

PROYECTO ¡OYE!

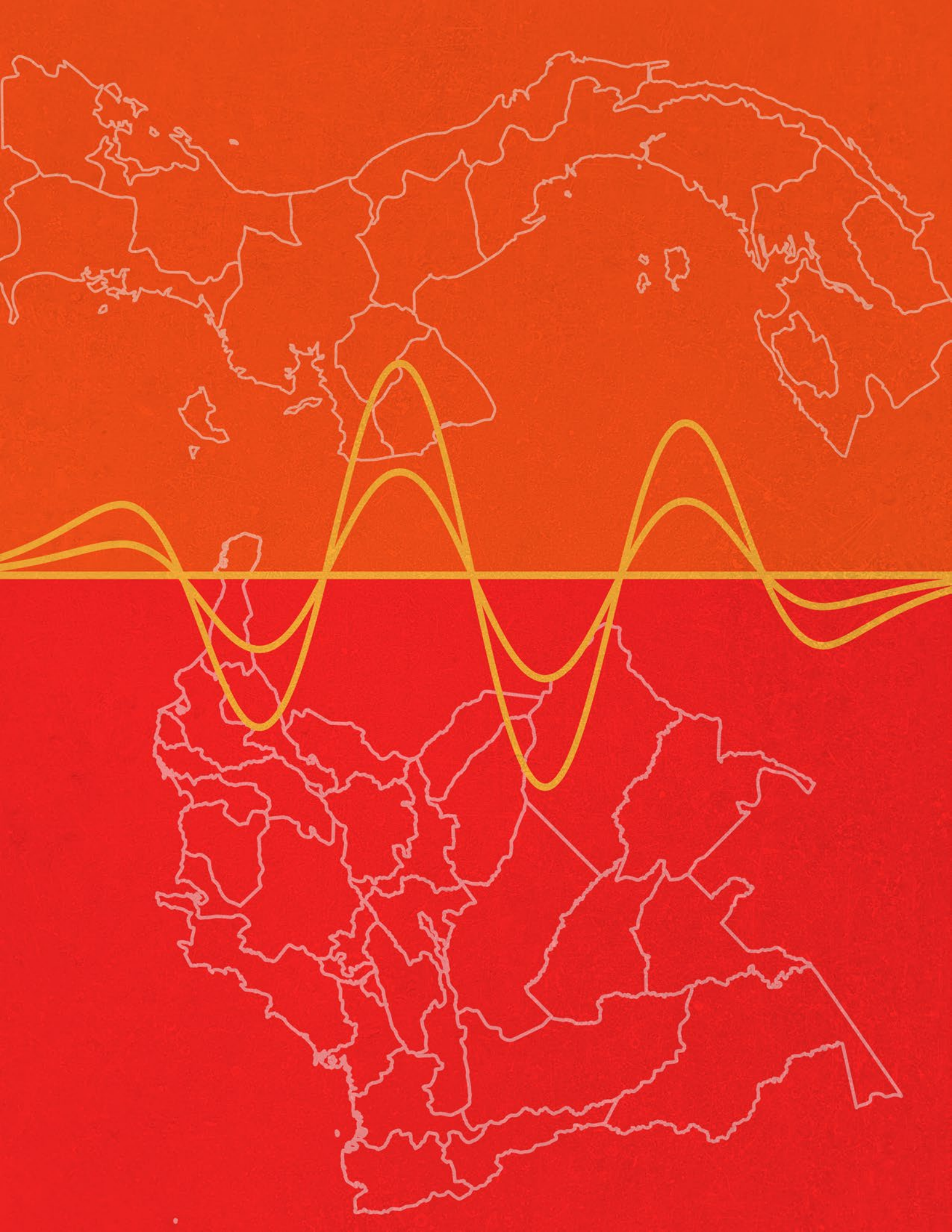
LESSONS ON THE NARRATIVE-POWER
INFRASTRUCTURE IN COLOMBIA AND PANAMA

RESEARCH MEMO



REFRAME

AFRORESISTANCE



INTRODUCTION

We want a world rooted in respect for the humanity and dignity of all persons—their autonomy; their sovereignty; and their collective voice, force and power. We believe in co-constructing this world and know that we breathe this new reality into being not only through organizing and building narrative power at home but in how we listen to and respond to one another across race, gender, class and borders. Only as we listen deeply can we hope to be in “right relationship” with one another as the starting point for strengthening social movements abroad.

