



NARRATIVE SPICES

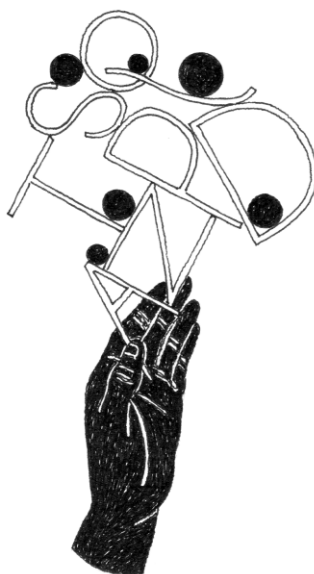
AN INVITATIONAL GUIDE FOR
FLAVORFUL HUMAN RIGHTS

LUCAS PAULSON

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An invitational guide for flavorful human rights

Author

Lucas Paulson

Director

Juan Camilo López Medina

Editorial coordinator

Avital Benedek

Copy Editing

Jordan Taylor Jones
Cooper Hewell

Design and illustration

Sebastián Cadavid

With input and support from

Avital Benedek
Arpitha Kodiveri
James Savage

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JustLabs

Calle 63 #3-12 / Bogotá, Colombia

The Fund for Global Human Rights

1301 Connecticut Ave NW, STE 400
Washington, DC 20036
USA

This document is available at:

www.openglobalrights.org/partnerships/the-narrative-hub/



Featuring:

- *Lessons and tips for sprinkling narratives into human rights practice*
- *A “narrative spice box” for practitioners*
- *Examples from experiments in Venezuela, Hungary, Mexico, Australia, and Sri Lanka*
- *Reflections for the narratives field*



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FOREWORD:

A semi-quick note of gratitude



In a series of interviews we ran at the conclusion of our three-year process, several participants, when asked what they would remember most from the project, responded: “the people.” That’s probably true for most—if not all—experiences. It was a good reminder that sometimes the most important “impact” of a project are the relationships that we build. While it fell to me to put this process into words, this is the collection of many people’s efforts, wisdom, and energy. These are a few of the people to whom this work owes much:

Krizna Gomez, **César** Rodríguez Garavito, **Thomas** Coombes, and all of the JustLabs **team members** and **associates** who helped imagine and create this initiative. **Sean** Luna McAdams, who helped guide this project through a period of many difficult transitions, the pandemic among them. **Arpitha** Kodiveri, who was a rock of calm and presence. **Jordan** Jones and **Shreya** Ghoshal, without whose conversations this document would never have been written. **Ella** Scheepers, **Ishtar** Lakhani, and **Archana** Deshpande for their inspiration and guidance. **Juan Camilo** López Medina, for his heart, friendship, and willingness to center relationships and personal learning in this process. Our colleagues at the **Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR)** for being a model of proactive, supportive, and flexible funding, and all of the back donors who made this experiment possible.

A special thanks to **James** Savage, for being an outstanding, kind, and thoughtful funding partner. And to **Sebastián** Cadavid, who designed this document, to **Gabriela** Urco and **Jimena** Mora of DOCUPERU, who collaborated with us on the interviews and video productions, and **Cooper** Hewell of FGHR who helped to edit and consolidate interviews. This document was authored by myself, **Lucas** Paulson, with the much-needed input of **Juan Camilo**, **James** Savage, **Arpitha** Kodiveri, and **Avital** Benedek. The document was edited by **Jordan** Jones and **Cooper** Hewell. The spice box metaphor came from **Arpitha’s** brilliant mind.

Wherever possible, this document references and points towards others who have informed our thinking. We are especially indebted to **Thomas** Coombes, the team at the **Common Cause Foundation**, **ILGA Europe’s** guide, resources by the **Center for Artistic Activism**, and **Ishtar** Lakhani. Much of my own thinking about narratives, and their relationship to how we change and grow as people in movements, has been shaped by the work of **adrienne maree brown**. I cannot hope to do her ideas, vision, and practice justice, but I am grateful for the ways they challenge me.

Thank you to all of the team members from **Hungary**, **Mexico**, **Australia**, **Venezuela**, and **Sri Lanka**, who took it upon themselves to engage in this exploratory, creative, sometimes bizarre process in the midst of all the vital work that they do. This is, more than anything, a celebration of their efforts.

Finally, thank you to **Rosita**, JustLabs’ most important friend and team member.

– Lucas



THE INVITATION

Before you begin, slow down.

I'd like to invite you, wherever you're reading this, to take a deep breath. Look away from the screen or page. Stretch a bit. Open up your body. Breathe. Notice the lights, shadows, colors, movement, or sounds in your space. Quiet your thoughts.

Breathe. As you exhale, in that moment of release, ask yourself the question: How are you?

Of all the stories we tell, the one we often fail to take seriously, and tell honestly, is our own.

Why we wrote this document.

"Narrative" is often described as a strategic approach to more effective communication for social change. But in our three-year initiative exploring creative narrative projects with human rights groups from around the world, we found ourselves facing all kinds of questions, opportunities, and ideas that didn't fit into the neatly packaged messaging guides (as helpful as they are).

What this document is.

This document is a different kind of guide. Meaning, it's less of a guide and more of an invitation. An invitational guide, if you will.

For us, narrative research has become one door into a bigger, older, interrelated question about how we inspire one another to change. This document tries to connect some of the contemporary ideas about narrative practice to some of the wisdom and inspiration that can be found in related practices—from Afrofuturism to artistic activism to peacebuilding—all while offering questions to inspire thinking about your own practice, examples from our partners' initiatives, reflections from our experience, and resources for your own exploration.

We lay out six elements (or, as we call them, spice blends) that describe and invite creativity, reflection, and exploration for activism and advocacy:

- I. Problem Spaces
- II. Creativity
- III. Visioning & Imagination
- IV. Hope, Values, Emotions
- V. Experiences & Relationships
- VI. People



Each element emerged from the work of the teams we partnered with, and they build on and point towards the work that has inspired and informed our own thinking. They are intended to be explored, played with, changed, and built upon. They are meant to be a resource and a source of inspiration and reflection for practitioners and funders alike.

Why we're talking about spices.

Arpitha Kodiveri, one of the contributors to this process, likened this series of elements to a spice box. We love this metaphor because we want to challenge the idea that there's any one right way to “do” narrative work. We have different tastes, we cook different dishes in different kitchens, and we're feeding different people. Many of you have probably been cooking for a long time. We're not interested in telling you to cook differently, to buy a whole new stovetop, or to start making sushi instead of curry or curry instead of sushi. We do want to invite you to have a look in your own activist (or advocate or funder) spice box, though, to reflect on which spices you usually use and which ones you're less familiar with, and to imagine some new mixes you could try.

What you'll find in the spice box.

Each element is like its own *spice blend*. Each blend consists of different flavors, colors, and aromas. The blends can be used in different quantities, with different dishes, or mixed with other spices. Most importantly: they are yours, to mix, match, and experiment with. We didn't invent them, and we certainly aren't experts in them (we're starting to be cautious about that word)—but we have seen them show up over and over and we think they're worth exploring.

Each spice blend features three sections:

- I. **Spice Theory** offers a summary of research, inspiring thinking, and examples from other campaigns that offer an “ideal” or “theoretical” description of the element. Think of this like the part of a guide that describes the *flavor* and *aroma* of a given blend by a spice connoisseur.
- II. **JustLabs' Kitchen** offers examples of how this spice was actually used¹ by the teams we worked with, reflections from JustLabs on what it's like trying to use this spice in practice, and quotes from different team members. Think of this like descriptions of different dishes that aspiring cooks tried with the spices, and some of their reflections.
- III. **Your Kitchen** offers a quick takeaway summary of the Spice Theory, a few “quick practice” exercises to inspire your own thinking about how you might use each spice, and a list of resources for you to explore further.

Who this document is for.

This document is for anyone who works in, funds, or supports social change rooted in a more compassionate, more just vision of the world. Our context focuses especially on the practice of human rights, though these lessons certainly extend beyond people who define their work as such. Most of the participants in this work were lawyers, communications staff for non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and campaigners. We hope this document will be useful to you, whether you've heard about narratives or not, and whether you are a passionate believer in narrative strategies or if the language and ideas confuse and frustrate you.

1 A reminder that we didn't start this process with this list of spices—the framework was informed by some of what we saw in the teams' work, and our understanding of the teams' work was informed by some of what we saw in the framework. Neither perfectly represents the other—but that's also the point!



Ways to read this document.

You can read the whole thing or skip around. Who are we to say? If it's helpful:

- If you're 1) a practitioner interested in finding creative inspiration and getting a better sense of what you might encounter when trying to “do” narrative work, or 2) a funder or a narrative change practitioner curious about what we learned and how that might inform the narrative-change initiatives you're developing: we do recommend you read the full thing.
- If you want to know how our thinking about narrative practice has changed: start with the intro, “Re-evaluating Narrative Practice.”
- If you're particularly interested in the experience of practitioners or want to hear directly from them: skim through the JustLabs' Kitchen sections, [watch our mini-documentary](#), and [read each teams reflective interview](#). (The “Our Context” section provides a quick overview of each team and their experiments.)
- If you're just looking for inspiration and resources: dip in and out of the spice box as you see fit.
- If you're a practitioner short on time and looking for short summaries, activities, and key resources, skim through the Your Kitchen sections for each spice.

A note on style.

In writing the spice box, I often use a rhetorical “we.” This decision is, by and large, an effort to recognize that you, the readers of this document, (hopefully) share some sense of common purpose: the desire to build a better world. It is also an effort to acknowledge that anything that sounds like advice, I am writing as much—if not more so—to myself and my team as I am to you. The decision is also, at times, taken to recognize that as a *field* or *fields* of practitioners, we might hold some responsibility for *collectively* addressing some of the challenges identified here.

This “we” is not meant to signify or flatten the many different identities, experiences, perspectives, and roles that make up the broad and beautiful sphere(s) of social change—much less to deny the need for attending to power within and across our efforts. I hope that I have written with the care to do that intention justice—most especially in the moments where I try to recognize certain areas of narrative practice, capacity building, and “social change innovation” that feel like they are flirting with extractive consulting dynamics, and try to reorient myself, JustLabs, the text, and—if relevant—you, reader, back towards the leadership, wisdom, and accountability of movements and community.

I'll be the first to say I have so much to learn in this regard. I hope that as you read, you'll extend me your grace—and your feedback.

As a point of clarity: JustLabs is named wherever “we” refers specifically and exclusively to the JustLabs team and initiative.

INTRODUCTION

Re-evaluating Narrative Practice



What are narratives? It's one of those terms in the social change sphere that is both simple and frustratingly complex. It's a term that comes from everyday use: at its most basic, *narrative* describes the way a story is told. It is a way of coherently tying events, characters, and ideas together. I'm a student of literature, and in one university course, my professor would ask us to break a story into its basic parts. He drew a distinction between the plot (what happens) and the narrative (how those things are told).

Applied to politics, activism, or advocacy, narrative as a tactic means paying attention to subjectivity. [Narrative-informed thinking](#) asks us to ask ourselves: What do people believe about how the world works? How do people tie together characters, events, and ideas in our world? Most critically: In what ways does our activism and advocacy draw upon, shift, or reinforce those ideas? The [Narrative Initiative](#) has compared narratives to [tides in the ocean](#) and to [mosaics](#). What are the deeper currents that shape how our work is received? What is the bigger picture that each story told about our work contributes to?

These ideas make sense at a conceptual level. If people believe, for example, that drug use is an individual moral failure, or if they believe that punishment is the best way to change behavior, it will be far more difficult (regardless of what the evidence points to) to advocate for harm reduction policies that prioritize the wellbeing of those experiencing addiction and that address the systemic conditions that push people into an unsafe and harmful relationship with substances in the first place. Convincing people of the value of harm reduction also requires taking into account the deeply entrenched beliefs about substance use, addiction, individual choice, and “criminality” that their work will confront.

What does taking that into account really look like, though? How does one “apply” narratives in practice? For several years, JustLabs has worked with the Fund for Global Human Rights and a variety of NGOs, activists, and practitioners from around the world to explore this question in the context of human rights. In a round of interviews towards the end of the project, when asked how he would define narratives, one of our partners—a lawyer in Venezuela—replied: “*Creo que todavía no sé qué son.*” “I still don't think I know what they are.”² I could have kissed him.

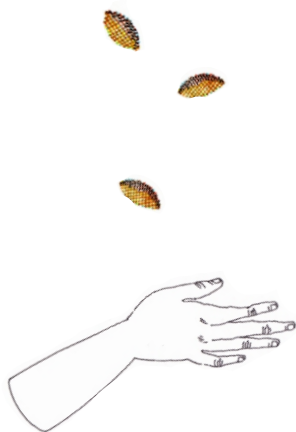
Before 2019, I had never used the term “narrative” outside of literature classrooms. I have now spent three years researching narratives, thinking about what working with them means for human rights, wrestling with how I might best support practitioners in exploring those ideas, and wondering whether our “narratives project” was *really* narrative work. Most of the examples we have of “successful” narrative change, after all, come from massive, decades-long campaigns for legal protections that are, in many cases, still contested. I was working with eight people from four different teams on four diverse projects. What did working with narratives look like for us? I still ask myself that question—and I still have many days where I want to reply: *todavía no sé*.

What I do know, however—or what I have learned—is that the deeper question at the heart of all the messaging guides and buzzwords and talk of “game-changing” strategies is a much more familiar one: *How do we encourage and invite one another to change?* Facing that question is about far more than finding the right slogans and images for campaigns trying to reach people “out there” (though those are important, too). It's also about how we—as individuals, organizations, and movements—evolve in our relationship to one another and to the communities of people we engage with. In the words of science fiction writer Octavia Butler: “Everything you touch, you change. Everything you change, changes you.”

² He went on to give an excellent definition of narratives as “a way to change beliefs which are instilled in individuals”



Maybe one of the deeper narratives we need to embrace is the idea that a better world requires each of us to be willing to be changed by the possibilities of joy and the experiences of suffering that we encounter in one another.



This is a reflection on the implications of our advocacy tactics. But at a more human, interpersonal, philosophical level, asking how we might invite others to change begs a series of questions I feel we don't ask enough: How is it that we ourselves are changed? What kinds of experiences and relationships push us to grow? When have we resisted being changed and hurt others? None of us are born knowing how to do right by everyone else. Every day, we learn more about the violence and harm that we enact upon one another and our environments. Every day, we can be pushed to see more, and to think with more creativity and generosity about better, kinder, safer, more just ways of living together. Maybe one of the deeper narratives we need to embrace is the idea that a better world requires each of us to be willing to be changed by the possibilities of joy and the experiences of suffering that we encounter in one another.

I mean that as loftily as it sounds—but I also mean it at a very real, practical level. Part of my fear, or hesitation, is that in all the rush to explain narratives and promote it as a strategy, we miss a larger invitation to bring curiosity, imagination, humility, and old and new wisdom to the enormous, age-old, formula-resistant question of how we move—and are moved by—one another.

At JustLabs, we started this initiative by asking: *What are the ingredients of effective narratives?* We knew that changing narratives was a matter of both changing the language that organizations use, *and* also, fundamentally, had to do with the way that teams think about and engage in their work. And yet, the question betrays a certain kind of complex simplicity that I often struggled with when trying to make sense, in narrative terms, of the work our teams were doing. Some of the most important challenges our partners worked through were things like being verified to run A/B tests on Facebook, building a productive working relationship with a graphic designer, strengthening their connections to community members, or just affirming their own ability to think creatively about their work.

None of this can be captured by asking about what narratives they created, or if those narratives were effective—unless we're talking about the internal narratives that we hold about ourselves and what doing advocacy work looks like and feels like for us. This is not to dismiss the importance of more strategic communications-focused efforts—or of the work that our partners *did* do in experimenting with more accessible, hopeful communication. It's undeniable that many of our ways of working for social change don't take the narratives we are contributing to seriously. With so much activist work focused on highlighting the hurts and harms that people experience, we leave very little space for people to feel inspired, to understand the richness that can come from creating small moments and big structures that are caring, generous, and tender. But I do wonder if we might find ways of talking about narratives that are more inviting of both big movements *and* small personal shifts, that do a better job of identifying the building blocks and related questions that emerge from exploring this work in practice, and that recognize the people who have long been doing such work.

When I look back now on the work our partners did, I don't see a handful of organizations trying to uncover and test new narratives about human rights with target audiences. Instead what I find is a collective effort by a variety of individual people to open themselves, their colleagues, and their teams to re-examining (however hesitantly) how they engage with and shift people's understanding of themselves in relationship to one another and the world we share. I see small shifts in individual and team mindsets, and a gradual opening to thinking with more

curiosity and creativity about different ways—big and small—of inviting people to change. Sometimes this is as wild as dreaming up a food truck for lawyers; other times, it is as tedious as creating a testing matrix for a Facebook post. The common denominator is a willingness to explore, adapt, and change.

