

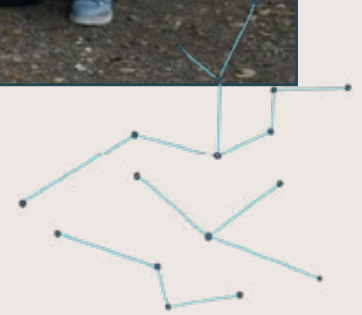
OES-LAC Narratives Workshop

Report (live)

Barcelona, 6-7 March 2023



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Objectives:

- To create a space for theoretical and methodological learning about the work to change narratives in a way that will help to improve our strategies for social and political reform.
- To exchange the experiences, knowledge and interests of different people within Oxfam (Latin America and the Caribbean-Spain/PROG-COMS etc.) and outside of it, to strengthen a learning community around narrative change.
- To identify shared principles and working models that will enable us to enhance our impact on narrative change.

Day 1: laying the groundwork

The Hackeo Cultural collective gave us a presentation on their working model for narrative change, from which we would like to highlight some key aspects:

1. The concept of narratives:

- a. Narratives are interpretative social structures that frame our experience and make sense of everyday reality while guiding our actions and decisions.
- b. Narratives are more than just a set of inter-related stories. They are complex adaptive and evolutionary systems.
- c. Narratives are alive. They emerge, evolve, mutate, die out or converge with other narratives within a specific cultural environment or context.
- d. Narratives define how we collectively make sense of our reality.
- e. Narratives have a visible side and a hidden one.

2. The idea that hegemonic narratives (or narrative monoculture, as they are referred to) tend to maintain the status quo and reproduce systems of oppression and inequality. Therefore, fighting injustice demands an awareness that new narratives need to be cultivated.

3. The method used by Hackeo Cultural is as follows:

To ask



To listen



To understand



To recode



To hack



Although, due to lack of time, we did not go through the whole process, we were shown a case study of an intervention that was made during the elections in Guatemala, where the whole process unfolded ([Elijo Dignidad Documentary](#) and [Explanatory Presentation](#)).

Some of the comments, questions and contributions made during the debate included:

- The importance of understanding that these intervention techniques find their richness in their dynamism and constant adaptation. They are based on communicative action, but do not represent a campaign in the traditional sense in which we NGOs understand it, because campaigns tend to have a more unidirectional and predefined logic, whereas the experiences presented were openly in dialogue, adapting and mutating from this identification of the interests of society.

- The importance of recognising that those who drive hegemonic narratives already operate with models of this kind, and in fact may be capturing the narratives around HR, Democracy, Freedom, etc., and finding a way to fight against that is challenging. In this sense, it must be recognised that the construction of narratives is an ongoing exercise, a struggle based precisely on giving meaning and value to words and concepts from different points of view. Words don't belong to anyone, and their meaning is disputed territory; hence the importance of decoding, re-signifying, appropriating, etc.

- An important challenge to the model of NGOs such as Oxfam is that they have traditionally achieved legitimacy on the basis of criteria and values that have been shaped by colonialism: academicist, with a Northern Hemisphere, white male and human rights perspective (as a Eurocentric construct, etc.). Recognising this is a first step in attempting to search for the legitimacy of narratives from other positions and values (e.g. giving a voice to the protagonists, communicating on simple and sensible terms, rather than complex and specialist, renouncing the brand, learning to communicate academic knowledge in different ways, etc.). This is not to say that we should stop doing what we have done until now, because, for example, in the case of academic knowledge, we recognise that it is still necessary and contributes value; it is simply that we must understand that it is not the only form of legitimate knowledge.

- Although a large part of the struggle for narratives takes place in the field of online digital communication, and this allows for a great deal of dissemination and penetration, it is important to understand that in mobilisation and changing of narratives, presence is necessary because it gives a face and body to the struggles, demands and proposals.

- It is important to recognise that narratives are expressed on very different levels and planes: from the informal/formal, the personal/institutional, the communicative/performative. Coherence is a challenge.