The world faces multiple and unevenly distributed crises, including a global pandemic, heightening economic inequality, rising inflation, and a quickly escalating climate crisis, all of which are colliding with and contributing to a global rise in authoritarian governments that is eroding democracy, freedom and equality. Due to long-standing racism and gender oppression, people of color and women overwhelmingly bear the brunt of these interlocking crises. Worldwide, we are witnessing the limits of current organizing practices and movements in meeting these crises head-on.

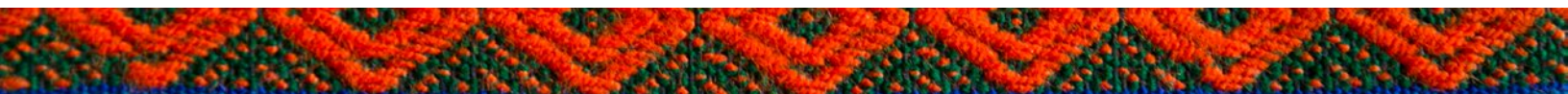
There are solutions to these crises—but the necessary changes require a shift in underlying narratives¹ that shape civic society and societal values and determine how we organize societies and economies. Organizers, activists, and grassroots leaders from racial, gender, climate, and economic justice movements have long driven such narrative change. ReFrame invests in people — strategists, creatives, leaders, and dreamers — developing the skills, acumen, and networks we need to advance just narratives at scale.

ReFrame concentrates its efforts primarily in the US. Yet, we acknowledge that technological innovations and a globalized economy, including workers who cross borders, facilitate the spreading of culture and values that challenge national boundaries. If narratives are now increasingly global, then our research and action must be as well.

ReFrame has long held curiosity about how to ethically and responsibly expand our work internationally, if at all. In 2022, we launched Proyecto ¡Oye!, a project to determine the strategic communications and narrative power-building needs of human rights organizations and their leaders in the Spanish-speaking Latin American context. To start, we chose to focus on Colombia and Panama, both Spanish-speaking countries with significant racial and ethnic diversity and countries that also provided strategic lenses as well as political insight into the Americas due to their geographical, political and economic positioning.²

Before recommending any course of action, we believed it was necessary to engage in a deep listening project with grassroots organizations on the ground in Panama and Colombia. Organizers and activists delineated gaps they identified in their communications and narrative change infrastructure. This project was co-led by AfroResistance, a multilingual, Afro-Latinx, women-led organization with extensive knowledge and expertise in educating and organizing for human rights, democracy and racial justice throughout the Americas.

The following research overview summarizes the topline findings included in the full Proyecto ¡Oye! research report, as well as recommendations on how to fortify the efforts of organizers seeking to build narrative power for human rights through an intersectional lens in Panama and Colombia.



SUMMARY OF PROYECTO ¡OYE! FINDINGS

Historically, strategic communications has been a tool used by the elite and the ultra-right in Latin America to generate, maintain, and protect their socioeconomic and political advantages. Traditional telecommunications, including television and radio, combined with social media platforms moving at the speed of the Internet, have ironically thwarted the free and public exchange of knowledge and information, especially that which advances a Leftist agenda.

In response, human rights and social justice networks and organizations must strategically engage in these conditions on the same narrative terrain. Organizers and advocates must amplify their narrative power³ to raise awareness among their audiences, transform, and mobilize them to take collective action for justice and equity across the region.

Our research aimed to understand the social, political and narrative context of human rights organizations in Colombia and Panama, and to identify the most pressing needs and gaps in their infrastructure, communications strategies, training and narrative power-building.

