



Ethical *Storytelling* Resource

Explore, Challenge and Reshape
Narratives for a More Ethical and
Impactful Future



Following the Ethical Storytelling session at the International Cooperation Futures forum, this new learning resource — an ARC Hub, a Cooperation Canada program, initiative — offers key insights on best practices in storytelling and ethical communication. Featuring diverse perspectives that challenge conventional narratives, it invites reflection to improve narratives, strengthen partnerships and support a more inclusive and sustainable future in global cooperation.

 **Melissa** *Fundira* Moderator 

Flavie Halais  **Rana** Nazzal Hamadeh

 **Jackline** Kemigisa 

 **Célia** Romulus 

Speakers



Methodology

In the creation of this resource, we wanted to preserve the nature of the conversation and not fall into the trap of creating a step-by-step guide but instead allow the conversation to birth important reflections for individuals and organizations to build their own journeys to ethical storytelling.

This resource reflects our team's interpretation of the unique narrative shaped by the storytellers in the context of the session and the people present. It's a precious gift that we hope you'll engage with care and intentionality. Storytelling is deeply personal, evoking diverse meanings for everyone. While we aimed to honour the storytellers' intentions, it is important to recognize that this resource is a reflection of our engagement with the narrative and how we connected and received their stories.

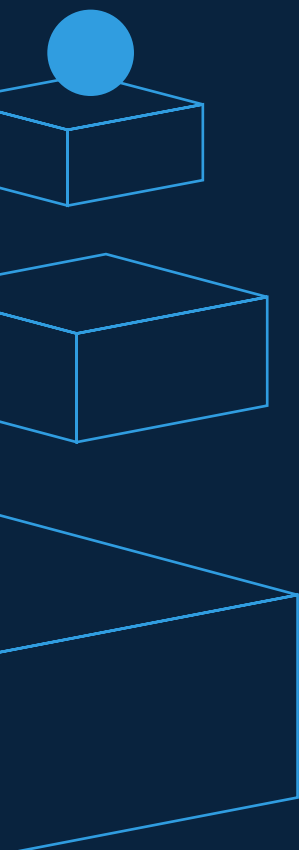


Flavie Halais

Flavie Halais, a brand and communications strategist based in Montreal and editor of the guide *Better Conversations About Ethical Storytelling*, is leading a shift in how stories are told in media and international development. Drawing from her background as a journalist with articles in **WIRED**, **The Guardian** and **Devex**, Flavie emphasizes storytelling as a sacred act, sharing that a story is part of one's self and should be treated with honor and respect. Yet, she observes that this sacredness is often lost in extractive practices where storytellers become mere resources.

At the forum, Flavie advocated for a deeper connection and understanding between storytellers and their subjects, a lesson learned through her own experiences in the field. She challenged traditional and transactional storytelling in the international development sector, arguing that narratives should inspire, educate and build authentic connections.

The guide provides tools for practitioners who understand this but lack influence in their organizations, offering tips to build cases for more ethical storytelling. Flavie called for trust-based relationships between organizations and donors, believing that genuine stories lead to lasting engagement. Her aim is to return to the essence of what defines a great narrative—one that goes beyond funding to cultivate a genuine appreciation for our global interconnectedness.



Rana Nazzal Hamadeh

Rana Nazzal Hamadeh is a Palestinian artist, filmmaker, writer and researcher based in Ottawa. Her interdisciplinary arts practice focuses on settler-colonialism, examining its impact on knowledge, food, memory and movement. Her films, [*Something From There \(2020\)*](#) and [*We Would Be Freer \(2023\)*](#), have screened internationally and explore the relationship between land and indigeneity. With an MFA in Documentary Media from Toronto Metropolitan University, Rana is a Research Analyst for the Indigenous-owned **Firelight Group** and a founding member of **Artists for Palestine**. Since 2021, she has collaborated with **Addameer**, a Palestinian prisoner support organization in the **West Bank**.

Reflecting on media narratives around Palestine, Rana spoke about the failure to center Palestinian voices in traditional media. While often portrayed, Palestinians are rarely understood, typically reduced to stereotypes - either helpless refugees or threats. Local organizations and advocates like Rana persist, even as Israel's security forces outlaw groups like **Addameer**, a Palestinian non-governmental, civil institution that works to support Palestinian political prisoners held in Israeli and Palestinian prisons, raid offices and deploy spyware against activists.