Practical Exercises:

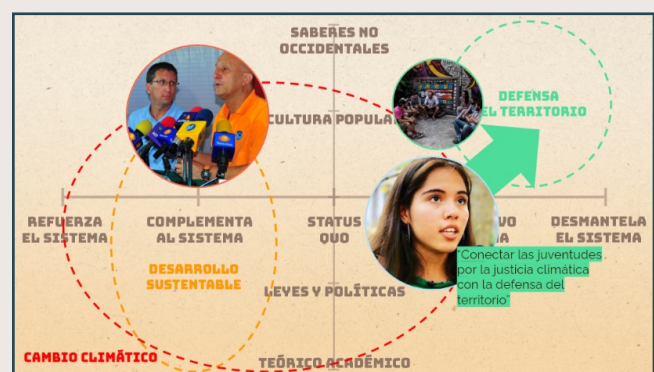
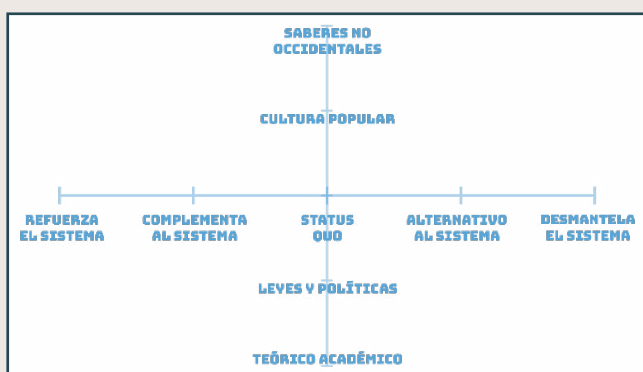
a. The Narrative Horizon:

This consisted of identifying the objective we are pursuing with an initiative to change the narrative, based on 3 questions: what do we want to change in the short, medium and long term? Where do we want to be in 10-15 years? And what do we want to drastically change in today's world?

b. Narrative Territory:

This involved an exercise to situate (a) the narratives, (b) the communities that are part of the conversation and (c) the narrative intentions in quadrants divided by 2 axes: the axis of change (from what reinforces the system to what dismantles the system) and the axis of Knowledge (from Western to non-Western).

This exercise allows us to clearly visualise the space of struggle that is generated by the hegemonic narratives and those that we want to transform, as well as the network of actors that interact. The quadrants are as follows, and are shown with an example:



Some reflections on the exercises:

– Trying to define a narrative horizon helps to really focus reflection and strategy. The longer term is important, because it helps to emphasise the difference between narrative change and the “campaign”, which may or may not be a strategy that is used.

– However, due to a lack of time we were unable to resolve some doubts about the categories and slogans of the Narrative Territory exercise. It seems to us that it is an exercise that allows us to demonstrate the position of Oxfam, its allies and the “target group”. Because sometimes, depending on who we talk to, it can be helpful to us to see if our position as Oxfam can facilitate communication or not, maybe it is in our interest to talk through or alongside allies. In this regard, we should not confuse what we are and where we are with where we want to be, as this leads to erroneous analyses.

– Implicitly, the exercise helps us to seriously consider what role we as Oxfam want and can play in certain narrative change initiatives,

– We have realised that this is a paradox: on the one hand, we find it easier and more grounded to carry out this type of exercise on issues where we have more experience and background, while we have more difficulties with “new” issues or where no positions and policy have been developed. However, on familiar issues we tend to reproduce so much of the analysis or strategies we have already used

(even if they have not necessarily been effective) that we find it difficult to take a more transformative stance. With new issues, given that they present more of a blank sheet, we can allow ourselves to think from a breakaway point of view, not only in terms of objectives, but also ways of doing things. In the first cases, the question that helps us is, “What could we be doing differently?” to try to break inertias and question things that have been assumed.

– We recognise that anti-racist narratives are particularly complex because they bring to the fore intersectionality and the need to discuss and agree on aspirations, points of view and the logic of intervention. Moreover, this narrative axis also invites us to rethink the others that are “clearer” to us, because it is a category that crosses them. In this sense, there is a very important warning about the deceptive words we use to “encapsulate” very different realities and problems and which, through simplification, end up de-problematising this complex reality.

