

Conducting Narrative Assessments in Polarised Environments: Lessons from Kenya

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Introduction

Narrative assessments map and analyse the deep stories, identity frames, and meaning-making systems that shape how individuals and communities relate to one another and respond to political or social change.¹ In polarised contexts like Kenya, which has been especially riven by ethnic tensions between the Luo and Kikuyu, they are crucial to understanding the narratives that drive conflict and developing effective peacebuilding interventions. The challenge is that such narratives are deeply entrenched and emotionally charged. They tend to be weaponised by political actors and reinforced through media, memory and lived experience.² Communities in such an environment will be understandably cautious, defensive or selective in what they share, including during narrative assessments.³

Distinguishing between elite-driven and community-held narratives adds a layer of complexity.⁴ In Kenya, political elites have long amplified divisive ethnic narratives to mobilise support, while ordinary Luo and Kikuyu community members often have far more nuanced, ambivalent or contradictory stories. Moreover, group narratives differ in their historical positioning, power and perceived legitimacy.⁵ This means that even when narrative assessments yield rich insights, they may be difficult to translate into concrete interventions that can genuinely reduce polarisation and build shared meaning.⁶

Based on lessons learnt from a [narrative assessment](#) conducted in Kenya by the Institute for Integrated Transitions (IFIT) and Kenya’s Directorate for National Cohesion and Values (DNCV) and work by the experts in IFIT’s [Inclusive Narratives Practice Group](#), this practice brief equips peacebuilders, researchers, government officials, and other practitioners with the tools to identify dominant, counter- and emerging narratives in polarised contexts, while supporting ethical and sensitive engagements with communities whose narratives may be contested, painful or politically instrumentalised. The brief provides practitioners with practical, step-by-step guidance on how to design, conduct and analyse the findings of a narrative assessment, as a solid foundation for narrative transformation and peacebuilding efforts.

The Importance of a Narrative Assessment

Narrative assessments are essential because stories shape how people see themselves, interpret events, organise politically and socially, and relate across group lines. Narratives are not background noise; they actively influence identity, threat perception, and behaviour. Research and field insights, including our assessment of Luo–Kikuyu narratives,⁷ show that understanding these storylines is fundamental for anyone working to manage conflict or strengthen cohesion.

The systems of stories that make up narratives help people make emotional sense of the past and future. Sara Cobb describes them as living structures that hold history and relationships together.⁸ Even when not factually precise, they feel true.⁹ Sarah Federman notes that narratives often override rational arguments because they speak to identity and fear.¹⁰ In practice, narratives act as personal anchors, telling people who they are, who threatens them, and which actions are justified.

Polarising narratives simplify complex realities into “good versus evil” plots. Solon Simmons shows how such stories validate one group’s grievances while dismissing those of others.¹¹ Our assessment of Luo–Kikuyu narratives reflects this clearly: each community interprets political events through long-standing narratives of betrayal, domination or exclusion. New events are quickly absorbed into the same storyline, reinforcing mistrust. People gravitate towards these simplified stories because they offer clarity, while more nuanced narratives can feel destabilising. Although Kenya is a multiethnic country with many groups, Luo–Kikuyu relations tend to dominate national politics and often serve as a substantial barrier to national unity overall.

Narratives also carry unresolved pasts. Frauke de Weijer and Alison Castel explain how “chosen traumas” and “chosen glories” pass across generations, shaping the way groups read the present.¹² In Kenya, Luo community members reference historical betrayals such as the Kenyatta–Odinga split and the 1969 Kisumu massacre, while many Kikuyu community members draw on memories of displacement. These inherited memories keep narratives emotionally charged and resistant to change.¹³

Narratives do not always circulate organically, but instead are cultivated by powerful actors. Robert Entman shows how elites frame events to mobilise supporters, while media institutions amplify these frames.¹⁴ In Kenya, political leaders use ethnic narratives to portray elections as existential battles, and the mainstream media often echoes these messages. Social media accelerates this process through rapid, emotionally charged repetition.