The research team collected quantitative and qualitative information from participants, through 44 surveys, interviews with 26 people, and a 10-person focus group that included cisgender women, men, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and personnel and community leaders across 45 organizations. Researchers used “descriptive design”⁴ methodologies and focused on human rights issues such as gender, race, ethnicity, language, residency status, and immigration status—conducting analysis and making recommendations based on practices, training, and the development of communication and social media skills.

Through this research, we identified the following regarding the current state of the narrative infrastructure⁵ among the organizations we partnered with:

- Most organizations lack designated, skilled media and communications staff as well as integrated communications strategies. Instead, they rely on volunteers, whether it's to build their social media presence or to respond defensively to their opponents.
- Human rights advocates we spoke with lack access to communications collaboratives and networks that could develop shared narrative power-building strategies and increase networked capacity.
- Consistent and substantial financial investment to build strong communications and narrative power infrastructure for change is minimal, a reality across all Latin American contexts.

In Colombia, most research participants cited the lack of a dedicated media and communications department and staff as one of their major challenges. They mainly rely on volunteers to create content and maintain an active presence on traditional and social media. Due to the lack of resources, which also leads these organizations to use outdated technology, they tend to react largely to events rather than create a proactive, strategic narrative and communications plan.

In Panama, 62 percent of research respondents have a team responsible for generating content to spread their values and narratives. However, in most cases, those teams lack training in developing robust, long-term narrative and communication strategies.

"I think that this space for the analysis of the construction of narratives from social organizations is very important, because there is, from my point of view, a weakness in the production of content. I think it is in part the lack of knowledge of activists, who need to make better use of the communication services offered by the internet and social networks."

—FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

What explains this lack of infrastructure and resources? We hypothesize it is partly due to barriers created by racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia both historically and in the present. ReFrame encountered similar conditions when we began our mentorship program in the U.S. in 2015. Seven years later, thanks to strategic investments made by ReFrame, funders, and other social justice movement entities, we now not only have a more robust narrative ecosystem but one that is increasingly representative of the broader movement across race, ethnicity, gender, gender expression, and sexual orientation. These advances, while far from organic, required strategic and significant investments — the kind that can and should be replicated in Latin American contexts.

In terms of social and political contexts, Panama and Colombia continue to struggle to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic. With a loss of paid employment and ongoing job insecurity, more than 40 percent of residents in both countries work in the informal economy. Indigenous and Afro-descendant communities in the region

continue not to have access to equitable healthcare and social services, particularly those who live in difficult-to-reach areas. The sluggish post-pandemic recovery poses a challenge to the governments of both countries, respectively.

In response to increasing social instability in Colombia and Panama and throughout Latin America, narratives from the Far Right that oppose racial justice, social justice, reproductive rights, gender equity, sexual diversity, and the right to emigrate have escalated in intensity. This extreme intolerance and fanaticism have been promoted by key players such as the Catholic organization Opus Dei, groups affiliated with Evangelical churches, anti-abortion activists, and other conservative and far-right sectors of society.

CONCEPTS OF “NARRATIVE” IN THE LATIN AMERICAN CONTEXT

ReFrame draws from the Narrative Initiative and defines narrative as “a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea or belief for effective and equitable change.” This definition was formulated in a U.S. context; in a Latin American context, the word “narrative,” however, is usually associated with literature. For AfroResistance, the definition of narrative must include political discourse that brings to light stories that shape how power is built. This resonates with ReFrame’s definition of Narrative Power.

However, some interviewees stated that the concept of “narrative” is an Anglicism⁶ which depoliticizes what is typically called “discourse” in Latin American contexts. Many participants expressed that the term “narrative” has depoliticized political discourse. One Panamanian interviewee told us: “Well, now it is called narrative, but fundamentally it is a discourse, and the discourse is the way in which someone formulates, poses or analyzes a question.”

