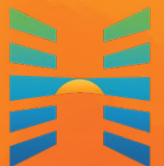
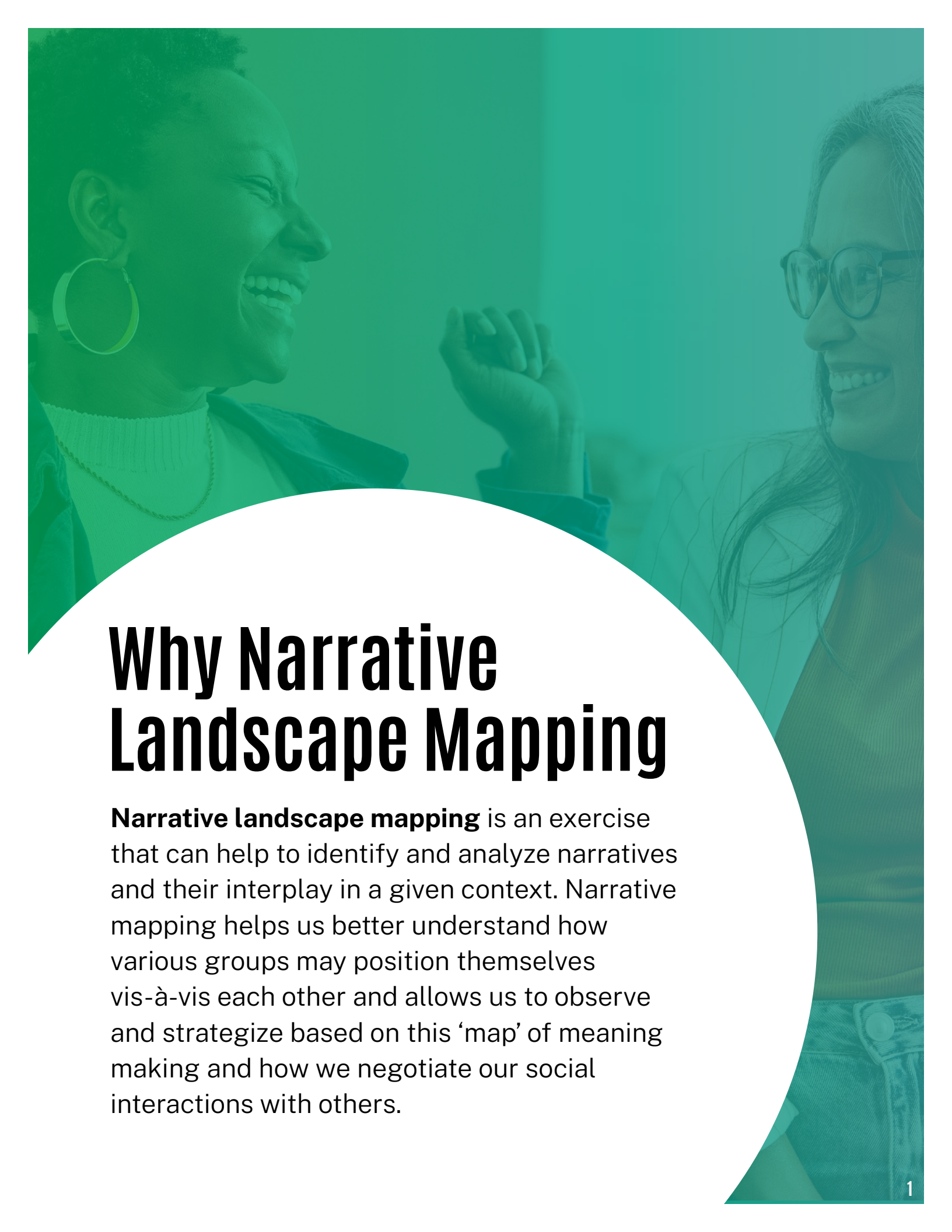


NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE MAPPING

**NARRATIVE ENGAGEMENT
ACROSS DIFFERENCE (NEAD)**

HORIZONS
PROJECT



A background image of two women laughing and talking, overlaid with a teal color filter. The image is partially obscured by a large white circle that contains the text.