Finally, narrative environments reflect inequality. Pierre Bourdieu describes how symbolic power elevates certain stories as “common sense” while silencing others.¹⁵ IFIT’s research demonstrates that political and economic structures further entrench dominant narratives.¹⁶ Quieter, marginalised or alternative stories rarely appear in public debate.

IFIT’s [narrative peacebuilding approach](#), of which narrative assessments are a part, is designed to disrupt simplistic and divisive narratives, enabling those who hold such stories to change them from within. These efforts work best when they enrich the national narrative landscape, instead of attempting to replace existing narratives.

Elsewhere, Simmons and I warn that promoting a single “unifying story” often backfires.¹⁷ In Kenya, people have rejected harmonising messages that ignore historical grievances, such as the government’s 2004 *Najivunia kuwa Mkenya* (I am proud to be Kenyan) media campaign. What works better is understanding and creating space for multiple diverse stories that are already in circulation, including about shared struggles, everyday cooperation, and alternative visions of belonging.

Across contexts, from Kenya to Colombia, Tunisia, Myanmar and Northern Ireland, narrative assessments have revealed hidden grievances, emotional drivers of behaviour, and the specific stories that (re)ignite conflict.¹⁸ These insights rarely emerge through traditional conflict analysis, but are key to peacebuilding efforts.

The Narrative Assessment Process

A narrative assessment is only one component of a larger narrative peacebuilding effort, which is a dialogic process that depends on continual adaptation as conditions shift and new opportunities emerge. This practice brief focuses on the first of the three cyclical phases of that process: 1) *assessment*, involving a thorough and inclusive mapping and analysis of the narrative landscape; 2) *strategic planning*, involving development of an informed, coherent and iterative plan of action for narrative transformation; and 3) *implementation*, at multiple levels of society and politics.¹⁹

A narrative assessment typically unfolds through a structured, iterative process that ensures both methodological rigor and ethical sensitivity (see Table 1).

Table 1: Steps of a Narrative Assessment

Step	Expected Outcome
1. Define purpose and scope	A clear, manageable focus that guides methods, sampling and analysis.
2. Select appropriate data collection methods	Methods tailored to political, social and emotional realities, and increased capacity to capture lived experiences.
3. Ensure representation and narrative diversity	Inclusion of diverse voices across identity groups, and the ability to map dominant and quieter narratives.
4. Engage stakeholders early	Local legitimacy, reduced suspicion, and smoother community entry.
5. Train the data collection team	Skilled, trauma-aware facilitators capable of safe, ethical, bias-free data collection.
6. Apply a contextually relevant mapping tool	Clear visualisation of narrative roots and outcomes, and deeper insight into why narratives endure.
7. Use strong ethics protocols	Safe participation, informed consent, anonymity and trust, especially in sensitive contexts.
8. Facilitate safe, insightful narrative exploration	Open, honest sharing and the emergence of dominant and secondary narratives without fear or judgement.
9. Incorporate trauma sensitivity	Protection of participants and facilitators, and increased capacity to manage distress and avoid (re)traumatisation.
10. Analyse collected data	A complete evidence-based narrative profile, in addition to coded patterns, reconstructed narratives, and reduced bias.
11. Validate findings with participants and other key actors	Confirmation that interpretations of narratives ‘sound right’, as well as increased accuracy and protected participants.



Defining Purpose and Scope

A narrative assessment starts by clarifying its purpose. A clear purpose helps guide method and tool selection, participant sampling, and analysis. For example, despite Kenya having 40+ ethnic communities, the purpose of IFIT's 2025 assessment in Kenya was to map Luo and Kikuyu narratives, as they are the main drivers of ethnic polarisation. The team sought to understand the historical roots of these narratives and how they shape political behaviour and intergroup relations. We knew this required going beyond surface-level opinions to uncover the deeper stories behind intergroup mistrust. The team also kept the scope manageable by limiting the assessment to two ethnic communities, acknowledging that it was not feasible to map every narrative in the country.



