

# Enriching Narratives to Overcome Polarisation: Lessons from IFIT's Work in Latin America

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## Introduction

How can societies fragmented by polarisation or torn apart by violent conflict find pathways towards more constructive engagement across divides? This question cannot be addressed without understanding and working with narratives – the systems of stories people tell and internalise to make sense of events and experiences in the world around them. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, narratives play an especially critical role in shaping identities, (de)legitimising different policies and actors, and promoting or undermining peace.

Via its [Inclusive Narratives Practice Group \(INPG\)](#), the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) has developed, tested and refined an innovative [narrative peacebuilding method](#) designed to overcome polarisation and reduce conflict in divided societies. By raising societal awareness of narrative dynamics, working with divided groups and influential actors to transform conflict narratives, and amplifying less prominent stories, the approach enriches the narrative landscape, reduces the power of simplified ‘us versus them’ narratives, and enables peaceful engagement.

After detailing IFIT’s approach, this practice brief documents concrete steps for translating narrative peacebuilding concepts into action, using examples from IFIT’s work in Latin America, particularly Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico. Through activities such as narrative mapping, tailored facilitation methods, toolkit development, and arts-based interventions, the brief shows that narrative peacebuilding can be both a stand-alone line of programming and an embedded lens in daily practice. The brief concludes with lessons for practitioners, offering practical ideas and realistic expectations about narrative transformation as a long-term, context-sensitive pathway to more inclusive peacebuilding.

“ Bringing narrative frameworks and tools into our work has sharpened our analysis and expanded how we understand both the root causes of complex problems and the solutions we can propose. It gives us a more precise reading of the context, and a deeper understanding of the actors we work with, their incentives, and the stories that shape their decisions. ”

María José Daza Bohorquez, IFIT Research Associate

## IFIT’s Narrative Peacebuilding Practice in Latin America

The narrative peacebuilding approach developed by IFIT’s INPG centres around the analogy of a narrative landscape populated by [narrative trees](#). The rigid trunk of the tree is the publicly visible narrative, the roots are the often-hidden historical events and mythical stories that feed it, and the branches are the resulting policies and other outcomes. In highly divided contexts, a few dominant, simplified narratives overshadow smaller ones. Whereas the usual peacebuilding strategy of promoting a single unifying narrative tends to fail, IFIT’s approach instead fosters a narrative landscape where diverse complex narratives thrive together. This encourages collective acknowledgement of multiple stories, actors, traumas and grievances, and shared responsibility for resolving conflicts across divided groups.

IFIT's narrative peacebuilding methodology is a cyclical **three-phase process** consisting of: 1) an assessment, with a broad range of local stakeholders, that maps dominant and alternative narratives and their roots and branches; 2) strategic planning of contextualised interventions to transform dominant trees and nurture smaller ones; and 3) implementation, from the grassroots to the societal level, using a combination of tools such as facilitation, storytelling workshops, and media campaigns to enrich the narrative landscape.

The experience of IFIT staff in Latin America demonstrates how this approach can be put into practice and moulded to fit contextual and operational needs. The IFIT team has worked for more than a decade with the local leaders in its Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico **brain trusts** and other actors in the region to mitigate polarisation and strengthen rule of law. Recognising divisive narratives as key drivers of conflict, staff have invested in testing and then adapting IFIT's narrative peacebuilding approach to each country. They have done so in two ways: first, by developing stand-alone narrative initiatives explicitly focused on narrative transformation, often in response to specific political junctures such as elections or periods of acute polarisation; and, second, by using narrative as a transversal lens to inform all aspects of their work.



Narrative workshop in Chocó, Colombia, with young artists mapping local narratives.

### ***Stand-Alone Narrative Initiatives***

IFIT Latin America staff's narrative-driven initiatives have ranged from internal training and learning processes to narrative mapping, the development of toolkits for use with external actors, engagements with cultural production, and training workshops for a range of stakeholders.

After trainings with INPG experts and a series of internal reflection sessions on how to apply the narrative peacebuilding approach in the region, the team developed an internal pedagogical brochure summarising key concepts and tools to socialise a shared understanding and common language across staff. They also created an internal tracking system to document, monitor and evaluate narrative-driven interventions as a discrete line of work.

In Colombia and Mexico, the IFIT team conducted narrative assessments at the national and subnational levels. Using IFIT’s narrative tree analogy, they mapped dominant and alternative narrative trees, their roots and branches, the actors nurturing them, and potential entry points for narrative transformation. Capacity constraints meant that the assessments were not as wide-ranging and inclusive as suggested in IFIT’s three-phase methodology, but the exercises revealed useful patterns that informed subsequent narrative peacebuilding planning and implementation.



