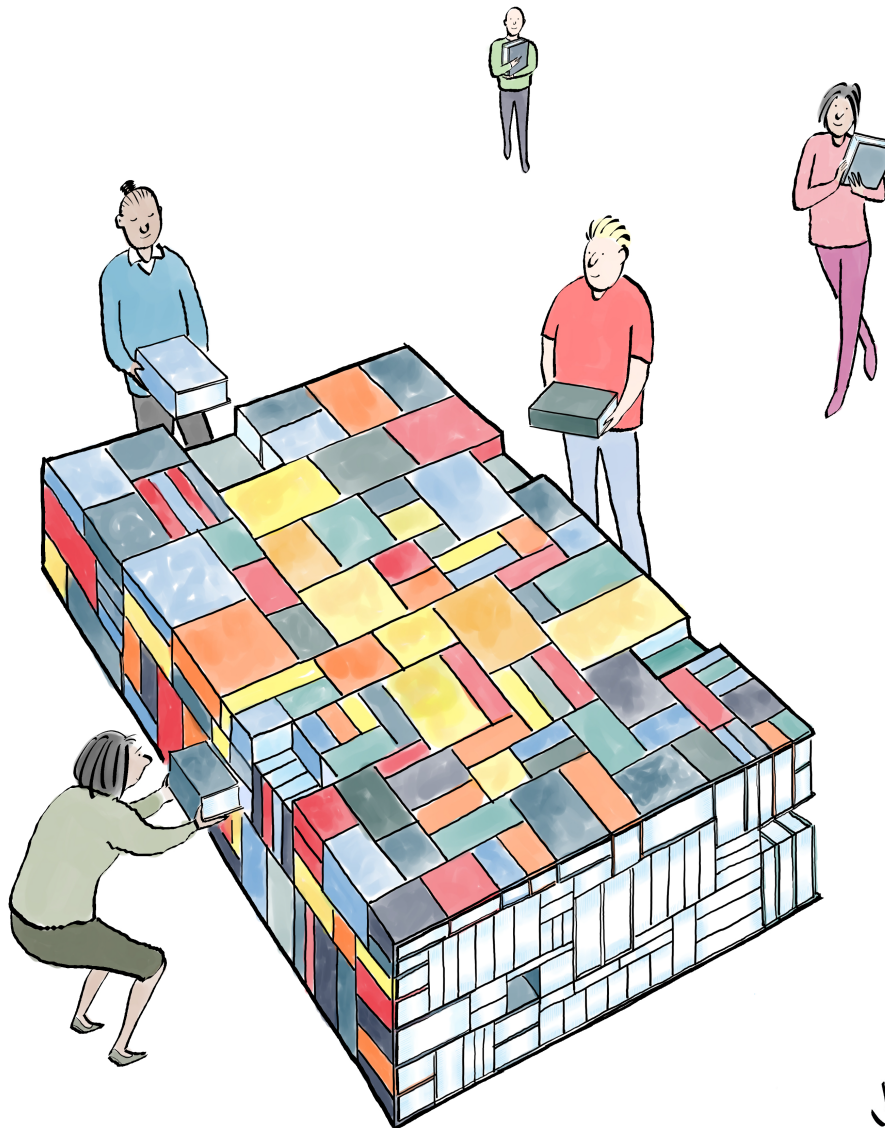


DEPOLARISATION MANUAL

REIMAGINE
PLANET
RIE

R E F R A M E

A METHODOLOGY FOR FACILITATING
DIALOGUE AND BUILDING TRUST



Jonesy

**NAVIGATING THE DEBATE
ON NEW GENOMIC TECHNIQUES**

**By Urs Niggli,
President, Institute for Agroecology**

The debate on the sustainability of agriculture and food systems has reached a critical point. We recognise the urgency of a rethink among both the population as a whole and the players in food systems. There is a broad consensus on the two goals for a desirable and necessary transformation. On the one hand, natural resources such as soil, water, air, and biodiversity must be utilised sparingly, efficiently and without degradation. This is because natural capital secures the future of human nutrition. On the other hand, we need a comprehensive innovation strategy that utilises social, economic, institutional, ecological, and technological components equally and in harmony. The legislative developments in response to the European Green Deal are therefore not only a quest for progress, but also a great opportunity to restore confidence in the heart of our food systems.

The R.E.F.R.A.M.E. methodology, as a key element in the Depolarisation Manual, is pivotal at this time as it offers a structured yet hopeful approach to depolarising the conversations that are shaping our agricultural future. It is a clarion call for all stakeholders to come together to break the cycle of distrust and create fertile ground for ideas that meet the needs of today's world.

Infused with optimism, this report argues for a view that builds trust rather than sows division and seeks common ground where innovation and ecological wisdom meet. It is testament to our collective ability to find ways of working together to ensure that today's debates produce tomorrow's sustainable solutions. We need more appropriate narratives that see technological development as part of the long-term protection of natural capital. Only then will a growing number of people be able to feed themselves safely and fairly.

