TAKING ACTION: HOW TO CHANGE THE NARRATIVE

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL INEQUALITY FRAMEWORK: THE OXFAM TOOLKIT

Narratives have power. Changing the narrative refers to changing the prevailing norms, beliefs and attitudes that sustain the current economic model and have resulted in a widespread tolerance of inequalities and discrimination. These dominant societal narratives act as a barrier to change as injustice is normalised, the nature of inequalities are hidden, and the solutions are branded too radical to consider. A key value added of Oxfam's work is drawing the public's attention to neglected issues through creatively influencing and pushing the boundaries of what is considered 'acceptable' in public policy terms.

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What do we mean by "changing the narrative"?

There are many definitions and interpretations of "narrative change." The phrase generally refers to efforts to change the **established worldviews** that dominate our society and act as a barrier to change. The term worldview can be understood as '*the collection of beliefs, norms, value systems, core themes, popular wisdom and traditions that people draw on to help them make sense of the world around them*'.[1] Dominant narratives are deeply embedded in a culture and society and consistently repeated and reproduced over time. They provide a frame of reference for people to comprehend the complex reality in which we live and the way society works. They also, by and large, determine the focus and content of public policy and what is considered politically feasible for governments and political parties to target.

The area of narrative has been heavily studied by cognitive and social scientists. They have looked at how our brains identify patterns, create categories and rely on stereotypes to organise our understanding of the world. This can be most simply described as **'everyday thinking'**. It is what comes most naturally to people most of the time, when we look for simple explanations and rely on anecdotes with which we are familiar. As such, the language used in policy debates becomes critical. In the absence of a comprehensive understanding the public will rely on 'everyday thinking' and their own 'shortcuts' – including cultural stereotypes – and the definitions of the issue most readily available in news coverage.

Discrimination is an extremely important aspect. Negative cultural stereotypes can greatly impact the public's perception of an issue (e.g. if poverty or unequal outcomes in areas such as education are associated primarily with an ethnic minority population). Discriminatory stereotypes can become deeply intertwined with the dominant narratives on the economy, poverty and inequality within society.

Why is narrative change important for those working to tacke inequalities?

Narratives have power.

Huge shifts in values are needed to confront and transform norms associated with inequalities, intolerance and discrimination

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[1] Sandra Hinson, 2016, *Worldview and the Contest of Ideas*, Grassroots Policy Project

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Work to change the narrative is important as it is about shifting consciousness and values over the long term. It is not just about finding the right messaging but is fundamentally about the **'battle of big ideas'**.

Oxfam has identified seven misguided and common societal beliefs that stand in the way of fighting inequality:

- Inequality is not high or not higher than before.
- Inequality, though high, is not a problem: it does not have bad consequences.
- Inequality is fair: it is caused by fair economic rules that reward hard work; or it is an unavoidable fact of life.
- The solutions to inequality are a problem; redistribution harms economic growth.
- The solutions to inequality are politically unfeasible; rich people control government.
- Government is part of the problem, not of the solution; it is corrupt beyond hope.
- Globalization is the main source of the inequality problem; the villains are immigrants and workers overseas.

Despite a growing awareness that the system is rigged, the belief in meritocracy – that rich people deserve their wealth because it reflects hard work – remains strong. In some countries, the belief that inequality is right or fair is driven by religious belief (everybody has his/her place and inequality is a fact of life) rather than theories of social justice. The feeling that inequality is inevitable is also commonplace among the public. Feelings of powerlessness are coupled with a major lack of faith in government because of corruption and mistrust of politicians. For voters seduced by populist parties, these two beliefs are also intertwined with a third one; rejection of globalization in the form of demonizing of the "other".

More often than not the dominant narratives in society define **what is possible in terms of policy change**. Consider the nature of the debates around universal, free healthcare in the USA, which has long been considered unthinkable. In Kenya the government's negative narrative on the NGO sector enabled them to propose a cap on foreign funding for national NGOs and was seen as a tactic to silence criticism of the government. This was possible, as the government had successfully promoted a narrative linking NGOs to external interference from donors, and painting them as unruly activists out to destabilise the country and promote foreign interests and terrorism. Only thanks to a very successful mobilisation by civil society to counter this narrative – mobilising Kenyan citizens on Twitter, carrying out a grassroots public participation initiative and researching and publicising the real extent of CSOs contribution to employment and the economy – was this proposed legislation withdrawn.

Narratives have power. In many countries it is likely to require huge shifts in to transform norms associated with intolerance and discrimination.

What are the organisational implications of focusing on narrative change?

Narrative change work is not something one organisation can undertake alone. It requires unprecedented levels of alignment, coordination and creativity. So many organisations are working on many connected issues – from minimum wages through affordable childcare to tax policy reform. There are many different policy prescriptions being promoted, all of which are relevant to tackling inequality but none of which provides the sole answer. Addressing one area will not significantly energize public concern about inequality on its own. The most effective approach would be to have **a unifying theme that goes beyond each single issue and unifies progressive organisations** fighting to tackle all forms of inequality across society.