Selecting an Appropriate Data Collection Method

The assessment must be tailored to the political, social and emotional realities of the context. This requires thoughtful decisions about data collection methods. Practitioners can review existing literature, run workshops, hold focus groups, conduct opinion or narrative surveys, or analyse media and policy outputs, among other options, to understand which stories exist in the narrative landscape and how widely they circulate. They can also carry out formal or informal individual interviews at the community, subnational or national level. The choice depends on what you need to understand.

In the Kenya assessment, the team relied primarily on a literature review, formal individual interviews, and community-level focus group discussions, which allowed us to capture the lived experiences behind the ethnic communities' narratives. These methods also allowed participants to speak in their own words and negotiate meaning in group settings.



Ensuring Representation and Narrative Diversity in the Sampling

Narratives vary across geography, identity, age, gender and lived experience. What matters most is involving people from diverse groups, including those on different sides of a conflict, so the assessment captures a wide range of narratives. The Kenya team used purposive sampling to intentionally include diverse voices.

The team chose selected locations to reflect different demographic realities: Ruaraka (predominantly Luo), Dagoretti South (predominantly Kikuyu), and Westlands (ethnically mixed). Each site hosted focus groups with six adult men, six adult women, and four youth. To deepen the richness of the mapping, the assessment included participants from diverse professions, including teachers, social workers, small business owners, boda boda (motorcycle taxi) drivers, religious leaders, community organisers, students and academics, each of whom brought distinct experiences and interpretive frames. This structure allowed the assessment to capture both dominant narratives and the quieter, alternative stories circulating in Kenya's narrative landscape.



Engaging Stakeholders to Ground the Process

Engaging stakeholders early is essential for grounding a narrative assessment in local realities and ensuring that the process is trusted, understood and supported by those closest to the communities involved. In Kenya, DNCV officers visited local administrators in Ruaraka, Westlands and Dagoretti before the assessment. These meetings served multiple purposes: they informed local administrators about the goals of the assessment, explained the criteria for selecting participants, and enabled the coordinated mobilisation of those participants. These early engagements reduced suspicion, built legitimacy, and smoothed community entry.



Training the Data Collection Team

Narrative work demands specialised skills, emotional intelligence, and strong ethical awareness. In Kenya, seven research assistants and three coordinators underwent intensive training to prepare for this work. They learnt the narrative peacebuilding approach, the assessment process, facilitation strategies for polarised settings, trauma-sensitive interviewing, and bias-free recording. Professional psychologists supported both the training and fieldwork, helping the team manage distress and prevent (re)traumatisation among participants and themselves.

The training also created space for the team to reflect on our own narrative biases – an essential step that strengthened self-awareness and improved the accuracy of the assessment. A well-prepared team creates safer spaces and gathers richer, more trustworthy data. By investing in this level of preparation, the Kenya team ensured that data collection was safe, ethical and capable of capturing the depth and complexity of community narratives.