INTRO DUCTION TION

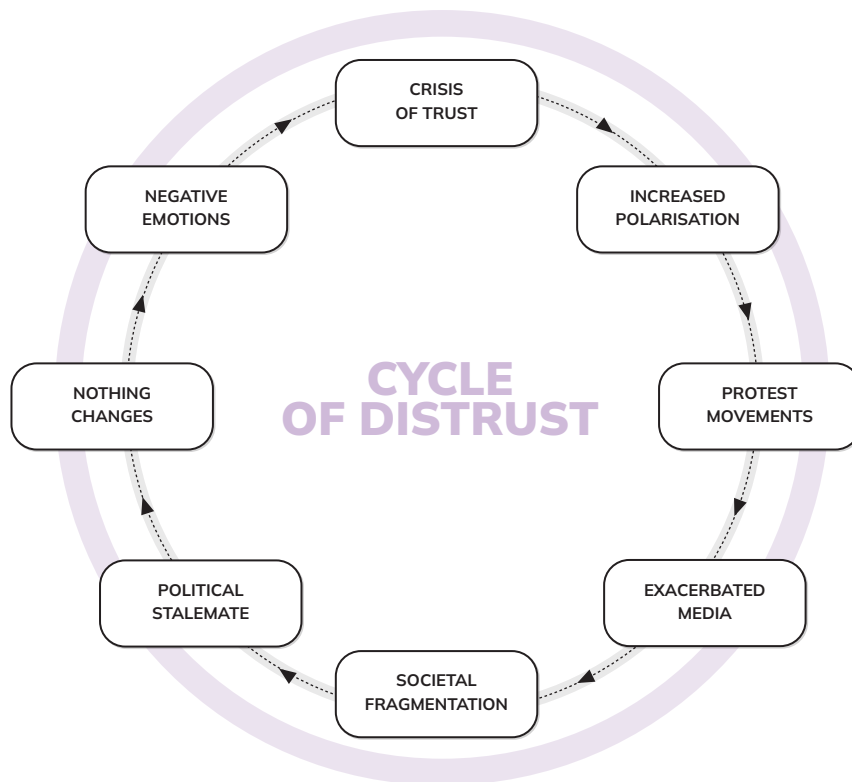
WHY POLARISATION IS A PROBLEM

In her 2023 State of the Union address, President Ursula von der Leyen highlighted the urgent need for strategic dialogue, emphasising that “We need more dialogue and less polarisation... I am and remain convinced that agriculture and protection of the natural world can go hand in hand.”

This call for dialogue is not merely rhetorical but a prerequisite for change. The European Green Deal has set forth a vision for a new European model of sustainable agriculture, yet the current state of debate is mired in polarisation, rendering progress towards this vision nearly impossible.

THE COST OF POLARISATION

Europe has long celebrated diversity as a cornerstone of its strength, with robust public discourse being a pillar of its democratic societies. In an ideal scenario, a variety of ideas, experiences, and perspectives intermingle to forge robust solutions. However, excessive polarisation has precipitated the very antithesis of this ideal: a quagmire of inaction, frustration, and eroding trust. This is detrimental to any society, as it hinders forward momentum and creates a vicious cycle that stifles the decision-making processes of our democratic institutions. In the realm of policy-making, this leads to a deadlock, where no progress is made, and no resolutions are found.



Currently, the European model for sustainable agriculture is ensnared in such a cycle, threatening to undermine the entire initiative. Despite shared values and objectives that unite us—supporting small and medium-sized farmers, combatting climate change, preserving biodiversity, providing healthy and affordable food, and ensuring fair economic returns within the food chain—the focus has been hijacked by more divisive issues. This shift in focus only intensifies the cycle of distrust.

NAVIGATING THE DEBATE ON NGTs

The discourse around New Genomic Techniques (NGTs) remains mired in the legacy of past GMO controversies. Yet, technological advances and changing societal needs beckon a thorough reassessment. Re-Imagine Europa's 2021 "Beyond the Apple of Discord: Existing Narratives and Ways Forward" report provides a value-neutral analysis that uncovers shared values and objectives that could be the basis for a future direction of agriculture, transcending polarised views.

Today's challenges demand innovative thinking. By transcending the limiting binary of the NGT debate, we can harness Europe's rich tapestry of opinions as a catalyst for progress. This booklet aims to be just that—a practical guide to listening, understanding, and moving beyond the current impasse towards a productive dialogue on NGTs and the future of agriculture more broadly.

NA RRA TIVES

Narratives are not in opposition to facts. They are the tools our brain uses to organise facts into meaning. They define how we understand the world around us and are co-created by societies to define common visions.

Narratives are fundamentally social. They create interpretative communities bonded by a shared notion of reality. Only the things that fit the narrative schema are perceived as real.

It is through narratives, shared interpretations of the world, that people unite. Yet, narratives also have the power to divide and polarise. Not sharing the common narratives is one of the basic factors taken into account when delimiting borders between nations, ethnic groups, religions or social classes. “Us” and “them” are very much narrative structures.

Narratives can be dissected along three dimensions for a comprehensive analysis, which is extensively discussed in our complete report. It is crucial to recognise that stories often obscure underlying motives and goals. For instance, a segment of the NGT debate might ostensibly oppose the technology, but their resistance may stem from a fear of promoting a big-industry model over local businesses and farmers. Interestingly, this concern aligns with an ostensibly opposing view that regards NGTs as an enabler for local solutions.

1. Structure

What is the main value?
How does it change in time?
Are the things getting better or worse?

Examples:

"It's always about money."
"The ugly duckling" scenario."
"Things used to be better when we were kids."

2. Code

Who is the protagonist and who is the enemy?
What is the typical vocabulary?
What images are used to illustrate the

Examples:

"A knight, a princess, a great innovator."

3. Community

Who do we share the story with?
Where and when is the story communicated?
Which media disseminate it?

Examples:

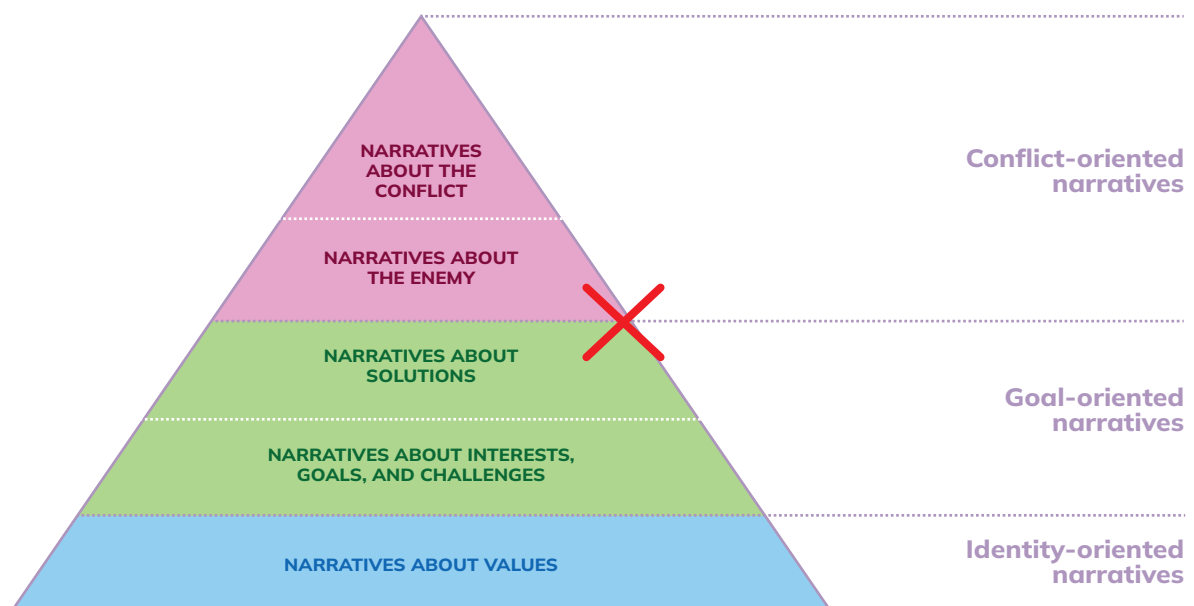
"This is a scientific point of view."
"Our political party will always stand for..."

Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman posits that our brains employ heuristic codes and shortcuts to interpret the world around us, often without our conscious awareness, thus ascribing subjective values to concepts of 'good' and 'bad' (Kahneman, D. (2011). "Thinking, Fast and Slow").

Consider the 5Star Movement in Italy, which shifted its stance on vaccines from opposition to neutrality during the Covid pandemic. The media criticised the party for inconsistency, yet a narrative analysis reveals a deeper allegiance to "the little guy." Pre-pandemic, vaccines were associated with big pharma—a villain in their narrative. However, as Covid-19 reshaped narratives globally, vaccines became a symbol of economic liberation for the common people, reflecting the movement's foundational values (Biorcio, R., & Natale, P. (2021). "The Five Star Movement and the Vaccine Debate in Italy").

Understanding our cognitive biases and the symbols we use is key to fostering genuine dialogue. Such awareness is not novel—it echoes the techniques Nelson Mandela employed to engage with the Afrikaners, transitioning from polarised debates to solution-oriented discussions rooted in mutual recognition of concerns and fears (Mandela, N. (1994). "Long Walk to Freedom").

Understanding narratives is not about changing minds but changing the conversation.



DO'S AND DON'TS

Conflicts that linger often become self-referential, fixated more on the mechanics of the dispute than the issues at hand. The ongoing debate on genomic techniques is a prime example, deeply rooted in the contentious history of GMOs and agricultural technologies. Our communication tips target this pattern, aiming to refocus the conversation on agriculture itself rather than the conflict.

Emotions are deeply intertwined with reasoning and decision-making—after all, as António Damásio put it, “we are not thinking machines that feel, we are feeling machines that think”. In conflict, emotions can escalate tensions. Our goal here is

not to strip emotion from the debate, but to navigate it wisely, avoiding pitfalls.

We present tools informed by psychology and semiotics to demystify polarisation and foster constructive dialogue. This manual isn't about winning arguments or defeating opposition but about exploring and discussing diverse perspectives to cultivate a range of viable solutions.

We've distilled our communication strategies into a seven-point R.E.F.R.A.M.E. methodology that together forms a blueprint for depolarising the debate and breaking the cycle of distrust:

R

I. Responsive Listening. Learn to hear beyond words, grasping what is truly being said

E

II. Eliminate Polarising Language. Use neutral terms to sidestep emotional triggers and maintain a constructive dialogue

F

III. Focus on Shared Objectives. Direct discussions toward common aspirations, using common values as a foundation for joint action

R

IV. Recognise Shared Humanity. Approach adversaries with empathy, seeing beyond labels to the person beneath

A

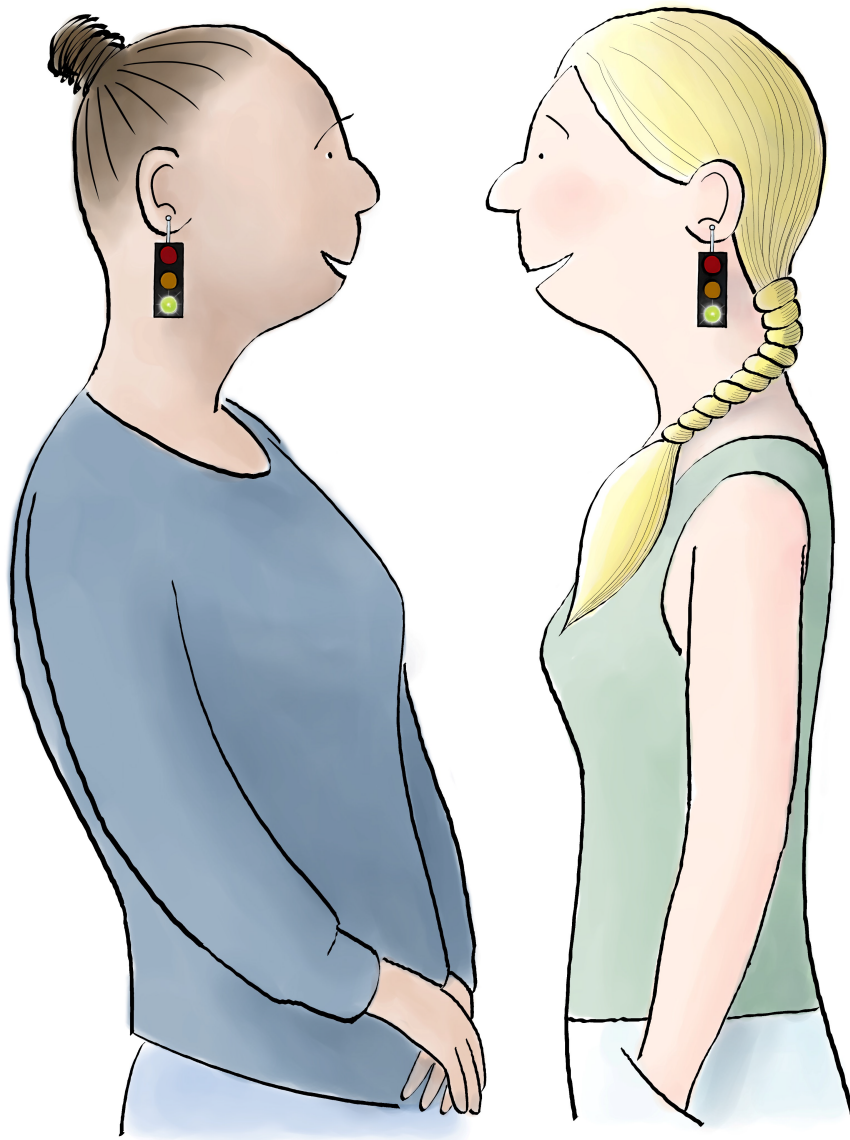
V. Adopt Clear Guidelines. Implement procedural rules to guide discussions and curb escalation