This is an issue of scale and process: When we talk about changing narratives, are we also thinking about the small shifts that practitioners need to go through to integrate narrative thinking into their work? What other issues of practice does exploring “narrative” work raise? In the context of our initiative, I’ve seen us shift from asking “What narrative will win support for X issue?”, to asking questions like:

When we talk about changing narratives, are we also thinking about the small shifts that practitioners need to go through to integrate narrative thinking into their work?

- How do we bring and find energy in advocacy work?
- How do we reinvigorate habitual processes and approaches to problems with creativity and joy that fills us as we do the work, even as it reaches people differently?
- What kinds of encounters and experiences change people?
- How do we create opportunities for people (including ourselves) to explore our values, hurts, and dreams together, in relationship with one another?



None of these are new questions. They echo questions posed by—and can find wisdom and guidance in—liberation movements and restorative justice movements around the world. As Ishtar Lakhani, a dear friend and one of JustLabs’ collaborators told me: “I didn’t know I was doing narrative work until someone asked me to give a talk on it—I was just doing what we’ve always done. A lot of these are standard feminist organizing practices.” Black, queer, Indigenous, feminist, and decolonial movements have long been asserting the need to dream, to imagine a different future, and to be attentive to relationships and power on the way to building that future.



Of course, there are many people doing what is now called (and which they themselves would call) *narrative work* who come from and are more embedded in such movements and practices than I am. Nevertheless, through my foray into the “narratives field,” especially in the realm of human rights, I am both conscious and wary of its currency (metaphorically, as well as literally, through the monetization of funding and consulting) as a flashy “new” approach—dynamics in which myself and JustLabs are involved and are trying to make sense of.



The world of tactical narratives, the social psychology of values, the neuroscience of misinformation, the technical expertise of digital campaigners—all of these evolving fields offer important tools, research, and entry points into more effective ways of moving people. But so does our attention to relationships and dialogue, well-being, healing, and creative and imaginative thinking. Doing advocacy creatively goes deeper than running a design-thinking workshop—it also requires supporting individuals and teams to develop a sense of confidence in their own creative thinking and practice. Telling the story of the world we want requires more than finding hopeful images and

messages for a campaign. It also requires taking the time to actually reflect on, dream, and imagine new possibilities—and to find small ways of bringing those dreams to life. How we tell our stories matters, but so does how we create stories to tell.

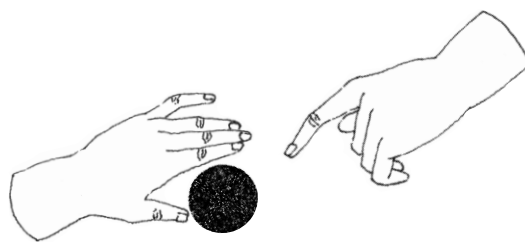
In her beautiful book *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer explores Indigenous ways of understanding responsibility and relationship in the world—particularly in the context of Turtle Island (North America). One of the ideas that Kimmerer explores is the Indigenous practice of the Honorable Harvest: a way of living based on the idea that you take only what you need and only what is offered. She draws a contrast between a world structured by regulations, laws, and rights, and one structured by deep “cultures of gratitude.”

How we tell our stories matters, but so does how we create stories to tell.

Struggles for human rights (and protections that extend beyond the “human”, to include communities, other beings, other forms of life, and ecosystems) are often struggles for laws and policies. They are struggles for restrictions, permissions, or recognitions that have tangible, vital effects on people's lives. They are important. They are necessary. They save lives. And in a world with so many institutions and powers and people driven by seemingly boundless greed, they may be the only way of saving our existence on this earth. But I am compelled by Kimmerer's ideas that the world we really need—the world so much of our work is striving for—is much closer to one governed by “cultures of gratitude.” We can build a society where everything that is wrong or harmful is illegal. But we can also—should also—invest in building cultures that are caring, that are sensitive towards the suffering and the sorrow of others, and that are invested in healing, mutual support, and communal and ecological thriving.

The cultivation of “cultures of gratitude,” or perhaps cultures of accountability and cultures of healing and care, is a kind of narrative work. But truly cultivating such ways of living must also be a project of transformation, learning, listening, and growth for all of us, including those of us advocating for change—and especially those of us who, like me, occupy identities (US citizen, white, cis, man, among others) that wield the force of and hold responsibility for structural violence and oppression.

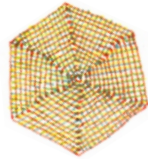
My point here is that—for those of us in the “narratives field”—when we ask practitioners (or ourselves) to pay attention to narratives, are we doing so in a way that invites a sense of creative agency, or in a way that makes it feel like someone else (who we often have to pay) must have better answers? Are we disguising an old, deeply complex question as a simple formula, or creating the opportunity to encourage reflection on how we dream, embody, and truly model change?



adrienne maree brown's book *Emergent Strategy* thinks about change as a process of emergence: change begins at the level of connection and relationship. Part of what she is saying is that how we create change should reflect the change we are trying to create—indeed, is the change that we create. For practitioners, this is an even more grounded take on the message at the center of JustLabs' earlier publication, [Be the Narrative](#). Ad tests might help us win votes and policy change (which we need), but they won't teach us the thing we all need to explore: how to live better with one another.

In the book, brown includes words from Shira Hassan about transformative justice: “I need us to acknowledge more that we have no idea what we are doing—that we are birthing a new collective consciousness out of the pain of losing too many people to colonialist justice.” Hassan is referring to an abolitionist vision of justice that could be rooted in healing, not cycles of harm. But her words offer wisdom for social change more broadly: sometimes, we need to acknowledge that we don't know what the hell we're doing—and then to vision and build together anyway, as responsibly as we can.

Maybe more of us need the courage, like my colleague from earlier, to say “todavía no sé.” “I still don't know.” Maybe more of us, especially those of us who work in accompaniment, funding, or capacity-building roles, need to recognize that our ideas, tactics, and tools are only as meaningful as what we create with the people who we are hoping will use them. Sometimes, we need to give ourselves permission to not know what we're doing. This is not an indictment; except, maybe, of the instincts, funding schemes, and consulting dynamics that sell “new tactics” at the expense of the humility, thoughtfulness, and curiosity that should be at the heart of experimentation and social change—even when the change is urgent.



Maybe more of us need the courage, like my colleague from earlier, to say “todavía no sé.” “I still don't know.”

Experimentation should always be an invitation. If nothing else, that's what I hope this document is. If this document does anything, I hope that it encourages you—whoever you are, and whatever resources you have—to give yourself more permission to bring your whole, caring, loving, joyful, sad, creative self into whatever work you are doing. Whether that work is writing tweets, coordinating meetings, managing grants, creating protest slogans, or organizing public dance interventions. Give yourself permission to take the ideas of so-called experts and play with them. Try something new. Work with someone new. Find wisdom and inspiration everywhere. Empower others to do the same. Do it together. That's where new narratives will come from. That's where we'll find our new world.

Love and solidarity,

Lucas

THE QUESTIONS, THE KITCHEN, THE COOKS

(Our context)



The (Initial) Questions

By 2018, when this initiative began, the ideas of “a populist tide” and “closing space for civil society” had already painfully crystallized for many human rights activists—and many other people—around the world. Understanding this context as an indicator of a [period of profound transformation](#), the team at JustLabs asked (a version of) the question: *In what ways does the practice of human rights need to change to be an effective source of protection, resilience, and imagination for the challenges our societies face?*

With authoritarian—often democratically elected—leaders around the world manipulating values and emotions, pulling swaths of people on board with anti-elite, anti-pluralist ideas, and leveraging those sentiments at activists and rights advocates, one of the key questions for navigating this period of transformation seemed to be: *How can human rights activists use creative strategies to reclaim how the story of their work is told, and shape new narratives about what human rights are and can be for a society?*

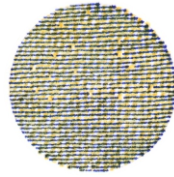
The Kitchen

To explore these questions, JustLabs set out to build a creative process that would use research into populist narratives (which we identified as underpinned by *crisis*, *conflict*, and *controversy*) as an entry point into experimental project design. JustLabs began running design-thinking workshops that brought human rights groups from different national contexts together with interdisciplinary teams of psychologists, communicators, creative activists, and artists to explore each team's narrative challenges and imagine creative interventions and initiatives in response. Together with a variety of funders, JustLabs worked with groups from around the world, from South Africa and Kazakhstan to Brazil and Cambodia. The story of that research and those prototypes is recounted in our 2019 publication [Be the Narrative: How changing the narrative could revolutionize what it means to do human rights](#).

Building on that work, in 2019, JustLabs and the Fund for Global Human Rights (FGHR) formally launched the Narrative Hub—an initiative to [fund and support four teams](#) in Venezuela, Hungary, Mexico, and Australia to experiment with bringing their workshoped ideas to life. In a parallel process, we worked with Amnesty International South Asia and several teams in Sri Lanka to follow a similar process developing projects that responded specifically to growing Islamophobia in the wake of the 2019 Easter bombings.³ For nearly three years, we learned together, navigating the opportunities and challenges of applying narrative research and practicing creative experimentation. Each team built upon, adapted, or completely rethought their initial ideas. JustLabs and FGHR, on the other hand, learned and grew in our own understanding of what responsible funding and accompaniment of creative work means.

³ While the workshop and ideation process was similar to the Narrative Hub initiative with FGHR, the teams we worked with in Sri Lanka had a shorter and less direct accompaniment process by JustLabs.

The result of this work is a rich, diverse set of personal and organizational journeys. The team's experiences, and our own learnings are woven through this document, which is set up to be as much an invitation and source of inspiration for practitioners as it is a recounting of what we did and what we learned in the process. The question we're asking now is not: *What are more effective narratives about human rights?* Instead, we're asking: *How do practitioners, capacity-builders/accompaniers, and funders work together to create conditions that encourage one another to reflect on, re-examine, and experiment with how we do our work?*



The Cooks

Mexico | Centro Prodh – [Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez](#)

- **Profile:** Research & legal accompaniment; ex: cases of forced disappearance, sexual violence
- **Questions:** How to build support for a security model that doesn't rely on militarization? How to tell difficult stories about truth and justice in ways that inspire hope and empathy, and that encourage people to engage, not just turn away?
- **Experiments:** Created and tested a hope-based video ([Todavía](#)), which encouraged viewers to imagine [community-centered alternatives to security](#). Revisited reports on people who have experienced sexual torture to create designs that [center and uplift women seeking justice](#). Exploring ways of telling inspiring stories about and strengthening relationships with collectives of “searchers.” Pursuing training on social media strategy and narrative storytelling techniques such as podcasting.

Hungary | HHC – [Hungarian Helsinki Committee](#)

- **Profile:** Advocacy, research, and legal counseling on issues of rights and justice
- **Questions:** How to encourage and inspire young people to stand up for themselves and others and engage in public life? How to translate “rule of law” into experiences, stories, and content that resonate with young people.
- **Experiments:** Conducted audience research and focused outreach on [Instagram](#). Partnered with agencies to make creative, visually appealing content; partnered with “creative ambassadors” to produce [custom content on the rule of law](#) (GIFs, podcasts, videos, etc). Held debate games and role-play games at regional festivals. [Rebranded their organization](#) (with input from young people). Held internal mainstreaming workshops to share learnings across team.

Venezuela | ProVene – [La Fundación ProBono Venezuela](#)

- **Profile:** Pro bono legal support for low-income neighborhoods in Caracas
- **Questions:** How to work with communities to strengthen their understanding of their rights and inspire their vision of how they might bring their rights to life as a community.
- **Experiments:** Repurposed food truck into a [mobile office/community center](#), which was digitally launched as *La Nave* (The Ship) with an [accessible framework describing rights](#). Partnered with local community leaders, creatives, and

service providers to design activities that would embody these rights and inspire a sense of hope and action within communities. Held a position for “social creative activism” and held [upcycling workshops to create face shields](#) and [partnered with community kitchens](#) during the pandemic.

Australia | HRLC – [Human Rights Law Centre](#)

- **Profile:** Research, legal accompaniment, campaigns; ex: Australian Charter of Human Rights campaign, dignity in prisons, Indigenous rights, migration/refugee/movement rights
- **Questions:** How to inspire Australians to see their values in movements for human rights protections, and to strengthen support for legal protections that entrench the value of care into law? Codifying the idea: “We care for everyone, and everyone deserves care.”
- **Experiments:** Conducted audience research and workshopped ideas with different creative agencies for “values-priming” activities to support their campaign for an [Australian Charter of Human Rights](#). Settled on a [“time machine” concept](#) that would provide an immersive user experience to explore the history, progress, and relevance of human rights in Australia. Set time machine idea aside during the pandemic, though integrated components of it into the [“co-design” project](#): a campaign tool featuring a digital storybank and quiz inviting users to test their knowledge about human rights in Australia. Created Facebook ad tests for launching tool.



Sri Lanka | Collaboration – [Shreen Saroor, Hashtag Generation, Sisterhood Initiative](#)

- **Profile(s):** Collaboration between a prominent women's rights activist (Shreen Saroor), a women's group creating intra- and inter-faith dialogue and inspiring leadership by young Muslim women (Sisterhood Initiative), and a youth-led movement for more inclusive civic and political participation (Hashtag Generation).
- **Questions:** How to create a safer, more inclusive society for Muslims in the context of rising Islamophobia and the pandemic?
- **Experiments:** Conducted research to lobby United Nations and Organization of Islamic Cooperation leaders (Shreen). Produced a video for Women's Day featuring a woman activist sharing her experience as a Sri Lankan Muslim woman. Partnered with a southern organization to hold workshops mobilizing women to be peace-builders and promoting intra and interfaith dialogue (Sisterhood Initiative). Held a [media briefing](#) on forced cremations and a [video](#) telling the stories of family members of those who underwent forcible cremation (Hashtag Generation).

Sri Lanka | NPC – [National Peace Council](#)

- **Profile:** Peace-building organization
- **Questions:** How to create a safer, more inclusive society for Muslims in the context of rising Islamophobia and the pandemic?
- **Experiments:** Held food bazaars in different districts with youth from different parts of the country and different ethnic backgrounds. Included performances, opportunities to try making different dishes, conversations about the origins and importance of different foods, and opportunities to build bonds and deconstruct harmful myths through dialogue and friendly exchange.

A NARRATIVE SPICE BOX

Overview

This *Narrative Spice Box* offers an exploration of different elements that can inspire reflection and creative thinking about creating initiatives, interventions, and narratives that move people. Every element is like its own *spice blend*. Each blend consists of different flavors, colors, and aromas. The blends can be used in different quantities, used with different dishes, and mixed with other spices. Most importantly: they are yours, to mix, match, and experiment with.

Each spice blend features three sections:

- I. **Spice Theory** offers a summary of research, inspiring thinking, and examples from other campaigns that offer an “ideal” or “theoretical” description of the element. Think of this like the part of a guide that describes the *flavor* and aroma of a given blend by a spice connoisseur.
- II. **JustLabs' Kitchen** offers examples of how this spice was actually used by the teams we worked with, reflections from JustLabs on what it's like trying to use this spice in practice, and quotes from different team members. Think of this like descriptions of different dishes that aspiring cooks tried with the spices, and some of their reflections.
- III. **Your Kitchen** offers a quick takeaway summary of the Spice Theory, a few “quick practice” exercises to inspire your own thinking about how you might use each spice, and a list of resources for you to explore further.

The Spices

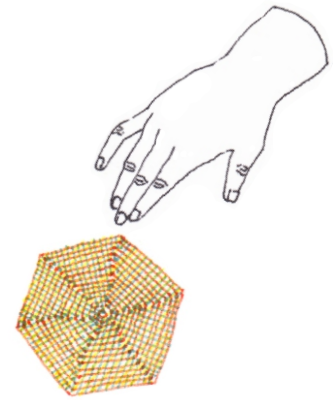
PROBLEM SPACES	<i>Shifting how we think about change</i>
CREATIVITY	<i>A mindset and a habit</i>
IMAGINATION & VISIONING	<i>Exploring the dreams of your movements</i>
HOPE, VALUES, EMOTIONS	<i>Moving people and modeling change</i>
EXPERIENCES & RELATIONSHIPS	<i>Creating new, unexpected ground</i>
PEOPLE	<i>Who's it with, who's it for?</i>



PROBLEM SPACES

PROBLEM SPACES

Shifting how we think about change



"Everything you touch, you change. Everything you change, changes you."

Octavia Butler

"In order to find your way, you must lose it. Generously."

Bayo Akomolafe

SPICE THEORY

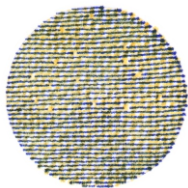
Where do you look for change?

One key tendency in activism and advocacy is to think of our work in terms of "initial states" (the problem) and "goal states" (achieving the solution). We are encouraged to identify clear, tangible steps and define [goals that are SMART](#) (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, Time-based). Doing so can help keep our work grounded and focused on achieving real signals of actual change, and is an important skill to grow and develop.

Thinking about problems only in terms of goal states, however, creates a series of challenges. For one, the goals we set are often beyond our reach. What does affecting something as nebulous as "cultural change" or "narrative change" really look like? How can small teams meaningfully reflect on the impact they have made on large, systemic issues? These are questions worth asking. Under the pressure and urgency to show progress, we too often assign meaning to whatever metrics are most easily accessible. We need to find ways of defining better goals and more meaningfully measuring progress.