– Finally, there is a clear recognition of the need to find more spaces for joint reflection, to identify that common ground between different narratives, and that shared community between the Latin America and Caribbean and the Oxfam Spain teams. It is important to dedicate time to these spaces, trying to escape the inertia, the bureaucratic stranglehold of funding. It is an exercise in reflection but one that must feed into concrete action.

The importance of LISTENING in the work to change narratives: the experience of PUENTES.

We were given a presentation of the work of diagnosis and listening to narratives by this organisation that works in Latin America and the Caribbean, which exposed the need to be rigorous when identifying the hegemonic narratives and the values that sustain them, as this allows us to identify where entry points can be for new narratives. Some

interesting findings emerged from this presentation:

– The diversity and complementarity of methods, ranging from focus groups to surveys and other types of narrative testing mechanisms. It is important to thoroughly analyse the space in which we will move, and the more information we have, the better.

– We must also insist on the importance of audience identification models (sympathisers, undecided and antagonists), not in terms of percentages and socio-demographic aspects per se, but in terms of values and what serves to justify their attitudes and behaviour. Understanding this would allow us to weave “incremental” narratives that enter through elements of common interest and shared values, rather than narratives that

will markedly clash with the values of the persuadable/flexible. Being able to work on the tests in person is ideal in order to be able to fine-tune the strategy. The case of the Chilean vote and referendum is a good example of how flexible groups can change their position in a matter of weeks, and how necessary it is to establish conversations based on their values.

– All digital diagnostic and listening mechanisms have a bias, and everyone must strike a balance between reach and cost. In any case, Facebook is a more open network from which you can reach more different people. A compromise can be made with regard to rigour to ensure a good outcome, and then the sample can be amended as you go.

Day 2: moving forward with proposals

We started the day by learning about Oxfam's experience of narrative work in Vietnam. They have been promoting narratives to defend Civic Space for several years, and shared some key learnings with us. We would like to highlight just a few key ideas:

- The process of generating the new narrative can be as or more important than the narrative itself: they say this because their experience is based on solid work with the network of partner organisations, which they have expanded and diversified in order to obtain a broad view of “civil society”.
- Their experience is valuable because it shows how good work on narratives can be promoted, even in closed and complex contexts (they had to invent a way of talking about civil society without saying they were civil society).
- The relevance of the analysis and identification of the values around which the new narrative can be built. This made it possible to identify entry points and anchors with societal values that would enable them to generate support and reinforce the role of civil society.
- The importance of a comprehensive institutional approach to narrative work. It is not just about what you say (a communication campaign), it must be consistent with what you do and who you are; values must not only be translated into words but also into actions.
- One of the key aspects of their work is that it has been highly adaptive and learning-based. Without having everything clear from the beginning, but instead taking steps, testing and co-constructing with others a more dynamic approach than we are accustomed to.

