Dialogue can be viewed as one means – if not the classical one – of dealing constructively with conflicts. As the saying goes, as long as you’re talking, you can’t be shooting. What better method is there of resolving a dispute – according to another commonsense observation – than through an honest exchange of views? Initiating, organising and facilitating dialogues has become one of the key methods of peacebuilding. Scholars, educators and practitioners argue that dialogues are an important element in engaging with the opposite side in a non-confrontational manner, to “humanise” the interaction and to explore ways of preventing, managing or resolving the conflict. Central is the effort
The modern meaning of dialogue has its origins in antiquity and the Middle Ages. The term is now primarily defined as a spoken or written conversational exchange between two or more people. Originating in the Greek * diá* and *lógos*, it can be interpreted as the “flow of words” or “meaning” created by more than one person.

In contrast to the terms “discussion” and “debate”, which focus primarily on the content of a conversation, the word “dialogue” places equal emphasis on the relationship between the persons involved. Another difference is that the former terms often include a competitive component to underline the superiority of one opinion, while the latter term implies mutual understanding or the desire to identify common ground. In the reality of conversations in and on conflicts, though, the dimensions of discussion, debate and dialogue will often be mixed and can only be separated analytically. Nevertheless, the essence of a successful dialogue is that it is a face-to-face interaction between members of conflicting parties, in which they respect each other as human beings and are prepared to listen to each other deeply enough to inspire some kind of change of attitudes or learning which can contribute to conflict transformation.

to create a different kind of communication and a deeper understanding of one’s own needs and interests as well as those of the other side. At the same time, while dialogues are important to help transform relationships, promote empathy and inspire problem-solving, they are no substitute for efforts to address structural causes and engage with the power-political aspects of the conflict.
Elements of promising dialogue

During the last few decades, dialogue has become a favourite subject for creative thinkers from various disciplines. Important contributions have been made by the theologian Martin Buber, physicist David Bohm and his theory of dialogue as a process of collective learning, and William Isaacs, along with other systemic thinkers who have explored this method as a tool for organisational learning.

These and other contributions have given rise to a set of elements for dialogue that have a transformative potential for the persons involved:

- Demonstrating respect for and acknowledging the equality of all dialogue participants with their unique background and opinions.
- Developing active listening skills and empathy for the contributions from all dialogue partners.
- Suspending own assumptions, ideas, emotions and opinions for some time to allow new impulses to emerge.
- Speaking from the heart and expressing one’s own truth in a genuine manner, emphasising the process which has influenced one’s own position rather than the result.
- Slowing down the process of communication and interaction, opening up to new insights and exploring opportunities for joint learning.

This list is obviously a collection of ideal requirements which will rarely be achieved in situations of highly escalated conflicts. There, the affected persons look at each other with deep mistrust, if not hatred. They may even be reluctant to meet each other face-to-face, for example when the political escalation has created “moral”, legal and/or physical barriers to encounters with the “enemy”. The main challenges, though, are rooted much more deeply in the participants’ concepts of identity and their perceptions, fears and feelings about each other. One basic requirement for any promising dialogue is to create “safe spaces” for these meetings, sometimes also called “containers”. This can
be one of the tasks of third parties whose support and facilitation are often needed to prepare the ground for these face-to-face encounters and to enable meaningful conversations.

Together with mediation efforts, facilitated dialogues have become key tools of peacebuilding and conflict transformation work (facilitation, mediation, negotiation). While some of them are organised as one-off events, the majority of peace professionals are convinced that it is necessary to envision effective dialogues as long-term processes with a relatively continuous group of participants.

A broad spectrum of dialogue methods and tools has been developed to promote social change and to develop creative modes of participatory learning. They comprise approaches:

- to inspire participants to engage with each other in a variety of settings (e.g. using open-space techniques or the World Café approach);
- to encourage participants to speak about their conflict-related experiences, grievances, and expectations in a manner which makes more constructive interaction possible (such as Marshall Rosenberg’s “Nonviolent Communication” or Dan Bar-On’s “Reflect and Trust” initiative);
- to make use of creative methods to promote empathy and change of perspectives (e.g. theatre work, change laboratories or role reversals);
- to generate alternative futures (scenario building, future workshops and the like).

Beyond these specific approaches for a limited number of participants, some dialogue efforts aim for a much broader outreach. “National Dialogues” are often created to unite countries after a civil war or other violent traumatic experiences. The concept of creating a culture of “democratic dialogues” became popular, particularly in Latin America, in the context of politically deeply divided countries.
A key argument behind these two concepts is that the traditional democratic instruments of elections, of party-political rivalry, competing political elites and parliamentary debates might not be sufficient to ensure effective political decision-making for common good in divided and highly politicised societies. They should therefore be complemented with dialogue mechanisms and approaches. To support and qualify these types of comprehensive dialogue, “peace support structures” have been developed, for example the “Common Space for Consensus Building and Knowledge Generation” in Lebanon.

**Critique of dialogue projects**

The critique of dialogue projects in the peacebuilding and conflict transformation field has been very much focused on their strategic deficits and the difficulties in assessing their impact. Many dialogue initiatives seem to be based on the simple assumption that just bringing together representatives of conflicting parties will do some good and cannot do harm. This assumption can no longer be justified in light of various cases in which participants were attacked by hardliners from their reference group because of their encounters with the “enemy”. At the same time, there is no doubt that many dialogue projects on the grass-roots and middle levels have contributed significantly to creating islands and cultures of peace – but this has often not been translated into a macro-political impact. Another criticism is that dialogues can be harmful in highly asymmetric conflicts if they conceal the inherent inequalities on the ground by creating the formal impression of a “symmetrical dialogue”. While the more powerful representatives glorify their openness to dialogue on “difficult” issues, the less powerful representatives often perceive these encounters as a waste of time or, even worse, as a reinforcement of the unequal status quo.

As with all other tools of peacebuilding and conflict transformation, it is crucial to conceptualise all dialogue work within a strategic context and an explicit theory of change and to be pre-
pared for a long-term process which will need parallel efforts to address the structural drivers of conflict.

References and Further Reading


Online Resources
