

Colombia: Creating a Toolkit for Constructive Dialogue in Polarised Contexts

The 2022 Colombian elections were hotly contested. As is often the case during election periods, the dominant narratives and political discourse in the country became increasingly polarised in the run-up to voting. In addition to regular public and media attacks between opposing candidates and their supporters, the period was marked by oversimplification of political debate and a decreased willingness among members of each side to engage with the other. In response, IFIT created a [toolkit](#) for enabling more complex and constructive dialogue.

This practice brief outlines the development of the toolkit, the challenges and lessons that emerged in the process, and recommendations for other practitioners interested in developing and using such a resource to enable narrative transformation and manage conflict in electoral periods and beyond.

Both the toolkit and the practice brief were informed by consultations with members of IFIT's [National and Territorial Brain Trusts](#) in Colombia. They also drew on the ideas and practices in IFIT's [narrative framework](#) and our follow-on papers on the role of the [media](#) and [powerful actors](#) in fostering narrative enrichment – all of which were developed by IFIT's [Inclusive Narratives Practice Group](#).

Background

After Colombia's congressional elections in March 2022, the presidential elections occurred in May and led to a runoff in June 2022. These elections brought to the surface grievances rooted in the country's 50 years of armed conflict, which were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a country traditionally governed by the political right, the 2016 peace agreement between the government of Colombia and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia–Ejército del Pueblo* (FARC-EP) created a new scenario. As the armed conflict ceased to be the central axis of political divisions and discussions, a range of pre-existing grievances and demands emerged, related to poverty, inequality, healthcare, education and employment. Since 2016, these issues have become central in public debate, and the left has gained ground among social sectors traditionally 'ignored' by the historically dominant political parties. The shift caused concern in some sectors about the possible breakdown of the country's political culture.

With then President Ivan Duque unable to run due to term limits, the months leading up to the 2022 presidential elections saw increased public dissatisfaction with the performance of his administration, a rise in social protests, and deteriorating security conditions in former FARC-controlled regions. Making matters worse, many electoral candidates and their followers engaged in polarising rhetoric and actions that raised tensions and fuelled violence.

For instance, leading leftist candidate and now President Gustavo Petro [labelled](#) Duque a ‘neoliberal Taliban’, accusing him of leading more than 600,000 companies to bankruptcy and 10 million Colombians to hunger, in addition to neglecting to implement the 2016 peace agreement. This political discourse targeted the sectors of the population that felt neglected by the political elite.

Right-wing candidate Federico Gutiérrez, meanwhile, continually reminded Petro of his past as an M-19 guerrilla member, [accused](#) him and his campaign of negotiating with and acting like ‘bandits’, and [branded](#) him a threat to democracy. Gutiérrez’ discourse affirmed the well-trodden ‘perils’ of a left-wing candidate coming to power in Colombia. For his part, independent candidate Rodolfo Hernández [described](#) himself as a citizen willing to rescue the country from a traditional political class who were nothing more than thieves.

Although the candidates’ policy positions overlapped on many points, their rhetoric was demeaning and exclusionary. Furthermore, traditional and social media coverage focused more on personal confrontations between the candidates and their followers than on the candidates’ policy ideas. Consequently, as the presidential elections approached, substantive discussions on key political issues – peace agreement implementation, security policy, access to education – dramatically shrank and simplified, while the risks of violence increased. Similar dynamics marked Colombia’s 2022 congressional elections.

Toolkit Development Process

Against this background, IFIT began developing a dialogue toolkit with the initial intention to promote more constructive public discourse and media coverage around the elections and thereby reduce polarisation – a focus that changed based on lessons learnt in the process.

Going in, we were aware that electoral campaigns are often polarising by design, with candidates assuming opposing positions to sharply differentiate themselves from the competition and using provocative rhetoric to gain attention and votes. We thus primarily sought to provide tools that responded to, rather than denied, that reality. Our guiding question was *how to create more complex electoral narratives and conversations in Colombia’s polarised context*.

With this in mind, our process for creating the toolkit consisted of research and ideation; consultations; target audience definition; prototyping; and testing and iteration.

- 1. Research and ideation:** Having conducted an internal [assessment](#) of the main opposing narratives in Colombia from 2021 to 2022, we were aware of the narrative dynamics informing the country’s politics. To better understand polarisation in the 2022 electoral cycle and its potential effects on the democratic process, we researched forms of polarisation, its drivers, its function in electoral processes and the [role of the media](#) in countering or promoting polarisation in conflict-affected contexts.

While there are different types and levels of polarisation, the form that exists in Colombia has often been severe, involving poles of actors opposed to each other because of ‘who they are’ more than ‘what they believe’. We thus decided that the toolkit needed to include tools for exploring and addressing this.