Applying the Best Mapping Tool

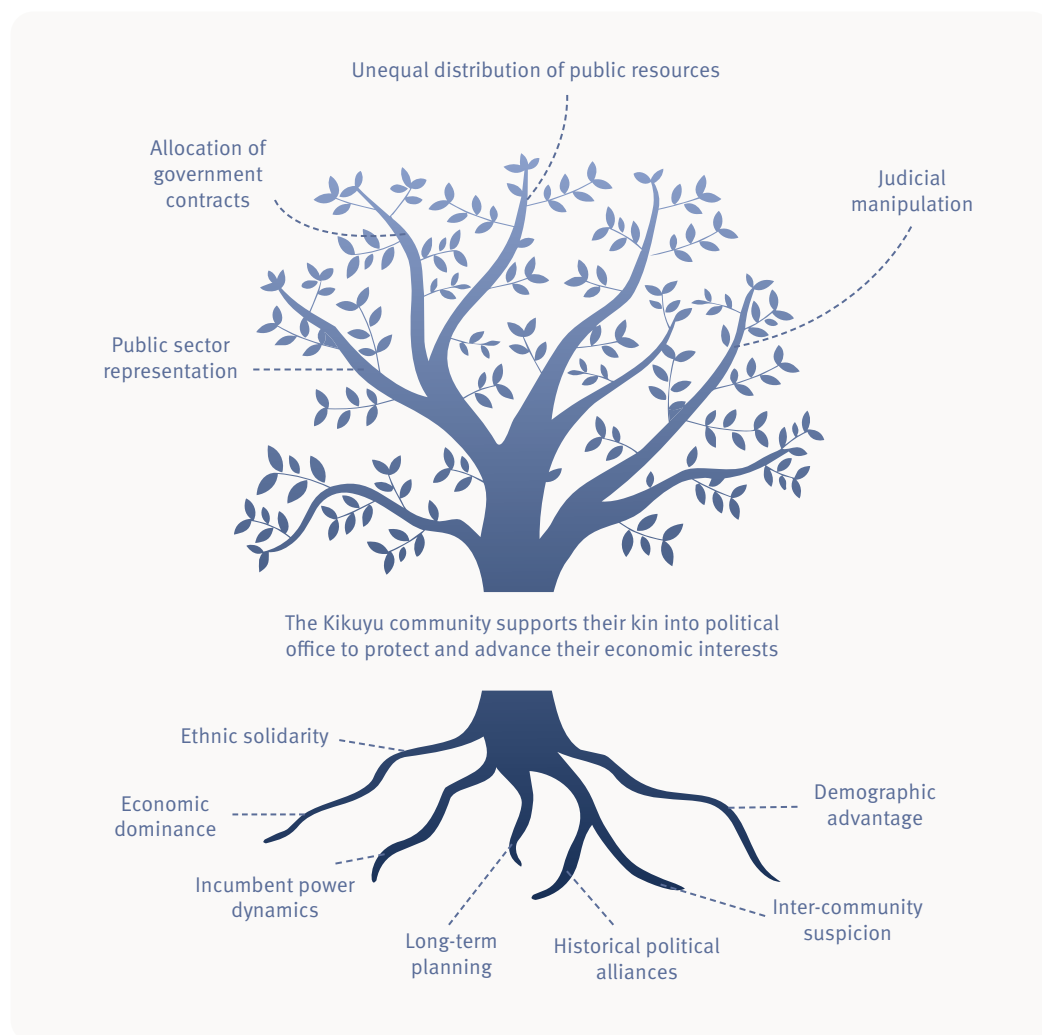
A contextually relevant mapping tool is essential because different tools reveal different layers of meaning. Some methods help you understand how widespread a narrative is, others uncover how people negotiate stories in groups, and still others trace the deeper emotional and historical roots that give a narrative its power. In Kenya, the team applied IFIT's 'narrative tree' as the mapping tool, which proved highly effective because it allowed for exploration of participants' stories, identity frames, and meaning-making systems. In a narrative tree, the rigid trunk 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.²⁰

Using a focus group discussion schedule and a key informant interview guide, the team engaged with the participants to identify dominant narratives and then secondary or marginalised narratives. The facilitators listened closely for narrative signals, or recurring grievances, fears, identity claims, myths and explanations that revealed deeper meaning. A moderator, note taker, and flip-chart writer worked together to capture these signals in real time, while participants confirmed, refined or challenged them. This participatory approach ensured that the team's interpretations of participants' remarks reflected community meaning making rather than our own assumptions.

Once signals emerged, the team grouped similar ones into themes, such as “The Luo community exhibits strong allegiance to their political leader, who leverages this loyalty to capitalise on political opportunities” or “The Kikuyu strategically acquired land from local communities in various parts of the country to take and maintain control of the whole country”. Participants then selected the themes that best represented dominant and secondary narratives in their community. This step reduced researcher bias and highlighted which narratives carried the most emotional and political weight.

The team then mapped each narrative using the narrative tree tool, as illustrated in Figure 1. Facilitators and participants sketched the narrative trunk based on the selected theme, identified the roots by exploring historical events and myths, and determined the branches by examining how the narrative shaped voting, policies, trust and other outcomes. The labels at the roots and branches reflect how the participants described each dynamic, using their own language and interpretations. The narrative tree tool makes narrative dynamics more visible, helping practitioners see not just what people believe, but also why those beliefs endure and how they influence behaviour.