There is another, more fundamental challenge, too. When we fixate on goal states—however important those goals are—we risk losing sight of all the important things that happen along the way. We are often uncomfortable in the ambiguous "problem space" (the space between the problem and the solution) even though these uncomfortable spaces of unfolding are where we experience growth and encounter and create the possibility of real change within ourselves and the day-to-day world we move through.

"Changing the narrative," then—or any social change, really—happens at different levels. We often focus on how our **initiative** (what our project "does") affects what happens "out there" at the **societal** level (what people believe/how they act). But there is another level to change: our own **internal process** (what have I learned/how are we changing). To put this in narrative terms: what are the internal narratives you/your team have about the work you do? What harmful habits do you fall into?



What changes do you need to make internally to make real change possible? To think in terms of spices: making a good meal isn't just about mixing the right spices—it's about keeping the spices well stocked, finding the right ingredients, and learning what spices go well with which dishes. It takes messing up and making some dishes that don't taste good. It might even be about finding meaning and joy in the process of cooking and sharing a meal with others.

We want to do work that is *effective*, which requires defining clear goals and learning how to meaningfully measure progress. Just as important, however, is thinking clearly about where we look for change and what we decide to value. A campaign that succeeds in passing a law might have split a team apart in the process. Is that still a success? Another campaign might make no meaningful impact on public opinion, but running it allowed a team to build meaningful relationships with a grassroots collective, build confidence thinking creatively by curating an art installation, or implement an approach to project management that better supports staff wellbeing. Is that a failure?

People like adrienne maree brown, whose practice integrates ideas of [emergence](#) and [expressive change](#), remind us that [complex systems emerge from simple interactions](#). Change is not just what we try to change out in the world, but how we change it. The internal is the external. Many movements for social change, especially those embedded in organizations and shaped by funders, are conditioned to value the outcomes of the work they are striving for, and not the way they themselves are interacting and changing through the *process*. What if we thought of our “*how*” as a legitimate area of change too?

The flexibility and support to explore, experiment, fail, learn, and practice new ways of creating together (explicitly focusing on “internal” practice) is so rare for practitioners. Bayo Akomolafe reminds us (as Audre Lorde did before him) that solutions [will not come from the institutions that already exist](#). Our funding schemes and organizational practices are wrapped up in harmful systems. True change will be something we live into and create together—it won't come from a suddenly more “innovative” approach to funding. Nevertheless, there are so many opportunities for all of us—in NGOs, in funding agencies, in movements—to find better ways of seeing and valuing the change that happens through the process of our work, not just what we want that work to achieve.

JUSTLABS' KITCHEN

"Perhaps the most important thing has been the process, because we acquired all these tools and they impacted our work in other ways—even if, in reality, the video didn't necessarily achieve what we wanted."

Sofía, Centro Prodh (Mexico)

Spice Samples

Venezuela: Each team began by identifying narrative challenges in their contexts. ProVene in Venezuela observed that rights were not understood or seen as a priority within the communities they worked in. This, they reasoned, made it easier for the state to push narratives about human rights lawyers and activists being "anti-Venezuelan." ProVene wanted to raise community awareness about rights, shift the narrative that communities have about what they deserve and what they are capable of creating together, and seed a sense of grassroots legitimacy for human rights work.

They created *La Nave* (meaning "The Ship")—a kind of mobile community center to inspire and support collective community action. They bought and repurposed a food truck, and built a network of local community leaders and service providers to design activities that would embody different kinds of rights. In addition to their legal services, they imagined holding concerts, sporting events, mediation training, and entrepreneurial workshops. Like the space travel metaphor that the term *La Nave* alludes to, the project aimed to work with communities to *despegar*—to take off or blast off—towards a new reality.

The pandemic disrupted many of these plans, but for the team in Venezuela, it reinforced the need to think creatively about their work. They held upcycling workshops to create face shields, partnered with community kitchens, and formalized a position for "creative social activism." Even though they started with a question about rights awareness, the questions the team has asked themselves through this process have turned more introspective, reflecting on what it means for them to be lawyers in these communities, and how they might "give rights a new face" that corresponds more to the realities of the people they work with.

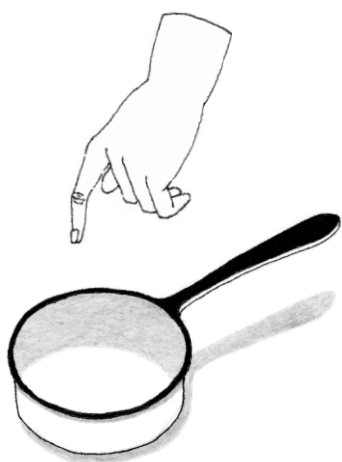
At the heart of *La Nave* was an invitation for people to reach out their hand, to come on board, and work together for a better community. *Building something new together* is a message just as relevant for the team as for the communities they work in. Even though the truck has been immobilized by lockdowns and gasoline shortages, the team has spent three years thinking in new ways, exercising new muscles, and asking new questions about how they relate to the communities they work with—which may be as important, or even a precursor to, achieving any of their initial narrative change goals. It wasn't just the communities, but the team itself that was learning to *despegar*.



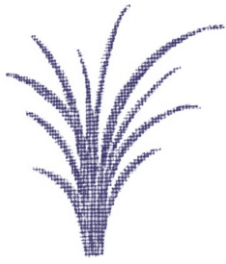
Observations & Notes

- In some ways, this spice is a call to [slow down](#). The work is urgent, and we urgently need change. But it's worth saving some space to reflect, to make sure we learn from what we do, and to ensure our ways of working are not reproducing and recreating the harm we are trying to resist.
- Those of us in positions of privilege—especially funders—have a responsibility to help create and defend space for those on “the front lines” to engage in deep learning, reflection, and community building with other changemakers. Funders and companions should never add to a sense of urgency, which the people we are working with feel far more acutely than we do.
- Our initiative benefitted from a funding structure that set out *learning* as the primary objective—not external change. In future projects, we would add to this a process that explicitly explores with teams the resources they need and the ways of working that would support and prioritize their own well-being.
- Funders often don't know what more meaningful measurement of external change actually looks like, and yet increasingly place that burden on teams—a burden which often requires technical expertise teams don't immediately have access to.
- Funders and companions can ease the burden of reflection by [building in and facilitating reflective processes and practices](#)—and not requiring teams to take on all the work of documenting and making sense of those reflections.

Reflections from the Cooks



- “It struck me as a very different kind of cooperation than what we normally have, because in a sense it was very free. We could frame most of the content and also the boundaries. We could ask for help when we needed help, but we could really experiment with lots of things; I think it was a very elevating process in that way. It's not something that happens very often. This was very different because the process was important as well, not just the outcome. I think that's a very different perspective.” – **Anikó, HHC (Hungary)**
- “I never met these kinds of project managers who were not asking for numbers, they were asking for feelings and learnings.” – **Detti, HHC (Hungary)**
- “It took a long time to understand what the process was or what I was in the middle of—to find that right comfort level of like, ok, this is an experimental space. We can think out loud, come up with ideas, explore. We've got permission to fail, but we are going to learn in that process. And I think that is a fantastic thing to try to achieve. A lot of not-for-profit organizations know we are going to these spaces thinking we have to impress potential funders and we have to do this and that. I think kind of letting go or dropping your guard and saying, ok, there is no pressure here, we really can experiment in the lab, if you like—that was really a great exercise.” – **Tom, formerly HRLC (Australia)**
- “It not only changed me as a person, it also changed ProVene. This project has changed us because we also understand—and well, with the pandemic as well, because everything has blended together—so we have come to understand that the work we were doing and how we were doing it was not enough. That we had to open our minds to go further, to understand that lawyers can do more creative work, that lawyers can invent, that we are not stuck in an office with a book, but that we can develop weird and wonderful activities, and reach the communities in a more powerful way.” – **Gerardo, ProVene (Venezuela)**



YOUR KITCHEN

Takeaway

Change occurs at different levels. It occurs both “out there” as well as within ourselves and our teams. While doing more effective work (including “changing narratives”) does require getting better at [defining clear goals](#) and learning how to meaningfully measure progress, we also need to expand [how we think about change](#) and [where we look for it](#). We need to get better at seeing, valuing, and supporting the “internal” learning, growth, and change that happens through the process of our work.

Quick Practice

Think about a project you were involved in that ended a while ago (something you have enough distance from to think with some clarity on). What is something you are proud of from that project, and what was something important that you learned through it? How did the work affect your relationships with your team?

Think about a project you're currently working on. How did you define success? Regardless of what happens with your “objectives”, what would make it a successful learning experience for your team? (A “successful failure” if you will.)

Reflect on one habit or relational dynamic you fall into in your work that you feel is harmful or uncomfortable. What is one thing you could try tomorrow to shift that dynamic?



Explore More

On slowing down, expressive change, and the internal in the external:

Read: ['The Times Are Urgent: Lets Slow Down'](#) – Bayo Akomolafe

Explore: [Bayo Akomolafe](#) and the [Emergence Network](#)

Read: [Emergent Strategy](#) – adrienne maree brown

Practice: [Self-Guided Workshops](#) – Organization Unbound

Explore: [A Larger Us](#) – The Collective Psychology Project (now: Larger Us)

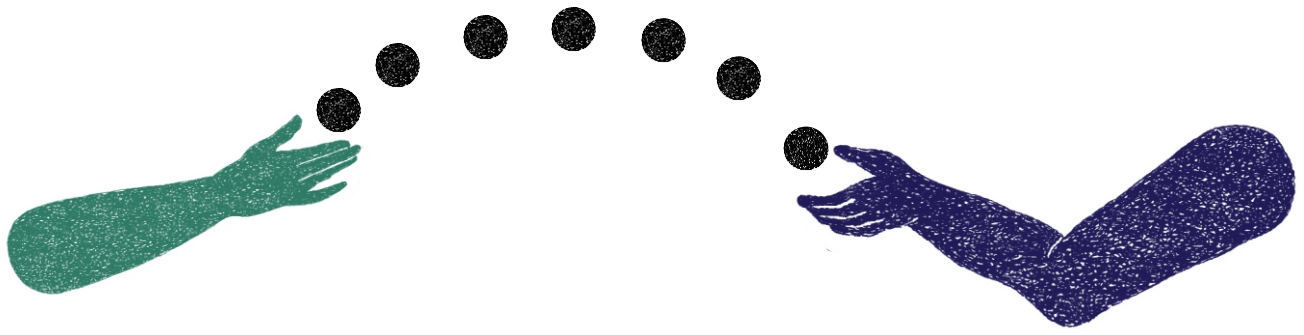
On setting better traditional advocacy goals:

Explore: [SMART Objectives](#) – Beautiful Trouble





CREATIVITY



CREATIVITY

A mindset and a habit

"Others have seen what is and asked why. I have seen what could be and asked why not."

Pablo Picasso

SPICE THEORY

Creative is something that *you choose to be*, more than it is a description of the work you do. Being creative is a *disposition* or a *mindset*. Doing creative work is not about finding the perfect idea, it's about opening yourself to trying, failing, and approaching problems with curiosity and a sense of possibility. In the spice box metaphor, creativity is a flavor that should be mixed in and sprinkled everywhere. Learning to use it well will change how you think about flavor.

Sustaining creative energy is difficult, especially in the midst of the day-to-day pressures, institutional habits, and threatening contexts that many practitioners work in. Adding new, unfamiliar "tactics" can add pressure, stress, and anxiety, instead of opening up possibilities. The call to "be creative" can often feel more like an added demand than a supportive invitation. At JustLabs, we believe that everyone is creative, and that creativity can be fun and liberating. But to make accessing that creativity in your work easier, we recommend both 1) building intentional spaces in your work environment that encourage open, creative thinking; and 2) building confidence in your own, personal creative potential. (Or, if you are a funder, finding ways to support such spaces and flexibility for the teams you work with.)

Building intentional spaces to encourage creative thinking

Whether we're diving into a meeting, planning a project, or sitting down to finally start writing that social media copy, we often don't do ourselves any favors in how we structure our work space. Here are a few strategies we use at JustLabs to interrupt our patterns and show up to our challenges differently:

— **Begin well.** To get creative, you need to relax! Take some deep breaths. Listen to a song you like. Dance or move your body a bit. Anything that gets you to lighten up. As the Center for Artistic Activism suggests: [turn down the pressure and bring the love](#) (pg. 7).

— **Imagine without pressure.** It can be helpful to get your creative juices flowing and begin generating ideas by removing the pressure/context. A few questions we've enjoyed asking are:

- If you could work with one person or group who has a particular skill, perspective, or position, what would you do together?
- Who would you choose for your 'dream team' of allies?
- If someone gave you \$1000 for your project, what would you do? What about if they gave you \$100,000? (Or any scale that makes sense to you). What ideas do your answers spark that don't require any money?

— **Turn your problem into a question.** It can be helpful to start by reframing the challenge in front of you as a question: How might we _____? This can be as big as "How might we get young men to support our initiative?" or as small as "How might I write a clever campaign tweet?"

Start brainstorming. Our creative inspiration, Ishtar Lakhani, is very insistent that the best ideas don't come from thinking and overthinking. We need structure. Ishtar has a [fantastic video](#) that walks through her process for creative activism, but here are a few brainstorming highlights:

- Get as many different minds into the room as possible. The more the merrier!
- Set a time limit. Start with 5, 10, or 15 minutes. Try to get 1 idea down per minute.
- Quantity over quality. As Ishtar says, don't be a hater! Judge the ideas after the brainstorm. While you're in it, work on letting go of your inhibition and just putting the ideas out there.
- Brainstorm the impossible. It's easier to make a wild idea possible than it is to make a grounded—dare we say boring?—idea creative.
- Have fun! Being creative is also about getting to think playfully about the work you do, even when that work is serious.

— **Structure feedback.** It can be easy to fall into groupthink, or other stuck patterns when evaluating ideas. A helpful design process is to select a few ideas, and do a short "round-robin" activity. You can do this individually or in small groups. Set a timer and complete each step in 2–3 minutes. If in a group, pass the papers with each step so that participants respond to a different idea each round.

Step 1: Each person writes an idea on a piece of paper or in a shared document

Step 2: Answer: What do you like about this idea?

Step 3: Answer: Why will this idea fail?

Step 4: Answer: How can we change this idea to address that possible failure?

Building confidence in your own creative potential, and [investing in creative habits](#)

There's no checklist or tips for this one—just four questions:

- What are your creative practices?
- In what areas of your life do you practice creativity?
- What do those moments of creativity feel like for you?
- How might you replicate that feeling when addressing work-related challenges?

The answer to the first two questions is not *nothing* or *nowhere*. Cooking can be creative. Walking to work, making your bed, making tea or coffee, writing birthday cards—our creative mindsets emerge in all kinds of unexpected places. Starting to recognize the ways in which you are creative is an important step in seeing yourself as a source of creative thinking for activism and advocacy.



Investing time in *intentional* creative practices is an investment in making your work creative. Creativity, after all, is about building a relationship with the discomfort of stepping outside of the things we usually do or the way we usually do them. So buy that sketch notebook. Find time for that walk. Try something new with the meal you're cooking. For all the field-level talk of creativity in social change, a lot of that focuses on ideas; there's not a lot of structure invested in supporting people in developing confidence in their own creative problem-solving. What conditions would help you feel more comfortable and confident thinking playfully and creatively about your work?

JUSTLABS' KITCHEN

"You can always innovate and change and modify. If we believe that the world can be different, then we also have to believe that our strategies can be different."

Sofía, Centro Prodh (Mexico)

Spice Samples

Our process began with big design-thinking workshops (labs) that put people into multi-disciplinary teams (including lawyers, psychologists, creative activists, and communicators) to think in new, expansive, ambitious ways. More important than these big ideas, however, were the ways the teams developed their own confidence and challenged themselves as they translated, distilled, and transformed their big ideas into smaller, more grounded experiments and habits.

Hungary: In the lab, HHC imagined a "word of the year" contest, which would involve young people in a campaign to invent a word in Hungarian for the opposite of "armchair warrior." The team transformed this idea into an exploratory research process and [campaign on the rule of law](#) that focused on young people. The team's creative growth came in the ways they pushed themselves to build new partnerships; play with new visual designs, simpler messages, gifs, and podcasts; and explore ways to connect with young people through Instagram, creative ambassadors, and in-person festivals.



Australia: HRLC imagined a values-priming activity; together with a creative agency, they designed a [“time machine” concept](#)—a public art installation which would provoke people to see their own opinions on contemporary human rights issues relative to past movements (the women’s suffrage movement, for example). Even though this idea was set aside during the pandemic due to its physical component, the team was able to integrate the storytelling idea into their digital [“co-design” campaign quiz](#), which invited users to guess which human rights–related stories happened in Australia.