In Canada, Rana feels disheartened by policymakers' reluctance to stand against oppression. Yet she remains unwavering, convinced that centering Palestinian voices is essential to shifting the global narrative and fostering genuine understanding and justice.



Kemigisa Jackline

Kemigisa Jackline, an independent journalist and researcher, is reshaping how stories from Eastern Africa are told and understood. Through her work with the Center for Arts Design and Social Research, where she organizes the [*Black Planetary Future Conversations*](#), and as co-host of the [*Wulira History*](#) podcast, Kemigisa dived deep into the power of narratives to shape realities. Her recent research report on anti-Blackness in Eastern Africa underscores how certain narratives reinforce oppressive systems, questioning who gets to tell these stories - and who remains silenced.

Kemigisa challenged the international development sector's tendency to oversimplify African stories into binaries - either tragic or cheerful, narratives that, she argues, serve financial motives rather than transformative understanding. "*Narratives shape lives,*" she says, urging practitioners to approach storytelling with honesty and an awareness of power dynamics. She sees the practice of taking photos of suffering as a troubling reflection of unequal power, questioning why such images are even necessary to affirm shared humanity.

For Kemigisa, changing these narratives means changing ourselves. To tell Africa's stories ethically, she believes, requires grounding in mutual humanity - recognizing that we draw our humanity from each other.



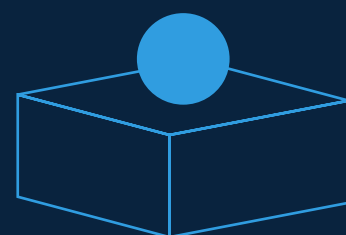


Célia Romulus

Célia Romulus is an assistant professor at the *University of Ottawa's Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies* and the School of International Development. Her work focuses on anti-oppression, Afro and decolonial feminisms and, as a former UN Women program director, Célia brought critical insights into the impact of storytelling on marginalized communities. She explained that narratives hold real power in shaping perceptions and outcomes - particularly in the Haitian context, where narratives often miss the voices of the Haitian people themselves.

Reflecting on international interventions in Haiti, Célia pointed out how media coverage after the 2010 earthquake framed Haitian women as perpetual victims and men as inherently violent. This reductive portrayal, she argues, spread widely from one skewed set of statistics, silencing the diversity and resilience of Haitian voices. Canadian media often oscillates between hyper-visibility through racist framings and outright invisibility for the Haitian community.

Célia calls for a shift in international development, urging a storytelling approach rooted in solidarity and collaboration, not a Western-centric gaze. She believes supporting narratives that center Haitian perspectives - and those of other marginalized groups - can *dismantle* harmful *stereotypes* and foster a more ethical and inclusive global understanding.