“Narratives, in my opinion, are how humans express our lived experiences, feelings, and sometimes even desires. That, to me, is a narrative—, the way we express ourselves.”

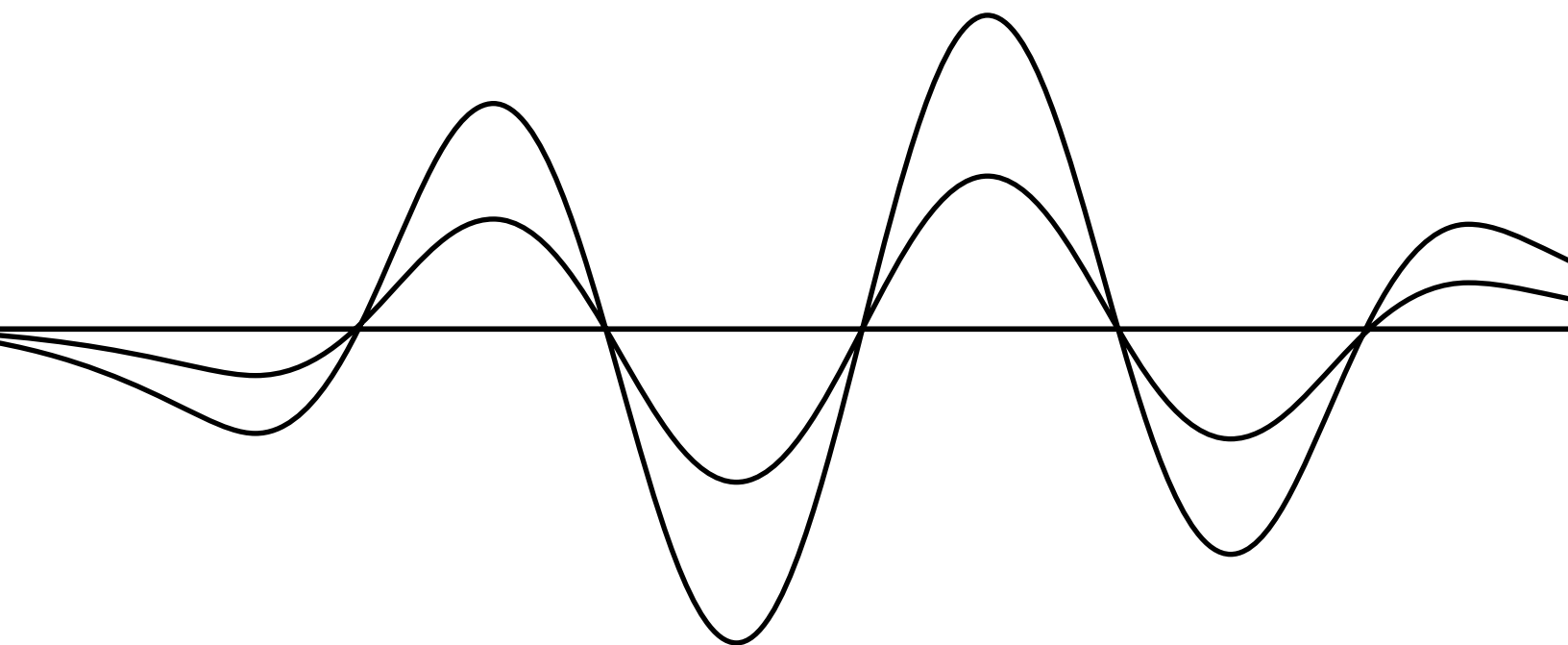
—COLOMBIAN INTERVIEWEE

Any serious efforts to build narrative capacity and offer training in Latin American countries must take into account the social and cultural context of human rights activists and advocates in the region. As we found, this must include the very terms that we use.