Figure 1: Example of a Narrative Tree from the Kenya Narrative Assessment





Using Ethics Protocols

Applying strong ethics protocols is essential in conducting narrative assessments, particularly in politically sensitive environments where stories about ethnicity, political leaders, or historical grievances may expose participants to risk. Practitioners must obtain informed consent and clearly explain the purpose of the assessment, its potential benefits, and any risks involved. This information should be communicated in simple, accessible language.

In Kenya, the team followed strict ethics protocols. Participants were reminded that their involvement is voluntary and that they may pause or withdraw at any time. The team avoided collecting identifying details, and it anonymised and stored notes securely. Facilitators in Dagoretti South chose not to audio-record sessions because participants feared that the recordings could be misused in the tense pre-election climate at the time. This simple adaptation strengthened trust and allowed participants to speak more openly.



Facilitating Safe, Insightful Narrative Exploration

Creating a safe space where people can speak without fear or judgement is crucial to a thorough and ethical narrative assessment. In Kenya, this meant starting with Luo-only and Kikuyu-only groups, setting clear ground rules, and emphasising confidentiality and the right to pass instead of speaking. Skilled facilitators managed tensions and encouraged those with quieter voices, especially women and youth, to speak out. Sessions took place in familiar community locations to increase comfort. After trust was built, mixed-identity groups helped surface cross-community perceptions. These practices allowed both dominant and secondary narratives to emerge safely.



Incorporating Trauma Sensitivity

Trauma-sensitive methods are essential to any narrative assessment. The Kenyan experience demonstrated that engaging with community stories can trigger emotional distress, particularly when narratives touch on unresolved trauma, historical violence, or experiences of exclusion. For this reason, safe spaces, trained facilitators, and access to mental health and psychosocial support during and after the assessment are not optional – they are core components of responsible practice. The Kenyan team addressed this by using researchers trained in trauma-informed listening, pausing sessions when emotions rose, and ensuring that participants had access to counsellors and mental health referral pathways when needed. Six traumatic responses occurred during our focus group discussions and were managed through grounding techniques and community support.



Analysing Collected Data

A well-designed and thorough analysis of the data ensures an accurate narrative assessment and subsequently increases the likelihood of effective narrative peacebuilding efforts. Five steps are involved:

- **Consolidate all data sources:** Begin by bringing together all the materials from the mapping process, such as narrative trees, flip-chart summaries, transcriptions,

and field notes. This creates a single dataset that reflects everything participants shared across methods and settings. Having all the materials side by side allows you to see the full narrative ecosystem before breaking it down.

- **Code and categorise supporting data:** Go through the materials and code them for identity claims, grievances, fears, stereotypes and emotional cues. Coding helps you systematically organise the raw data into meaningful categories. This step reveals patterns and nuances that may not have been fully captured during the mapping process.²¹
- **Reconstruct each narrative in full:** Use each narrative tree as the structural backbone and enrich it with details from the engagements and the literature. This includes adding historical references, policies, emotions and examples that participants shared. The goal is to turn each tree into a complete, evidence-based narrative profile rather than a simple diagram.
- **Validate or challenge the narrative trees:** Compare the coded data with the narrative trees to check whether the trees accurately reflect what participants said. Look for missing elements, contradictions or alternative interpretations that need to be incorporated. This process strengthens the credibility of the analysis and reduces researcher bias.
- **Identify narrative variations within and across groups:** Examine how participants of different ethnicities, genders, ages, locations, political persuasions, and other identity markers interpret the same narrative. This comparison reveals where narratives converge, diverge or directly contradict each other. It also helps identify which narratives are elite-driven, community-held or unique to mixed-group settings.



Validating Findings with Communities

Validation is essential in narrative assessments because it confirms that the analysis reflects how participants actually create meaning. In sensitive or trauma-affected settings, it must be done with great care to avoid reigniting tensions or exposing participants to harm. In Kenya, we relied on trusted intermediaries and small, private conversations to check whether the identified narratives and their interpretations ‘sound right’. The validation corroborated patterns rather than quotes, used composite summaries that protect anonymity, and avoided reinforcing stereotypes. Divisive narratives were presented in softened, analytical terms, focusing on their function. Working through institutional partners strengthened accuracy and protected participants.²²

Lessons and Recommendations

The Kenya narrative assessment led by IFIT and the DNCV offers practical lessons for practitioners working in polarised environments. These lessons can guide future narrative assessments and strengthen narrative peacebuilding efforts.