Why Narrative Landscape Mapping

Narrative landscape mapping is an exercise that can help to identify and analyze narratives and their interplay in a given context. Narrative mapping helps us better understand how various groups may position themselves vis-à-vis each other and allows us to observe and strategize based on this ‘map’ of meaning making and how we negotiate our social interactions with others.



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A core aspect of narrative mapping is identifying dominant narratives and how they produce power relations and dynamics in coalitions we work with as well as in broader movement spaces. A critical element (a starting point) for this is understanding, not only narratives of “the Other” but also of “Self” — our own stories and narratives that we are caught up in and how those narratives operate in the space where we work. Our narratives are part of the landscape as well as within existing power relations. Narrative mapping is key to becoming aware of and identifying how we position ourselves and others in narratives so that we have the opportunity to strategize entry-points for broader relationship-building and effective collaborations within coalitions, as well as for navigating differences and engaging with those we disagree with in a way that fosters democracy and does not contribute to division/toxic polarization. Examples of this could be using narrative mapping to figure out power dynamics and positioning of various groups within coalitions and in broader movements for more effective collaborations and relations; staying aware of when

we may start using delegitimizing language towards “Others” that alienates potential allies; or, developing strategies for our work (relational or external communications) vis-à-vis a particular issue based on analysis of dominant narratives.

Keeping in mind that NEAD is focused on *narrative engagement across difference*, we place an emphasis on mapping those narratives that can help identify and navigate (ethically) those differences, so they do not lead to further power imbalances, marginalization, delegitimization or reduced participation — all key democratic principles. Narrative mapping that yields a ‘big picture’ view of the narrative landscape and one’s own place in it can provide more strategic pathways, a vision, and potential entry points rather than being focused on only countering specific narratives. You can work on evolving narratives or developing alternative narratives. Such understanding is important both within coalitions in which groups collaborate, as well as in the broader environment that groups are working within.

WHAT IS NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE MAPPING?



Narrative landscape refers to the narrative context (or environment) that encompasses narratives which are circulating in a given context. **Healthy narrative landscapes** include multiple, diverse narratives that are circulating and can sit in tension with each other (within the boundaries of peaceful free speech), and the narratives themselves are complex.

Complexity at the narrative level implies that narratives are nuanced and include interdependence of characters and events in storylines (not only bad guys doing bad things to good guys), and they do not denigrate, delegitimize, or assume bad intentions of groups or individuals. Experiencing nuance at the level of narrative allows many diverse actors to participate in the creation and re-telling of the stories that make up that complex narrative. Narratives that are complex continue to evolve and incorporate new elements. This is a process of “enrichment” or of incorporating more components into a narrative as new characters and plotlines are brought into view when groups are sensemaking together. We are open to new understandings and new meanings of issues and identities that open us up to allyship and potential solutions to a challenge we may not have seen before.

For example, we can imagine a simple narrative regarding White Christian Nationalism where we reduce anyone who is Christian into a one-dimensional character — an adherent to extremist, racist beliefs -because of their membership in an evangelical church. Complexifying this narrative is to incorporate more characters, plotlines, and values that deepen our understanding of a Christian fundamentalist individual or group with their histories and with other affiliations and identities. This complexity opens opportunities to deepen our understanding and invites participation in our joint sense-making that will further the enrichment of the narrative.

MAPPING NARRATIVE LANDSCAPES

Mapping a narrative landscape helps us identify and analyze/name/categorize/capture how various groups position themselves vis-à-vis each other. It helps us observe how this map of positions and interpretations interacts dynamically and shifts through social negotiations.