In addition, whoever takes up the cause of narrative network weaving in the region must be deeply acquainted with the values and needs of the Left in Latin America, especially women, queer, gender-expansive persons, and those of Indigenous and African descent. Narrative capacity-builders from these communities must take the lead in constructing dynamic, responsive, and functional definitions that center contentions for power.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations, if implemented, would help create the infrastructure required for practitioners to build and wield narrative power—shaping what is politically possible, creating regional networks and building capacity to secure healing, justice, and liberation for our people and the planet. Additionally, we recommend that foundations and donors set and communicate benchmarks for investing, expectations, and deliverables when investing in communication and narrative infrastructure in Latin America.



PROVIDE TRAINING, SKILLS DEVELOPMENT, AND TECHNOLOGICAL TOOLS, INCLUDING:

- Ongoing basic and advanced communication training, such as: messaging, narrative power building, combating misinformation and disinformation, using traditional media as megaphone, and using social media to advance and protect human rights.
- Access to current technology, software, and other needed tools.
- Fellowships and scholarship opportunities in media and communications.
- Train-the-trainers programs that focus on media and communications.
- Create culturally aware, grounded media and communication guides and curricula for social justice organizations.

Create networks to increase collective narrative change capacity that would incentivize and unify social justice leaders to meaningfully collaborate across issues and geographic areas to intentionally develop the narrative ecosystem. They could then build the individual and collective skills, capacity, and infrastructure required to deepen strategic communications and narratives to build political power.

FUND THE REGION'S SOCIAL CHANGE ORGANIZATIONS AT THE LEVEL NECESSARY TO INCREASE THEIR NARRATIVE CHANGE CAPACITY:

- Foundations and donors interested in supporting strategic communications and narrative power-building infrastructure in Panama and Colombia must first develop a thorough understanding of each country's political, cultural, and socioeconomic realities.
- Foundations and donors should establish benchmarks and deliverables that are informed by the findings and recommendations of local leaders and researchers.
- Foundations should shift towards providing multi-year commitments to individual organizations and collaboratives working on building the necessary infrastructure for narrative power building.
- Funders should engage in collaborative partnerships by co-designing and co-leading efforts with local leaders in Colombia and Panama, aimed at building trust and autonomy.
- Engage in collaborative partnerships by co-designing and co-leading efforts with funders and local leaders in Colombia and Panama. Aim to build trust, autonomy and access to dialogues to create accessible media, communication and narrative power building.
- Provide grantees with media and communication and narrative power-building multi-year consulting support.

CONSTRAINTS AND LIMITATIONS OF OUR RESEARCH

The main objective of our research was to understand the state of narrative infrastructure in Latin America, with a particular focus on Colombia and Panama. Constraints, as well as opportunities, always abound in research, and this project was no different, taking place amid COVID-19 outbreaks and a presidential election in Colombia.

Many leaders of social justice movements in the Americas have a complicated relationship with the United States. Everything that sounds “gringo” or North American is rejected. This is especially true in Leftist social movements and in countries like Colombia and Panama that have had a significant U.S. presence or have been negatively impacted by U.S. foreign policies. The U.S. presence in Panama is still palpable, as it is woven into its people’s daily life and culture, from Spanglish words to supermarket brands to the media consumed. In both Colombia and Panama, many people, including some interviewees, were skeptical of our project and questioned our funding, objectives and goals.

This experience did not surprise us, and points to an important lesson—any effort in building narrative infrastructure must be led by active and trusted actors on the ground. The process of building narrative infrastructure may start with supporting the overall infrastructure and growth of those anchor organizations in areas where they are under-resourced.