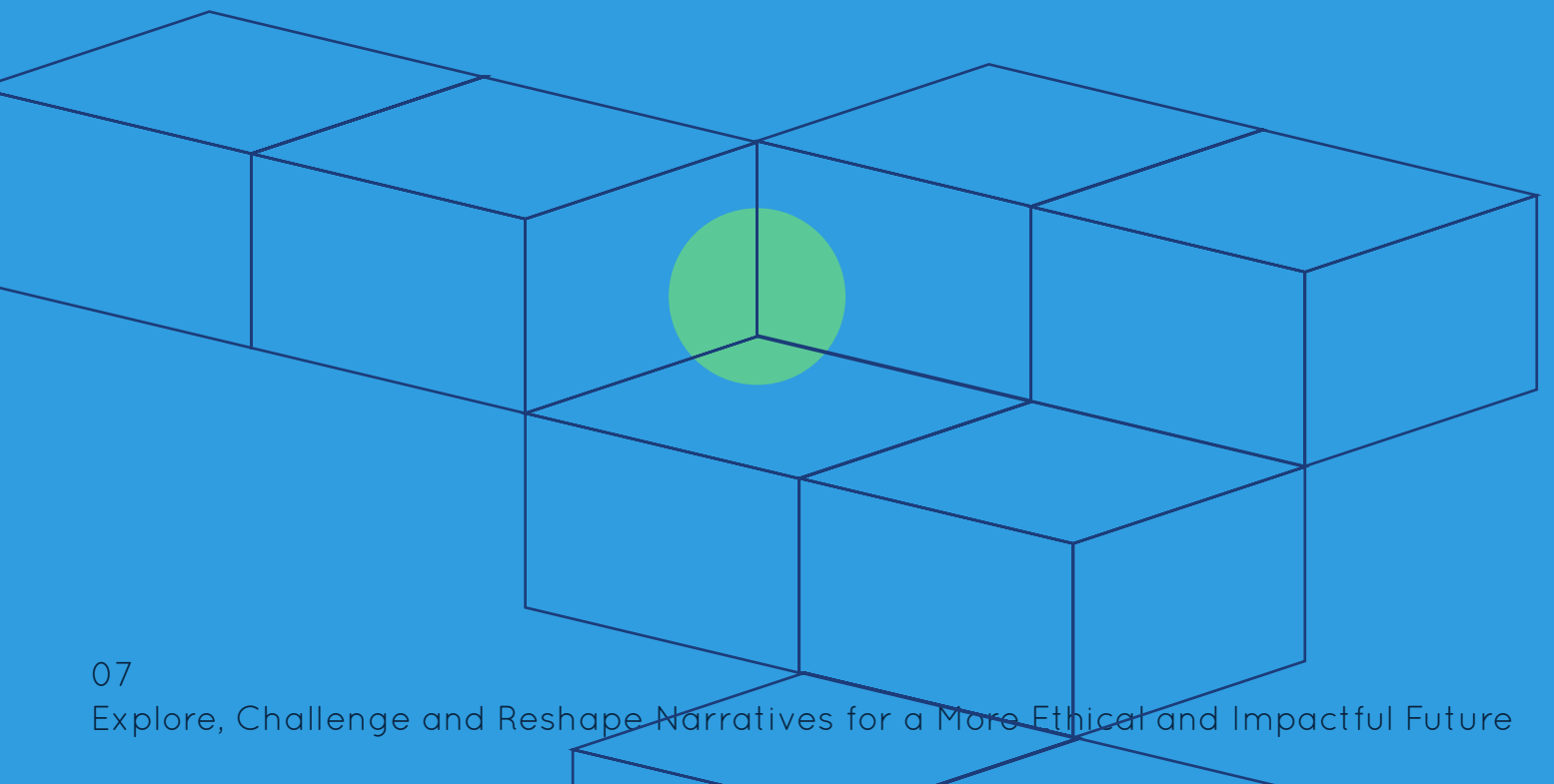




Melissa Fundira

Melissa Fundira is an award-winning journalist and podcast producer with *The New Humanitarian*, the only newsroom worldwide that specializes in covering humanitarian crises and keeping the aid sector accountable. She produces and hosts *The New Humanitarian's* flagship podcast, *Rethinking Humanitarianism*, which explores the future of aid in a world rising crisis – from the revolutionary rise of Sudan's mutual aid groups, to bold ideas radically reshaping our global order, and the impact of narratives on humanitarian response.

Melissa is also currently hosting and producing a new podcast called *Power Shift*, slated for release in early 2025. It's an experiment in dialogue where decision-makers in aid and philanthropy and the people affected by their decisions commit to hours of frank, one-on-one conversations about the power gaps in the sector and how to bridge them.





Landscape & Looking Forward

Sector Landscape

To begin, it's essential to contextualize our storytelling work. To achieve this, we've created a table that outlines the significance of storytelling, situates it within the international cooperation sector and explores its impacts.

The table is designed for easy navigation, mainly from top to bottom, but also from left to right, to help you understand and make connections.

Landscape and Looking Forward



Storytelling is often used in the sector to **sustain** itself and for extractive purposes more than to show up for the **people** that we are supposed to be supporting.

Storytelling is a sacred act

Importance

The sacredness is really not honored in too many ways in the media, in international development.

"So much sacredness, but also care that has to go around honoring the story, holding space for the story, receiving the story" - **Flavie**

Landscape

There's a lot of extractive practices when it comes to storytelling in the sector.

The stories we write and share in international development are rarely for the people that are most concerned, and the communities we work with (e.g. mining stories to justify a program).

Impact

We don't do impact stories that are for the community. We do impact stories that are for our funders.

