



Why dialogue matters for conflict prevention and peacebuilding



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I. Introduction

In September 2007, Padraig O'Malley had an idea. The previous year had been Iraq's most violent. Civil war appeared imminent. Using his experience in Northern Ireland and South Africa, the veteran Irish peacemaker brought together over a dozen Iraqis across the sectarian divide in Helsinki. In April 2008, a follow-up meeting was held "to broaden the table" with an even more influential group of Iraqis from a cross-section of society—including government, civil society, and academia¹. A former head of the Irish Republican Army and African National Congress joined the talks to shed light on conflict resolution. The purpose of these informal meetings was not to hammer out an agreement overnight; the aim was to get Iraqis talking. Through dialogue, as O'Malley found in Northern Ireland and South Africa, war-torn societies could shed their distrust, build relationships, and bridge their differences. By the end of the discussions, the Iraqis agreed on a set of seventeen principles, ranging from respect for minority rights to reintegrating ex-Baathists back into government. Violence has since ebbed in Iraq, even if political reconciliation has yet to be reached.

This kind of dialogue process has proven effective not only at bringing about post-conflict resolution but also at addressing transnational issues, such as climate change. Nearly half of Mexico, for instance, is vulnerable to drought and desertification. Because of the country's uneven development, climate change disproportionately affects the poor, especially those in heavily populated areas. To address the development impacts of this looming crisis, a dialogue was convened between members of the government, academia, civil society, and private sector. The aim was to reach an agreement that would reduce carbon emissions, maintain economic development, address the security and socio-environmental consequences, strengthen Mexico's legal framework for dealing with climate change, educate the populace of the importance of this issue, and build cooperation between the government and society, firming up Mexico's reputation abroad as a leader on this global issue. The talks, which are ongoing, have shown remarkable success.

II. What is the importance of dialogue?

Dialogue is an inclusive process. As the climate change talks demonstrate, dialogue brings together a diverse set of voices to create a microcosm of the larger society. To bring about sustainable change, people have to develop a sense of joint ownership of the process and become stakeholders in identifying new approaches to address common challenges.

Dialogue entails learning, not just talking. The process is not just about sitting around a table, but changing the *way* people talk, think and communicate with one another. Unlike other forms of discussion, dialogue requires self-reflection, spirit of inquiry and personal change to be present. Participants must be willing to address the root causes of a crisis, not just the symptoms on the surface. For instance, the 1979 Camp David accords between Egypt and Israel may have ended the armed conflict, but arguably created no qualitative "below-the-waterline" difference in

¹ "Bringing Iraqis To The Table," The Boston Globe (April 25, 2008).
http://www.boston.com/news/nation/articles/2008/04/25/bringing_iraqis_to_the_table

the relationship between their people. That is, there was peace (understood as the absence of violence) but no personal change (which would lead to genuine and sustainable peace).

Dialogue recognizes one another’s humanity. Participants must be willing to show empathy toward one another, recognize differences as well as areas of common ground, and demonstrate a capacity for change. To foster this kind of human interaction, a respectful and neutral setting—or “safe space”—is preferred. That is why O’Malley brought Iraqis to Helsinki and not Basra.

Dialogue stresses a long-term perspective. Other forms of conversation tend to focus on the symptoms rather than the root causes of problems. To find sustainable solutions requires time and patience. The process can be painstakingly slow and incremental, lasting anywhere from ten minutes to ten years—one-off interventions very often do not work to address deeply-rooted causes of conflict or to fully deal with complex issues.

III. How does dialogue differ from—and complement—other processes?

Dialogue is not a one-size-fits-all strategy. It is not a panacea for resolving all the world’s crises, where there is deep political paralysis or a long history of violence. Rather, it represents just one tool in policymakers’ toolbox—a process that is flexible and adaptable to different contexts and countries, one that is especially useful when the parties to a conflict are not ready yet for formal negotiations.

