



# 10 criteria for the creation of effective alternative narratives on diversity

## Policy brief

Prepared by Mr Daniel De Torres  
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Ciudades Interculturales  
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### The increase in negative narratives about socio-cultural diversity

In recent years we have seen how negative narratives about cultural diversity, migration, refugees and ethnic, religious or minority groups have gained traction around the world. This has gone hand in hand with an increase in socio-economic uncertainties, cultural and identity issues, and concerns with the capacity of institutions and majority parties to channel these into projects and policies which effectively respond to the challenges of the present. These complexities have a global component, but they concretise in different ways depending on the local context.

Many of political leaders who resort to negative narratives accompany them with other criticisms (of the *establishment*, the consequences of globalisation, the idea of Europe or feminism, among others...) and call for a return to "authentic national" values and an idealised past in which everything was supposedly better. These narratives based on prejudice and stigmatisation or fear of the "outsider" or the "different" also relate to an increased social polarisation, with societies ever more "divided" into population groups which hold often seemingly irreconcilable positions on important issues of community life.

The more rigorous resolutions that take into account the complexities of proposing solutions based on social consensus are replaced by diagnoses applied through a black or white lens, and by recourse to emotions that leave little room for serene and constructive debate. In this context, simple and populist recipes, which propose quick solutions at the cost of reinforcing prejudices resulting in a greater contrast between a "us" and a "them", are made available through the dissemination of narratives that have a significant impact on the perceptions and attitudes of broad layers of the population. These narratives, along with other factors, are the breeding ground for discrimination, racism, xenophobia and hate speech.

The dissemination of these narratives takes place both offline and online, but they have undoubtedly found an ideal channel for the expansion of simple messages in the social networks. This has been helped by the phenomenon of *fake news*, which - although it has always existed - has multiplied its impact in the social networks. Further they are used by a wide variety of actors with different ideologies who see the dissemination of these messages as a fundamental strategy to influence the citizens' opinions.

However, despite the noise and the stubborn presence of these narratives in the 'public space', many people do not share them and have very different views on the diversity and coexistence. The over-representation of these messages demonstrates the difficulties that other alternative narratives have in making themselves heard with the same intensity.

Reality shows that generating alternative narratives that emphasise other values and messages is much more difficult to consolidate. The aim of this *paper* is to identify some criteria which have proved to be effective in building alternative narratives. Although these criteria are valid for a wide variety of actors, both political and civil society, we want to put the focus especially on the role and responsibility of the local level, on the cities, to contribute in a relevant way to the creation of alternative narratives.

## The complexities of creating and consolidating alternative narratives

The in-depth analysis of how public attitudes are formed and what factors influence them is a complex issue which goes beyond the objectives of this report. However, it is important to note some ideas that help us to better understand the complexity of the process.

First, we start from an idea based on two-way thinking: public perceptions and attitudes influence discourses and policies, and in turn, the discourses and policies implemented influence the attitudes of citizens.

Secondly, public attitudes about diversity, immigration or the arrival of refugees, are the result of multiple inter-related factors. Political discourse, the media and social networks, the role of key actors in civil society or the specific context of each territory are interrelated with socio-economic factors and those linked to values and identities. Attitudes cannot be dissociated from citizens' concerns, and how they perceive social, economic, technological or demographic changes may affect aspects such as the economy, employment, public services, security or social cohesion. Hence, it is important to listen to the reasons that lead people to feel attracted to discourses which provide simple solutions to complex challenges. It is not easy to counteract these narratives that appeal to emotions such as fear, reinforce prejudices and spread messages that distort reality. Here are some of the difficulties:

- Negative narratives play with some advantages, starting with the investment that many *think tanks* and political parties have made to design these narratives.
- Furthermore, increased fragmentation makes it difficult to create alternative narratives. When the debate is polarised and differences become barriers to a consensus in the defence of certain values, it is difficult to find space for a discourse that does not seek to disseminate a simplified vision of reality.
- The difficulty of countering simple messages based on prejudice and emotions with excessively complex and scattered discourses, or by relying solely on data and rational arguments, is another factor that hinders the impact of these alternative narratives.
- Another element explaining the complexity of consolidating the alternative narratives is their preventive nature, whose impact tends to be in the medium and long term. In a context of greater polarisation and the immediacy of social networks, it is not easy to invest in strategies that do not obtain immediate results. This requires the commitment of many actors, both political and from civil society.
- Finally, another problem lies in the fear of many politicians to risk losing electoral support by advocating for more constructive and pro-diversity or pro-immigrant discourses. This leads to a normalisation and incorporation of elements of negative narratives, in an irresponsible attempt not to lose support, causing the normalisation and consolidation of the frame of reference defined by the populist strategists.