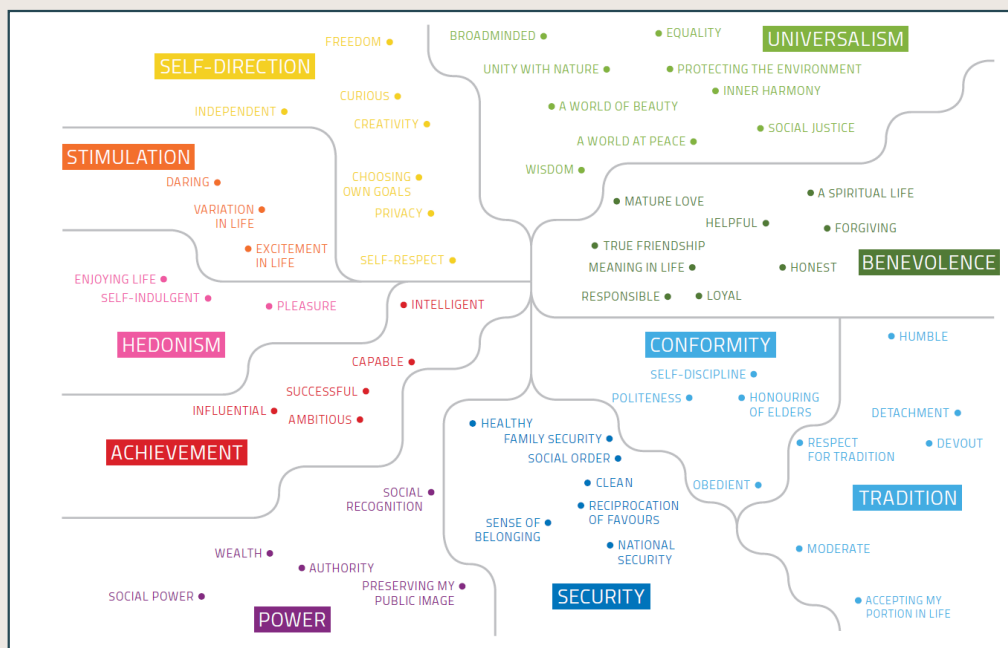
NARRATIVE WORK AT OXFAM:

It is important to be aware that there is still a long road ahead within the confederation. The Vietnam experience has been identified and supported through the guidance of the Community of Practice on Narratives, which has been driven by members of the Civic Space group in the confederation. The intention was to present some basic materials summarising concepts, recommendations and examples during the workshop, but this was not possible due to schedule changes. We would like to share two of the most summarised resources, just to provide an overview: **An introductory overview of the work on narratives in civic space**, and a document **with the ABC of narratives for Influence**. These documents already

contain lessons learned and practices from teams in countries such as Peru, Vietnam and South Africa, enriched with experiences from external allies.

The Community of Practice is currently being reorganised due to the departure and change of responsibilities of several of its members, but very interesting work is being developed, such as the **identification of narratives on Climate**, conducted by Isabel Crabbtree-Condor, who recorded this video to explain her initiative to the participants of the Barcelona workshop. We will share more case studies and experiences shortly.

Then, to continue delving into the topic of **VALUES**, Eloisa Nos gave a presentation which brought us closer to the theoretical model and practical reflection by using a **CEIPAZ** model on collective and transformative values, and building on the **Finding Frames** proposal, the concept of the cultural effectiveness of messages and value maps such as the one from the **PIRC**, shown below:



Practical Exercises:

Following the presentation, we engaged in a **GROUP EXERCISE** to try and identify the values that were implicit in our narrative (identified the day before), and to give us an opportunity to tweak it according to the values we would like to convey in line with the change we want to generate. The guiding questions were as follows:

1. What is the focus of the narrative (promotional/transformational)?
2. What is the framework (where is the narrative told from? What is the focus? What is left out of the problem-solution analysis?)
3. What values does it convey?
4. Is it culturally effective?
5. How could we change it to make it more transformational?

Below are some of the responses to the presentation and the practical exercise:

– Reflection on values is important, because we recognise that there may be cultural, neo-colonial biases, and the work of re-signification and re-interpretation, and even the recognition of new values, is of great importance. Thinking about values, in any of the existing typologies, does not imply classifying some values as “better” or “good” over others that are “worse” or “bad”; this is not an analysis that serves to establish moral standards; we must be careful not to fall into this trap.

– Analysis of values is essential to the design of transformational narratives, because it helps us to identify the niche of our action: it is key to identify the core values of our target audience, and to design and test ways to anchor our narrative in these values. Otherwise, they won’t listen to us.

Later, with the help of Hackeo Cultural, another presentation was delivered on how to decode a narrative, through guidelines for analysing fundamental or representative pieces of the hegemonic narrative. The model of analysis that was presented is based on 2 complementary levels.

