



10 Facilitating Negotiation and Dialogue

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“Nobody is as wise as we all together.”

African proverb

When working to overcome differences on a political and societal level in order to transform violent conflicts, the facilitation of dialogues and negotiations is a key tool for peacebuilders. Over time, the applications of facilitation as a peacebuilding tool have diversified. Facilitated processes are now implemented with a broad range of participants such as decision-makers in their private capacity (informal track 1 processes), influential individuals and analysts from civil society (track 2 processes), or mixtures of civil society and decision-makers (track 1.5 processes).

FACILITATION | the assistance of an accepted “third party” to ease the management of communication and process of dialogue, negotiation or other encounters. Facilitation happens before, during and after meetings.

DIALOGUE | a face-to-face interaction between people with different backgrounds, convictions and opinions, in which they respect each other as human beings and are prepared to listen to – and learn from – each other deeply enough to inspire a change of attitudes.

NEGOTIATION | back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement in a situation where parties on different sides of the situation in question have a number of interests in common and others that are conflicting.

All three are central to peacemaking as well as peacebuilding and play a role in all peace processes.

The different terms used to describe the communicative aspects of third-party (or occasionally insider-peacebuilder) involvement in a peace process have significant conceptual and practical overlaps.

Facilitating transformative dialogue

Dialogue methods and benefits

Dialogue, face-to-face interaction between people with different backgrounds, convictions and opinions, in which they respect each other as human beings and are prepared to listen to each other deeply enough to inspire change of attitudes or learning, is one central means – if not the classical one – of dealing with conflicts in a constructive way. 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 common-

On terminology ...

Facilitation is characterised by the presence of an accepted “third party”, who assists the negotiating (or conflict) parties in managing key elements of the communication and/or negotiation process. While *mediation* (→ Mediation and Mediation Support), a semi-directive type of facilitation, emphasises the need to reach a mutually accepted agreement, many facilitators focus more on improving the relationship and general communication between the parties. Facilitators and mediators both help the group to communicate more effectively and improve their mutual understanding. Their responsibilities relate to the process rather than the content but facilitators can also act to some extent as creative content providers for enriching the discussion.

Dialogue, as Norbert Ropers defines it in “Basics of Dialogue Facilitation”, is the meaningful and meaning-creating exchange of perceptions and opinions and is one of the methods people most frequently turn to when addressing conflictive issues peacefully.

Negotiation can be broadly defined as a communication process between two or more actors, who are mutually interdependent, for the ostensible purpose of reaching an agreement on a situation perceived as a problem or conflict. In many ways, negotiation is a basic means of getting what you want from others. It is back-and-forth communication designed to reach an agreement in a situation where parties on different sides of the situation in question have a number of interests in common and others that are conflicting.

sense observation – than through an honest exchange of views? 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 and avoids the usual element of “competition” as much as possible. The central goal is to try 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. This paves the way to exploring better ways of preventing, managing, resolving or even transforming conflict.

Some of the elements widely regarded as hallmarks of constructive dialogue are:

- ≡ 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 one’s 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.

While dialogues are important to help transform relationships, promote empathy, and inspire problem-solving, they are, of course, no substitute for efforts to address structural causes and engage with the power-political aspects of the conflict. The ideal requirements will rarely be achieved in the context of highly escalated conflicts. There, the affected persons may be reluctant even 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, however, are rooted much more deeply, in the participants’ concepts of identity and their perceptions, fears (for example of losing face or being seen as weak), and feelings about each other. One fundamental requirement for any promising dialogue is therefore the creation of “safe spaces” for these meetings.

Some dialogues are one-off events, but most 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. Some of the approaches at the disposal of a facilitator are:

- ≡ inspiring participants to engage with each other in a variety of settings (e.g. using open-space techniques or the World Café approach);
- ≡ encouraging participants to speak about their conflict-related experiences, grievances, and expectations in a manner which enables more constructive interaction (e.g. through story-telling or biographical work, an approach explored and honed by the Berghof Foundation, for example in the South Caucasus);
- ≡ making use of creative methods to promote empathy and a change of perspectives (e.g. theatre work, change laboratories, or role reversals);
- ≡ generating alternative visions of the future (scenario-building, future workshops, and the like, another area that the Berghof Foundation is investigating both in its research and in its practical engagement).

Criticism of dialogue projects

Criticism of dialogue projects in the peacebuilding and conflict transformation field has focused mainly on the strategic deficits of dialogues 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 constituency because of their encounters with the “enemy”. At the same time, there is no doubt that many dialogue projects at the grassroots and middle levels have contributed significantly to creating islands

and cultures of peace – even if these efforts often fail to translate into a macro-political impact (→ Establishing Infrastructures for Peace).

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 then may glorify their openness to dialogue on “difficult” issues, representatives of the less powerful party often perceive these encounters as a waste of time, a fig leaf or, even worse, as reinforcing the unequal status quo.

In the Berghof Foundation’s experience, as with all other tools of peacebuilding and conflict transformation it is crucial to conceptualise dialogue work within a strategic context and an explicit theory of change and to be prepared for a long-term process with parallel efforts to address the structural drivers of conflict.

Facilitating negotiation as a tool for peace support work

Transformation models build on the assumption that a conflict develops from its latent phase towards a manifest phase. This is because conflict parties evolve and mature over time: a “party to the conflict” develops, at a later stage when the situation is ‘ripe’, into a “party to the negotiations”. In other words, (meaningful) negotiation and mediation can only take place and succeed when the parties acknowledge that there is indeed a conflict and when they accept the other party’s relevance in achieving some form of (re)solution.

Due to its open-ended character and flexible selection of participants, facilitation can be a good tool in creating spaces for encounters, exchange, and (possibly, preparatory) dialogue in situations where negotiation is impossible, either because parties do not accept its necessity or because official negotiation formats exist but the process is not dynamic and shows signs of

a stalemate. (See also → Mediation and Mediation Support and → Breaking Deadlocks.)

Outside of working with two or more warring parties, facilitation can also be directed towards social and political reform on one side only. The facilitated process empowers participants to advocate reforms that are also influenced by the views, hopes, and problems of the “other side” (→ Empowerment and Ownership). Mutual understanding, respect and recognition create the framework for people to define their own issues.

References and Further Reading

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Online Resources

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