The more people telling a similar story well, the more powerful that story is likely to be. However, there is no agreed upon blueprint for communicating on "the big picture" of highly unequal societies. It is important to work together across networks and coalitions to actively construct a narrative that can join together the various policy proposals, reach beyond traditional progressive alliances and aspire to genuine cultural shifts in public perceptions and understanding over the long term.

One major implication from this is that it naturally moves the institutional focus off working on one specific issue in order to win a policy change. Narrative change implies more of a **cultural strategy**, which focuses not on an issue but on 'narrative leverage points'. In essence it means prioritising work to confront deeply ingrained ideas about gender, race, the role of government, and other dominant issues, rather than focusing on a specific policy win. As such developing a new narrative strategy is something that is best done – not as an addition to the design of a campaign – but as a critical influencing competency that can be developed and implemented over the long term.

Six tips for teams interested in narrative change work

1. Develop in-depth knowledge of the public understanding of inequality

There is no easy or single answer on how to develop a strategy to successfully achieve narrative change. What is clear, however, is that a first, critical step is to develop in-depth knowledge of the current public understanding of inequality in your society. This can best be done using two techniques: **public opinion research and media analysis** (tracking dominant stories on TV, in print and online).

Box 1: Oxfam's public opinion research on the perceptions of inequality

In 2017 Oxfam conducted a survey with over 50,000 respondents in 10 high and middle- income countries (Denmark, India, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, Nigeria, South Africa, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States). The survey had three aims:

- to help Oxfam understand how people estimate income inequality and whether they really underestimate it, as some existing evidence suggests;
- to help Oxfam explore concern and attitudes towards inequality

and redistributive policies and government action;
- to see if giving people information on inequality would increase concern, and boost support for addressing inequality.

Questions for this research were selected from previous academic research on perceptions or established opinion polls (like the International Social Survey Programme). Respondents were asked questions about **what they perceive, and would prefer, the current level of inequality to be in their country**. The distributions that were shown to respondents to capture these perceptions were based on real income distributions from different countries, and the type of charts used were chosen after feedback from focus groups that they were the simplest to understand. Respondents were also asked **where they perceive themselves to be in the national income distribution**, using the concept of quintiles (groups of 20% of people).

Respondents were also asked questions about their **demographic characteristics** (age, gender, education, location and income), as well as who they would vote for if there was a national election today. As such **the results about existing perceptions of inequality can be disaggregated by characteristics**, for example looking at how rich people (the top 20%) respond or analyzing the data by gender for differences.

Some of the more **general findings from the research** include that:
- most people underestimate the current level of income inequality in their country, often dramatically; and falsely the large majority think they sit in the middle of the income distribution,
- nearly two-thirds of all respondents thought the gap between the rich and poor needs to be addressed urgently or very urgently;
- there was a particularly strong sense of urgency in some countries: 79% of respondents in South Africa, 85% in Nigeria and 93% in Mexico endorsed the need for urgent, or very urgent, action;
- Information on inequality can influence people's concern and attitudes towards inequality, but the effect, size and direction varied and require advanced statistical analysis.

The experiment also asked respondents to estimate the yearly salary of the CEO of a large national company and that of an unskilled worker in a factory (to compute the estimated pay ratio between the top and the bottom of the wage distribution). Following from these respondents were asked to indicate how much they think these two professions should earn per year, enabling calculations of the preferred pay ratio. **Findings show that respondents consistently want CEO to worker pay ratios to decrease**. In South Africa, for example, respondents estimated a CEO to worker pay ratio of 27.8. Their preference, on the other hand, was to see a pay ratio of 9.2. In reality the average CEO to worker pay ratio in South Africa is 540:1, demonstrating how far preferences are from reality.

Read this blog to know more: Why people's perceptions of inequality matters?

2. Research and test new frames that can help transform public understanding about inequality

Having analysed the dominant narratives in your context, the next step is to consider how these can be reframed in a way that supports inequality reduction as an urgent societal priority. This is not a simple exercise. Anyone serious about developing a new or stronger narrative will need to **research and test their frames and messages**. This includes testing the alternative messages – the catchphrases, slogans, visuals and allusions to history or culture – that you might use.

Although you know what you are saying, it cannot be assumed you know what people will hear. You will need to **test your new frames and messages amongst all groups**, traditional allies, non-traditional allies, ethnic minority groups, opponents etc. People will interpret your messages according to their own beliefs and norms and you could activate negative stereotypes inadvertently. Testing allows you to find the most effective way to engage people with your ideas and get insight into what will persuade those who do not already agree with you. Test your story, through everything from polling and focus groups to direct feedback from your target audience. This will make your influencing more effective.