Meeting between members of IFIT’s Brain Trust for the Colombian Transition and municipal authorities in Ocaña, Colombia, to reflect on the links between narrative biases and polarisation.

Responding to high levels of electoral polarisation in Colombia, the IFIT team developed specific narrative tools that enable people with opposing viewpoints to engage constructively and take steps towards narrative transformation in environments ranging from the classroom to public debates. The team then applied these tools in situations as diverse as fostering pre-election discussions in university classrooms, introducing positive narrative elements into a televised national election debate, and enabling reflection on narrative biases among municipal officials (for an example, see Box 1).

Perceiving a need for narrative tools across Latin America, the IFIT team created a [Toolkit for Constructive Dialogue in Polarised Contexts](#), which is designed for adaption to different countries. Documenting lessons from the process of developing and using this toolkit, they also published a narrative practice brief on [Creating a Toolkit for Constructive Dialogue in Polarised Contexts](#). In addition, the team contributed to the INPG expert study on [Narrative Dynamics in Polarised Contexts: A Case Study of the 2021 National Protests in Colombia](#), which provides concrete examples of narrative peacebuilding concepts at work in a specific country.

Through these experiences, the IFIT Latin America team came to recognise the centrality of arts and culture in enabling more inclusive narratives in polarised contexts. In Colombia, IFIT staff organised a public discussion that took acclaimed writer Alonso Sánchez Baute’s novel [Líbranos del Bien](#) – on the parallel lives of a guerrilla fighter and a paramilitary leader from the same town – as the starting point for a discussion on victim, perpetrator and other narratives crucial to the national transitional justice

process. The approach used in this and similar events facilitated deep dialogue among representatives of Colombia's Special Jurisdiction for Peace, victims' organisations, the media, scholars and members of the public.

“ The biggest value I've seen from using narrative tools in Colombia, especially in our subnational work, is how adaptable they are. The INPG approach is rigorous, but easy to translate into real agendas, meetings and practical activities. In our narrative camp with young leaders in Chocó, for example, we used simple exercises to identify the positive stories they wanted to amplify. ”

Mariana Valderrama Arriola, IFIT Research Officer

At the subnational level, in Chocó, a region of Colombia marked by armed conflict and racial tensions, the IFIT team brought together 20 community leaders and artists from diverse backgrounds, who normally would not have engaged with each other, to **compose, record and perform** a song acknowledging and transforming the divisive narratives dominating the area. The participants were all young people – the group IFIT identified as most vulnerable to divisive narratives and as having the greatest long-term stake in addressing them to enable peaceful engagement.

Based on lessons from these varied experiences, the team began conducting training workshops on narrative dynamics and transformation with diverse actors across Latin America. These workshops, which the team tailored to meet the needs of each country, engaged and supported civil society organisations, university faculties, young peoples' movements, journalists, politicians and civil servants, among others, to reflect more purposefully on how narratives have shaped their worldviews and actions, both within their group and in relation to other groups. The workshops helped introduce complexity into simplified narratives to create more agency and space for constructive engagement.



Forum at the Central University of Venezuela on narratives and peace negotiations.

### Box 1: A Multistakeholder Narrative Peacebuilding Initiative in Catatumbo, Colombia

In the Catatumbo region of Colombia, divisive narratives around [historical and ongoing armed conflicts](#) have consistently undermined social trust, inhibited political participation, and hindered alignment between local priorities and national peace agendas. To facilitate narrative transformation and enable cooperation towards peace among opposing stakeholders, IFIT staff and members of IFIT’s [Brain Trust for the Colombian Transition](#) brought into dialogue local authorities, civil society members, women and youth leaders, and representatives of the private sector in the municipality of Ocaña.

The team started by convening each group separately to enable candid discussion, facilitate reflection on internal narrative biases, and open participants to the possibility of constructive dialogue with the other actors. Using narrative facilitation tools, the team helped participants articulate their understandings of key terms such as ‘peace’, ‘security’ and ‘transformation’.

They then brought the groups together to identify overlaps in their understandings of core issues and to develop shared priorities, with the aim of guiding local action and informing national peace efforts. IFIT acted as facilitator, applying narrative strategies to reduce ‘us versus them’ framings, build trust among stakeholders across divides, and support sustained engagement.

The initiative delivered three practical outcomes: 1) enabling conversation between actors who had not previously engaged or cooperated with one another on peace efforts in Catatumbo; 2) helping them move beyond dominant conflict narratives towards more complex stories and shared priorities for local transformation; and 3) strengthening local government’s readiness to organise ongoing dialogues and build on the commitments generated.