✓ Engage Local Institutions

Local institutions provide legitimacy and access. They help mobilise participants and reduce suspicion. In Kenya, the DNCV played this role effectively.

✓ Build a Multidisciplinary Analysis Team

A strong narrative assessment requires a team with diverse skills to hold emotional, historical and political complexity at once. In Kenya, the team combined researchers, psychologists, narrative specialists, and an international narrative scholar and used a four-person structure to lead each focus group to ensure accuracy and emotional safety.

✓ Invest in Training

Narrative work requires skill. Teams need training in facilitation, trauma sensitivity, and narrative tools. They also need emotional support. An investment in training in Kenya strengthened the entire process.

✓ Use Tools that Reveal Depth

The right assessment tools help participants explore the roots and consequences of their stories. They make complex narratives easier to understand and analyse. In Kenya, the narrative tree tool helped participants trace how historical betrayals have shaped current intergroup mistrust.

✓ Maintain Impartiality and Avoid Taking Sides

Practitioners must stay impartial and focus on how narratives function, rather than judging their accuracy. The Kenya team members made their impartiality explicit and stated that they did not endorse any narrative portraying whole communities as uniform or blameworthy, which helped participants speak more openly.

✓ Manage Power Dynamics Carefully

Practitioners must design the process so all voices can contribute safely, especially those often overshadowed. The Kenya project organised Luo-only, Kikuyu-only and mixed groups, with balanced representation, including concerning gender and age, which surfaced narratives that otherwise would have remained hidden.

✓ **Prioritise Protection, Safety and Trust**

People share more when they feel safe. This means ensuring participants understand exactly what the assessment involves and giving them the freedom to consent, pause or withdraw without pressure. It also requires organising all engagements in familiar, comfortable and community-trusted locations where people feel secure enough to speak openly.

✓ **Adapt Constantly**

Group dynamics can change quickly, which means that practitioners must stay flexible. If recording devices create fear among participants, practitioners should stop using them. If a location feels unsafe, the process should be moved. If emotions rise, practitioners should pause the engagement. The Kenya team adapted at every stage, which improved participation and data quality.

✓ **Triangulate to Strengthen Accuracy**

Triangulation means examining an issue from more than one standpoint by combining different assessment methods and sources of data. By revealing contradictions and confirming patterns, it helps practitioners avoid relying too much on one perspective and falling into misinterpretation. In Kenya, the team's triangulation through multiple participant groups, assessment locations, data collection methods, and diversified literature produced a richer understanding of the narrative landscape.

✓ **Avoid Reinforcing Harmful Narratives**

Practitioners must present narratives descriptively and avoid amplifying divisive stories. In authoring the case study based on the Kenya narrative assessment, Simmons and I clarified that we do not support any particular narrative, highlighted the diversity of views we found within groups, and grounded our findings in the country's historical and structural context to prevent reinforcing stereotypes.²³

✓ **Translate Insights into Action**

A narrative assessment is only the first step. The findings are useful not only for understanding narrative dynamics but also for designing engagements and interventions. However, practitioners must take care to acknowledge historical roots, reframe myths, and redirect harmful behaviours, without confronting dominant narratives head on. Since narratives are often tied to identity, emotion and historical memory, challenging them directly can close down dialogue rather than open it up. A better approach is to create space for alternative stories.

Conclusion

Narrative assessments offer a powerful way to understand the emotional, historical and identity-based drivers of conflict and cohesion. When conducted ethically and strategically, they reveal hidden dynamics, amplify marginalised voices, and create pathways for narrative peacebuilding. The 2025 IFIT and DNCV assessment of Luo–Kikuyu narratives in Kenya demonstrates that narrative work is not about pursuing narrative unity, but about enriching the narrative landscape so that more complex, inclusive and humane stories become visible.

Notes

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