## Alternative-narratives vs. Counter-narratives

What do we understand by alternative narratives or counter-narrative? Counter-narratives aim to - in a direct way - dismantle and delegitimise negative narratives or hate speech. However, there is an intense debate about the effectiveness of counter-narratives as they are considered too reactive rather than proposing and building an alternative. Moreover, there is a broad consensus that people's opinions are not changed by telling them their ideology is wrong, or by trying to dismantle their ideas through data and counter-arguments. Despite this, it may be necessary or useful to use the counter-

narrative approach, however not as the only strategy to reduce the impact of negative narratives.

Unlike counter-narratives, alternative narratives pursue a more preventive and global objective, and do not focus as much on denying the negatives as on proposing alternative messages and ideas from a constructive and propositional point of view. It is a matter of trying to ensure that negative and prejudice-based discourses do not expand, and instead creating and communicating a more inclusive and propositional framework which can connect with the concerns and needs of a broad social majority.

Alternative narratives should seek to promote critical thinking while avoiding a paternalistic or morally superior attitude. A mistake which is often made is to not give importance to the creation of these narratives, for instance, not accompanying the implementation of policies or projects with a narrative that allows for the communication of the values the policy pursue, and what it means for the population as a whole, leaves a free space which can be occupied by negative narratives. For these reasons it is important to design strategies that define the objectives of the narrative and identify the target audiences, adapting messages to different audiences and contexts.

## **Criteria for the creation of effective alternative narratives**

Different disciplines such as cognitive science, social psychology, communication or neuroscience have, for years, studied the factors that influence attitudes as well as the creation of the narratives that affect them. In addition to this research, there are direct experiences from politics, organisations and actors of civil society. Without attempting to go into detail on the theories and experiences, we can identify a set of criteria that must be considered in order to generate new narratives that are more effective and have impact on public perceptions and attitudes.

### **1. The importance of listening**

We start with a fundamental element of any communication strategy: knowing how to listen. In the face of increasing support for parties with populist, simplistic and xenophobic discourses, it can be easy and convenient to adopt a simplistic view. For example, this happens when voters are considered racist and ignorant or when it becomes a generalised view that they are the people most affected by the consequences of globalisation or economic crises. The reasons for supporting or participating in negative narratives are diverse and interrelated, and a more rigorous analysis of the causes is needed.

It is equally essential to listen to those who are subject to stigmatisation and prejudicial discourses. Defining narratives that seek to capture the interest of a social majority without listening to their voice and without their active participation leads to an ineffective discourse.

Therefore, it is important to dedicate time and energy to generating effective spaces and channels for listening to people, beyond the moment of exercising the right to vote. If we do not start by listening properly, we will not be able to communicate well.

### **2. Starting from a new frame of reference**

In his book "Don't Think of an Elephant" George Lakoff (2004) set out his theory of mental frameworks and their role in creating political and social narratives. According to Lakoff, frames are mental structures that determine our way of seeing the world. They are frames of reference that appeal to certain values, from which a set of ideas and a language influence our way of interpreting reality and

what we understand by common sense. From these frameworks, narratives are derived and used to justify specific policies. A framework is consolidated when its language and discourse is accepted and used by many social, political and media actors, including those who disagree and wish to challenge it.

If we start from the reference framework that links the arrival of immigrants or refugees with the concepts of "crisis", "mass arrival", "abuse of the system" or "insecurity", we see that many political parties and media will end up using these negative terms, therefore standardising them. From the perspective of public policy, these concepts highlight the need to emphasise aspects such as security and (border) control, which are currently the main objectives of policies in many countries. It is not a question of not recognising and addressing complexities, but rather a matter of offering a more complete and rigorous discourse that emphasises other values and issues, without accepting and standardising the negative framework.