In the longer term, the initiative is helping local and national actors articulate a regional vision for peace that prioritises security alongside humanitarian responses and development efforts. The Ocaña Mayor’s Office is acting as convener of a collectively developed roadmap for peacebuilding and transformation.

“ Drawing on the narrative peacebuilding approach, we mapped the competing narratives surrounding Colombia’s first transitional justice rulings to make them visible and reduce their polarising effects. We did this together with IFIT’s Law and Peace Practice Group and with input from an INPG member, so the exercise could feed directly into concrete recommendations. ”

Paula Vargas, IFIT Associate



Panel on the role of the media in navigating narrative polarisation during elections.

### ***Narrative as a Lens Integrated into Everyday Practice***

Having worked with narratives for several years, the IFIT team in Latin America has internalised the concepts of narrative peacebuilding to such a degree that they have become second nature. The approach has infused virtually all their activities, from the development of theories of change and stakeholder outreach to event design and facilitation of engagements between conflictive actors. In the words of one staff member: “It is in our blood; it influences what we do every day”.

As a starting point, the team has taken time to identify their own individual and group narratives and analyse how internal narrative biases influence their work. This includes how they collaborate with each other, which actors they choose to engage with, and ways they respond to developments in various spaces, both consciously and unconsciously. They regularly review their narrative orientation during team meetings.

Staff have also used a narrative lens to craft context-specific theories of change in the region. These include bringing attention to less visible narratives, amplifying marginalised and silenced voices, encouraging powerful actors to enter engagements with greater openness, and identifying common narrative roots and branches across groups that are otherwise divided.

Extending to micro-level decisions, narrative peacebuilding has made IFIT team members much more aware of what language to use when approaching or introducing key actors, how they manage relationships when dynamics are tense, and the need for meeting and event preparation that fosters trust, resonance and constructive dialogue. This requires a deep appreciation of the narratives shaping different actors’ worldviews, as well as sensitivity to the emotional and symbolic power of language.

In facilitating different kinds of engagements, the team integrates elements of tested [narrative tools](#) into their processes. These include, among others, encouraging ‘positive attribution’, or statements that ascribe positive intentions and traits to the opposing side; asking ‘circular questions’, which promote reflection and responses that bring nuance and complexity to simplified narratives; and ensuring ‘externalisation’, so

that an issue is not personified in an opposing group but rather seen as an external challenge that can be collectively solved.

The effectiveness of narrative engagements, as understood and assessed by IFIT staff, is evaluated through specific indicators that emerge during implementation. These include observable changes in language, patterns of interaction among actors, and even emotional responses that arise in facilitated spaces. For example, if a meeting plan leads to visible discomfort or confrontation, this is taken as a critical signal that something in the framing, tone or sequencing of the engagement needs to be revised.

Building on this internalised awareness, IFIT's team in Colombia has convened a **multi-party group** of young politicians in Congress, using a narrative lens to facilitate dialogue across divides and enable collective efforts to address common challenges. They have created narrative spaces where former FARC guerrilla members feel safe acknowledging responsibility for past human rights violations. In meetings with other actors in the country's transitional justice process, they use narrative strategies to translate concerns into bridge-building messages and help each side communicate more effectively with the other, even in cases when the actors are not meeting directly face to face.

In Venezuela, meanwhile, the team uses narrative tools to analyse and address the concerns of political actors from different sides. They start by facilitating intra-group meetings to transform narratives from within, and then move to inter-group discussions to enable dialogue despite a context of extreme polarisation (see Box 2). Similarly, in Mexico, IFIT staff have facilitated sensitive conversations among civilian and military actors on the growing role of the military in areas traditionally managed by civilian institutions, including security, law enforcement and infrastructure development. These examples demonstrate the diversity of engagements in which a narrative lens and narrative peacebuilding concepts and strategies can be usefully applied.



Workshop with community leaders in Florencia, Colombia, on dialogue and inclusive narratives.

### Box 2: Inclusive Narratives and Political Engagement in Venezuela

In the tense days surrounding [Venezuela's 2024 elections](#), the IFIT team and members of IFIT's [Venezuela Expert Group](#) supported efforts to offer a confidential space for dialogue – a space meant to go beyond the electoral dispute that followed the vote and to help safeguard the broader constitutional and political guarantees at stake. Although the fullness of the dialogue was impeded by subsequent events, the process of attempting to set it up underscored the importance of designing narratives of inclusion and restraint amid an atmosphere of acute polarisation and uncertainty.