Mapping narrative landscape involves:

- ✦ Identifying what narratives are circulating in a context (“landscape”).
- ✦ Identifying narrative of Self (along with Others).
- ✦ Analyzing the narratives themselves. (How are the Self and Others positioned at the narrative level?)
- ✦ Understanding the narrative dynamics (i.e., what is dominant and what is marginalized in order to tease out the power relationships amongst different narratives).

The reason to engage in mapping is to better understand how rich and healthy or unhealthy or over-simplified the narrative landscape actually is, to identify our own positioning within that landscape; and to develop strategies to influence a healthier more complex and nuanced narrative environment. When pro-democracy coalitions or movements are developing strategies to contribute to a healthy landscape and deciding upon the contributions they want to make, the starting place is understanding the existing narrative landscape and how their narrative strategy impacts their ability to achieve their goals and foster either a more complex narrative context or an unhealthy narrative context that promotes ongoing delegitimization.

Starting with the Story of Self (To ground our strategy): Any one person or group/coalition that conducts narrative landscape mapping needs to include themselves as a starting point within the exercise to better understand their own positionality within the landscape and to better engage with anyone they may consider to be outside their circle of care, or otherwise referred to as their “other” in tense, conflictive dynamics. As we and our narratives are part of the landscape, narrative mapping needs to start with mapping and understanding our own narratives.

LEVELS OF NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE MAPPING¹

A. LANDSCAPE LEVEL

Mapping narrative landscapes refers to identifying narratives which are circulating in a given context with an eye towards understanding multiplicity, diversity, power imbalances/dynamics, and interactional patterns of narratives in that landscape. Narrative(s) of Self should also be included in this map. *A core feature of this analysis is understanding the power dynamics or how power functions in the narrative landscape and within narratives.*

Narrative power analysis is an analysis of what stories are dominant, and which are excluded, marginalized, and don't get talked about. It is also any analysis of how dominant narratives function/operate to establish power relations by setting up various descriptions/characterizations, rights and responsibilities, privileges to various groups, position of groups vis-à-vis each other, etc. When there is marginalization, understanding those dynamics within the landscape is important to be able to incorporate them into your strategy as a coalition and for external audiences. When we map a narrative landscape and analyze narratives and their dynamics as part of narrative mapping, we are always tracing power.

Dominant narratives: Dominant narratives organize power relations and regulate norms. Dominant narratives are the stories in our culture/society which represent 'common sense' and socially shared understandings. Dominant narratives set the parameters for what is normative when it comes to identities or behaviors — what is good or bad, who or what is right or wrong, who is seen and valued and who isn't. Because these dominant narratives are often experienced as 'common sense,' they are often invisible, while also having a powerful hold as people do not often question what they assume is common sense.

Dominant narratives are not necessarily oppressive by default but because they assign power and maintain power relations, they can be. **Identifying and understanding dominant narratives and how they function in a given narrative landscape is key to uncovering what and how 'a common sense' set of meanings (or how a narrative) can produce and maintain our understanding of the world or about certain issues and all the implications and consequences of that.**

Dominant narratives not only categorize and cast groups in a certain way, but they also regulate relationships (who has power and privilege over whom or how people can be positioned with each other). More importantly, they have the power to shape what is possible to say and do (and what cannot be said).

¹ See this document that includes some steps:
<https://ifit-transitions.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/The-Role-of-Narrative-in-Managing-Conflict-and-Supporting-Peace-1.pdf>

Marginalized narratives. Marginalized narratives refer to those narratives that are obscured, pushed away by the dominant narrative(s) to the margins of a narrative landscape. Concealed narratives are a type of marginalized narrative. Marginalized narratives are there, but they do not get into wide circulation within the landscape.