Venezuela: ProVene, a small team of lawyers, ended up purchasing, renovating, and launching *La Nave*—a food truck converted into a mobile office/community center. Just as important as this big, beautiful initiative were the small ways the team learned to adapt and think differently and dynamically about the challenges that faced them. During the pandemic, with the truck immobilized, the team found partners to hold upcycling workshops to create face shields and connect with community kitchens. Some of our conversations led the team to see the creativity and connection in ideas they had been considering for a long time, such as holding mediation training with community members.

Mexico: Centro Prodh reshaped their original idea of creating a parody show to contrast the president of Mexico’s campaign promises with the reality of his governance into a more serious, hopeful campaign about alternatives to militarized security. Important creative growth for this team was in recognizing that circumstances will sometimes bring plans and initiatives to a halt. When this happened with the security campaign, the team adapted and found ways of integrating hopeful and empowering messages into other areas of their work.

Observations & Notes

— Creativity comes in all shapes and sizes. Having the creative spark from a big workshop at the beginning of the process set the tone for the experimental structure of the process: think big, think imaginatively, see what happens. As Ishtar Lakhani says, it is easier to make an imaginative idea manageable than to make a grounded idea more creative. Just as important, however, were the small shifts in the ways each individual participant built their own confidence as creative problem solvers. How do we find ways of recognizing and acknowledging this kind of growth?

— There is a risk in big creative workshops (especially ones that involve external brainstorming partners) that the process rewards the wildest and flashiest of ideas, and not the ideas that most excite and inspire the people that will be working on them. There is a difficult balance to strive for here, between providing the push to open up one’s mind to new approaches, while still empowering and encouraging creativity as a small, personal practice and habit.

- For us at JustLabs, sustaining this creative openness over the course of a long project was challenging. We began designing small questions for the beginning of every conversation, with both our funders and the teams, to disrupt the “business-as-usual” dynamic of project management, and instead invite laughter and creative thinking.

- We also started holding monthly online workshops that we took to calling [Espresso Labs](#). Rather than a problem-solving or skills-training space, these workshops were a routine, habitual space of play with a community of people working in and around human rights who were interested in exploring their own creativity.

- Within our own team, we started reserving one hour each week for a team problem-solving space, where anyone could bring a challenge and we would use brainstorming strategies from our workshops to come up with solutions.

— When it comes to implementation, any creative idea will inevitably be distilled down and adapted to the realities of a team’s context. Embracing an experimental process also requires letting go of the “ideal” version of the project as imagined in a creative environment and focusing on the valuable opportunities for learning as that project actually develops and evolves.

— Creative campaign ideas do not need to be expensive.



— Funding creativity also requires funding and supporting experimentation, failure, and the space to step back and look at work (and results of the work) differently.

— At the end of the process, we asked Xosé (one of the team members with Centro Prodh), who participated in an origami workshop with us: *If you could create a new origami figure to represent your experience of this project, what would it be?* He replied: *"A heart with wings because I feel that the heart is always where it should be when you're working on human rights, but the wings allow us to go further. You [JustLabs] are precisely what allows the heart to get to that place and to stay there."* How do we find ways to encourage in all aspects of human rights work the kind of quick, creative, beautiful, and visual thinking that Xosé demonstrated in that answer?

Reflections from the Cooks

— "The benefit of all of this was that it wasn't just done as, 'For the next two hours, please think creatively and here's all the things you need to do that and afterwards thanks for your time, have a good day!' It's important that there was purpose to it and there were abilities to implement." – **Daney, HRLC (Australia)**

— "I think the trigger was the pandemic. We're an organization that works on the street day in and day out. We were going to have our pro bono houses in many low-income communities in Caracas. We were catering to hundreds of people every month and thousands a year; suddenly they pulled down the Santamaría,⁴ they shuttered up the streets, and we were left with nothing to do. What then? We couldn't go to the neighborhoods to work. The organization was surely doomed, unless we cracked ourselves open, opened up our minds, and evolved along with what was happening. I think we pivoted, well, pretty much because of this project. It's been hard but we kept the ball rolling." – **Gerardo, ProVene (Venezuela)**

— "It was very interesting because it gave us a big scope, and also was something new for me. But this is really important for us, because we see that there is a kind of fatigue towards the way that we used to talk about our work. We cannot gather new audiences with our previous messaging, so I think it was a wonderful opportunity for us to be able to experiment and find new ways." – **Anikó, HHC (Hungary)**

— "The project also reminded me of the importance of always keeping other areas of life nourished, such as creativity—those playful spaces that are often lost in day-to-day life." – **Sofía, Centro Prodh (Mexico)**

— "Another interesting thing I guess, was having that permission, to think big. Even though in that case our big idea didn't get off the ground, I still think the skills learnt going through the process were really valuable. It encouraged that, you know, you should allow yourself that space and time to bring some creative thought to your problem-solving." – **Tom, formerly HRLC (Australia)**

⁴ In Venezuela, the name "Santamaría" is given to the roll-up metal shutters used as doors in shops, warehouses and commercial establishments. 'Bajar la Santamaría' is a colloquial way of referring to the denial of a service or the termination of a relationship.

YOUR KITCHEN

Takeaway

Creative is something that *you choose to be*, more than it is a description of the work you do. Being creative is a *disposition* or a *mindset*. Doing creative work is not about finding the perfect idea or the biggest idea—it's about opening yourself to trying, failing, and approaching problems with curiosity and a sense of possibility. You are creative, and you can feed that mindset by [creating intentional spaces in your work to think creatively](#) and by [exploring your own creative thinking](#).

For a few [brainstorming tips from Ishtar Lakhani](#): get as many minds into the room as possible, set a time limit, go for quantity over quality, brainstorm the impossible, and have fun.

Quick Practice

Activity 1

What is one task you've been procrastinating or avoiding? Write down a How might I _____? Related to that task. Set a timer for 5 minutes, and write down 5 ideas in response. If you start a sentence or an idea, finish writing it (no erasing).

Activity 2

Think of an issue or a campaign you worked on recently or care about. List 5–10 tactics you've used or seen used around that issue (protest/march, report, letter-writing, fliers, Instagram posts, etc). Then set a timer for 2 minutes and list: 3 emotions, 3 locations, and 3 objects or people. Once you have your lists, set a timer for 5–10 minutes, and try to come up with as many “activist” interventions you can that mix a tactic you've seen used with one item from each of your lists. (Ex.: if you listed report as a tactic, joy as an emotion, and movie theater as a location, what would an intervention look like that involved a movie theater, a report, and tried to create joy?)

Activity 3

Pick any activity from the Center for Artistic Activism's [workbook](#).

Explore More

For inspiration on how to do creative activism:

Watch: [Creative Activism](#) – Ishtar Lakhani

Watch: [How to recover from activist burnout](#) – Yana Buhner Tavanier

Watch: [Should Craftivism Be Fun](#) – Sarah Corbett

Read: [You cant break a SWEAT](#) – Ishtar Lakhani



For workbooks and resources:

Practice: [Art of Activism Workbook](#) – Center for Artistic Activism

Practice: [Workshop Handout](#) – Center for Artistic Activism

Explore: [Resources](#) – Center for Artistic Activism

For inspiration from creative campaigns:

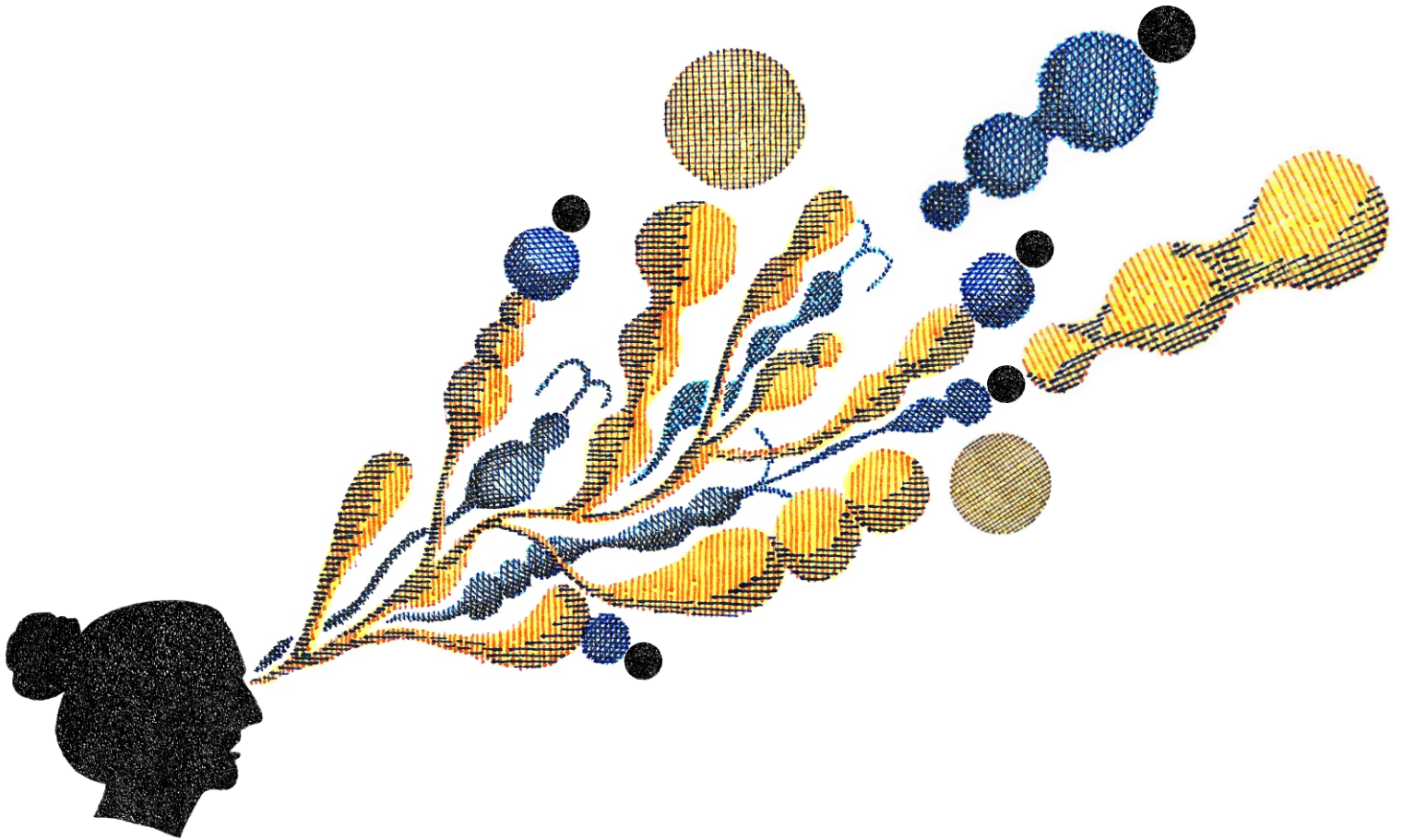
Browse: [Actipedia](#)

Browse: Innovation Reports ([2021/22](#) & [2020](#) & [2019](#)) – International Civil Society Centre

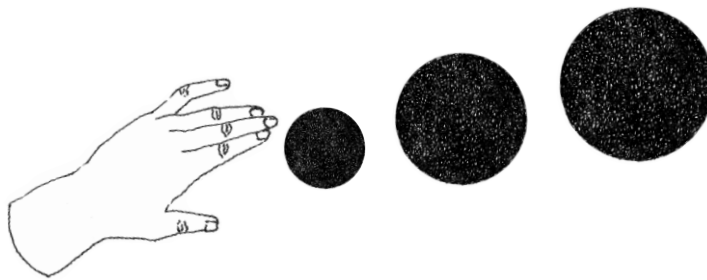
Listen: [Words to Win By](#) podcast – Anat Shenker-Orsorio OR [C4AA Podcast](#) – Center for Artistic Activism

Read: [The fight for “fun”damental rights for sex workers in South Africa](#) – Ishtar Lakhani





IMAGINATION & VISIONING



IMAGINATION & VISIONING

Exploring the dreams of your movements

"Without new visions, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics, but a process that can and must transform us"

Robin D.G. Kelley

"Look closely at the present you are constructing: it should look like the future you are dreaming."

Alice Walker

SPICE THEORY

What is the world that you want to believe is possible?

Imagining the future is an uncomfortable practice, especially for people doing the serious, pain-filled, present work of human rights. We're so used to thinking about—and talking about—what is wrong with the world we live in. That's important. But when we don't imagine and articulate where we want to go, and why, we risk letting others miss our bigger point or fill in the gaps with narrow, exclusionary, and discriminatory worldviews. When that happens, we get sucked into conversations and debates that distract from the vision we actually care about. Imagining the future is about more than messaging. People—including ourselves—need to be encouraged to imagine and believe in the possibility of a future that is different from the present. This starts with us taking the time to open our own imaginations and examine how much our work reflects and draws from those dreams.

The practice of imagining, dreaming, and believing in new possibilities is a practice at the heart of most (maybe all) social change, though certainly has deep roots in liberation movements. It is at the core of Afrofuturism, a term often used to describe creative expressions of Black liberation that imagine beyond the realities of the current world. Ytasha Womack [describes](#) Afrofuturism as both an *artistic aesthetic* and a *practice*—as "a way of looking at the future, or alternate realities through a Black cultural lens" that "intersects imagination, liberation, technology, mysticism." Imagining the future, Womack insists, is a practice that helps to create agency, challenge structures that imagine and have imagined oppressive and exploitative futures, and seed liberation in the here and now.

When it comes to activism and advocacy, the invitation and the challenge, as [the Center for Story-Based Strategy](#) indicates, is to begin inside our own imaginations—not inside the imaginations of the people who built the structures we're trying to find our way out of. In that sense, even more than a persuasive strategy, imagination is the way we seed hope and energy within ourselves to create new possibilities for the world within our own lives. The roots of imaginative practice in liberation movements, however, should also demand self-reflection about power and positionality: Whose imagination of the future is your work based in? To whose dreams are you accountable?

One powerful example of embodied imagination are the [transformative justice movements](#) that rethink how we as communities and societies imagine justice, accountability, and community safety. For many people, the idea of not having and relying on policing, prisons, and punitive systems of punishment is unthinkable. But people who work in transformative justice are imagining and creating relational practices that don't respond to harm with more harm, but that instead center humanity and healing as the core vision around which community structures of accountability should be organized.

Imagination can also be a powerful campaigning tool, as Ishtar Lakhani has noted. In one intervention for sex worker's rights, her team at the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce [created a fake political party](#) to show what it would be like to have a sex worker run for president. The initiative wasn't meant to win an election—it was meant to disrupt people's imagination and open doors for new conversations. As Terry Marshall, an activist and Afrofuturist, has observed, part of what liberation movements are struggling for—and struggling to encourage in others—[is the space to imagine](#).

In describing the sci-fi book she co-edited, '[Octavias Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements](#)', adrienne maree brown writes: "*With Octavia's Brood* (2015), the focus was: how do we attend to, and liberate, imagination, recognizing that we must imagine what we want to create as a future society; imagine who we need to be in order to move and grow in life-affirming directions; and imagine solutions, even when we are told we have reached an impossible problem or condition?"⁵

Too often, our initiatives start at the level of our constraints. What if you set your goal as one of encouraging people—starting with yourself—to dream and imagine? How might your work be changed if you gave yourself permission to dream, and to explore the dreams of the people to whom your work is accountable?



JUSTLABS' KITCHEN

"What is the promise? What's the promise of the better tomorrow? If we do this thing, and we do it together, and we do it well, what does tomorrow look like?"

Tom Clarke, formerly HRLC (Australia)

Spice Samples

Australia: A core idea at the heart of HRLC's Charter campaign was to show people that the values of human rights are values Australians already hold and practice. Their project sought to embody this idea of human rights being something that everyone engages in by creating tools that would allow people from around the country to have input into the draft Charter.

⁵ This quote can be found in adrienne maree brown's *Holding Change: The Way of Emergent Strategy Facilitation and Mediation* (pg. 3).

Venezuela: *La Nave*, ProVene's mobile office/community center, was grounded in the idea of community empowerment—a vision of a world where freedom and rights are something that people have agency to practice in community, even when the structures around them are oppressive and restrictive.

Mexico: *Todavía*, Centro Prodh's first campaign, was rooted in the vision of a world where public safety, dignity, accountability, and a better life can be achieved without militarizing police forces.

Hungary: HHC's narrative vision started with the idea that strength comes from a community that actively builds and creates together. They sought to strengthen democracy by encouraging and inspiring people, especially young people, to have the confidence to engage in civic life in their communities.



Observations & Notes

Our process asked participants to reflect on the narrative challenges in their context (ex: rights defenders are foreign agents) and the new narratives they wanted to create (ex: we are strong as individuals and as a community). This approach can help ground this visioning into the present context; however, it runs the risk of jumping right into finding slogans and words, and skipping over a deeper, reflective, imaginative process. It would be interesting to spend more time in reflection, world-building, and imaginative dreaming—and to encourage this imagination as a part of the process/learning, before trying to assign language, slogans, and campaign ideas.

Visual and expressive practices (such as drawing, painting, sketching, finding images, or storytelling) are important tools to utilize **before** trying to connect those visions to narrative change. (Especially since we are prone to repeating familiar, advertisement language when asked to come up with mottos and slogans.)