Dialogue requires that basic conditions be present first. When violence, hate, and mistrust remain stronger than the will to forge a consensus, or if there is a significant imbalance of power or a lack of political will among the participants, then the situation might not be ripe for dialogue. Moreover, participants must feel free to speak their minds without fear of retribution, or rejection.

Dialogue is meant to complement other forms of diplomatic or political processes, or lay the groundwork for future and more formal talks, not replace them. Sometimes dialogue occurs within more formal negotiations, as has been the case with ongoing talks between Colombia and Ecuador after a March 2008 cross-border incursion damaged relations. As Jimmy Carter told the Bi-National Dialogue Group of Ecuador and Colombia, “It’s not always the formal channels that are the useful ones, and you know that².”

The process is different from other forms of conversation. In dialogue there are no winners. Whereas the purpose of negotiation is to reach a concrete settlement, the aim of dialogue is to bridge communities, share perspectives and discover new ideas. “Time and again,” as Nelson Mandela once said, “conflicts are resolved through shifts that were unimaginable at the start.”³

² “Why Jimmy Carter Has No Interest In Reining Himself In,” New York Magazine (July 28-August 4, 2008). <http://nymag.com/news/politics/48675/>

³ The Independent Lecture at Trinity College, April 13, 2000.

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/independent-lecture-delivered-by-nelson-mandela-719364.html>

IV. What are some areas where dialogue can make a difference?

Dialogue can facilitate recovery from crisis. After four years of recession and rising unemployment, Argentine President Eduardo Duhalde convened a “historic national dialogue” in 2002, inviting the Catholic Church to facilitate the process and UNDP to play the role of the secretariat. “I want to be one more worker in this convergence that unites the main members of political forces, business, labor and social groups to deal with the destruction that has brought us to the brink of anarchy and violence”, the president told Argentines⁴. The dialogue did not heal the socio-economic crisis overnight but it did help relieve tensions, develop a set of social reform options and prepare an emergency economic plan.

Dialogue can help avert violent conflict. In response to a tense and deteriorating situation in 2003-2004—widespread poverty and a political stalemate—talks were convened in Mauritania. Under the auspices of UNDP, about 400 members of Mauritania’s government, opposition and civil society convened over a span of six months. The entry point for the dialogue was to advance the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—a set of UN benchmarks to combat global problems like poverty, illiteracy, and HIV/AIDS by 2015. The MDGs ended up providing a safe point of departure to bring the political factions and other stakeholders together. Moreover, a culture of communication and cooperation was created, allowing the opposition to tackle more sensitive issues like corruption, social discrimination, and uneven development.

Dialogue can help address environmental concerns. To outsiders, the Galapagos Islands appear to be a peaceful and idyllic locale, best known for their varied wildlife. But in recent years the volcanic archipelago has been embroiled in a different sort of eruption—a feud between nature preservationists and pro-development natives. The impasse threatened to stymie the local economy, neuter the government, and break down efforts at biodiversity conservation. Talks were convened in the late 1990s, bringing together conservationists, fishermen and a diverse set of political actors. The result was a Special Administrative Law that required all sectors of society to collectively manage a marine reserve and take part in the decision-making process. Problems remain but the dialogue process helped restore locals’ confidence in their government and reconcile economic with environmental interests⁵.

Dialogue can assist in conflict resolution. In response to a dispute between rural villagers and urban inhabitants in the San Mateo Ixtatan region of Guatemala, a country still reeling from its decades-long civil war, a dialogue was convened in 2001 by the Organization for American States. Power had shifted to the cities, and rural representatives, many of them former guerilla members, wanted more attention paid to poverty relief and economic development. The dialogue, which was observed by the Catholic Church and the media, addressed these concerns while in the process providing a catharsis of sorts, as participants shared the pain and suffering they experienced from the civil war. The dialogue paved the way for greater communication and built trust between the two feuding sides.