M

VI. Merge and Solve. Tackle issues systematically to reduce friction and enhance cooperative problem-solving

E

VII. Evolve Collective Stories. Shape new, shared metanarratives that emerge from collaborative engagement



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RESPONSIVE LISTENING.

LEARN TO HEAR BEYOND
WORDS, GRASPING WHAT IS
TRULY BEING SAID

RESPONSIVE LISTENING

The debate on New Genomic Techniques (NGTs) is often less about the science and more about what NGTs represent - varied economic models, progress, or other deep-seated beliefs. This complexity echoes Wittgenstein's perspective that words carry different meanings for different people, much like the differing worldviews of a believer and an atheist.

To foster genuine dialogue on NGTs, we must engage in responsive listening that seeks to

understand what NGTs represent to each party, navigating the subtext and acknowledging the broader economic, social, and philosophical models that they symbolise for different individuals.

By applying this level of responsive listening, we create space for a conversation that recognises the multifaceted symbolism of NGTs, moving beyond the surface debate to address the core concerns and aspirations that drive it.

EXAMPLES OF POLARISING COMMUNICATION

- NGTs are just a tool for corporations to monopolise agriculture and exploit farmers.
- Opponents of NGTs cling to romanticised notions of nature that ignore the urgency of food security.
- Advocates of NGTs dismiss traditional farming wisdom, prioritising profit over people and the planet.

EXAMPLES OF DEPolarising COMMUNICATION

- How do we ensure NGTs can support traditional farming and SMEs. Could the example of Argentina be a best practice?
- Could NGTs help to find more local solutions to challenges created by changing weather patterns?
- How do we ensure freedom of choice for farmers to opt for the solutions that work best for them?