- Imagining a better world is a practice rooted in liberation movements. This means a few things:

- Visioning and imagining should be a source of healing and energy.

- Visioning and imagining is a belief that a radically different future is possible—and an orientation towards creating, wherever possible, better ways of living *within our own lives and relationships* that honors that possibility.

It raises the question of accountability: Who are you? Whose dreams are you accountable to? In what ways does your own imagination need to be opened up to create more possibility and liberation for someone else?

Reflections from the Cooks

— “The aim of the first project we had was basically to try to create a narrative that we thought could focus on the issue of security, to somehow promote the importance of having a less militarized security model, which has been the dominant model across the country, to make it a more humane security model, more in touch with the people, more respectful of their rights.” – **Sofía, Centro Prodh (Mexico)**

— “You're not saying, 'this is the way it should be,' you're actually showing how things could be. If human rights campaigners are trying to make the world more fair and more inclusive and more participatory and democratic, then wouldn't it be fantastic if our movements were all of those things too? In fact, I would say, they kind of have to be if we want to prove that it's something worth getting behind, that the destination is worth striving for.” – **Tom, formerly HRLC (Australia)**

— “Before going further, think about: what's your story, why are you involved in all of this? Why do you want to progress and engage in human rights and advocacy for human rights? If your values are not clear, then things won't be as easy or simple or as effective.” – **Daney, HRLC (Australia)**

YOUR KITCHEN

Takeaway

We're asking people to believe in a world that doesn't fully exist yet. We need to encourage them to imagine, and to help them see the dreams we have and where we want to go, which means we need to spend time, as the Center for Artistic Activism puts it, [wandering through our own imagined utopias](#). How often do you spend dreaming and imagining the world you want? How visible are those dreams in your work? How does your work encourage others to expand their imagination about what is possible? In the [words of the Center for Story-Based Strategy](#), “When we start with 'no,' 'against,' 'cancel,' and 'resist,' we start inside *their* imagination.”

What's inside *your* imagination? What visions are you [saying yes to](#)? To whose visions and dreams are you accountable?



Quick Practice

Close your eyes. Center yourself. Breathe. Think about the work that you do. Why do you do it?

Set a timer for 3 minutes. Think about what the world would be like if all the changes you desired happened. Imagine your home—the place you live, or the place you grew up. Picture it. Picture your community or neighborhood, your surroundings. What does it feel like? Who is with you? What are you doing? What are your neighbors doing?

Try drawing this society. Then, finish this sentence: *I want a society that* _____.

Look at the drawing and the sentence. *Notice: Are you describing the absence of something you don't want or the presence of something you do?* How could you revise the sentence or the drawing to show what the world looks like (not the bad things that are absent from it). Then think back to your work. Try answering the following questions (think about a specific project, or about how your team or network relates to and engages with one another):

- What is one way you *embody* or *create* this dream right now?
- What is one thing you could change to make your vision (or your embodiment of it) more visible in your work?

Then, try bringing this activity to a colleague, or someone from the community you work with. What are their dreams and visions?

Explore More

For a sense of why this matters:

Watch: [Dream Strategy](#) – Terry Marshall

Watch: [Afrofuturism: Imagination & Humanity](#) – Ytasha Womack

For inspiration:

Read: [The Endless Sea: Imagining a Story of Tomorrow](#) – More in Common

Peruse: [A Users Guide to \(Demanding\) the Impossible](#) – The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination

Read: [Octavias Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements](#) – adrienne maree brown & Walidah Imarisha (editors)



HOPE, VALUES, EMOTIONS



HOPE, VALUES, EMOTIONS

Moving people and modeling change

"Because it takes a second to say hate, but it takes longer, much longer, to be a great leader."
"Because some people love what you stand for, and for some, if you can, they can."

Pádraig Ó Tuama, [Shaking Hands](#)

SPICE THEORY

What emotions do people need to feel to be inspired into action? What values and behaviors do we need to draw out and model through our work?

Hope & Positive Messaging

Laura Ligouri, a neuroscientist who studies the brain science behind both dehumanization and bias as well as benevolent and prosocial behavior, suggests that modeling care and helpful actions rather than emphasizing abuses [may do more to generate empathy and action](#). Communicators like Thomas Coombes have drawn on this and similar research to call for [hope-based communications strategies](#) that mobilize humanity by showing people what you are for, not just what you're against. The traps that many efforts fall into, he reminds us, are:

- We repeat or respond to the frames of the conversation that others set (ex.: refugees are *not* criminals; pro-life vs. pro-choice), rather than creatively asserting our own.
- We push people into a place of fear and anxiety, which some research suggests may lead them to be less open to the generosity and compassion we're often asking of them.
- We rely on guilt and shame, which is often ignored or leads to avoidance.

Ireland's [Together for Yes campaign](#) for access to safe abortion, for example, avoided traditional frames about "pro-life vs. pro-choice," and instead focused on the ideas of care, compassion, and choice in a crisis. Rather than responding to claims about the economy or crime, Amnesty International's campaign for refugee protection focused on inviting generosity and kindness by encouraging people to ["build a longer table"](#) for people fleeing their homes.



Values

The Common Cause Foundation (CCF) makes a similar argument through research on the social psychology of values. CCF uses a [map](#) of internationally surveyed values, known as the Schwartz Theory of Basic Human Values. Their research suggests that values are like muscles. The more we use certain groups of values, the better we get at using them—and the harder it becomes to engage other groups of values. This suggests that taking shortcuts when persuading people to support individual issues (ex.: building a case for immigration around economic arguments) might be counterproductive towards reinforcing the values of care and interdependence we need people to exhibit for more sustainable, long-term change.

From this perspective, the long-term success of human rights movements might rely on effectively modeling and encouraging people to engage in the kinds of behavior, values, and conversations that you *actually* believe in. Or, as Anat Shenker-Orsorio puts it: “[Don't take the temperature, change it.](#)”

Much of CCF's work focuses on finding values-based frames and perspectives for campaigns that might uplift multiple causes. One of the tactics they suggest is called the [benevolence pivot](#). “Benevolence values” (care for family, loyalty, honesty, etc.; see [map](#)) are widely shared, though are often leveraged by right-wing movements to pull people into more conservative positions (think: gender ideology and “traditional family values”). Benevolence values can also, however, be a bridge and a point of connection for moving people towards more “universal” values. ILGA-Europe's [Framing Equality Toolkit](#) has distilled this into a simple idea: “Speak to people's best selves.” They ask: “Who is your audience kind to?”

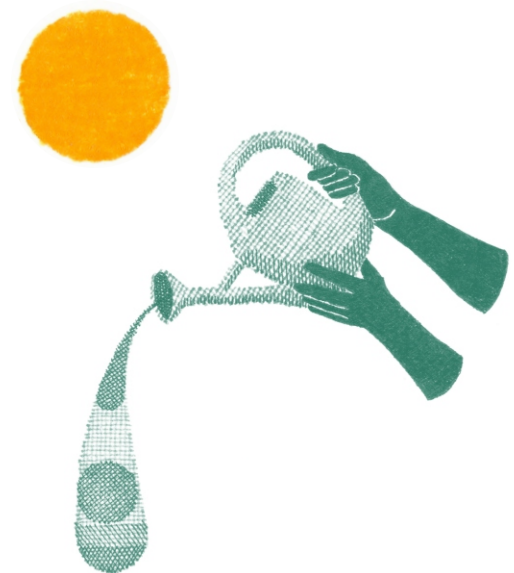
Individual campaigns like the [‘This Mothers Day’](#) video protesting the offshore detention of families in Australia embodies this idea by leading with images and statements of appreciation for mothers, before drawing attention to the mothers and families who had been detained. Other initiatives, such as [Familias: Ahora](#) and [Reclaiming Family Values](#) are seeking to reclaim family values more broadly for progressive movements, shifting the conversation about family from one of identity (what a family looks like) to values (what a family does).

Emotions

As Ishtar Lakhani, and other creative activists and artists remind us, there are many emotions (in addition to hope) that motivate and move people. The Center for Artistic Activism invites activists to [think about a list](#) (pg. 11) that ranges from joy and curiosity to outrage and humiliation. Laughter and humor can move people. So can tears. [Beat](#), a collaboration organized by Fine Acts, explores “the ominous silence around domestic violence.” Set in Bulgaria, the campaign video features only a drummer and a stopwatch, and films how long it takes for a neighbor to intervene when someone plays the drums in the same apartment building where a woman was killed by her partner. The video is powerful. It thoughtfully engages with the brutal reality of domestic violence, while using the emotions it draws on to push viewers into a sense of responsibility and possibility for change.

Positive emotions and shared values may not always work for you. They are one of many spices. (You wouldn't flavor your curry with just a jar of paprika!). The invitation and challenge of this perspective, however, is to begin thinking more *intentionally* about what kinds of emotions and values your efforts are actually stirring in people, and what blends you usually rely on. Human rights advocates are often well versed in legal justifications, statistics, and jarring examples of harm. Expanding that repertoire into the realm of hope and values may help spice up individual and collective advocacy. As [Thomas Coombes has said](#), “We can't say that human rights work is full of joy, but we can say that it is the promise of joy.”

How often do you make that promise of joy explicitly felt?





JUSTLABS' KITCHEN

"We don't just want to create narratives in order to reach a lot of people and that's it; no, it's for a reason. And the reason is that we believe that these values have to be pursued, to make them more real, more concrete."

Sofía, Centro Prodh (Mexico)

Spice Samples

Mexico: Centro Prodh's first video on de-militarized policing took up the challenge of transforming familiar anxiety-inducing scenes about insecurity into joyful scenes of celebration and family. This was blended with the visual disarmament of a police officer. It was an experiment for the team in thinking about the emotions and visuals they usually rely on. The campaign was titled *Todavía*, carrying the sentiment of "we can still change."

As the team pivoted to their work on forced disappearance, they had to balance the tension between the brutal reality of forced disappearance in Mexico, and the frustrating reality that its prevalence has made many people apathetic and averse to any mention of *desaparecidos*. In one brainstorm for a video, the team suggested applying the benevolence pivot to the story of a mother searching for her missing family member. The video would open with a mother preparing her child's favorite meal (using family care as a relatable entry point), before shifting into the story of the child's disappearance. This idea also uplifted collectives of "searchers" as models of care, dedication, love, and innovation—not just as victims.

The team decided to bring a similar approach to sharing the stories of cases of women who had experienced sexual violence. They [revisited the visual design](#) of a report they had previously produced in a way that would still share their painful stories, but would also offer images that evoked the resilience and strength of the women who were tenaciously seeking justice.

Hungary: Just by changing the [visuals of their Instagram content](#) and creating shorter, more playful messages about their legal advocacy, HHC was able to balance their serious work with an inviting tone for people unfamiliar with the organization or the issues. One intervention, as part of their [campaign on the rule of law](#), called for the government to treat *all* citizens like "very important people" (VIPs). After consulting with young people, the team [decided to update their logo](#) to be more inviting.

Australia: The Charter campaign coalesced around several issues that many Australians support but don't necessarily see as human rights issues, in particular housing and health care. The initiative sought to link the idea that Australians help one another out to the universal values embodied in human rights legislation. The campaign manager summed up this idea as:

"We care for everyone and everyone deserves care."

Alongside this project, HRLC also collaborated on the '[campaign to raise Australia's age of criminal responsibility](#) from 10 to 14. One of the tactics they used was asking people to [share a photo of themselves when they were 10 years old](#), to shift the focus away from statistics about crime and to re-center the people at the heart of the issue.

Observations & Notes

Making the conversation about values and emotions *explicit* is a worthwhile exercise. CCF's [framework](#) (and map) can help give language and structure to what otherwise feels like a very abstract conversation. Try asking: "What values and emotions does this initiative rely on/invite?"

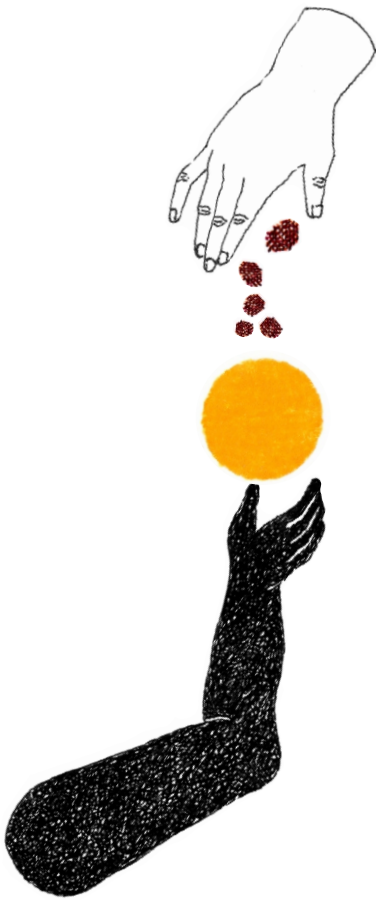
— Weaving values, hope, and positive messaging into human rights work does not come easily, especially to practitioners trained in the documentation of harms. Opportunities to experiment in small ways (Hungary's posts, Mexico's first video) are important to work through the tensions of using positive emotions around harsh realities. What is the balance between making stories of people who have suffered heard, and getting those stories to reach others in new ways?

— The discomfort of balancing suffering with hopeful messaging is very real, especially when that hope is a strategy that is being used to convince comfortable majority populations to not vote for abusive leaders. We need more hope, but we also need more grassroots-led explorations of what hopeful strategies look like for people in contexts of violent conflict, structural failure, and systematic oppression. In other words, whose hope are we centering?

— There is a difference between *disruption* and *persuasion*. The more intentional activists and practitioners are, the better—but social movements cannot be fabricated, and what works to win a vote in an election isn't always the point or purpose of a movement.

— Part of the reminder here is that we don't all play the same role in the [social change ecosystem](#). In the words of the MobLab team: "*If we truly wish to build hope, and especially hope-based narratives, we truly need to begin differentiating between all of 'us,' and begin to localize and contextualize stories, individuals, cultural contexts, and more.*" How (and if) you apply psychological research or communications strategies will be different depending on who you are and what you're trying to accomplish. And as the field tries to make sense of "strategies," those strategies should be built in conversation with the people who are deeply affected by the issues.

— This is not just a "public facing" exercise for convincing an audience "out there." It is part of personal practice and exploration of what ideas, possibilities, and people provide each of us the energy to engage in the work we do. And it's a practice of paying close attention to our own values and our own emotions around the injustices we witness or experience, and finding the places and the ways of bringing those feelings into the work.



- As a communications strategy, it's also worth thinking about the way we use hope, values, and emotions internally with our allies, organizations, and networks. It's a balance, a register, and an awareness that should be practiced just as much in conferences and workshops with allies as it is in social media posts.
- What does embodying values and creating hope look like beyond slogans and images?

Reflections from the Cooks

- "It's very difficult to find a perspective from which you can tell the story while, at the same time, making it so that the person who's listening, as soon as they hear the word desaparecidos (disappeared) or as soon as they hear about the suffering of the families, they don't look the other way. In other words, that they don't stop looking at what you're showing them." — **Xosé, Centro Prodh (Mexico)**
- "I think a big change for our communication at the Human Rights Law Centre was the realization that you don't talk about laws, you talk about people. So, you start with the person that is affected by law rather than talking about the law itself." — **Michelle, HRLC (Australia)**
- "We represent more the human side of the story. We dare to show not only the rational arguments, but also the personal or the more emotional ones. That's a big shift, and we're not fully there, but I think we are on our way...For example, we have to narrate a brief for graphic designers. You have to say how you want to be seen as an organization. We wrote that we want to be seen as an organization who stands by your side. So it's a very personal way of talking about ourselves. And I think that's more expressed now." — **Anikó, HHC (Hungary)**
- "Behind the pain there's always a lot of strength, and in some way that strength offers hope because it shows the resilience of this country in its efforts to fight for and to seek justice. So, I think that making sure that that's always clear, not only as something we believe in but as something that has to be put out there for others, is also one of the things that has stayed with me the most." — **Sofía, Centro Prodh (México)**
- "When I, for example, am writing a post for our blog or Facebook or anything, I always think about people who feel the same loneliness I felt. I really want to give them tools to discuss the topics and I know that sometimes they just feel that they are right but they don't have the right thing to say when somebody is questioning them. I write for people who felt the way I did." — **Detti, HHC (Hungary)**



YOUR KITCHEN



Takeaway

Research into the [neuroscience](#) of empathy, the [social psychology of values](#), and [hopeful communication strategies](#) suggests that the values and emotions we try to evoke, the frames we repeat, and the behaviors we highlight are the muscles that we are encouraging people to exercise.

Our work should explore, model, and encourage people to see new possibilities beyond the limitations of the relationships, habits, and systems we live in. This doesn't need to be a call for fluffy utopian visions and empty aspirational language. It does, however, ask you to think intentionally about what levers you're pulling, and what the effects of those levers might be. What values and emotions do people need to be engaging to support you? How often do your efforts draw those emotions and values out? When can you draw on shared values as a bridge and an invitation?