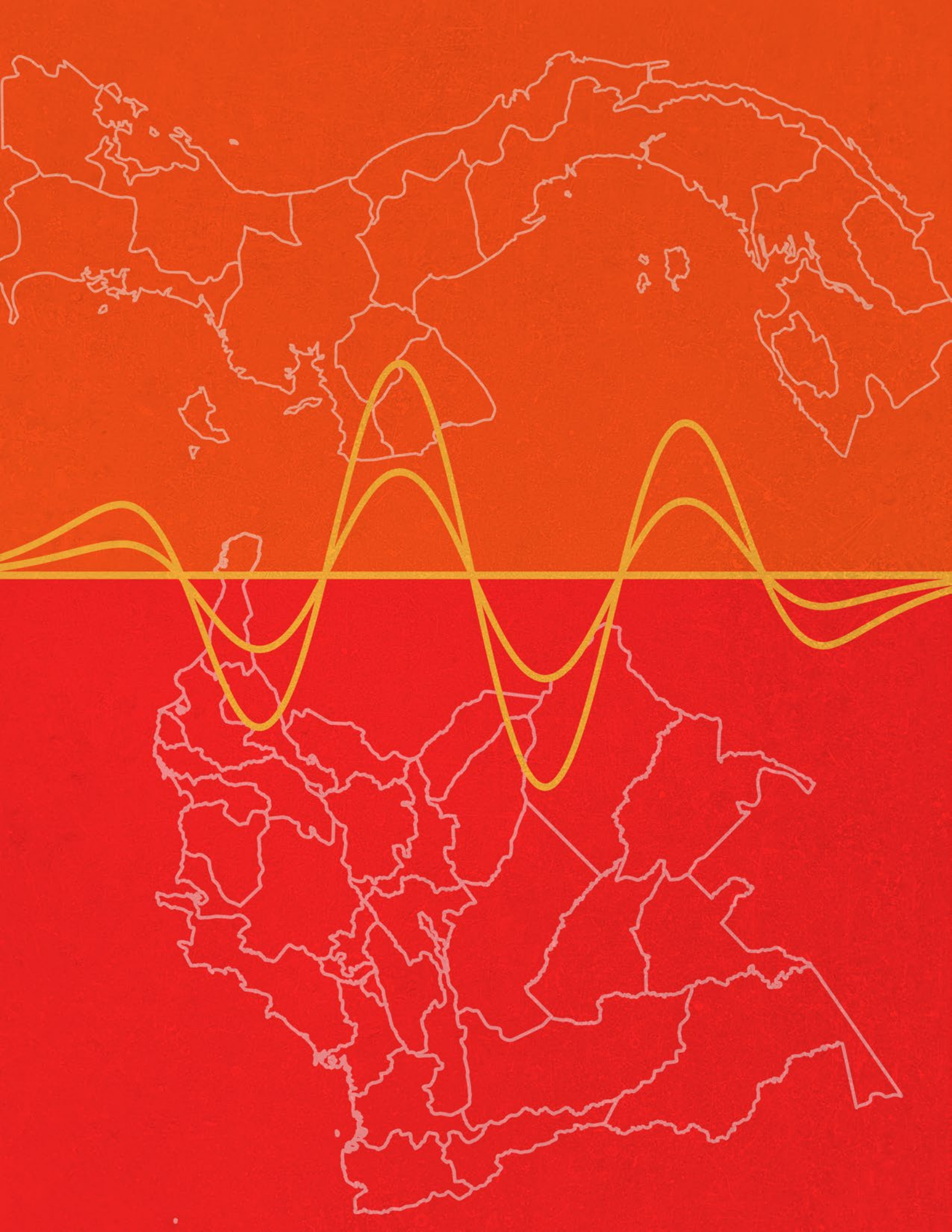
Considering the skepticism of most participants when they found out that ReFrame and AfroResistance are U.S.-based organizations, we had to develop a collaborative research approach that was culturally appropriate and respectful of the sociopolitical context, and one that honored the courage and expertise of participants.

We also ensured that the research team was composed of local professionals from each country with extensive professional and lived experience studying or working on social research in Latin America, focusing primarily on social, gender, and racial justice issues. These professionals are college professors and active members of numerous local and regional social justice organizations and networks. In addition, AfroResistance and the leading researchers have a long history in Colombia and Panama's academic fields and social movements. This

combination of experience, militancy, and relationships was crucial for identifying and gaining participant trust.