R

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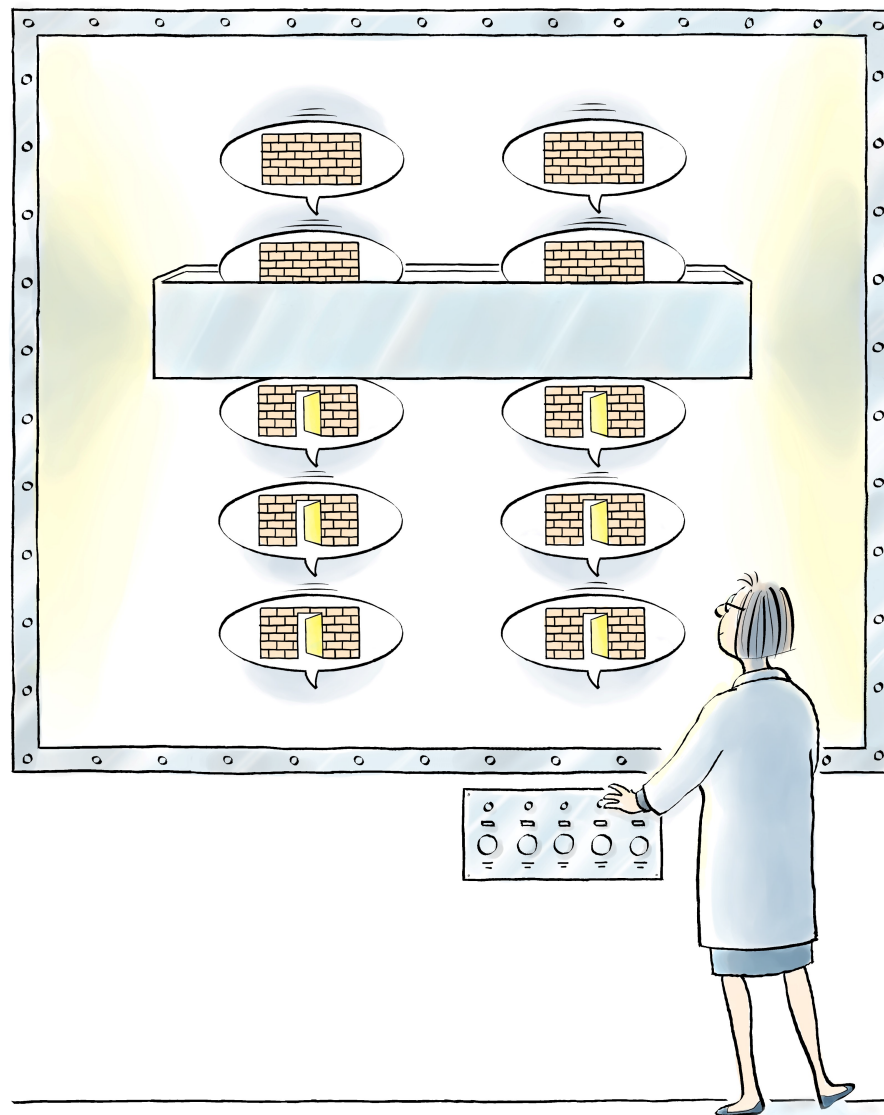
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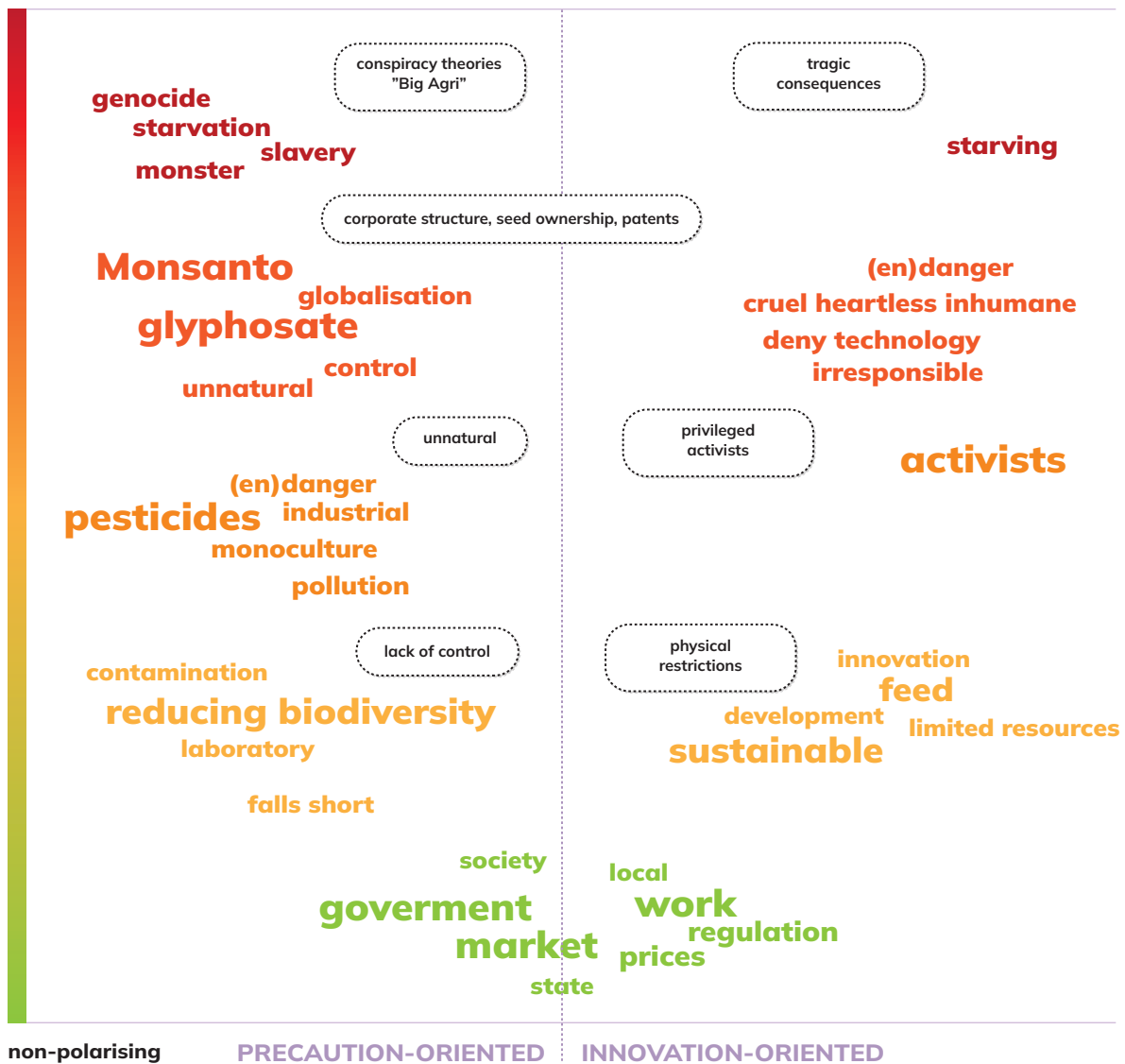
ELIMINATE POLARISING LANGUAGE. USE NEUTRAL TERMS TO SIDESTEP EMOTIONAL TRIGGERS AND MAINTAIN A CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE

ELIMINATE POLARISING LANGUAGE

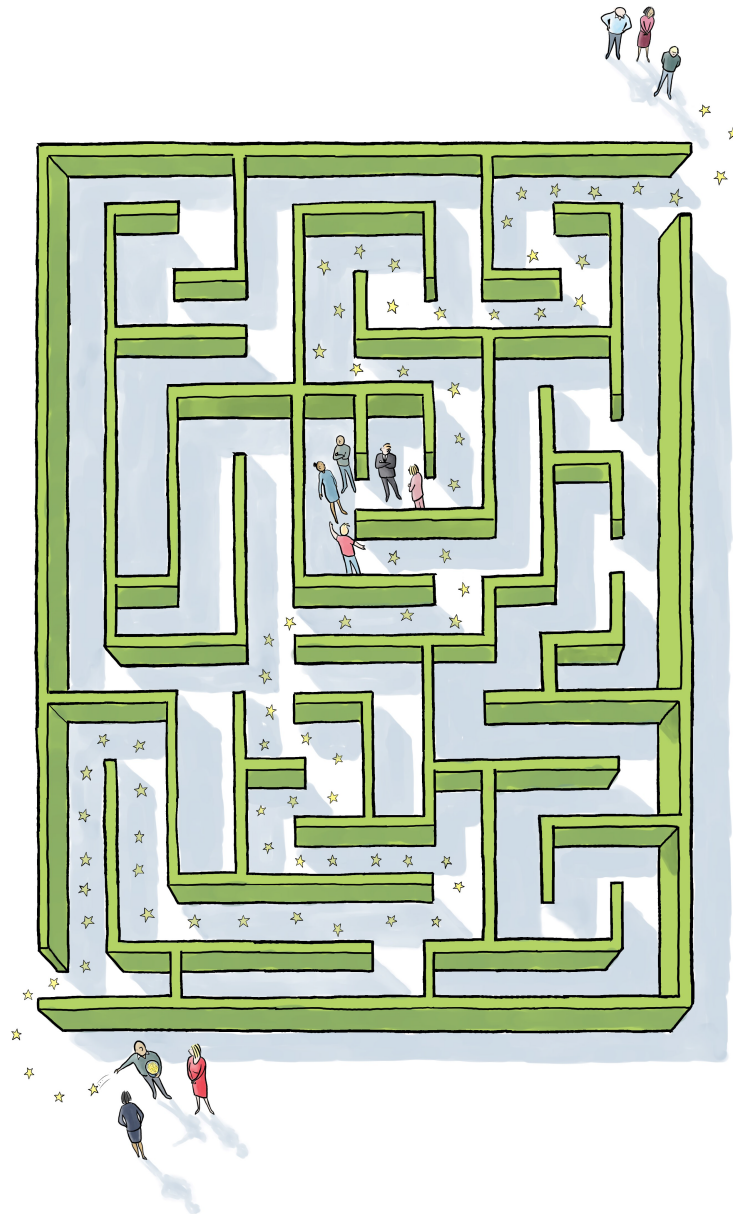
Words carry weight beyond their definitions, often coloured by the emotional and ethical spectrums of our narrative communities. Our graph elucidates this, mapping out how terms fall into varying degrees of polarisation—red for highly polarising, yellow for moderate, and green for neutral. It's