Quick Practice

Activity 1

Think about the last discussion you had with someone you're close to about a social or environmental cause. Have a look at CCF's values [map](#). Which values were you relying on to make your case? As you reflect, think about areas of their lives where they exhibit caring and selflessness. How else might you have tried to connect with this "best self"?

Activity 2

Revisit your answers from the Imagination & Visioning section. What might the society you want look like visually? Try finding a photo or an illustration that captures that vision. (We recommend browsing [The Greats collection](#) by Fine Acts.)

Activity 3

Try using Opportunity Agenda's [build your own message](#) tool.

Explore More

For a sense of why this matters:

Watch: [Anger mobilizes, hope organizes](#) – Thomas Coombes (or read his short [article](#))

Watch: [How Psychology and Neuroscience Can Transform Human Rights](#) – Laura Ligouri (or read her [short article](#))

For an introduction to narrative, and practical tools for developing messaging and campaigns

Read: [Framing Equality Toolkit](#) – ILGAEurope (comprehensive, accessible, lots of activities)

Explore: [Communications Toolkit](#) – Opportunity Agenda (clear framework for messaging)

Explore: [Resources](#) – Narrative Initiative (especially [values-based organizing worksheet](#))

For more on communicating hope

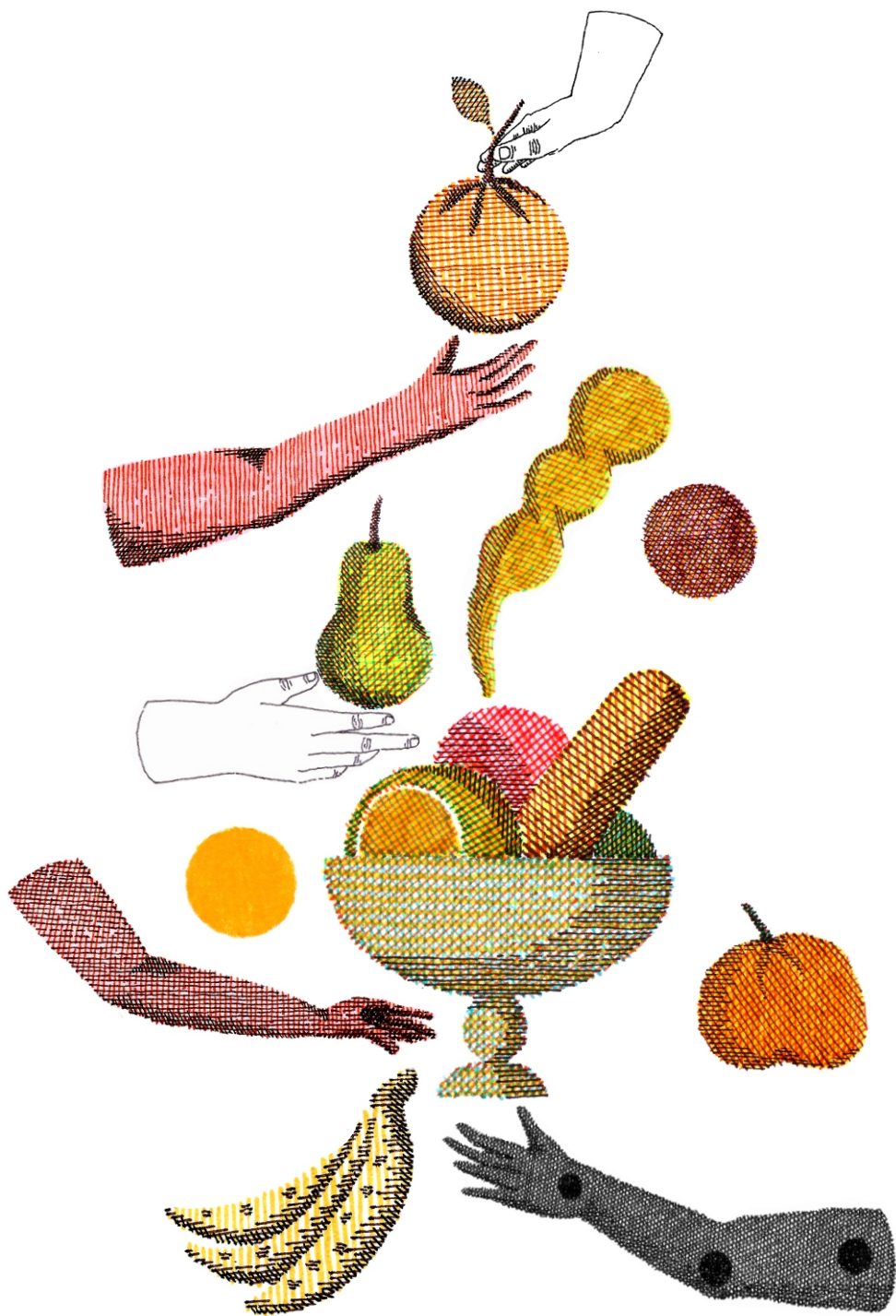
Browse: [Seeing Hope: A Visual Communications Guide for Human Rights](#) – Fine Acts

Explore: [hope-based comms](#) For more on the social psychology of values

Explore: [The Common Cause Handbook](#) – Common Cause Foundation

Read: [From neighborliness to social justice](#) – Ruth Taylor & Tom Crompton (Benevolence Pivot)





EXPERIENCES & RELATIONSHIPS



EXPERIENCES & RELATIONSHIPS

Creating new, unexpected ground

"We are entangled... And any movement towards disentangling ourselves from each other, all these aspects of each other, is wreckage."

Ross Gay

SPICE THEORY

When was the last time you changed your mind about something? How often are those changes brought about by personal relationships, difficult conversations, or real experiences?

The work of changing how someone sees or perceives the world is a very personal project. We are asking people to care, to get involved, to recognize the way their lives are [entangled](#) and interconnected with others. In a world so shaped by the scale of social media, we often think about change in terms of quantity of reach, not in terms of depth and quality. While we certainly need ways of popularizing campaigns and messages that reinforce our values and vision, we can't lose sight of how important real experiences and real relationships are in moving people.

Effective interventions often take people by surprise. The Center for Artistic Activism [explains](#) artistic activism as combining the ability of art to move people (affect) and the ability of activism to create change (effect). But, they go on to say, "art and activism often conforms to expectations—and for many people, those expectations are, unfortunately, negative. Artistic activism is activism that doesn't look like activism, and art that doesn't look like art." Surprise, they insist, "is a moment when hearts can be touched and minds reached, and both changed."

Offering moving experiences

Creating surprise often involves getting creative not just with the content or message, but also with the location or medium through which people are invited (or pushed) to engage. Some initiatives, such as ['Operation Liberos campaigns](#) in Switzerland are clever and loud. One campaign for marriage equality, for example, featured couples arriving in [suits and wedding dresses to a ski resort](#), riding the chairlift carrying signs reading "unhappily unmarried", and having conversations with passing skiers. In an intervention during an AIDS conference in Durban, South Africa, the Sex Workers Education & Advocacy Taskforce [held up a timer](#) with the phrase: "You've been talking for [mm:ss] without a mention of sex work." Drawing on the power of spectacle, humor, and public shame, the action created pressure, which pushed speakers to rewrite sex work into their speeches.

Other initiatives invite people into sitting with difficult emotional experiences. [Rise](#), a public performance organized by Diana Ocholla, brought the voices of survivors of domestic violence and the vulnerable performances of poets and dancers to a

street corner in Muizenberg, South Africa. Fine Acts' [Beat](#), from Bulgaria, created an interactive installation that connected the drum kit from their campaign video to recordings of survivors of domestic violence. They photographed the reactions of people engaging with the installation, titling the collection "Faces of Empathy."

Facilitating personal connections and relationships

Personal experiences can be even more powerful when they happen live between people. Many campaigns that are examples of successful, positive narrative messaging have also relied on the power of meaningful relationships and encounters. Ireland's campaigns on both marriage equality and access to safe abortions, for example, also featured encouragement, training, and guidance on [having conversations](#) with loved ones—[especially grandparents](#).

In the US, LGBTQ+ action groups utilized a technique they call "[deep canvassing](#)" to build voter support for protections for transgender people. Rather than knocking on doors and listing facts and statistics, canvassers would have a conversation, ask open-ended questions, listen, and share stories about people affected by the policies—all while nudging and encouraging their conversational partner to think about shared experiences, be it experiences of discrimination, the need for support, or the feeling of love for a partner. Research suggests the strategy can have meaningful and lasting effects on shifting people's opinions—and that the key is having a two-way conversation that centers storytelling.⁶

Many peace-builders and mediators know that creating transformation in the midst of division and polarization relies on creating spaces and conditions for real people to explore a different kind of relationship with one another—to re-encounter one another as people. We don't all need to pull everyone on board—that isn't practical, just, or safe. But creating a meaningful experience for someone does involve a certain degree of investment in *wanting* and *supporting* their growth—an orientation that runs counter to how we often think about "audience." As a field of changemakers who do share some sense of values and purpose, we might need to think collectively about who can sustain the risk of connecting with people who are difficult to sway or seemingly opposed to what we stand for.

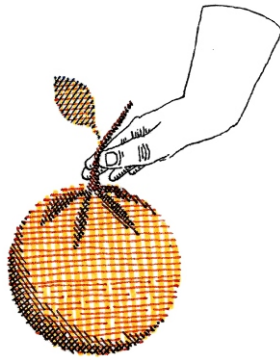
Such work is slow. While disruptive and relational elements can be worked into campaigns, building real connection takes time. Much of the work at [Corrymeela](#), a peace-building organization in Northern Ireland, consists of this deep relational work. For them, change can be as small of an act as bringing a young person who has only ever known relationships of violence and competition into a space where they are welcomed. Derick Wilson, a longtime peace-builder and Corrymeela member, has said, "Sometimes, reconciliation is as fragile as one relationship, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth it."

Change can be as fragile as one person, one interaction, that offers new ground to connect on. How might your interventions create such ground?



⁶ In a recent conversation with an activist who was involved in early LGBTQ+ movements in Argentina, I was told about how young LGBTQ+ people used to invite others to have lunch with their families. A reminder that these "spices" are not new, and that there is inspiration and wisdom to be found in looking back as much as looking at "new" or "emerging" practices.

JUSTLABS' KITCHEN



"When you talk directly to a person—and not just in general about your topics—you really have the chance to ask them questions, so it makes it easier to personalize your message. Even if it's a small group, you just see who you are talking to and you can try different things."

Deti, HHC (Hungary)

Spice Samples

Sri Lanka: NPC decided to address polarization and division by creating literal common ground. Though complicated by the pandemic, the team organized a variety of food bazaars around the country, inviting young people from different ethnicities, religions, and regions to cook and share meals together. The gathering created a space where polarized frames of engagement diffused and dialogue, immersion, and connection could be found.

Hungary: Trying to reach young people more effectively and more authentically, HHC worked with creative partners to translate their complex legal work into more personalized, visually appealing, sometimes even humorous posts. By partnering with "ambassadors," the team allowed their work and the issues they address to be transformed into authentic, creative content by the ambassadors themselves for their own networks. The team also started doing direct outreach through festivals around the country to hold conversations and playful activities (mock debates and role-playing games).

Sri Lanka: Shreen Saroor, Hashtag Generation, and the Sisterhood Initiative gathered a coalition to resist the forced cremation of Muslims during the pandemic. Led by young people, the coalition held press events (which included non-Muslim speakers) and created videos telling family members' stories. In one instance, the team called upon people to tie white strips of cloth on the fence outside the mortuary. They shared videos of the action on TikTok and other platforms. Among the people that came to show support were Catholic nuns and a Singhalese man, who later became an important, unexpected advocate. The relationship wasn't planned or manufactured: he was touched by one of the videos, and the experience of connecting with people who were affected moved him to step into his own activist leadership.

Venezuela: ProVene's mobile office/community center organized activities that "embodied" human rights and community empowerment. These efforts tried to create lived experiences that might make abstract legal notions more tangible, inspiring, and relevant for members of the community. Proposed activities ranged from upcycling workshops and mural painting to mediation training and entrepreneurial workshops.

Observations & Notes

— Narrative *communication* strategies are often seeking inspiring stories to tell. A precursor to creating messages that model empathy and change might be creating the space for people to actually have those experiences in the first place.

— This initiative asked participants to develop creative responses to narrative challenges in their contexts, which often invites digital campaigns and messaging. What would have happened had we asked each team to develop a creative initiative that built relationships with and experiences for just a handful of (specific) people who don't normally support or engage with their work?

— Thinking in terms of “creating an unexpected experience” opens the door to using all kinds of affective strategies (humor, spectacle, emotive performance). This can be thought of in terms of digital campaigns—but we would challenge you to think about what the *live, interactive* version of your digital campaign might look like. Thomas Coombes, when [reflecting on modeling the behavior we want](#), asks (in reference to Amnesty International's “build a longer table campaign” for refugee protection): “Maybe the future of progressive protests is less demonstrations and more dinner tables.” What if a campaign demonstration for refugee protection included putting inclusive dinner tables onto the street, or into government buildings? What other ways can you think of to embody the world you want in an experience for others?

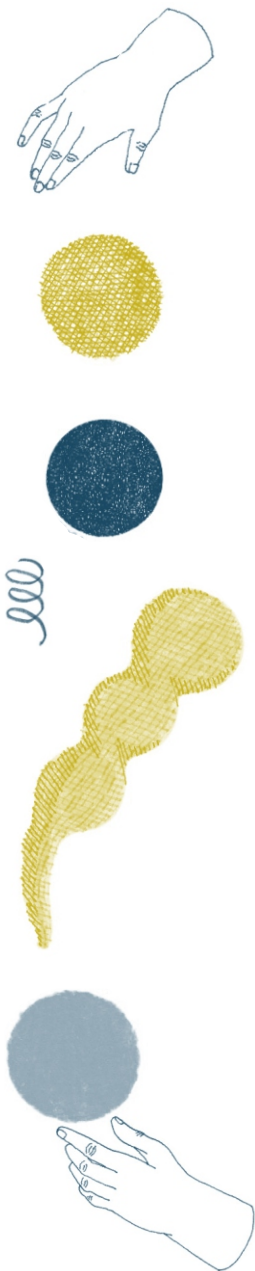
— So many of our interactions, especially in human rights work, are mediated by the need to defend a position, or by the goal of trying to convince someone else. OnBeing's [Better Conversations Guide](#) challenges us to think about how to create some spaces of connection that don't shy away from challenging conversations, but that also are not organized around the goal of reaching a conclusion and persuading others. What would it look like for you (or someone in your team) to open up *some* spaces in your work where your contact with others is not motivated by your aim of changing them? What might you learn? What might they learn?

Reflections from the Cooks

— “The attempt by both groups from south and north to make these different food items while being helped by their peers from different areas created a sense of solidarity within them which blossomed into a friendship where they exchanged phone numbers with each other and have been maintaining contact through a 'Whatsapp' group which they created soon after the food festival.” – **National Peace Council (Sri Lanka)**

— “That extra layer I was hoping to bring was the participatory level. So, if it's human rights for the people, by the people, to improve, then I would have loved to have seen more people feeling connected with the HRLC's work.” You know like, 'I signed that petition' or, 'I went to that event' or, 'I did these things and I contributed to that win'.
– **Tom, formerly HRLC (Australia)**

— “[How?] Through human rights, through activities that strengthen individuals' knowledge of human rights, Venezuelans' knowledge of human rights. We imagine the activities functioning like pill capsules. The projects are like capsules that are filled with medicine—in this case, the capsules are filled with human rights. The capsule is an activity: paint a wall, develop a face shield. You ask all these people: What is the human right behind the activity? Why is it important to fight for it, and defend it—because it is yours and it is inherent to you?” – **Gerardo, ProVene (Venezuela)**





YOUR KITCHEN

Takeaway

Changing worldviews is a very personal project. We need to think about change not just in terms of scale and reach, but also in terms of depth and quality. How can your interventions disrupt expectations about what advocacy and activism look and feel like? How can you create participatory experiences for people that invite them to engage with your work? How can you create spaces for people to explore a new relationship with the issues, with one another, and with yourself?

Quick Practice

Think of a cause or an issue you care about.

- Who is someone you know, who you wish you could convince?
- What is one assumption you make about them, and one thing you wish you knew about them?
- What is one story you would like them to hear, or one person you wish they could meet?
- Brainstorm 3–5 ways you might use humor, emotions, location, or medium (theater, dance, art, street installations, etc.) to make them more receptive to hearing that story/meeting that person (activism that doesn't look like activism).

