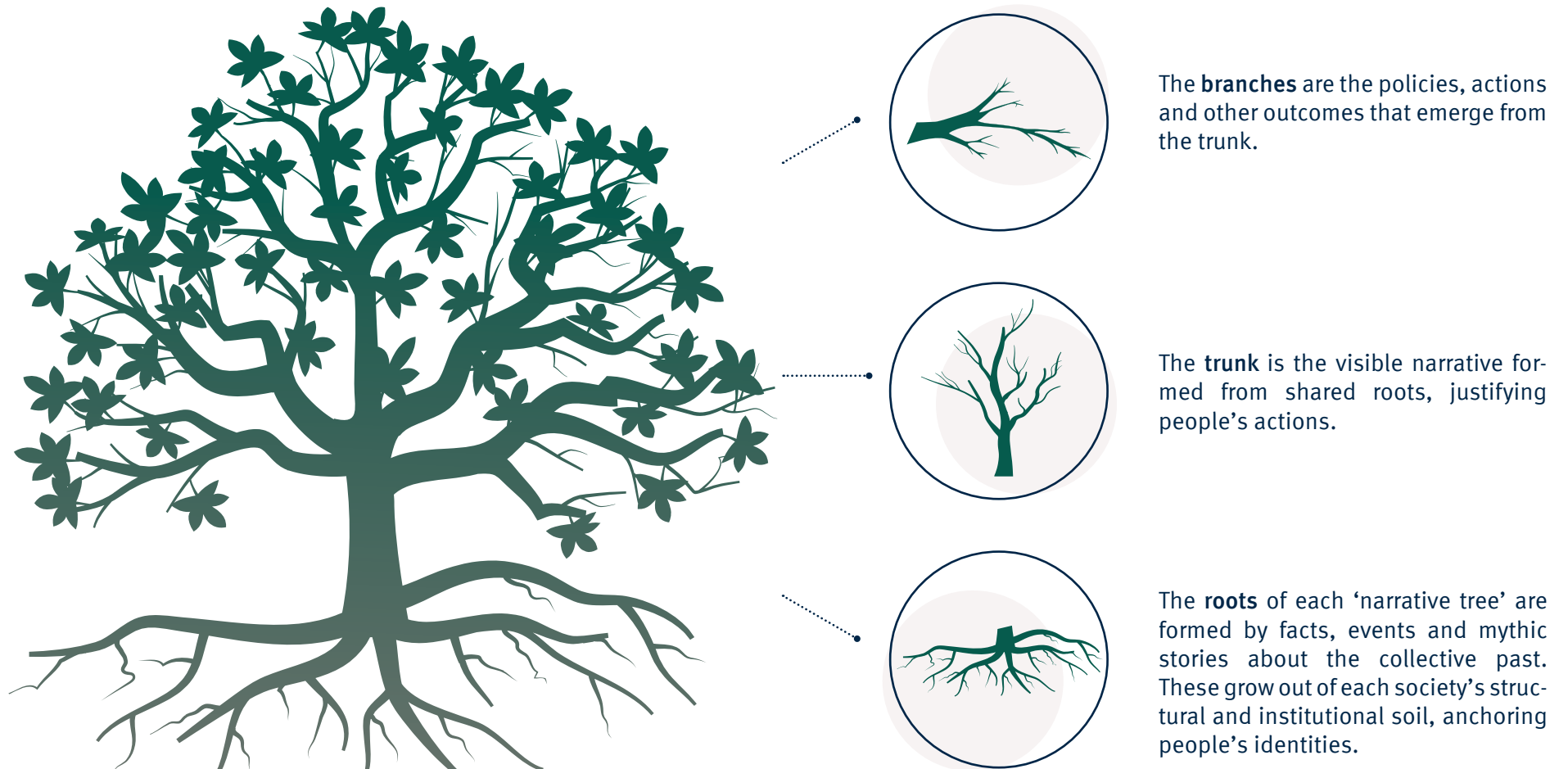


When integrated into peacebuilding efforts, narratives can enable pathways to peace.