crucial to recognise that the same term can resonate differently across narrative landscapes: "breakthrough technology" may signal progress for some, yet for others, it's a red-alert of caution.

extremely polarising



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FOCUS ON SHARED OBJECTIVES. DIRECT DISCUSSIONS TOWARD COMMON ASPIRATIONS, USING COMMON VALUES AS A FOUNDATION FOR JOINT ACTION

FOCUS ON SHARED OBJECTIVES

Steering conversations towards shared goals creates a foundation for collaborative action. In debates on new agricultural technologies, recognising common ground on key issues—environmental sustainability, the viability of small and

medium-sized farms, the affordability and nutritional value of food, and pollution reduction—helps shift from adversarial clashes to productive dialogue.

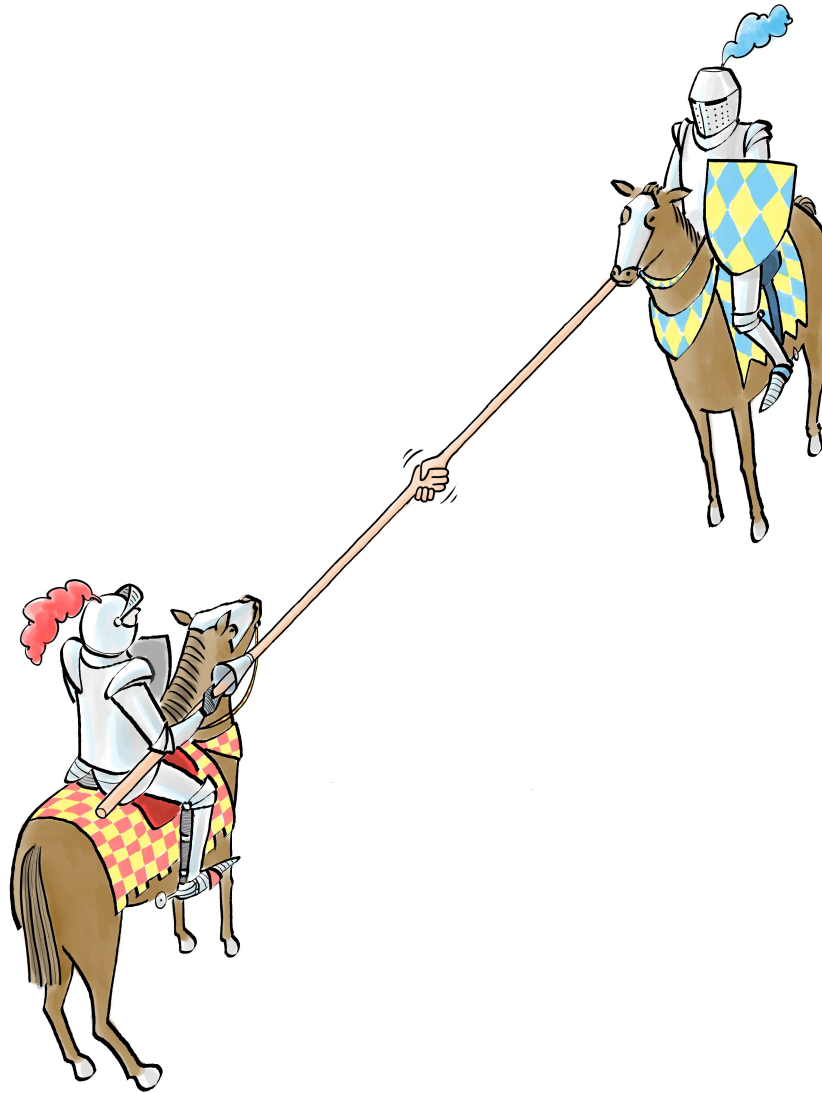
EXAMPLES OF POLARISING COMMUNICATION

- It is a battle between those who care about nature and those who only care about money.
- On the one hand, we have people who trust science. On the other hand, people who believe in superstition.

EXAMPLES OF DEPOLARISING COMMUNICATION

- We are all concerned about preserving biodiversity. This is why we need to assess carefully the impact of the old and the new solution.
- Could innovation help us deal with climate mitigation and adaptation? How can we ensure that innovation is used for sustainability?





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**RECOGNISE SHARED
HUMANITY.** APPROACH
ADVERSARIES WITH EMPATHY,
SEEING BEYOND LABELS TO
THE PERSON BENEATH

RECOGNISE SHARED HUMANITY

In the GMO and NGT debate, dehumanising rhetoric abounds, with each side casting the other as ethically suspect, creating a chasm that obstructs constructive dialogue. A common complaint from technology sceptics is that their concerns are not taken seriously, while scientists decry a lack of respect for their expertise. These grievances can lead to a cycle of contempt and resentment, fed by polarising narratives. Recognising shared concerns

like food equity, environmental stewardship, and sustainable farming is essential. By focusing on stated motives rather than assumed agendas, we can humanise the conversation, shifting from personal attacks to a discussion centered on mutual values and interests. This empathetic engagement allows for a collaborative search for solutions that respects diverse priorities, from ecological preservation to human well-being.