- Alternatively: Try ILGA-Europe's "Framing Sushi" activity in their [guide](#) (pg. 86)

Explore More

For more on disrupting expectations through artistic and creative activism:

Watch: [Creative Activism](#) – Ishtar Lakhani

Watch: [Craftivism](#) – Sarah Corbett

Read: [Why Artistic Activism](#) – Center for Artistic Activism

Watch: [Gheun Tak! Comedians Breaking Barriers](#) – BhaDiPa & Maraa

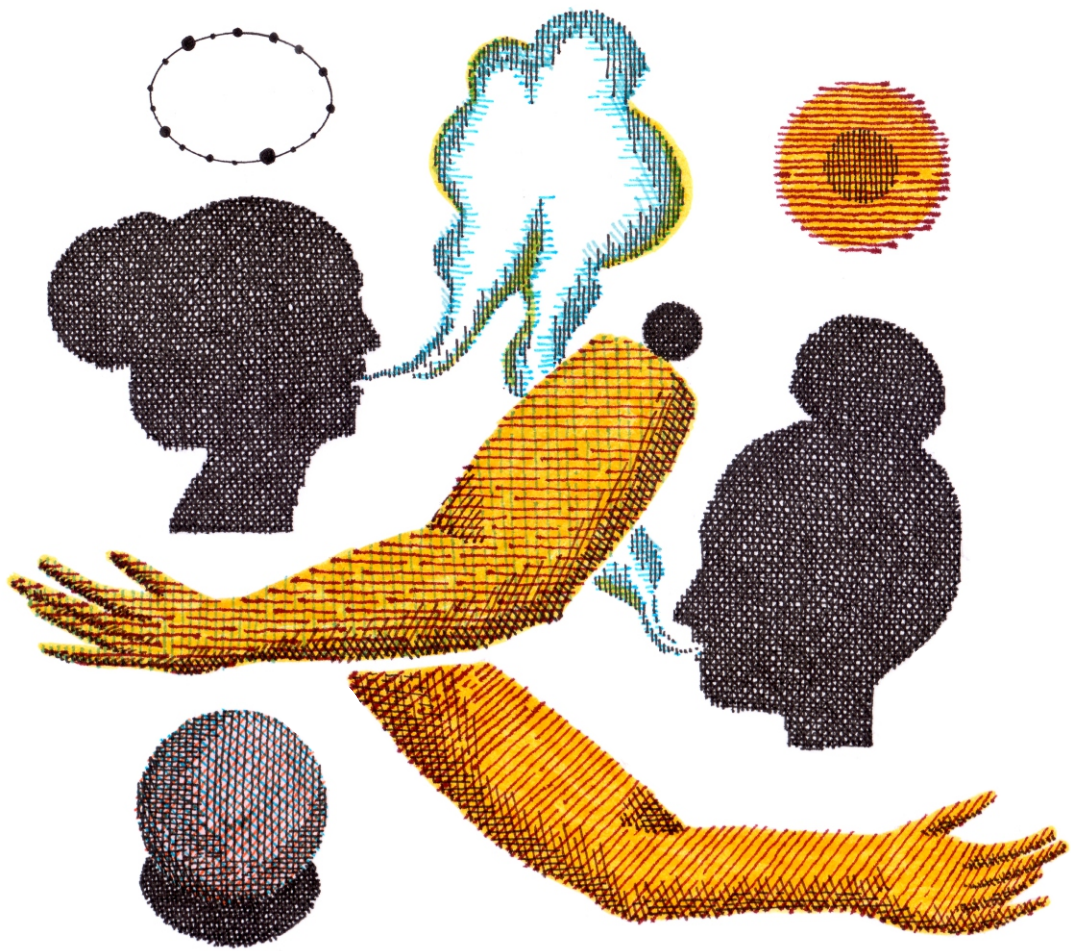
Practice: [Workshop Handout](#) – Center for Artistic Activism



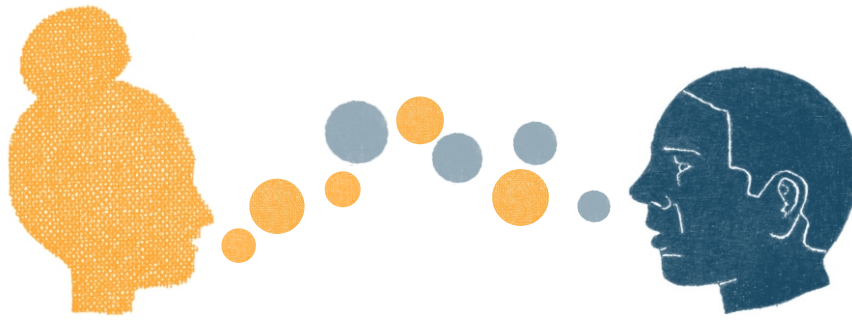
For more on facilitating better conversations across divisions:

Read: [The Better Conversations Guide](#) – OnBeing

Explore: [Holding Change](#) – adrienne maree brown



PEOPLE



PEOPLE

Who's it with, who's it for?

"Integrity is loyalty to the ambiguity of my own edges, and permission for you to be blurry too. I do not need precision to know myself, or you. I need room for all of our selves to hold counsel."

"Before all else, we are of the ecosystems."

"I will be different tomorrow. So will you, all of you, us, they."

Nora Bateson

SPICE THEORY

Who is affected most? Who are you trying to reach? What don't you know? Who can help?

Two refrains of narrative work are: *audience* and *collaboration*. With all the constraints and demands that practitioners face, what little time that's left for creative work often goes into hurriedly producing content—not necessarily into thinking about where that content is going, if it is shaped in a way that really fits the people it's trying to reach, or what other perspectives or voices might strengthen the process. "Who is your audience" and "who are your allies" are both vital questions—though they are also questions easier asked than answered. Even harder is figuring out what to do once you think you know.

Tools for researching and building audiences can range from stakeholder mapping and persona profiles to data from public opinion surveys and sophisticated [social listening](#) tools. Testing can likewise range from low-fi interviews and focus groups to more tech-heavy A/B tests and dial tests. For anyone looking for a place to start, we recommend the guides from [ILGAEurope](#) and the [Opportunity Agenda](#), which offer helpful explanations and activities for getting more specific than just "general public."

As necessary as *do-it-yourself* options are, however, the reality is that the tools for learning about and reaching people—especially online—are increasingly complex and expensive. Support often comes in the form of expensive consultants or one-size-fits-all trainings, which can easily lead to the tools and their application being decontextualized from the environments in which they're needed.

Just look at the language we use—at least in English. adrienne maree brown reminds us that *strategy* and *tactics* are military terms. Writer Ocean Vuong points out that [we are willing to call audiences targets](#) (who we *aim at*, no less). We need shared language—even brown concedes to *emergent "strategy."* But it is at best ironic and at worst deeply revealing that the narratives movement, which is founded on the idea that language shapes the way we think, is so strewn with metaphors of violence. My concern is not abstract semantics—it's what gets missed when we readily embrace "audience" as a buzzword.

Collaboration and *co-creation* have been similarly absorbed. As [Panthea Lee](#) (facilitator and one of the people behind the helpful [Design With guide](#)) has called out: what gets named *co-creation* is often nothing more than extractive performance. True co-creation, [she insists](#), tackles power, reckons with historical (in)justices, leans into tensions, and invests in what *actually* comes from a process. Much like *audience*, we reach for the idea of *co-creating* out of the important recognition that our processes need to be more intentional, informed, and inclusive. But in our rush for something *new*—and JustLabs is very much included in this—we risk not moving at the speed of real, sustainable relationships and practice.

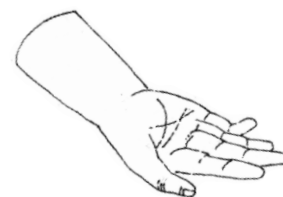
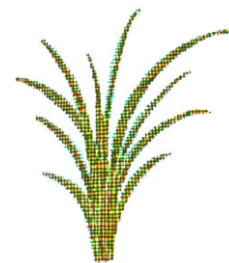
There are many initiatives within the narratives space that *are* doing relational organizing, and that are connecting efforts, sharing knowledge, and building—as the phrase goes—*narrative power*. At JustLabs, we're still learning from and being inspired by many of these efforts. Still, as a reminder to ourselves and to you: for all they offer, no amount of consultants, ad tests, design-thinking activities, surveys, or tech tools will teach us better ways of relating to one another.⁷ Collaboration, after all, is a value at the heart of community before it is any kind of strategic tool. The people who know the most about the creative possibilities of working together are the people who do it every day, so that their communities might survive and thrive. [Put differently by Elena Mejía](#): “You can have a whole team of publicists working around the clock to develop a slogan, or you can give a few kids a spray can and cardboard.”

There is a genuine need to make campaigns more digitally sophisticated, more evidence-based, and more diversely inspired. This spice, however, is an invitation to slow down. The flavor that blends audience and collaboration together are the real people and the real relationships that our work entangles *us with*. When it comes to revitalizing activist and advocacy practice, the more minds, perspectives, and skills the merrier—but we also need the intention and leadership to come together with self-reflection, responsibility, and accountability. To put this in the form of questions:

- As we learn to think more intentionally and specifically about who we're trying to reach, how can we also foster our own curiosity about those people (our “audience”)—allowing them room to be complex human beings, while seeking ways to connect them (and hold them accountable) to the issues we work with and the people affected by those issues?
- As we create space for people with technical knowledge to share their brilliance, how can we also ensure their knowledge is shared in a way that corresponds to the needs of practitioners, and that the realities of practitioners feed back into the ways such knowledge is shared?
- As we think about new allies and partners to bring in, how can we remind ourselves that expertise, perspective, and creativity come from all kinds of overlooked places—and find ways to ensure that our process [includes the right balance of perspectives](#)?

This is about who we bring into the room, but it's also about how we show up to the room, what parts of people's selves are invited into the room, and how relationships and power in that room are facilitated. What areas of your practice would need to change for you to take the *real* people involved in or affected by your work more seriously? What other “selves” can you invite into the rooms where you work?

⁷ Historian Jill Lepore offers an [important reminder](#) that the origins of “audience research” in politics are fraught with, as she puts it, the irony of white men building computers to try to understand women and people of color. These early efforts were full of bad science. The power of today's technology is drastically different, but the warning is the same: sometimes we turn to computers because we're too arrogant or too intimidated to turn to actual relationships.



JUSTLABS' KITCHEN

"If there's one thing I'm taking away from this process, it's the people that I've met."

Gerardo, ProVene (Venezuela)

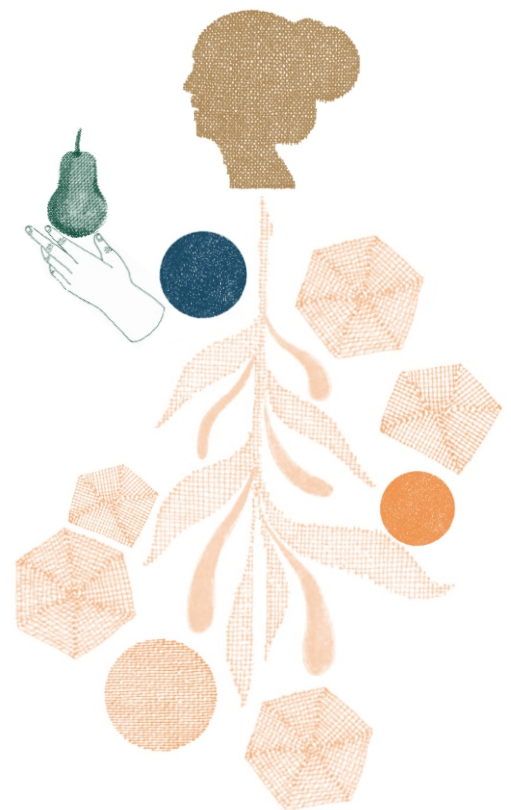
Spice Samples

Mexico: Centro Prodh experimented for the first time with using focus groups to inform the development of a project. They workshopped their video storyboards to ensure the visuals were having the intended emotional effect. Uncomfortable with outsourcing knowledge and expertise, the team focused their later efforts on researching capacity-building opportunities (specifically in audio/video) for their team. Importantly, their efforts to tell more hopeful stories led them to deepen their working relationships with grassroots collectives of "searchers." This respect has always been the core of their work, but this project led them to see "narrative work" as actually strengthening and centering those relationships, and uplifting the values and efforts that those collectives embody and lead.

Hungary: HHC started by recognizing there was a lot they didn't know. They connected with a research firm that would help them survey, interview, and map young people's values and political engagement. They used this research to shift their social media strategy to Instagram, in addition to contracting with social media strategists and pursuing creative partnerships with content creators (podcasters, graphic designers, etc.) to make their communication more accessible. The team's [decision to update their brand](#) was driven by feedback from young people who struggled to identify with their logo.

Australia: HRLC's project built upon existing audience research the organization had conducted for the Charter campaign. Their early ideation efforts involved extensive outreach to creative agencies (what one team member called getting lost in the "advertising woods"). Eventually, however, using some of the personal relationships developed through this formal, institutional process, the team found a good fit and was able to build the ["Co-Design" quiz](#) and produce a handful of creative prototype ideas, including their "Time Machine." The team also used the project to experiment with A/B testing on Facebook.

Sri Lanka: Though organized by an established activist, rather than working as a formal organization, one of the teams operated as a looser



network. This allowed different people, especially young people, to step into leadership roles and contribute their energy and experience to the team's initiatives. This intergenerational collaboration led to the coalition of young people stepping into the formal spotlight through press conferences, while also bringing their social media fluency to the existing organizing work.

Venezuela: The team of lawyers realized early on that diversifying their outreach activities would require new expertise. They strengthened a network of collaborators through this project, from community leaders, community kitchen organizers, mechanics, a psychologist, and a dentist. They decided to formalize a “creative activist” position within their team.

Observations & Notes

Collaboration & Co-Creation

—When it comes to creative brainstorming, the more the merrier. Bring in a doctor, your neighbor, the architect from the office across the hall, the cook from the restaurant next door—good ideas come from all kinds of places. Each of these initiatives pushed teams to work with new people, and they are richer for having involved new perspectives.

—Brainstorming is different from co-design or co-creation. What does it look like to really bring people into a planning process? What might have happened if JustLabs had involved the teams in the design of the process they were invited into? What if we had supported each team to build their own team of “stakeholders” to design *their* process with?

—We don't have to—and shouldn't—do everything ourselves. Collaborating well sometimes means getting out of the way. Think of the team in Hungary briefing their creative ambassadors on the topics and giving them creative control over the outputs. Or the work of [Cathy Borum Chattoo \(Yes, And...Laughter Lab\)](#) or the [BhaDiPa & Maraa project](#), which seek to connect social justice and comedy by opening doors to comedians who directly are affected by injustices.

—It can take time to find the right fit with paid partners. It's important to go in with a clear sense of your organizational identity and what it is you want done—but you don't have to commit to the first partner you find. If you're having trouble, pay attention to relationships with individual people; even if their agencies aren't a good fit, they might be able to connect you to others.

—One of the most important (and underutilized) components of this whole initiative was having a small, global cohort of people doing similar work and challenging themselves in similarly creative ways. These peer-to-peer learning spaces can add perspective, energy, and a sense of community to exhausted activists and practitioners working in challenging environments.



Audience & Technical Training

___ It can be easy to go through the motions of “audience research” without meaningfully changing anything. The key is curiosity: all the data and tools mean nothing if a planning process doesn't center curiosity about the people it is trying to reach. Small habits that cultivate this curiosity may be more important starting points than big, expensive, overwhelming research processes.

___ Time is as much of a constraint on teams as money. Several of the teams had to turn down access to tools and training because they didn't have the bandwidth to make use of them.

___ JustLabs brought in several specialists to run workshops and training sessions with the teams on different communications strategies. The field should do more to explore how to deliver such trainings in a way that is most useful to practitioners.

___ JustLabs commissioned social listening reports and supported a team with A/B tests. Social listening tools have user-friendly interfaces and flashy reports, but they require familiarity and experience to ask the right questions and make sense of the data. Running A/B ad tests is a simpler process, but (especially on Facebook) requires frustrating verification hoops.

___ This raises the question of field-level roles: supporting technical skills in-house might require more substantial investment in dedicated positions and custom, accompanied training rooted in the day-to-day work of the practitioners. What skills should be pushed in-house, and where can knowledge (especially audience research) be conducted and synthesized by allied organizations, and turned into practical, easy-to-apply recommendations for busy teams?



Reflections from the Cooks

___ “I wonder if I would have done anything close to this if I was just doing this by myself in the campaign in our organization. This required external inspiration and guidance to turn it into a reality. It's more creative as a result and tells a better story behind it and one which is far more accessible as a result.” – **Daney, HRLC (Australia)**

___ “I think it's a good thing when you have to work with outside agencies because you really have to be clear and vocal about who you are and what you want... When you have someone coming to help you, first you need to be very clear about what you do and why you do it. I think we could have shortened this first part of the cooperation with the creative agency if we had clarified this more for ourselves in a digestible format.” – **Anikó, HHC (Hungary)**

___ “The importance of networks. It is important to always nourish and maintain networks. Professional networks, but also those outside of work; it's spaces like these that will allow us to make better connections in what we do.” – **Sofía, Centro Prodh (Mexico)**

___ The room of people that JustLabs collected at the [lab] was just a fantastic collection of human rights campaigners, but also neuroscientists and creative agencies and just, a really fantastic and diverse mix of skills in the room. I think that's a practice that I'll definitely try to keep up in future projects. Just how do you have those different ways of looking at problems and solutions?” – **Tom, formerly HRLC (Australia)**

— “[Our ambassadors] surprised me. They really read a lot and they were curious about our work. So this is another thing—if I just call somebody because I like what they are doing, even if it's a little bit far from our stuff, then I can trust that they will be open.” – **Detti, HHC (Hungary)**

— “For me, it's always a very powerful experience talking to the people who are searching for the disappeared. They are people with incredible fortitude. I'd like to be able to communicate all that in the materials that we're going to create; I'd like for people to learn about this strength that those buscadoras (searchers) have.”