In this sense, starting from a new frame of reference means identifying a group of concepts, values or principles that will form the basis or foundation of the alternative narrative. This narrative will eventually be translated into messages that must be adapted to different audiences and contexts. For example, a narrative based on the intercultural approach will emphasise on the core concepts of equality, recognition of diversity, positive interaction and diversity advantage. This does not mean that these concepts should be used literally, with the view to spread the message of interculturality to different audiences, regardless of the context. They can certainly be used as they are in some situations, but in others they will need to be adapted and 'translated' into another language or into concrete examples that the audience can understand. The most important is to present a consistent narrative which has the above principles as a starting point.

In short, starting from a new frame of reference means adopting a proactive attitude to set the agenda through a new approach, based on different values and ideas. If we limit ourselves to reacting defensively or simply denouncing the ideas spread through the negative narrative, we will not have the same impact and we are likely to end up reinforcing the negative framework.

### **3. Inclusive, proactive and positive approach**

Alternative narratives will be more efficient if they are inclusive and address society as a whole based on values and interests that can be shared by a majority. If the public perception is that the alternative narrative is directed only at a certain social group (whether it be certain minorities, groups that are already highly sensitised, or those adopting the most opposing positions) it will not be able to influence a majority with more ambiguous positions. Key ideas should hence connect and challenge a majority, and be adapted to different audiences and contexts.

On the other hand, these alternative narratives should offer attractive and stimulating positive proposals, which avoid contributing to polarisation and emphasise issues that build bridges and consensus. They should thus allow for the generation of more global, intersectional, and inclusive identities based on shared objectives. Being able to effectively "sell" the message is important, so as it's important not to fall into mere denunciation or guilt. This does not mean that clearly xenophobic or discriminatory messages should not be strongly countered, but rather that - in parallel - visions capable of identifying challenges and solutions, while connecting with the concerns of very diverse publics, should be offered.



Finally, adopting an inclusive approach also means that the contribution and experiences of those directly affected by negative narratives are fully taken into account in the process.

#### **4. Honesty, coherence and complementarity of the narratives**

Following the above points, our approach must be honest and based on what we really believe. The opposite would be falling into the trap of manipulation, creating a narrative that is inconsistent not only with what we believe but also with what we do. This means that the alternative narrative must be supported by policies, decisions and concrete projects that fit into the framework.

This has to do with the idea of compensation. As we start from the idea that negative narratives are based on simplified messages that distort reality and appeal to basic emotions, we should here do the opposite. An example, some narratives attempt to offer an idealised image of coexistence and diversity, ignoring complexities and focusing only on emotional and partial messages that do not help generate critical thinking or capture the attention of the masses.

Recognising and addressing complexities is a prerequisite of any narrative that aims to have an impact. If our alternative narrative is complemented by concrete policies that are designed to proactively manage complexities rather than avoid them, it will have more weight and impact as it will be consistent with what we do. For example, if there are neighbourhoods of greater social complexity in which little investment into improving basic infrastructures, housing or cultural, sporting or educational resources is made, it will be difficult to generate a positive narrative if the residents feel abandoned by the institutions. Similarly, if there is no strong commitment to act against situations of discrimination, hate speech or hate crimes, we will hardly be able to make our narrative credible for those who suffer from these situations.

In the case of narratives based on the intercultural approach, our alternative narrative should be based on a clear commitment to policies that pursue equal rights, duties and social opportunities, and the recognition of diversity, emphasising on what is common and shared, and on generating opportunities and spaces for positive interaction. If there is no political commitment to these policies, our narrative will be very weak and have little impact.

This is not to say that a narrative that does not fit the reality of what we do cannot have an impact. Differences between perceptions and reality are a constant and it can be attractive to choose to spread a narrative regardless of what we do. We however start from the conviction and ethical commitment that if we want to counteract negative narratives, we must do it differently. We believe that the objective of generating effective alternative narratives must be based on a strong commitment to the coherence and honesty of what we do as well as to reality.

#### **5. Adding up, cooperating and generating consensus**

One of the main weaknesses when it comes to generating new narratives is the inability to reach consensus among the diverse actors in society. There is a tendency to put emphasis on differences and nuances rather than on the basic values and ideas that are shared. This causes dispersion and a lack of impact. This happens both at the political level and among civil society actors. For example, it is common to find "irreconcilable" differences between the anti-racist discourses of certain political groups, NGOs and other activist movements. While the diversity of approaches and strategies should be seen as a positive factor that allows the issues to be addressed with regard to their complexity

while being adapted to different contexts and audiences, the inability of many actors to agree on a shared frame of reference is rather an irresponsible behaviour. This fragmentation further reduces the ability to 'compete' with negative narratives.