EXAMPLES OF POLARISING COMMUNICATION

- We cannot all afford avocados on toast.
- Is big-Agri paying your salary?

EXAMPLES OF DEPolarISING COMMUNICATION

- I understand the concern about ensuring freedom of choice and options for farmers but I also think that ensuring access to affordable food in these times is important. Is there a way to do both?
- We need to ensure the transition to a sustainable food system whilst at the same time ensuring that there is enough food to avoid major global food shocks.

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ADOPT CLEAR GUIDELINES.

IMPLEMENT PROCEDURAL
RULES TO GUIDE DISCUSSIONS
AND CURB ESCALATION

ADOPT CLEAR GUIDELINES

In debates where emotions run high, like those surrounding GMOs and NGTs, procedural rules are crucial for maintaining focus on the issues, not the individuals. Rules that prevent personal attacks and emotional outbursts are key. For example, structured exercises and neutral presentations can prevent escalation, guiding discussions toward meaningful goals and shared concerns.

To avoid the 'narrative ping-pong' that fuels polarisation, establish a forum where each party

can articulate their position without immediate interruption. This calls for:

- **Equal speaking time for all participants.**
- **Strict rules against interrupting speakers.**
- **A clear, agreed-upon process for reaching conclusions.**

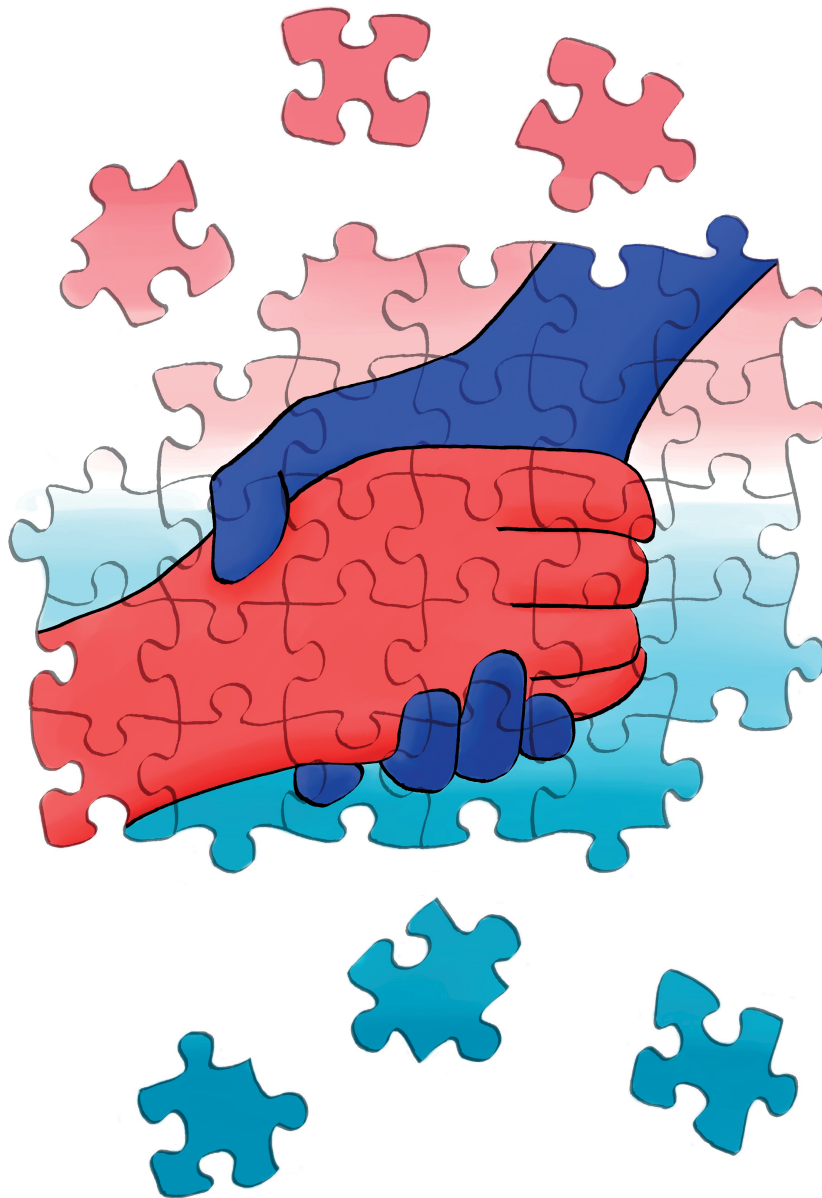
EXAMPLES OF POLARISING COMMUNICATION

- Consumers are undereducated and their concerns are the result of ignorance.
- These issues are too complex for a wider audience to understand.
- Scientists are arrogant and short-sighted. This should make us all the more inclined to regulate new technologies very strictly.

EXAMPLES OF DEPOLARISING COMMUNICATION

- We are in favour of full transparency. Let us work out rules that do not mislead consumers.
- The issue is very complicated, but let me outline the aspects that have the greatest impact on the environment and the wellbeing of consumers.
- We respect your expertise, please reciprocate this respect and answer our questions.

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MERGE AND SOLVE. TACKLE
ISSUES SYSTEMATICALLY TO
REDUCE FRICTION AND ENHANCE
COOPERATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

MERGE AND SOLVE

In addressing the multifaceted concerns surrounding New Genomic Techniques (NGTs), it's crucial to dissect the debate into specific, manageable issues. This systematic approach encourages stakeholders to collaboratively tackle each concern, thereby reducing overall tension and fostering a problem-solving ethos. Further, to depolarise the debate, we need all the tools that allow us to move from defending narratives to identifying and solving problems.