— “[Something that I've learned from them is that] if a door closes on you, to look for a way to open it. A couple of years ago, some women searchers from the north of Mexico told us that they'd raised some money together between them to buy a drone and had found someone to teach them how to operate it. And now they're doing field searches with a drone; people who probably had no idea how to even turn on a computer or how to use a program; now, they are now using drones to search for their loved ones.” – **Xosé, Centro Prodh (Mexico)**

YOUR KITCHEN

Takeaway

We need to be curious and precise about the people we are trying to reach, creative about who we work with, and accountable to the people most affected by what we're trying to change. All the tools and programs and worksheets and research firms and “expertise” should never distract from the bigger point: we are people, working with people, trying to connect with people. The more minds, perspectives, and skills the merrier—but we also need the intention and leadership to come together with self-reflection, responsibility, and accountability.



Quick Practice

Activity 1

Creativity and perspective come from all kinds of surprising places. Make a list of 5 (real) people you know. For each person, write down a few of their strengths, hobbies, and interests.

Then think about a project or plan you worked on recently. What ideas, perspectives, or skills might those people have offered?

Activity 2

Think about a project you worked on recently. Write down:

- Who the initiative was trying to reach
- 3 people you could work with who have skills or knowledge you usually don't use
- Someone who is affected by the issues

List a few ways you might have involved these people. Do you have direct connections to anyone? If not, how could you reach them? Reflect on some of the challenges or tensions that might need to be worked through to create meaningful and responsible working relationships with all of them.

Activity 3

Write down one working relationship you/your team has with someone outside of your team. Then read ['Panthea Lees thread on co-creation'](#). Reflect and write for 10 minutes on ways you might strengthen that relationship to make it more truly co-creative. (Consulting the [Design With guide](#) may be helpful.)

Explore More

On co-creation, relational organizing, and movement roles

Read: [Design With Guide](#) – Reboot

Explore: [Social Change Ecosystem Map](#) – Building Movement Project

Practice: [Self-Guided Workshops](#) – Organization Unbound

Explore: [Emergent Strategy](#) – adrienne maree brown (for an overview, see [this article](#))

For tips on working with creative partners

Skim: [Seeing Hope: Working With Artists](#) – Fine Acts

For guides and resources on audience identification and research

Practice: [Power Mapping and Analysis](#) – Anita Tang (The Commons Social Change Library)

Read: [Framing Equality Toolkit](#) – ILGA-Europe (Audience: pp. 36–38; Testing: pg. 88)

Skim: [Communications Toolkit](#) – Opportunity Agenda (pg. 6–12)

Read: [What is social listening?](#) – Christina Newberry (Hootsuite)

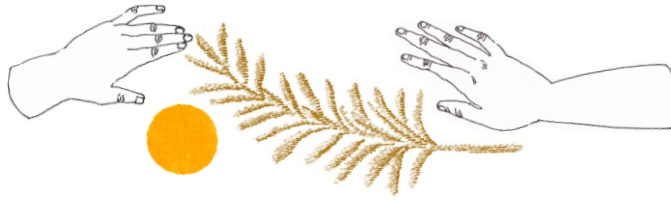
Explore: [A/B Testing on Social Media](#) – Christina Newberry (Hootsuite) or [Beginners Guide to A/B Testing](#) – Quick Sprout

Free social listening resources

— [Google Keyword Alerts](#)

— [Media Cloud](#) – MIT Media Lab





LESSONS & CONCLUSIONS

On keeping the spice box well stocked

This *Narrative Spices* document offers a shift in attention away from the specifics of the *how* and the *what* of effective narrative strategies, offering instead broad categories of skills and ideas to play with. The implicit and explicit invitation here is to turn inwards, towards the personal and organizational processes that facilitate and nurture exploration, growth, and change.

There is still immense value in the technical, creative work of identifying, testing, and sharing frames, messages, and stories that strengthen compelling narratives about movements for social change. Even within this initiative, each team did, in small ways, begin exploring their own approaches to narrating human rights differently. In the interviews, the team in Venezuela spoke about human rights as a kind of medicine; their project, *La Nave*, took on the metaphor of a spaceship blasting off from one reality to a new reality. The team in Mexico found hope modeled in the resilience and creativity of the people who have suffered enormously and still seek justice—that such people are a kind of guide, the persistent builders of a better world. The team in Hungary began to describe themselves as people who want to be by your side when you need it; they found playful ways to talk about the difficult issues of police abuse, corruption, and the rule of law, one of which involved stating that *everyone* deserves to be treated as very important people (VIPs). The team in Australia focused on human rights as something that is always close to home—that human rights are the way society cares for one another.

There are seeds in each of these examples of new—or shifted—narratives about what human rights are and about who the people are that work for them. As each team and each participant continues their exploration beyond this initiative, some of those seeds may be watered enough to bear fruit that speaks to *effective* narratives—or, in the metaphor of this document, in a way that offers full recipes and dishes, not just spices. What our journey, our experience, and this document speaks to most, however, is not a list of end products to be replicated, but a sense of ingredients and process that might inspire and encourage continued exploration. What we have learned most, and seen most clearly in the teams we have accompanied and in ourselves, is how personal of a journey it is to re-examine the way you work.

Reframing the question of narrative practice from one that centers the content of the narratives themselves (“what are effective narratives about human rights?”) to one that centers the journeys of the people who are trying to look differently at how they do their work opens the door to all kinds of questions—big and small, technical and interpersonal—about how we (as individuals and as collectives) change, grow, and practice building pieces of the worlds we dream of. What kind of support does a lawyer need to gain the confidence to run a creative campaign? What conditions allow for a communicator to bring more emotion into their work? What ways of organizing and managing tension and conflict enable an activist group to model better ways of relating, even as they call for structural change? What kind of reflection and support does a funding partner need in order to sit with the discomfort of supporting messy, experimental projects that center learning and growth? True to the spirit of *being* the narrative: changing the narrative can never be just about what we put out into the world. It’s something that starts with our own posture towards our work, our colleagues, our communities, and ourselves.

In a beautiful, humbling coincidence, this need for internal reflection and growth is a lesson that was laid out alongside the launch of our initiative. In November 2019, Thomas Coombes presented JustLabs' [early work on human rights narratives](#) at Oxfam's panel on Narratives and Civic Space. The panel [opened with Julia Roig of PartnersGlobal, who shared a quote from Rumi](#):

*"Yesterday I was so clever, so I wanted to change the world.
Today I am wise, so I am changing myself."*

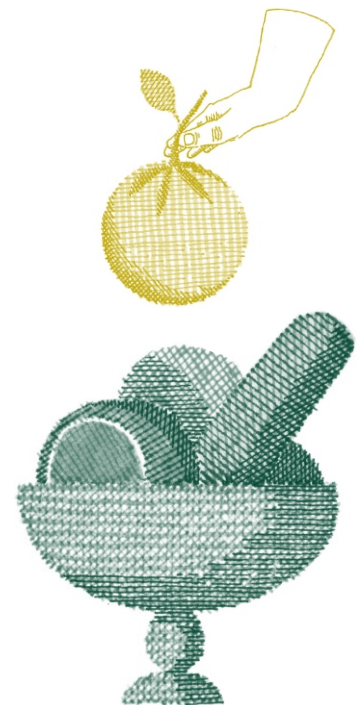
Roig went on to say "This need for self-reflection about how I need to change myself, and [how] I need my own self-reflection in order to then be able to do the work on engaging with narratives is one of the most important lessons." These words, better than anything else, summarize what this process and journey has meant for us at JustLabs and FGHR—and what we hope this document might inspire in you.

Part of what Roig is saying is that we *all* have work to do; building a better world will require each of us to learn, make mistakes, take responsibility, and grow. This is true at a deeply ethical level—but it is also true at a very practical level. Narratives are an entry point into an even deeper question about how intentional, accountable, and thoughtful we as practitioners are about *how* we do our work. This is about building what Roig calls "[narrative competency](#)"—the personal skills that enable people to recognize the role that narratives play in shaping their own lives. But it is also about building what we might call creative competency and relational competency—the personal skills that enable teams and collectives to examine and change their strategic habits, reflect on and explore the dynamics and relational patterns they fall into with one another and the people they work with, and build confidence in their own creative capacities. Building processes that take all of this seriously is not just a matter of finding the right blend of technical knowledge and creative inspiration—it also involves a whole series of personal, team, and organizational explorations, learnings, unlearnings, and experiments that take time, patience, curiosity, and support. Or, as the organization [Larger Us](#) puts it: "We have work to do on ourselves, we have work to do with each other, we have work to do together."

As we stated at the beginning: the invitation at the heart of this document isn't about using specific strategies or approaches, but about cultivating habits that enable curiosity, exploration, and growth. It's not a call to only use the spices we've laid out here, but an invitation to find ways of adding new spices to your own box, creating the habit of keeping your spice box well stocked, and cultivating the conditions and mindset that enable you to explore new ways of creating. The external challenges we face, after all, will continue to evolve. A narrative that is effective today may be derailed tomorrow.

What we can do, however, is to invest in our own ability—and one another's abilities—to reflect, learn, grow, and adapt.

the invitation at the heart of this document isn't about using specific strategies or approaches, but about cultivating habits that enable curiosity, exploration, and growth.



Takeout Thoughts

While much of “what this means”—especially for funding, accompaniment, and capacity building—is woven through this document, we will leave you with a few takeaways. Or, as it were, takeout thoughts:⁸

We need to shift how we think about change (by paying attention to personal growth). Working with narratives is all about thinking through how people change. And yet, how much attention do we pay to supporting the people *doing the work* in your/their/our own personal growth and practice (and talking about that growth as a legitimate “outcome” from our work)? Bringing values and emotions into the heart of human rights work requires practitioners to be more in touch with—and comfortable exploring—their own values and emotions. Doing creative work involves building habits and confidence approaching challenges with an orientation towards possibility. How we as people navigate relationships of conflict and difference within our own lives, circles, and teams is not separate from the work we do “to reach others” in campaigns, movements, or organizations. *So when we're talking about “narrative practice,” we should also be talking about the conditions that individuals need to 1) holistically thrive, self-reflect, and grow; 2) build the day-to-day habits that allow them to explore their work with creativity, joy, spaciousness, feeling, and fun; and 3) develop confidence being dynamic forces within their own organizations and networks.*

For funders, this means that *supporting narrative change may not always look like narrative work*. Some of our most important and inspiring learning didn't come from creating a moving new message or frame, but from small shifts that both teams and ourselves made in how we think about and approach problems. This initiative provided investment in communications skills, but it also provided flexible funding for teams to explore everything from role-playing games at festivals to collaborations with artists to community upcycling workshops. Things like this, or things like establishing a creative brainstorming space within an organization or supporting a retreat for teams to reflect on their working relationships may not “move the needle” on public opinion, but they are all important building blocks for seeding the kinds of dynamic, creative practice within teams that enable practitioners to engage more proactively with strategies and approaches like narrative work.

This requires intentionality, humility, and flexibility from funders and capacity-builders. Part of what felt unique about this process, which was reiterated by participants, was that the value that JustLabs and FGHR brought to our accompaniment of the teams wasn't our expertise or our theories, but the space, encouragement, and flexibility we offered for them to experiment with different practices, ask questions, chase ideas, make mistakes, and reflect on what they learned. This is a question of resources, but it's also a question of the quality of relationship, trust, and *genuine* co-creation between practitioners, funders, and capacity-builders. *Funders need to offer reassurance and encouragement, show their comfort with uncertain outcomes, show their curiosity about whatever learning that emerges, and create flexible structures with practitioners that identify and respond to the practitioners' needs.*

For people in the “narratives field,” this includes *deconstructing the one-way road of “expertise,” and sharing more examples of the learning process behind interventions*. A lot of teams need access to skills training and new tools. However, it's easy for these tools and technical support to overwhelm the already stretched capacities of teams, and it's very easy for this “capacity building” to turn into expensive, one-way consultancies where the “experts” feed “new approaches” into the work of practitioners, but those practitioners' experiences are not fed back into the development and sharing of those resources. There are times and places where technical expertise is incredibly important and deeply needed. But we need to find ways to disrupt the consulting dynamics, power dynamics, and posturing that can drive a wedge between the people *sharing* tactics and the people doing the messy work of *making* sense of those tactics in their context.

8 For more reflection on narrative practice that resonates with our experience, we point towards Ruth Taylor's [Transforming Narrative Waters](#) report—particularly the Recommendations sections (pp. 42–59)

What kinds of training have been most effective in enabling a communications officer in a legal advocacy organization to engage in more effective message testing? How have other lawyers overcome obstacles to implementing artistic interventions as a part of their campaigns? Behind the exciting examples of creative activism and narrative work, where did teams fail, feel insecure, or learn something they didn't expect? What would it look like to explore approaches to accompaniment, consulting, and training that are less prescriptive, and more exploratory? How do we balance the many varieties of expertise that this work needs with the importance of sustainable and balanced relationships?

For funders, narrative change folks, and social change practitioners, this means shifting how we think about “scale.” Funders of narrative strategy often look for “scalability” and network power: what are key ingredients that can be applied across contexts, and what people need to be mobilized to do so? Thinking about narratives as a question of personal and organizational space, posture, and behavior speaks to scale and the power of collaboration in a different way. What if we were to think not about scaling (and prescribing) “solutions,” or even strategies and approaches, but instead about scaling *learning processes*? Processes that celebrate small experiments, focus on building meaningful working relationships, support creative thinking, and offer practitioners the rare space to slow down?

Remember:

*“Yesterday I was so clever, so I wanted to change the world.
Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.” – Rumi*

End notes from the cooks

The final question we asked each of the participants in their reflective interviews was: “In the future, what do you think you’ll remember from this process?” Here are their answers:

I think there’s already something that I’m going to hold on to, a seed that I try to water every day: creativity. All my life I’ve been somewhat creative, but through this process it’s become something I’ve fallen in love with. Creativity, working on it and using it—it’s been a lot of fun. I think another thing that I’ve gotten better at and will continue to get better at is patience. Patience is one of the most valuable things that I’ve learned from this process and is something that I want to have more and more of in my life. To get better and better at being patient. – **Gerardo, ProVene (Venezuela)**

“I think I’ll remember the cooperation itself and the process of creating something very different. Like how, you know, from nothing all of a sudden there is something. I think that was the most amazing part of this.” – **Anikó, HHC (Hungary)**

“I think the main thing I’ll remember from the process—the advice that I’ll continue to give to organizations or campaigns—will be very much to carve out space and time and ideally some resources to really reflect on your work and to experiment. Some of them aren’t going to work, some of them might even backfire, but if you don’t experiment, you’ll never find that next winning formula. So, I think that’s something I think will live with me for the rest of my career, anyway.”

– **Tom, formerly HRLC (Australia)**

“I think the importance, again, of experimenting. In many cases, experimenting shakes us out of our day-to-day routine as regards the way we normally do things. It reminds us that creativity needs to be a tool we use more consistently in our daily work.” – **Sofía, Centro Prodh (Mexico)**

“A lot of things. I mean, there are these different work groups. We have this group with [JustLabs]. We have a group in house, in the Helsinki Committee with Anikó and some more colleagues. And we had these agencies. We had the young people who we really met, in real life. And I think that I will think about these people.” – **Detti, HHC (Hungary)**

"It has been an incredible opportunity which allowed me to learn from the best practitioners around the planet and learn the experiences and struggles from people around the world doing similar campaigns for human rights. I think that for me is the thing that is most indelibly stuck in my mind from all of this in terms of learning values and narrative and what others have experienced and the things that we have shared together through that." – **Daney, HRLC (Australia)**

"I'm going to remember the people a lot. The truth is that our friends from JustLabs, and our colleagues from other organizations who we've participated in workshops with, have given me a lot, personally. Listening to them is so gratifying for me because you can see your own stories reflected in theirs, or you hear about things that you might encounter. You can learn a lot from these processes. The work of renewing oneself is also really going to stay with me. Rather than sticking with how you usually work, renewing yourself and learning new skills." – **Xosé, Centro Prodh (Mexico)**

"I like to think that you pick up from these kinds of projects and this kind of work—where you are working with creative, thoughtful people—that you take a piece of it wherever you go. I always love connecting with other people who share the same values and have a vision for that. I do that in Australia and it's amazing being able to do that across the world. And I've loved watching Daney be inspired by that too, and Tommy being really excited at the start of the project and just kind of a giddy joy at going over to do this workshop to talk about human rights and you know it's exactly the kind of stuff that you want to do, it's such an amazing experience and opportunity. So yeah, it's the joyfulness of connecting with people, who are on the same track as you—who are on the same path, I think." – **Michelle, HRLC (Australia)**