It is essential to generate spaces and processes for dialogue and genuine collaboration between all the stakeholders with the view to avoid fragmentation and reach basic consensus on key concepts and objectives (common framework), that each can customise to develop its own strategies. This will also help consolidating the new narratives and making them more coherent. It is not a question of agreeing on a single message, but of being able to agree on a set of values and concepts with which the majority can agree.

## **6. Definition of objectives and audiences**

The first criteria have focused on important aspects of the pre-narrative design approach. The following criteria focus on concrete and practical aspects for the design of alternative narratives.

It is important to identify the concrete objectives we are pursuing with our alternative narrative. Although it may seem obvious, this is where communication strategies mostly fail. A narrative that seeks to raise the awareness of the majority of the population is not the same as a narrative that seeks to federate and bring together more allies, or call different actors to a joint action. A single narrative may pursue various objectives, but then separate strategies need to be designed for each of those. Defining the objectives is directly linked to the specific audience.

Below, an example to show the importance of adapting the narrative to different audiences in order to achieve the expected results:

Let us imagine a country with the following audiences:

- 25% of the population has attitudes favourable to diversity and immigration
- 50% of the population has ambiguous and ambivalent attitudes
- 25% of the population has opposing attitudes

Within each group there are sub-groups, according to the level of intensity of their opinions and the reasons they have to defend themselves and their stand-points. Having good knowledge and understanding of this reality is fundamental to be able to define the objectives and adapt the strategies and messages to each group. For example, in the group of supporters we can find those who are already activists and those who are not yet actively involved in any initiative or strategy. If one of the objectives of our communication strategy is to bring together allies, we must connect with the actors who are already mobilised to bring them together. However, we will also have to adapt our strategy to convince those who are in favour but are not yet taking action to join the movement. Similarly, if we want to focus on those with the most negative and hostile attitudes, we will have to analyse their reasons and adapt our strategy according to the objectives we are pursuing. In some cases, we would choose to directly denounce and counter hate speech, while in other cases the priority would be to capture the interest of – and convince - those who have less radical opinions so that they can change their attitudes and act as influencers. Finally, the ambiguous and ambivalent majority is the group with the greatest impact on the consolidation of social norms, and we must be able to reach out to this if we wish to change the norms and reduce the weight of negative prejudices and stereotypes.

It is important to note that any strategy must take into account both audience, attitudes, and profiles. A global narrative must influence a wide range of areas and, therefore, we should not only identify audiences based on their attitudes but also based on the areas and sectors in which we want to have an impact. For example, a narrative that seeks to impact the political level will not necessarily work in the field of education, unless it is tailored made to that environment.

## **7. Effective messages, messengers and communication channels**

Once we have defined the objectives and the target audiences, we must focus on the content and messages we consider most useful for reaching our goal. The messages must be consistent with the framework we have initially defined but – as already seen - need to be adapted to different audiences and contexts.

Firstly, the content should be stimulating and persuasive. Yet, achieving this is quite a challenge. For instance, in social networks priority is given to short, easy-to-understand messages. Even mainstream media oversimplify their messages in order to reach a larger audience and – in doing so – may end up reinforcing certain stereotypes. If we oversimplify the messages, we may fall into a trap and rather contribute to increase the extent of the problem. Yet, if we only spread long and complex messages, we will probably not reach the wider audience. Finding an effective balance between simplicity and complexity is one of the greatest communication challenges.

Secondly, we must start from the idea that the ability of our strategy to generate effective alternative narratives will also depend on the messengers. For example, it will be easier to catch the interest of youth if the messenger is someone who can inspire them and connect with their interests and concerns directly.

Finally, we will have to adapt the content of the narrative to the different communication channels and to the formats we believe will generate the desired impact. The speeches and public attitudes of political leaders are important; videos or graphics can be useful for social networks; theatre or comics can be very effective with a younger audience. The creation of alternative narratives must also be mindful of face-to-face interaction and the importance of dialogue in promoting critical thinking. It is not only a matter of sending messages, but of generating them in a participatory manner, through reflection and debate among diverse actors.