Storytelling holds meaning

Importance

Narratives shape lives and realities

"The international cooperation sector is actually deeply, intimately involved in storytelling, whether it's creating the story, amplifying some stories more than others". - **Melissa**

Landscape

Example of Palestine

"We're either seen as the poor, agentless refugee who just needs humanitarian support, or we're seen as the terrorist, irrational, angry, violent and dangerous. These are the two kinds of ways that Palestinians are portrayed everywhere". - **Rana**

Example of Haiti

The narrative on gender-based violence in internally displaces persons camps in Port-au-Prince, that was phrased as an epidemic of rapes, framed Haitian women as victims of violence, portraying them as lacking agency and men as inherently violent, driven by pathological sexuality.

Impact

The dehumanization of Palestinians has culminated in a very material way, to normalize and legitimate a genocide.

The genocide is being allowed to happen and, in some instances, actively supported by the global community

People, civil society organizations and nations who oppose the genocide are being punished, censored, and silenced all around the world.

Storytelling holds power

Importance

Storytelling is how history is preserved for us.

Storytelling is a question of power and a question of who gets to tell what, who receives it, how they receive it, and whose role it is to tell the story.

Landscape

"When it comes to how international development specifically covers Africa and how the role of storytelling in stabilizing the narrative of the West as 'good' and the South as bad".

- **Jackline**

"The way in which dominance, especially power, is used within international development when it comes to continent is to deny, first of all, the history of colonization, [and] to deny the extraction".

- **Jackline**


Impact

Storytelling has led to a surge in international interventions: It shaped international funding priorities, influenced the nature of interventions, and often sidelined local organizations.

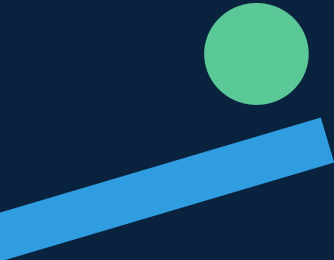
The influx of international experts and organizations has positioned local experts and organizations in competition for resources and funding.

Unethical storytelling is a gaslighting experience.

Stop



Before you even begin the process of elaborating a story, it's crucial to pause and reflect on the broader implications of the narratives you're about to share. Storytelling is a powerful tool, but it comes with great responsibility—especially when addressing complex issues in the context of international cooperation.