Oxfam has experience in this area. The Inequality Policy Team has tested narratives for its reports launched annually to coincide with the World Economic Forum meeting in Davos. This is how the team settled on the key message developed about the very small number of billionaires whose wealth equals that of the poorest half of the world. Although this is an important example of testing for influencing purposes, it is likely that Oxfam staff working in marketing or fundraising have most experience of doing this kind of research and testing. To work seriously on narrative change will require more staff to learn how to lead and commission this kind of research and testing, and generally more investment in this area.

3. Become a catalyst organisation and coordinate a narrative change strategy around inequality with others

The more people telling a similar story well, the more powerful that story is likely to be. Sharing and coordinating stories, frames and research amongst allies is an essential first step for those who want to create a different narrative. Coordination is not about telling identical stories – it is about agreeing **common frames** for debate and the strongest messages to deliver on inequality in your country. It allows **different messengers to use similar language and imagery** to reinforce the same frames and narratives whilst allowing room for different areas of focus. Without **deliberate and on-going cooperation**, such as meeting to discuss and agree how to communicate about inequality and pooling resources to do joint research and build consensus, advocates will not be able to get a consistent and powerful message across. It is in this area, acting as **convenor and catalyst**, that Oxfam's role is of vital importance.

4. Recruit the best messengers and stay on message

It is easy to think that evidence persuades people but there is a lot of research showing that this is not at all straightforward in reality. When it comes to challenging dominant, embedded narratives, **choosing the right messenger is equally, if not more, important than the message itself**. In order for a new narrative to resonate, people with whom the target audience can identify, and trust, must deliver the message.

This calls for a **more systematic approach to identifying and equipping messengers**. In your research it is important to look carefully at which opinion leaders might be best at delivering these new messages and to which specific groups. You can use **influence mapping** to identify and situate messengers – their potential influence and the groups on which they have influence. This will help you decide with whom to work and how to approach this task. This is not a small undertaking. You will need to build up **a critical mass of powerful messengers** ready to engage actively in spreading the message.

Box 3: Influence mapping - messengers

Often influence mapping tools are used in relation to advocacy for policy change, an area with which many Oxfam teams will already be familiar. A specific policy change and overall decision maker is generally identified and located at the apex of an influence pyramid (or centre of an 'interest map' for example). Influence mapping then investigates who has greater and lesser influence over the decision maker and maps the relationships between actors.

For this exercise the starting point is slightly different given teams will be interested in influencing societal values, norms and beliefs, rather than one, central decision-maker. As such it is more useful to think about the key groups in society you want to influence and the opinion leaders who can act as messengers to those groups. The exercise of defining groups and messengers to those groups can be approached as an iterative exercise, identifying either the groups of interest or the potential opinion leaders and their spheres of influence. With this information you can construct a groups and messenger map.

Once potential segments of society and messengers are identified, it is useful to delve deeper to analyse the position of potential messengers, to see what their motivations regarding inequality and the size

and channels of their influence are. For each potential messenger it is useful to think about the following:

- What is their position on the theme of inequality? Are they a strong supporter already or less committed but potentially a future ally?

- What particular aspects of inequality could motivate them strongly?

- What is the size of their influence with the group identified?

- What are the channels of their influence? Would they have to work through the media and/or do they talk directly with their communities / constituencies?

- Are there any constraints that would make it difficult for them to be a committed ally in this area?

- How easy would it be for Oxfam to gain access to, and work with, this person?

Assessing the messengers identified with techniques such as these will help you develop a strategy regarding who to approach, where more work needs to be done to identify new messengers, and how much work needs to be done to sensitize and equip messengers to work with their target groups. Planning for more investment of human and financial resources in this area could be a very useful element of your strategy to tackle inequality.

Strong **message discipline** is also essential. The more times a frame is activated the stronger it becomes. This means doing more media work and lots and lots of repetition. A new story needs legions of trained messengers to disseminate it.

5. Use alternative media to counter mainstream news coverage

Mainstream news coverage often reinforces public stereotypes and biases about the causes of, and solutions to, poverty and inequality. Getting the coverage, you need is a challenge. However, organisations can sponsor social media campaigns, use independent filmmakers, the entertainment media and other such tools to reach the public via alternative channels. Connections with creative and cultural organisations – visual artists, documentarians and celebrities – can play very important and effective roles in conveying particular messages. Connecting social justice activists to actors in the domain of the media, arts and culture is a challenge but brings enhanced rewards.

6. Consider stronger long-term investments in communications infrastructure

Focusing on communications infrastructure is critical, especially when it comes to enabling grassroots organisations to prioritize narrative change as part of a core strategy. It also implies thinking about strategic communications capacities across multiple organisation types, from the grassroots through youth organisations to the think tanks and others involved in the fight against inequality. This could include thinking about long-term mentorship programmes to develop the capacity of the next generation of equality activists.

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