Our research limitations may affect the generalizability in other Latin American contexts due to racial, ethnic, social, political, and economic differences. However, we hypothesize that many of the recommendations will endure. Furthermore, we recommend similar studies in Mexico, Brazil, and Spanish-speaking Caribbean nations and territories.





CONCLUSION

At the heart of this research, human rights leaders expressed the need and desire to preserve their culture, traditions, ecology, nature, land, and the narratives that define them. Thus, any future endeavor of this sort must be steeped in cultural humility, acknowledging the humanity and dignity of all people. Disparities in power and the ongoing nature of imperialism and colonialism demand that we start with deep listening, especially those of us in the U.S.

To this end, we listened and learned a great deal from those doing the hard labor of advancing human rights in Panama and Colombia. Now the question remains—how shall we meet the needs expressed? If nothing else, it will be important for those building networked formations and capacities to follow the lead of those in the region by offering support based on research along with actions that build power with and for those historically left out due to race, class, or geography. This includes women, queer, and gender-expansive people across race, ethnicity, language, and country of origin, including those of African and Indigenous descent.

The research did not identify any major narrative power networks or nodes among those involved in the course of this study. Still, multiple actors throughout Latin America have been making deep and aligned investments in the region. Among those, we count on Asociación Puntos de Encuentro,

Bridges-Puentes, HackeoCultural, and JustLabs to name just a few key entities.

We are grateful to all the courageous and thoughtful participants who helped make this study possible. The ongoing dialogue with these leaders and the lessons learned will influence and generate new conversations and strategies on how to center narrative power-building in the work to achieve transformative and sustainable social change and protect human rights. We are committed to sharing the lessons and findings with all participating organizations and the larger social justice field, including donors, in the region and beyond.

RESEARCH SUMMARIES

The following research reports informing this study have been included below. Please note that they are available in Spanish only.

- Social movements, their narrative construction from new media: the Indignation of Bogota on Twitter
- Narratives and misinformation about vulnerable groups during the COVID-19 pandemic: case studies in of Panama and Venezuela
- Communications and Media in Panama and their relationship with economic and political power
- Social media communications in Panama: background, situation and perspectives towards the new millennium. A critical analysis
- Communications strategy and direct action, public safety and peace building

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ENDNOTES

1. "Narrative" is a tricky term and means different things to different people. For our purpose to build power and effective strategy, we draw from the Narrative Initiative and define narrative as "a collection or system of related stories that are articulated and refined over time to represent a central idea of belief."
2. For instance, they share conservation areas on their border, which provides insight into regional migration patterns, as migrants from all over the world transit from the region's south to the north and within the region. Additionally, Panama and Colombia are countries where free trade agreements and U.S. policies have been implemented first in the region (i.e., the War on Drugs).
3. ReFrame defines Narrative Power as "the long-term effort of advancing, establishing, reifying and defending narratives through various strategies and tactics." We believe that social change happens by engaging and mobilizing the power of organizing, infrastructure, and making meaning on the terrain of ideology, worldview, and narrative. Engaging these three forms of power, those trained, developed, and resourced capture the energy of inflection points to advance public discourse or narratives grounded in liberation, freedom, and justice within and beyond the social justice sector. Our colleagues at the Grassroots Policy Project heavily informed our conceptual framework with the Three Faces of Power.
4. Descriptive design is a type of research method used to describe a population's characteristics. It collects data to answer a variety of what, when, and how questions about a specific population, group, or issue
5. Durable, long-term infrastructure includes networked individuals, organizations, and institutions that are aligned around shared goals and shape vision, political agendas, and more.
6. Anglicism, in this context, may best be understood as a word or conceptual framework borrowed from the United States or the United Kingdom. Many in Latin America and across the Global South may consider "narrative" and "narrative power" as constructions of neoliberalism and coloniality. These findings bore out in the research collection phase of Proyecto ¡Oye!
7. Gringo is a derogatory term used predominantly in Spanish-speaking countries and contexts to refer to people of the United States.