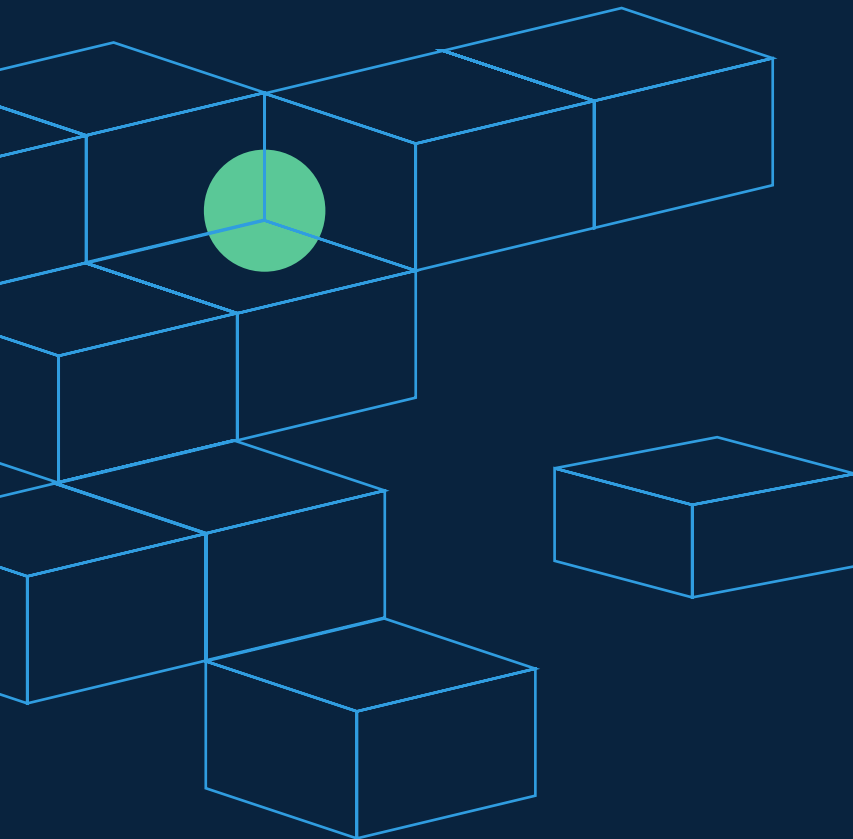


The following questions, inspired by the speakers' insights, are designed to guide your reflection process to approach storytelling with awareness, sensitivity and commitment to justice, ensuring that your narrative contributes to equitable change rather than reinforcing harmful stereotypes or dynamics. They act as examples to guide your process, as each specific context requires a unique approach. Honesty must be at the very core of intentional storytelling. These questions help you interrogate your own biases and critically examine your intentions, approach and the potential impact of your narrative.



Here are some key reflective questions to consider

- 1 What aspects of daily life do you choose to *acknowledge*, and what do you overlook or ignore?
- 2 What images are telling me that certain forms of violence are *normal* — and reinforcing the idea that this violence is supposed to happen in specific places or to certain people?
- 3 What images highlight the *value* of human life, compelling me to feel, reflect or take action?





4 Why do some images or stories deeply *affect* me while others do not?

5 How do you talk about stuff that's *complex* and hard to understand?

6 How do you address issues that *implicate* people with widely different sets of beliefs?

"It's about the perspective behind the frame. It's about all the information, all the work that goes into the moment before that image is shared." - Rana



Framework for *change*

As we navigate potential pathways for ethical storytelling, it is crucial to approach storytelling with a deep sense of responsibility, particularly when addressing complex issues in our sector. By engaging in this reflection, we commit not only to more respectful and inclusive storytelling, but also to challenge systems of oppression and amplifies diverse voices, for our stories to contribute to dismantling systems of oppression rather than perpetuating them.



Reflections to consider when building the pathways of your own **framework** for ethical storytelling

Framework for Change

Honesty

Being honest about the work that we do and the roles we play specifically within that structure.

Centering who we are writing for, **what do they want to hear?**

What silences do we see when reading/hearing certain stories, what silences do we ignore and what silences do we push, but also what silences are we allowed to actually sit with?

"The first step is understanding that international development is an industry, and its power dynamics."

- Célia

Commitment to Systemic and Political Shifts

Decentering Western countries

"We need to be able to support projects that tell stories that decentre Western countries, decenter international development and also support projects that create conversations between countries of the Global South."

- Célia

Power Analysis

That's just a small power analysis and you can map that.

Who is the story for?
What is the story for?
Why is the story important?
Who is telling the story?

"Sitting with the role that storytelling plays in the humanization of the peoples of the South, but also in the humanization of each other - the work of changing the way we tell these stories is also the work of changing ourselves."