⁴ “Argentina’s President Calls For A ‘Historic National Dialogue,’” Novinite.com (January 15, 2002). http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=5839

⁵ Galapagos National Park Service Appeals To Fishery Sector for Dialogue,” GCT.org (February 20, 2004). http://www.gct.org/feb04_6.html

V. What are some important lessons for policymakers?

Manage expectations. Be clear that the objectives are stated from the outset as well as the definition of success. Clarify that the dialogue is not the goal itself but rather a means to reaching the goal—the better to avoid what practitioners call “dialogue fatigue” and unmet expectations among people. Also this will ensure that dialogue is the best instrument under the circumstances.

Be flexible and adaptable to evolving contexts and people’s cultures. Envisage how changes (i.e. elections, outbreaks of violence, public opinion fluctuations, loss of funding, etc.) could disrupt, delay or derail the process. Be sensitive to cultural differences—ethnic, religious, or linguistic—as they arise, as they may also undermine the process.

Give a strong sense of ownership. Responsibility for the process should be with key constituencies. Dialogue should not feel imposed from above or outside. This allows voices to be heard and various stakeholders to feel more responsible for the outcomes reached.

Understand the actors involved. Sometimes referred to as “actor mapping,” be mindful of the institutions, interest groups and individuals involved. Understand the historical narrative of the crisis at hand, how events unfolded, and what the political context is. Recognize that different constituencies hold different perceptions of the process and take into account the role of “spoilers” who might disrupt the process, and how to best engage them.

Raise awareness for the dialogue. Launch public information and public awareness campaigns, through various media, so that people know the positive outcomes of the dialogue but also learn more about the issues affecting their communities. In Guatemala, for example, there was no communication about the dialogue launched to address grievances between rural dwellers and urban residents, resulting in renewed violence.

Prepare, prepare, prepare. A dialogue process is the result of careful preparation to reach the conditions necessary for a beneficial dialogue and level the playing field, as it were, before bringing people together. It is crucial to make sure the main actors and stakeholders are ready to genuinely engage in such a process.

Allow for transparency. Invite outside observers—members of the press and organizations such as the Carter Center—to participate. This helps build trust and create a feeling of inclusiveness, accountability, and transparency.

Understand shifting power dynamics. Be wary of differences among social and political hierarchies and disparities between elites, especially in status-conscious societies or countries with rigid class hierarchies. As Adam Kahane recounts after talks failed to resolve India’s child malnutrition crisis, “[W]e made one mistake: We ignored power.”⁶

⁶ “The Language of Power and the Language of Love: Solving Tough Problems in Practice,” Adam Kahane, <http://www.c2d2.ca/adx/asp/adxGetMedia.asp?DocID=690,32,Documents&MediaID=1635&Filename=Power+and+Love+3.0+1.pdf>

VI. Conclusion

Civilians too often grow frustrated by endless rounds of talks without concrete actions. That being said, the trend in international affairs points toward more dialogue, not less. “The challenge therefore is obvious,” wrote Jonas Gahr Støre, Norway’s foreign affairs minister, “to capitalize on the respect for dialogue by working to ensure that mediators and others involved are as well equipped as possible to deliver effective and long-lasting results⁷.”

The number of violent conflicts has declined in recent years as the willingness of governments, international organizations, and other actors to engage in dialogue has reached higher levels. That is no accident. To transform societies and find real solutions to the world’s most complex challenges—from violent conflict to poor governance, human rights abuses to uneven development, environmental degradation to eradicating HIV/AIDS—requires new approaches. If hearts and minds in South Africa and Northern Ireland can come unhardened, then the possibilities are endless. Take it from Albert Einstein, who correctly noted that “problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them.”

For more information on UNDP’s work on democratic dialogue, please consult:

[http://www.undp.org/cpr/we do/building_consensus.shtml](http://www.undp.org/cpr/we_do/building_consensus.shtml)

<http://www.democraticdialoguenetwork.org/index.pl>

⁷ “Don’t Cheapen Talk, Make Dialogue Work,” Humanitarian Dialogue Center (August 2007)
<http://www.hdcentre.org/files/Opinion%20-%20Don't%20cheapen%20talk%20Aug2007.pdf>