The team sought to (re)introduce a language of mutual recognition and shared responsibility into a context and discourse dominated by existential fears and zero-sum rhetoric across the political spectrum. They proposed that, before addressing the election result itself, the lock-horned parties could begin by identifying shared principles (roots) and framing gestures of political will (branches). Through this approach, IFIT and its partners outlined three immediate steps intended to reinstate civility and engagement: 1) demonstrate goodwill through symbolic actions and language; 2) designate trusted representatives endorsed by both sides; and 3) maintain dialogue efforts regardless of external provocations.

Moreover, the team applied narrative mapping and listening exercises to identify the stories that different constituencies – community leaders, faith actors, business voices, and moderate political figures – are willing and able to carry without increasing their risk. This helped them design safer convenings, reframe polarising debates into problem-solving agendas, and support civic actors to communicate 'coexistence' messages that are grounded in everyday priorities such as services, livelihoods and dignity, rather than political slogans.

Since early January 2026, following the US capture, arrest and removal of Nicolás Maduro, Venezuela has entered another challenging period. But it is one that, like the period before it, underscores the continuing need for inclusive dialogue and narrative awareness across political divides.

“ What narrative tools have enabled in Venezuela is a safe shift from accusation to problem solving, helping civic actors articulate credible ‘coexistence’ stories that can travel across divides and support dialogue even when politics appears closed. ”

Andrés García Trujillo, IFIT Senior Associate

## Lessons and Considerations for Broader Narrative Practice

IFIT's experience of narrative peacebuilding in contexts as diverse and complex as Colombia, Venezuela and Mexico offers a variety of lessons that may be relevant elsewhere.



### Nature of Narrative Work and Avoiding 'Toolkit-isation'

- Narrative peacebuilding is a gradual, dialogic process that, by its very nature, requires intensive engagement over a long period of time to develop understanding and trust across divides.
- The temptation to distil the approach into a quick-results toolbox should be resisted; the approach aims to support deep, collective reflection and relational work, not technical tool deployment.
- While narrative peacebuilding is a process that should be oriented not by tools but by goals, there are nevertheless different tools that can be very helpful in facilitating narrative work.
- Tools such as positive attribution, circular questions, and externalisation can open new avenues for engagement when used creatively from the grassroots to the societal level.



### Engagement and Dialogue Across Divides

- It is essential for practitioners to understand the narratives shaping adversaries' and stakeholders' worldviews and to attend to the emotional power of language, using terms that validate different actors' legitimacy and moral agency.
- IFIT's narrative peacebuilding approach can help create spaces where diverse and sometimes competing narratives can interact constructively, fostering active listening and greater openness.



### Self-Awareness and Reflective Practice

- Practitioners' own narratives shape how they analyse, engage and intervene. Systematic self-reflection helps prevent the reproduction of polarisation and increases the quality of external interventions.
- Real change occurs when practitioners examine their narratives about actors they see as 'the other', and the ways these influence their peacebuilding work or possibly have the unintended effect of reproducing divisions or polarisation.



### Capacity, Skills and Internalisation

- Narrative peacebuilding requires more than hands-on skills development, training and guidance. It also requires active socialisation and long-term accompaniment.
- When done consistently, narrative peacebuilding becomes part of everyday practice, consciously and unconsciously.



### Adaptation and Learning

- Effective narrative peacebuilding requires iterative adjustments, sensitive facilitation, and a high degree of flexibility and adaptation – even within a single activity.

- The approach is comprehensive, but practitioners can use elements of it flexibly and pragmatically based on what they need and how the approach can be most useful to them.
- Systematised learning helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice, with lessons from experiences in the field contributing to the refinement of concepts and processes, and vice versa, in an iterative manner.



### Conceptual Clarity and Strategic Integration

- While flexibility is essential, practitioners involved in narrative engagements must clearly understand the core ideas and assumptions behind narrative peacebuilding. Effective socialisation supports shared understanding and co-creation.
- Narratives should be incorporated into theories of change as a central component, not an add-on. Practitioners should focus on evolving narratives and narrative landscapes towards greater complexity, recognising that small shifts can have significant effects.



### Power of Creative Methods

- Literature, film, music and other cultural forms shape and disseminate narratives. They can either fuel polarisation or support complex, humanising stories. Their role should be analysed and incorporated into narrative peacebuilding efforts, especially at critical political junctures.

“ Using the narrative tools, especially those presented in the workshops we did with INPG’s Sara Cobb, we changed how we facilitate spaces with very diverse actors. We reworked our questions, built conversations around clearer premises, and consistently brought in the context each participant comes from, so people can feel heard and dialogue can stay constructive. ”

Martha Maya, IFIT Deputy Global Director and Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean

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