- Jackline

Solidarity

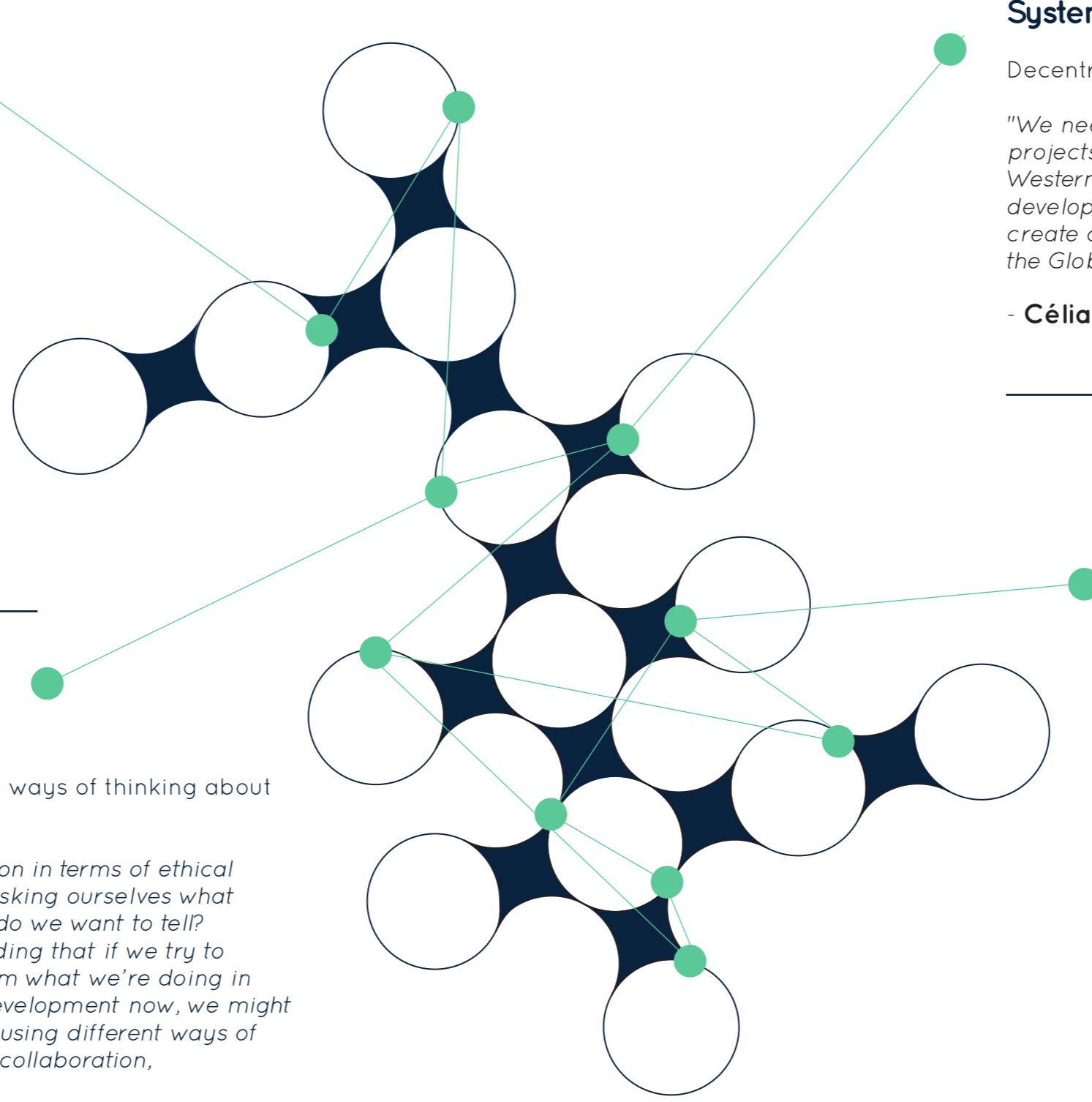
Using different ways of thinking about collaboration.

"The conversation in terms of ethical storytelling is asking ourselves what kind of stories do we want to tell? And understanding that if we try to move away from what we're doing in international development now, we might be talking and using different ways of thinking about collaboration, like solidarity."



- Célia

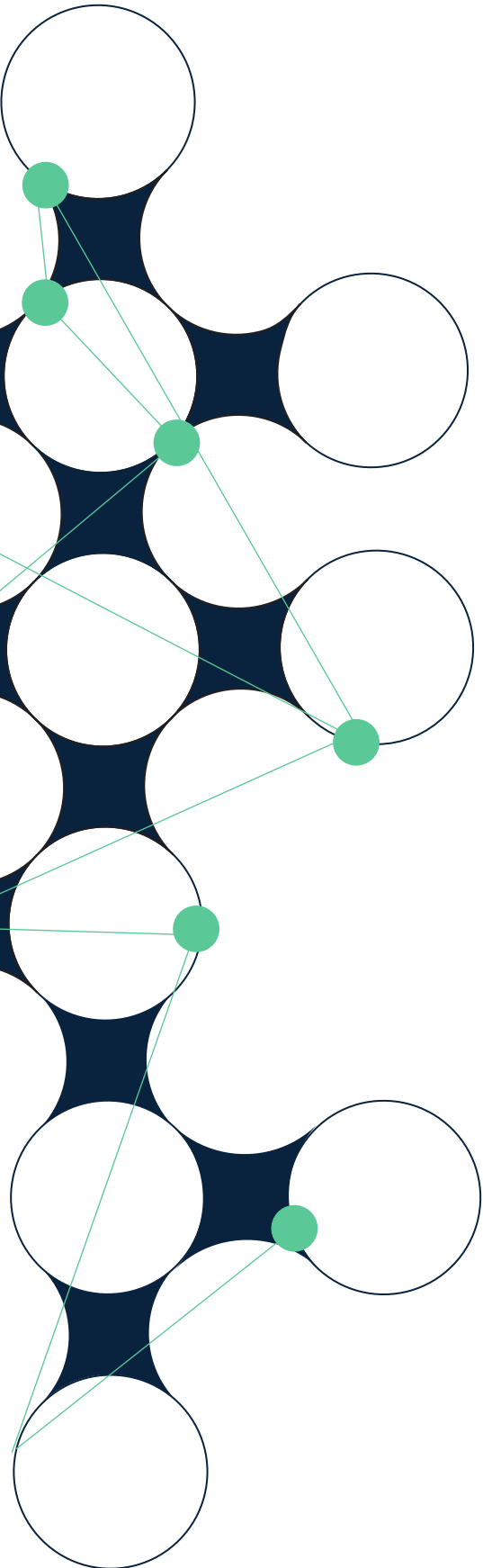
"There is no such thing as neutrality."