Examples of Cooperative Problem-Solving:

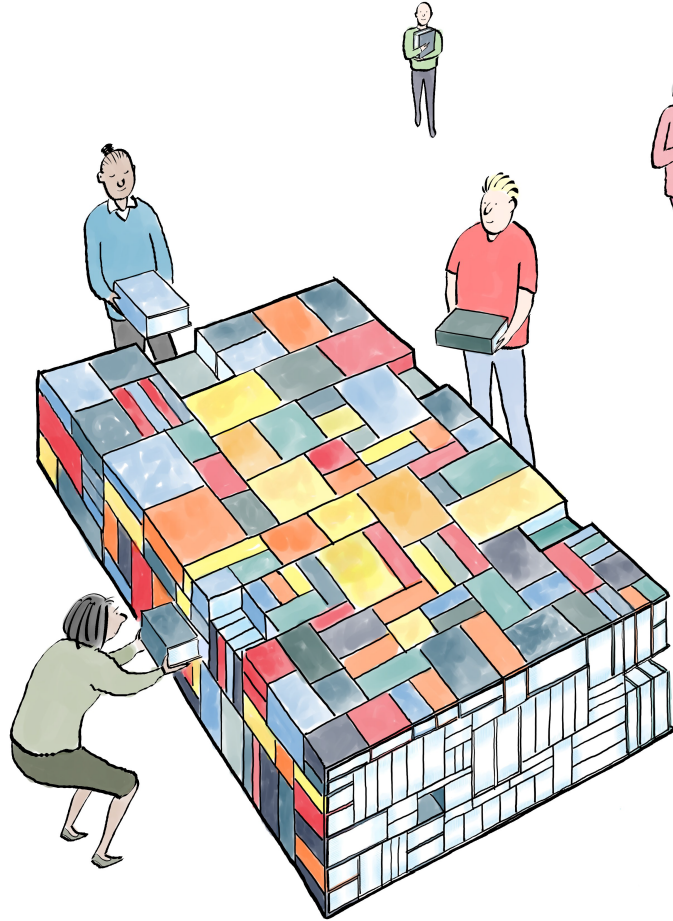
- **Safety and Regulation:** "Let's collaboratively establish a safety evaluation protocol for NGTs that satisfies scientific, environmental, and public health standards."

- **Economic Impact:** "Together, we can assess how NGTs might affect small farms. Can we create economic models that ensure their viability and benefit from these technologies?"

- **Consumer Choice:** "How can we ensure labelling transparency of NGT products, allowing consumers to make informed choices while not impeding technological progress?"

By focusing on concrete issues rather than broad contentions, discussions can progress toward mutually beneficial solutions, aligning with the diverse interests at the heart of the NGT debate.





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EVOLVE COLLECTIVE STORIES.

SHAPE NEW, SHARED

METANARRATIVES THAT EMERGE

FROM COLLABORATIVE ENGAGEMENT

Embarking on cooperative processes marks a pivotal shift from adversarial interactions to fostering inclusive metanarratives, essential for rebuilding trust among stakeholders. In the realm of agricultural innovation, this strategy notably reduces tensions by prioritising shared scientific insights over divisive speculation.

To truly progress, we must recognise and overcome the limitations inherent in our existing narratives. Our current narrative landscape exhibits problematic patterns of "black-box" thinking, obstructing the discovery of innovative solutions. Two predominant patterns stand out:

- **The dichotomy of nature/sustainability versus innovation:** Often, narratives mistakenly present the issue as an either/or scenario when, in fact, embracing innovation in the service of sustainability is vital. We must adopt a holistic view that doesn't force a false choice between

human needs (such as affordable food and support for farmers) and environmental imperatives (like biodiversity, climate adaptation, and pollution reduction).

- **The notion that progress requires sacrifice:** This deeply ingrained mindset within European discourse suggests that addressing climate change must inherently lead to suffering. It also casts suspicion on seemingly 'too easy' solutions, due to a lack of narrative plausibility. This fosters a counterproductive outlook that hinders potential advancements.

We need to craft new metanarratives that move past outdated "black-box" thinking, narratives that resonate with contemporary realities and are attuned to finding viable solutions for today's challenges.



CON CLU SIONS

As we navigate the ambitious pathways charted by the European Green Deal and the 'Farm to Fork' strategy, we confront a spectrum of challenges that demand cohesive action across diverse stakeholder landscapes. Embracing Europe's diversity is pivotal, as it is both a formidable asset and a complexity to be skilfully managed.

The forthcoming 'Legislation for plants produced by certain new genomic techniques' stands as a linchpin for progressive agricultural innovation. It is incumbent upon this legislation to harmonise the call for innovation with assurances of safety, to stimulate economic vitality while protecting consumer interests, and to promote global compe-

titiveness while supporting the vital contributions of small and medium-sized, especially organic, enterprises championed by the 'Farm to Fork' strategy.

In this context, depolarising the conversation is not just an ethical choice but a strategic necessity. The R.E.F.R.A.M.E. methodology presents a structured approach to this end, guiding stakeholders away from divisive rhetoric towards a more constructive, inclusive dialogue. This approach transcends the limiting dichotomies of 'us vs. them', fostering a space where innovative, yet inclusive solutions can emerge going beyond the cycle of distrust.

R E F R A M E

ABOUT US

Re-Imagine Europa (RIE) is a nonpartisan think tank that delivers world-class research to address some of the most challenging issues we face as a society. Founded by President Giscard d'Estaing to honour his friendship with Chancellor Helmut Schmidt, the organisation works with an innovative methodology based on narratives to look for shared values and solutions that go beyond personal, national or political interests.

The Re-Imagine Europa Task Force on Sustainable Food Systems and Innovation was created to go beyond existing polarisations, break the vicious

circle of mistrust and focus on common values and ambitions to facilitate a constructive debate about how to achieve these ambitious goals. Working with the innovative Narrative Methodology and a network of over eighty representatives from different stakeholders and perspectives, the Task Force focusses on very specific challenges to facilitate a constructive debate where existing differences in views and opinions can be the basis for a diversity of solutions and tools to achieve sustainable food systems within the framework of the Green Deal and the Farm to Fork Strategy.

**REIMAGINE
EUROPA**

Building solutions together

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