Mapping the coalition narratives (group) itself. Because NEAD is so interested in how coalitions/groups/movements come together across difference, part of the mapping could include mapping the narrative landscape of different coalitional members, and how they should come together as a loose network to be healthy, complex, and nuanced. (They don't necessarily need a shared narrative.) An important concept for narrative mapping is that when in coalition, not everyone needs to do everything. When we come together within a coalition, we don't have to completely agree on the landscape. But we should be able to map what we can talk about with everyone in the coalition. For example, some members might have a resistance framework; some have a bridgebuilding framework. We can't convince those who are fighting for people's lives not to change their resistance frame. Part of the mapping is to understand the complementarity of approaches and stories.

Landscape Level: What's there? What's not there? What are the dynamics within the landscape – marginalization, competing narratives, complete silencing concealed narratives (absent narrative!) It's important to look at the power dynamics and the interplay of different narratives. How are the narratives working within the landscape and what moral frameworks do they have? What themes and characters are included? For example, a victory narrative ends up silencing some stories. A vulnerability narrative cannot be spoken.

- ✦ Who would think differently than you that can help with your landscaping? What would they say about this issue or situation? And of themselves? "They might say being gay is unnatural... but what else would they say about themselves?" One of the reasons we do this is because maybe you don't really know who to ask. Maybe you have no idea what their story of themselves is. It propels engagement and further elaboration.
- ✦ This process is very tied to self-reflection. We need to explore marginalized stories. There also may be concealed narratives that we don't even know about. Maybe we're a part of the dominant narrative, and we don't even know it. Within the landscape, you can have a dominant narrative (for example a "do-gooder" hero's journey that you get automatically caught up in it...and you get tripped up. We often forget that others don't think about the world in the same way we do.)

B. PROCESS OF SELF-REFLECTION AS A STARTING POINT FOR NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE MAPPING

What should come first – mapping the dominant narratives in the landscape or your story? Start with your story. Your story of yourself and others.

- ✦ What is the story we tell about ourselves? Helps to write it down. You then need to step outside of yourself to look at the story (see the narrative as object)
- ✦ Analysis of your own story: what are the themes, values, characters? Does your story have a “hero” story? Good versus evil? Overcoming challenges/obstacles, coming of age? Is exceptionalism baked in?
- ✦ What values are not in your story that you would want to be included? If we want more people to be involved in our movements, what values would help to bring them in? (For example, does an exceptionalism story of a do-gooder make it so others don’t have a role to play?)

- ✦ Are others being marginalized or delegitimized in some way within our story? (i.e., who would see themselves in your story and who wouldn’t?)
- ✦ The emphasis of this analysis is that we may want to delegitimize a narrative but find a way to call in the people caught up in those toxic meaning making systems. (For example, those combatting White Christian Nationalism want to delegitimize the narrative of supremacy while also giving people off-ramps with “graceful accountability.”)

Perspective taking on your own narrative.

What about a person who disagrees with you? What is their story about themselves? What is their story of what happened in the event we’re analyzing? Do you know their story about themselves? This is a necessary process of complexifying. For example, movement leaders or activists can explore those who may have a different perspective on agitation tactics. There are those who believe that “We must have law and order. You’re not following the rules. Protestors are adding to the chaos.”

NOTE ON EXISTING TOOLS

The [Spectrum of Allies](#) is a standard movement-building tool to target different constituencies and to move them closer to allyship, but this is a tool that we may need to adapt for the purpose of NEAD’s approach, to add complexity to people’s identities and narratives that might not fit so neatly onto the spectrum.

The [Perception Box](#) is another common tool used by movement trainers to reflect on the perception of a particular group or campaign and those that might not agree. This is focused on developing messaging campaigns, which is not at the heart of the NEAD Project but could also be adapted for your purposes.

QUESTIONS TO GET YOU STARTED WITH YOUR NARRATIVE MAPPING



The following questions are meant to serve as prompts for self-reflection and a basis for sharing within a learning cohort.

Depending on the time you have available, these questions can be answered by an individual or with your team and/or together with partners. Feel free to be as expansive or as brief as you find helpful in answering the questions. It may be helpful to give examples to illustrate your points, to support us in going beyond generic descriptions. The main point of this exercise is to pause to take stock of our strategies and relationships with those we are trying to bridge *across difference* through our narrative engagement strategies.