## **8. Beyond data: promoting critical thinking, empathy, interaction and visibility of diversity**

When we define the content of our strategy, we must bear in mind that an alternative narrative that only offer rational data and arguments will not be enough. While this is a common mistake, evidence shows that people don't change beliefs based on data which simply contradict their views. We as humans are much more likely to adjust reality to our beliefs than the opposite. Moreover, not only are data and rational arguments insufficient, but depending on how they are presented, they can also be counterproductive and - in worst case - reinforce the beliefs we want to challenge. To have an impact we must incorporate other elements such as emotions, and be able to generate arguments that are solid, but also stimulating and attractive.

Today on the internet we have access to all kinds of arguments that reinforce our ideas (even if we believe that the earth is flat, we can find a great variety of "scientific" research that "proves" it). Adding



to this the fact that social networks filter the information so that we receive the messages which align with our thinking, we see it is easy to reinforce our ideas and very difficult to change them. The brain's tendency to categorise social groups through stereotypes also hinders our ability to perceive social complexity and diversity. Prejudices play a key role in our way of interpreting reality and can lead us to accept negative discourses about stereotyped social groups without critical thinking.

Stories and narratives that involve personal emotions and experiences are particularly successful tools for spreading messages. Our ability to retain information is limited, and it has been shown that we remember more the content of a story than a set of data and arguments, no matter how rigorous these may be. However, reducing prejudice cannot be achieved by simply disseminating alternative messages. A comprehensive strategy must aim to foster critical thinking and trigger a reflection on prejudice, inequalities and discrimination. It must also start from the recognition and visibility of diversity at all levels, questioning stereotyped generalisations and homogenisation of certain groups which can lead to dangerous processes of "dehumanisation". Promoting empathy and opportunities for encounter, interaction and mutual knowledge should also be sought.

## **9. Repeat, repeat and... repeat**

In order for a frame of reference and alternative narrative to be consolidated and endorsed, it is essential that people become "familiar" with them. This is related to the ability of the messages to be stimulating and persuasive, and to include an emotional dimension, but it also depends on another key factor: repetition.

Let us imagine we hear two messages which provide different answers to a question that matters to us. Let's assume we spontaneously initially agree more with message A than with message B. If it turns out that, over a period of three years, we hear message A three times and message B two hundred times, there are high chances that we will internalise message B and support it, even though initially we considered message A to be more rigorous. This is well known to the strategists who design negative narratives, and they have little trouble in achieving consensus on ideas that are communicated in a simple and direct manner, and that are repeated constantly.

As said, generating broad consensus for alternative narratives is not an easy task, but it is crucial for the narrative to be repeated in different spheres and through different communication channels. If this doesn't happen, then the process of familiarisation of massive audiences with values such as respect, human rights, equality, coexistence or the richness of diversity becomes more difficult. Yet, it is important to note that repetition should not be carried out in detriment of diversity of approaches and *nuance*. Precisely because alternative narratives also aim at promoting critical thinking, repetition cannot be converted into simplification or limitation of freedom in critical reflection.

## **10. Evaluation and impact**

All the above criteria are useless if we are not able to demonstrate that the narratives built based on those have an impact and serve to get the expected results.

Even though this paper does not aim at proposing evaluation approaches and methodologies, it still aims at encouraging stakeholders in charge of defining alternative narratives to closely and regularly monitor their impact. Rigorous evaluations of objective-based policies and strategies are rare, but good examples and tools do exist. Being able to evaluate the effectiveness of the narratives that accompany these policies and strategies is essential to adjust the discourse and messages when needed, so to achieve the objectives pursued.

While measuring changes in the levels of people's prejudices is not a simple task (and there are no perfect solutions to this challenge), it is still possible to obtain proxy indicators that measure changes in attitudes. For instance if, after designing, building and disseminating an alternative narrative that we consider to be solid we find out that the vote intentions for populist positions and xenophobic discourses has increased, we can be sure that our narrative has not had the expected impact and that it needs to be adjusted or corrected.

It is important to note that the criteria set out in this paper are derived from studies, analyses and experiences that have been the object of specific evaluations.