In addition, as we knew that both traditional and social media play a dominant role in the diffusion of divisive narratives, we planned for the toolkit to include guidelines for using depolarising language in media coverage of electoral campaigns. Our research showed, however, that such guidelines already exist, albeit focusing primarily on media standards and legal mechanisms for combating hate speech. As such, we realised we could fill a gap by shifting from providing guidelines on *reducing* polarisation towards developing practical pedagogical tools for media and other actors to use in constructively *navigating* polarisation.

2. **Consultations:** We organised individual meetings and closed-door events with a range of local experts and stakeholders to gain deeper insight into the political incentives behind campaign narratives and polarisation in Colombia. The stakeholders had extensive experience with building and reproducing narratives on a daily basis (e.g., journalists, artists, writers, storytellers, movie directors) and knowledge of the Colombian political landscape (e.g., members of Congress, political analysts, media executives). We gained the following key insights from these consultations, which complemented our research findings and ideation process:
 - **Emotions:** Emotions play a central role in politics. Even the most informed citizens tend to vote based on their emotions more than their ideas. Political campaigns use tools that appeal to primary feelings such as fear, anger or hate. From a narrative standpoint, the challenge is not to intellectualise debate, but for political campaigns to appeal to positive feelings. A good example is the [‘yes’ campaign](#) in Chile’s 1988 plebiscite.
 - **Terminology:** As with emotions, the language and terms most frequently used in political campaigns have negative connotations (e.g., corrupt, dangerous, elitist). Rather than avoiding these terms, the aim of narrative work is to understand the underlying fears, preconceptions or internalised stereotypes that explain the terms’ usage and resonance, and apply that understanding to navigate polarisation.
 - **Polarisation as a campaign tool:** Candidates try to differentiate themselves from their opponents as part of normal democratic competition. But in Colombia, candidates often differentiate themselves through the deliberate use of polarising narratives, which aim to denigrate and discredit adversaries in order to gain followers. We realised that a better understanding of how narratives work would help people see through these tactics and instead engage with the issues that underlie social divisions.
 - **The moral construction of candidates:** In Colombian culture, the figure of the hero is deeply rooted. Political campaigns portray their candidate as a hero who must defeat a villain to solve all the country’s problems, entrenching a logic of ‘us versus them’. From a narrative perspective, the challenge is to show that candidates are not ‘black and white’ but rather ‘grey’ in moral terms. This opens the door to them and their followers acknowledging each other’s legitimacy and thereby their shared responsibility for addressing grievances driving polarisation.
3. **Target audience definition:** Initially, we thought the toolkit’s target audience would be traditional media and politicians. Our research and consultations showed, however, that these actors may be invested in promoting polarisation and thus have little interest in the toolkit. We thus decided to reach this audience indirectly by engaging with a narrower one, namely influential educational institutions and independent media content producers. These actors play a key role in political campaigns, as universities and schools in Colombia host election debates and independent media outlets cover them. They were also easy for us to access, as members of IFIT’s Colombian brain trusts already had scores of relevant contacts and entry points.

4. **Prototyping:** The next step was drafting a prototype of the toolkit. We designed the tools to be pedagogical, easy to use and adaptable to different audiences and stakeholders. They can be used individually, sequentially or simultaneously, depending on the setting and context in which they are applied.

We shared the draft of the toolkit with IFIT staff and members of the IFIT Inclusive Narratives Practice Group, organising sessions in which they provided feedback on how to define certain tools more clearly and disseminate the toolkit for maximum impact. Importantly, they recommended that we adapt the toolkit for non-electoral contexts as well. A common comment in these sessions was that we needed to add a step-by-step guide on how to use each of the tools in different settings.

Box 1: Toolkit Overview

The toolkit introduces several original approaches, each with a narrow goal that is situated within the larger strategic aim of constructive dialogue:

I dare you to: Enabling people with opposing views to have more in-depth conversations with each other by avoiding the use of previously identified terms that polarise or close down engagement.

Transform your insult: Identifying ways to convey and express the concerns hidden behind an insult, while avoiding the use of terms that can be unduly polarising.

Electoral therapy: Reviewing the moral and political foundations on which we stand when we participate in polarised conversations during election periods.

Pat on the back: Acknowledging something positive about an opponent's ideas or position.

If you were them: Helping the wider public understand the internal and external constraints and limitations opponents face when taking hard decisions.

Inconclusive debates: Enriching debate and inclusion by incentivising candidates to reflect on how they build their policy proposals.

The full toolkit is available [here](#).

5. **Testing and iteration:** We shared the toolkit with stakeholders in the education sector (universities and high schools), and among media and policy makers. During a public debate among presidential candidates organised by the respected *Universidad Externado*, the [moderator used the toolkit](#). Applying the 'pat on the back' tool in particular, she successfully encouraged the candidates to say something positive about their opponents' positions (see Box 1). By using the tool, the moderator was able to create a space within a confrontational political debate where candidates felt safe acknowledging their opponents as legitimate actors.