OVERALL CONTEXT

- ✦ How would you describe the level of democratic decline or autocratic consolidation in your context? How does this affect your narrative engagement strategies? Your lived experience and those of your partners is the most important answer to this question, but if you would like to consult some resources, you may also find the [Freedom in the World Report](#) by Freedom House; or [the Global State of Democracy](#) Report by IDEO helpful.
- ✦ What are the main lines of difference you are trying to bridge? How do these divisions impact your work? Why are these lines of difference important to you and your organization's goals?

CONSTITUENCIES & SECTORS

- ✦ Who would you consider “your people” – the ones you work with most closely and feel most aligned with in your narrative and/or engagement work? *You can be as expansive or as limited in the circle of people you want to include in this description.*
- ✦ What are your main motivations for this narrative engagement effort? What is your “guiding star” or the values that you are trying to advance?
- ✦ Who is considered “other” by this group? And/or who is “othered” in your context that is part of the divisions you are addressing and may be preventing allyship to achieve common goals? — OR — Are the divisions based on a narrative understanding or idea that is furthered by several different actors?
- ✦ What are the main motivations of these different “others”? Are there diverse motivations and/or values within different groups that you are engaging? (Architects of a toxic narrative who benefit politically, versus “foot soldiers” who spread that narrative, etc.?)
- ✦ Are there others in your context who are passive and not engaging very much with the narrative context you are mapping? What are their motivations or narratives for non-engagement?



NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE

For this section, we invite you to explore the stories, messages, and frames within the narrative landscape you are operating within².

The point of the following questions is not to land on any objective truths, but rather this is an exercise to expand our understanding, try to explore our own biases and uncover potential entry points for engagement with others who may think differently.

Your responses are meant to be both descriptive (“this is what it looks like”) and also analytical (“this is how these narratives are constructed and operate”) so that we can better reflect on the impact they have on you, your work and your operating context.

² See “What is a Frame” by Frameworks Institute that includes other definitions that might be useful for this exercise:
<https://www.frameworksinstitute.org/article/whats-in-a-frame/>

NARRATIVE LANDSCAPE

TOOLKIT



1

How would you describe the narratives that you and “your people” create and tell — and that motivate you -about yourselves and your work? *Try to dig deep into your world views³ to identify these stories.*

2

What is the narrative that you and “your people” create and tell — and that motivates you — about who is considered “other” in your context?

3

What is the narrative that your “other” creates and tells -and that motivates them — about themselves? (Or several actors who are a part of the narrative you are engaging with?)

3

What is the narrative that your “other” creates and tells –and that motivates them — about you and your people?

4

Are there deep societal narratives -also referred to as dominant narratives -within your context that impact the above stories about self and others? Share how beliefs, values and societal institutions and systems help to sustain these deep societal narratives. ([This short video uses a narrative tree analogy](#), which might be useful in answering this question.)

5

How do these narratives interact with each other? (*yours with theirs; theirs with yours; each with the societal narratives*). Do they exist in parallel, compete and conflict, or does one dominate others?

6

What are the narratives that are not allowed to come to the foreground? What can’t be discussed within this narrative landscape? Are there concealed stories or narrators who are not included?

7

What is your initial assessment of the power relationships of the narratives themselves? (We will continue to dig deeper into Narrative Power during a future exercise but want to include this important issue within this overview of the landscape.

8

How do the answers above inform your narrative engagement strategy and priorities and/or inform learning questions you have to explore further?

³ If you would like to understand more about what makes up our world views, here is one resource to consult:
<https://www.worldviewu.org/what-is-a-worldview>



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Orienting Together: Mapping your Narrative Landscape

Rachel Weidinger, Narrative Initiative
Oct 26, 2023

How to Understand the Narrative Landscape with a Narrative Map

Frank Wolf, Staffbase
September 17, 2024