Linguistic Analysis	Narrative Analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Verbs: list the actions and processes, how they are conjugated and what they tell us about the message. - Subjects and Objects: identify who the active subjects are and on whom or what they are acting. - Images Evoked: list the images that the language evokes in the mind, what "subject matter" it is referring to and what figurative meanings are present. - Hidden Assumptions: discovering what is not said but can be deduced, what is not visible but is hidden behind the message, what is subliminal. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Logic: Related to belief systems and common sense, those truths that we assume and do not question. - Ideology: Structures of ideas and concepts that create a framework of meanings. This cultural context justifies a society's action. - Metaphor: Metaphors compare two ideas to create a third in our mind, they play with imagination and natural impulses. - Framing: This integrates all of the above into a coherent point of view. Narrative framing brings concepts to life and helps us understand the world.

Practical Exercises:

Based on the examples presented, we worked in groups to try to use these categories of linguistic analysis to decode a hegemonic message that we wanted to combat, or to analyse our own message at the institutional level. Due to time constraints we were not able to apply the categories of narrative analysis, but we did talk about a [concrete case \(CURA DE LA TIERRA\)](#) to understand how it works in practice.

Below are some of the interventions and comments that followed the exercise:

– It is very useful as a structure to analyse hegemonic messages so they can be decoded, and even to analyse our own messages: it allows us to give structure to the analysis and to convert constructive criticism into something more actionable, because it can also be used to recode.

– However, we acknowledge that our inertia and ways of working do not always "leave us time" to perform these exercises on a more daily basis. To realise the potential of these methodologies, we may need to stop doing so many things, to focus and go deeper.

– It is very important to insist on distinguishing between "narrative" and campaign: they are not the same thing, and narrative work is not limited to the design of a campaign or communication action in the classic Oxfam style.

– We conducted the exercises with some narrative pieces that were challenging, since although they did not follow a conventional linguistic structure, they managed to effectively mobilise and connect with audiences. Those who propagate oppressive hegemonic narratives have already done a lot of work and have a deep understanding of the techniques for disseminating narratives, we must be aware that this is a big challenge.

– Being aware that as an organisation we address different populations through different themes (and different voices - there is not one Oxfam, but many Oxfams in different locations), so we have a significant challenge when it comes to identifying common and overarching elements, and a need for strategic rationalisation in order to truly align our work, efforts and budget.

– For this, once again, it is important to highlight the need for spaces for reflection and joint construction, where we identify these differences, these complexities, and from both an attitudinal (humility, listening) and strategic perspective, we move forward.

– We recognise that there are issues on which we are at a preliminary stage of reflection, and that we would need to dedicate time specifically to them in order to progress our positions. This will give us an opportunity to (re)problematise some categories that are already “clear” to us, because it will allow us to identify elements of intersectionality and confluence that need to be addressed.

– We need to break away from the inertia and entrenched elements of Oxfam’s logic: the exercises have shown us that complexity cannot be

summed up in a slogan, or a linear phrase. We need to incorporate not only a more complex notion of narrative, but also understand how to use other languages and ways of expressing and conveying it in a way that is understandable and connects with our target audience.

– This is closely linked to our way of conducting research and collecting data, because we can no longer do it with our backs turned to the perceptions of the population we want to address. It is important to understand that the data we find shocking is not necessarily what the target population needs to challenge the deep-rooted values and beliefs that continue to sustain inequalities in the system.

Closing and ideas for follow-up

At the end of the workshop, we had a session where we contributed “words” that this experience of training and shared reflection left us with.



To finish off, we also had a round of feedback on proposals and ideas on how we can move forward with this work and learning agenda on narratives. The ideas that were put forward have been grouped together to give a more strategic sense to different possibilities:

Ad-hoc spaces:

- Continue to generate spaces for critical reflection, to break away from automatism and inertia.
- Generate spaces to (de)construct our own narratives as Oxfam, this is especially relevant for shared “new” issues.
- Learning days on specific and shared themes: how to understand and respond to narratives that attack us, hegemonic narratives about xx, etc.
- Practical exercises to help us internalise and put into practice: reflection on symbols, some reflection on campaigns in preparation.