- Melissa



Reflections to consider when building your own pathways towards your framework


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- 1 Whose voices are included in this story, and whose are missing? Are there people or *experiences* that have been excluded?
 - 2 Am I telling this story from my perspective, or am I *elevating* the voices of those who are directly impacted?
 - 3 Does this story serve the community's *needs*, or is it being told for external audiences?
- 



4 Does this narrative recognize the *structural* inequities and historical context that shape the issues, such as colonialism, racism, patriarchy or classism?

5 Are the power dynamics between the storyteller, the audience, and the concerned *community* being communicated clearly? How might they influence the way the story is received?

6 Does my story consider how multiple *identities* (e.g., race, gender, class, disability, sexuality, etc.) intersect and shape people's experiences in this specific context?

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- 7 Have I ensured that the people whose stories are being shared had agency in the process and were *empowered* over how their experiences are represented?
 - 8 How can I ensure the story *humanizes* those involved, and does not exploit or sensationalize their realities?
 - 9 How will I handle *sensitive* or traumatic content in a way that is respectful and doesn't cause further harm?

Reframing our Storytelling

From the landscape to the framework for change, we propose a reflection that challenges us to question how power dynamics, historical contexts and structural inequities influence the stories we share and the voices we amplify. It is essential to acknowledge the role of race and racism in shaping these narratives.

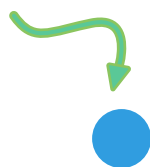
Reframing storytelling is a process that encourages us to critically examine the narratives we rely on—how they benefit some while disadvantaging others—and recognize our role in shifting this dynamic to prioritize racial justice. It calls us to approach storytelling with intention, fostering practices that dismantle oppressive norms while empowering and uplifting marginalized voices. Ultimately, it drives us toward creating more just and equitable futures.

"It is an invitation to engage in this process with more intentionality and to imagine and build alternative narratives—ones that are rooted in honesty, accountability and solidarity, and that centre humanity."

– **Jackline**

The following framework was proposed by Jackline, at the conclusion of the discussion.

Reframing Storytelling



Reframing Storytelling

1 Starting from the personal

What is personal to you, how is it complicit, what do you deny, and what are you choosing to see in your daily life?

"They ethically tell a story is to first understand that you draw your humanity and humanness from another person. And so once you engage with the other person or the narrative you're trying to push, and once you engage with that, knowing that there's a human being at the centre of it, it changes the power."

- Jackline

2 Looking at the organizational level

What are you choosing to not see and what are you denying within that?

"How we work as part of a system, but also how we work in community with one another, and how we work within ourselves. Because we tell ourselves certain stories, storylines and certain narratives."

- Jackline

3 Questioning the systemic level

Whether it's your country or the system you live in—what is it denying you that prevents you from living the life you deserve?

Reframing what giving means and what giving looks, and look at it within the power dynamic:

What roles do capitalism and white supremacy play in international development?

How does it frame the international development sector?

How does it frame our policies?

How does it frame our practices, and how we interact with each other?

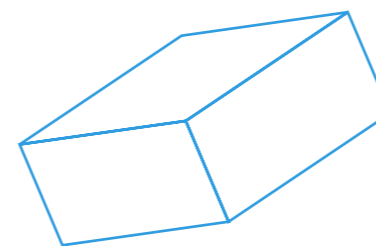
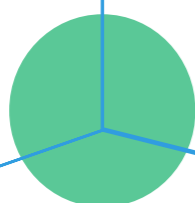




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