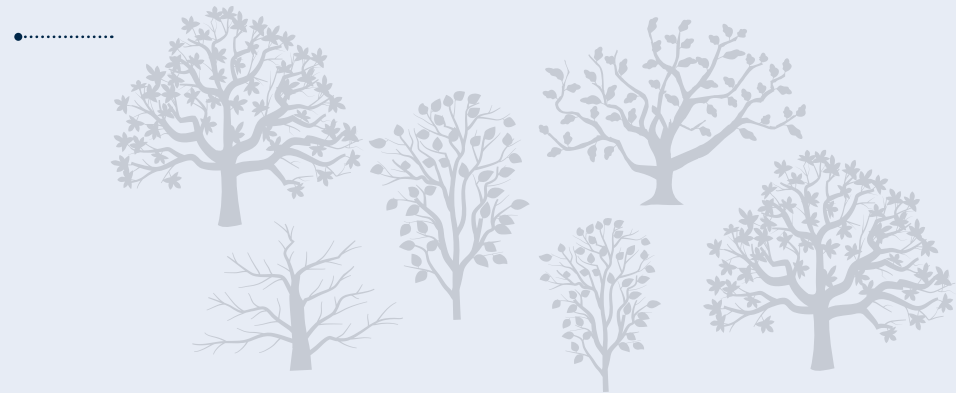
How do narratives contribute to polarisation?

Narratives are all around us, describing and shaping our world. Many narratives are so normalised and internalised that we cannot see how they influence our views and shape our choices and actions. To see them more clearly, narratives can be visualised as trees that form part of a larger societal or national ‘narrative landscape’.



In societies that manage their conflicts constructively, the narrative landscape looks like a ‘mixed’ forest, with different kinds of narrative trees growing together. It includes many diverse narratives that highlight the complexity of social groups and the conflicts that naturally arise among them.

These mixed narrative landscapes allow for the validity of different groups’ grievances and moral values. They encourage people to see others as legitimate actors and to share responsibility for how a conflict is managed.



In highly polarised societies, by contrast, a small number of narrative trees tend to dominate the landscape, overshadowing and blocking other trees. These dominant narratives – often promoted by influential actors to advance their own goals – reduce complex social realities into simple, self-reinforcing stories, which promote the legitimacy of one group’s grievances while portraying others as villains.

In this ‘us versus them’ environment, extreme views eclipse moderate views in the public eye and polarisation increases. This happens when a growing number of people internalise, repeat and amplify divisive narratives within and across their networks, and on traditional and social media platforms.



Over time, the dominant narrative trees begin to seem like the only way to describe what is happening in politics and society. The trunks become so large that they prevent other narrative trees from gaining ground, and so rigid that they resist any challenge. Trying to attack or defeat them with a new narrative from the outside can lead to backlash, repression or violence.

As a core part of peacebuilding efforts at scale, three strategies can help enrich national narrative landscapes:



Raising people’s awareness of how narratives shape us, our worldview and ways we deal with conflict.



Working with people to transform narratives from within, avoiding the rigid trunks and focusing on the more malleable roots and branches.



Growing the visibility of the many smaller trees in the narrative landscape to better reflect the complexity and interconnectedness of society.



Building on existing practices and resources in their context, local leaders can create spaces and develop processes for people to reflect on their and others' narratives.

Avoiding the rigid trunks, they can help people identify roots that feed divisive narratives and introduce new narrative 'tendrils' that can change the shape of existing trees while promoting the growth of more trees. Likewise, they can 'prune' existing branches while encouraging the growth of new policies and other outcomes.



Narrative tools – such as scaffolding, positive attribution, and circular questioning – destabilise rigid narratives by introducing new or different values (grey, not 'black and white'); new characters (beyond heroes and villains); and new plot points that disrupt the main narrative. They enable people to see others as legitimate, accept shared responsibility for conflict and gain a sense of agency to address it constructively.



The narrative transformations brought about by these processes can be amplified via the media and spread across people's networks, thus enriching the national narrative landscape and making people better at seeing through narrative dynamics and dealing with the issues that drive conflict.



Lasting peace does not come from imposing a narrative and everyone telling the same story – it emerges in societies where many complex, diverse narratives are encouraged to thrive together.

For more in-depth information and practical guidance on this approach – including major publications, videos, toolkits, practice briefs and more – please visit our [Narrative Peacebuilding Hub](#).