Connections:

- Form one or more Reference Groups around common narratives or common lines of work.
- Form a Mixed Critical Group, which can be a sounding board, a place for contrasting ideas, for mutual enrichment.
- Encourage bilateral connections, collaborations and shared learning between teams and individuals.
- Mutual participation in events or narrative actions, to learn from one another.

Resources

- Organise materials, bibliography, references, cases for learning on Compass, which serves to restore what has already been done, and build from there.
- Appropriating and updating literature as “finding frames”.

Themes:

The different proposals mentioned above are not labelled “thematically”, but we believe it is necessary to underline that there are some themes that have emerged strongly throughout the workshop, and which could serve to articulate some concrete actions:

- Linking between narratives and the closure of civil society spaces.
- Migration narratives (building on the momentum in Latin America and the Caribbean)
- Anti-racist narratives (as a way of beginning to articulate a position)
- Climate Narratives

Given that this is a shared OES-LAC agenda, the regional platform and the OES (Oxfam Spain) teams involved (IPLAM-SKY) will be assessing initiatives and concrete actions that can be generated and coordinated in the coming year.

ANNEX I: Participants

Estela Garcia	LAC-Comms
Maria Eugenia Luarca	LAC-Digital
Gloria Amezcuita	LAC-Coord. Programmes
Francisco Angulo	Peru-Inequality
Sayuri Andrade	Peru-Inequalities
Martha Sanchez	LAC-Programmes
Karla Castillo	El Salvador-Inequality
Cristina Fernandez	OES-Sahel Civic Space
Maria José Gascon	OES-Human Mobility
Natalia Pereira	OES-Decolonisation
Javi Gacio	OES-Climate Activism
Ximena Medina	OES-Taxation
César Santamaría	OES-Narratives
Ana Claver	OES-Learning
Olga Lopez	OES-Accountability
Marina Bertrand	OES-Public Engagement
Sandra Martinez	OES-Inequality/Youth
Rodrigo Barahona	OES-Learning
Viviane Ouganadou	Narrative Researcher
Julia García	OES-Youth (Tuesday)
Pau Adelantado	OES-Public Engagement (Monday)
Jana Diaz	OES-Public Engagement (Monday)
Rodrigo Barahona	OES-Organiser

Ponrnyrd

- **Hackeo Cultural**: Ana Lucía Ixchiú y Carlos Cano
- **Puentes**: Mónica Roa and Alejandro Gamboa
- **Eloísa Nos**
- **Van Le Thi Bich** (Vietnam civil society specialist) and **Duong Do Quy** (Asia Governance specialist).

ANNEX 2: Preliminary programme

Monday 6th		Tuesday 7th	
Time	Activity	Time	Activity
10:00	Start: presentations, etc.	9:00	Start and recap of the day with positive energy (dynamic)
		9:30	The experience of Oxfam in Vietnam
10:30	Workshop 1 Hackeo Cultural -Introduction to the Hackeo Cultural methodology, how to promote sustainable change through narratives and political action/Case study presentation: Cura de la Tierra Guatemala. From research to narrative, co-creation of communication strategies/Screening of short documentary: Thelma, curar el territorio/ Practical exercises (The Territory of Change and The Narrative Objective) (including break)	10:30	Values framework: theory and practice (presentation by Eloisa Nos + Discussion and practical exercise)
		12:00	Break
		12:30	Workshop 2 Hackeo Cultural (2:30 in total, lunch halfway through the workshop) -Narrative evolution, how we understand narratives in a cycle of social change/Case study presentation: From Cura da Terra to Milpamérica Resiste/ Explanation of the linguistic and narrative analysis/ Practical exercise (Decoding a narrative)
14:00	Lunch	14:00	(Lunch)
15:00	Understanding the experience of Puentes (presentation by Monica Roa and discussion) + Video on how to find new narratives? (Isabel Crabtree-Condor)		
16:00	Identifying areas for improvement in our work on narratives (including coffee break)	16:00	Recapitulation of identified needs
17:00	Identifying needs for improvement of work	17:00	Identifying and prioritising areas for collaboration and shared work
18:00	End of the day	18:00	Closing