The toolkit was also picked up by the influential news website *La Silla Vacía*, whose director used the 'pat on the back' and 'inconclusive debates' tools to formulate questions in a series of presidential debates she moderated. While the candidates acknowledged their opponents' personal attributes (using words like 'hard-working' and 'passionate'), they avoided acknowledging the legitimacy of their ideas or political positions and delving into the 'whys' and 'hows' of their policy proposals.

Next, a group of social and political leaders from Colombia's Montes de María region used the toolkit after a local electoral event became heated. Although IFIT staff had not planned to introduce the toolkit in this space, the discussion increased awareness of

what narratives are and enabled an active reflection on the pros and cons of certain language and terminology in electoral campaigns.

IFIT's [Mexico Peacebuilding Support Group](#) then adapted the toolkit for use in the Mexican context. The members tested the toolkit – particularly the 'I dare you to' tool – in a class exercise where university students were required to take opposing positions in a debate format. The tool proved more effective when established as a 'ground rule' beforehand than in the heat of the debate itself.

All of these engagements were learning experiences that we used to strengthen the final version of the toolkit.

Lessons Learnt and Recommendations

The toolkit development process provided valuable lessons that may be useful for other practitioners.

- **Diverse fields of knowledge:** By consulting with artists, writers and politicians, among others, we gained new insights into how narratives and polarisation are addressed in different fields. Understanding the relevance and power of stereotypes in folk culture and how they translate into politics enabled us to develop tools for delving into the preconceptions that give rise to common stereotypes ('transform your insult', 'electoral therapy'). Overall, this made the toolkit more useful and 'down to earth'.

 *Consulting with diverse sectors allows for more realistic tools to be developed.*


- **Audience definition:** Early on, we thought policy makers and traditional media would be the most relevant audiences for the toolkit, but, as our consultations showed, these actors may be invested in polarisation. Therefore, we realised that tertiary and secondary educational institutions and independent media with influential reach would be more interested and easier for us to access. We also saw that universities and schools offer a controlled environment for testing the tools in major public events.

 *Target audiences need to be mapped at the beginning of the exercise and continually revised.*

- **Tool flexibility:** We learnt that the toolkit needs to be adaptable. While initially designed in the context of Colombia's elections, we updated the tools so that any actor can use them and fill them with context-appropriate content. As long as the spirit behind it is taken into consideration, a tool can be modified to fit different purposes and contexts, including different settings (e.g., political debates, class simulation exercises, radio talk shows) and different actors (e.g., students, professors, journalists). We also learnt that tools work differently depending on the moment – for example, in one case the 'I dare you to' tool worked better as a 'ground rule' than as a measure to de-escalate a heated debate.

 *Narrative tools must be short, user-friendly and easy to adapt.*

- **Implementation settings:** In testing the different tools, we realised that the conditions for their use had an impact. For example, when people with opposing views are present, 'controlled' settings (e.g., with a moderator considered legitimate by all participants) are preferable. Individuals applying the tools must also know how to use them and be familiar with the participants to know which tool is appropriate at which time and in which format. This has a direct effect on the reach and impact of each tool and requires some prior 'training'. For this reason, the toolkit is not meant to be used generically at large scale.

 *Well-prepared settings with implementers trained in the toolkit are more likely to succeed.*

- **Language adaptation:** When applying the toolkit in the context of Mexico, we realised that some of the terms we used to describe each tool were inappropriate or inaccurate. For example, the ‘pat on the back’ tool was originally called ‘*échele flores*’ (throw flowers), as this is an idiom used in Colombia when complimenting someone. This saying is unfamiliar in Mexico, so people did not initially understand what the tool was about. We thus changed the name to ‘*el león no es como lo pintan*’ (he’s not as bad as he’s made out to be), which is a complementary idiom in Mexico.



Finding the right local expressions is important when adapting the toolkit to different contexts.

- **Consultation and feedback:** As we developed the toolkit, we became aware of the value of continually updating the tools and guidance. Testing and iteration allowed us to incorporate feedback from different activities and achieve continuous improvement of the toolkit.



Implementation, feedback and iteration loops are crucial to improving and adapting the tools.

- **Impact evaluation:** A persistent challenge we faced was how to evaluate the impact of the toolkit. While we have seen success in putting the tools into practice, we will continue to develop and improve them to foster more constructive dialogue.



The ability to measure success levels is critical to the optimal future utility of the tools.

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About IFIT. Founded in 2012, the [Institute for Integrated Transitions](#) (IFIT) is an independent, international, non-governmental organisation offering interdisciplinary 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, Libya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, The Gambia, Tunisia, Ukraine, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.