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From Resolution to Transformation:
The Role of Dialogue Projects

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1. Introduction

Dialogues can be viewed as one means – if not the classical one – of dealing constructively with conflicts. As one popular formula puts it: „As long as you're talking, you can't be shooting". „What better method is there of resolving a contentious issue", so runs another down-to-earth, commonsense observation, „than through an honest exchange of views?" „And", says discourse ethics, „what other way is there of finding lasting solutions to the numerous political-cum-moral conflicts in an interdependent and pluralistic world, than through „practical discourse between the affected parties" (Apel 1990).

In the sphere of classical diplomacy, skills in negotiation and dialogue have long formed part of the basic repertoire of any prudent management of international relations, although at least in the public perception, the dialoguing skills of official ‚Track 1' diplomacy have all too often been driven into the background by the constraints of power politics and *realpolitik*. Representatives of non-official ‚Track 2' diplomacy, by contrast, have instead chosen to place communication, direct encounters and mutual understanding centre-stage. Interest in non-official dialogue initiatives of this kind has been further fostered by the continuing rise in the number of acute or potentially violent disputes, particularly of the ethno-political and protracted variety, increasingly taking place *within* society.

There are now a huge number of dialogue projects underway – from the grassroots right up to leadership level – all designed to settle, resolve or influence conflicts. But the trend is not without its critics. What good does it really do if it is only, as a rule, the moderate representatives of parties to a conflict that gather around a table? Even if comprehension and understanding are achieved between influential persons within the framework of a workshop or series of workshops, does the success of the whole enterprise not rather depend on how the follow-up is managed?

And lastly: do adherents of the dialogue method not run the danger of fundamentally overestimating the importance of communication in dealing with conflicts? The ultimate concerns of most disputes, after all, are not stereotypical perceptions, differences of opinion and varying cultural standards, but rather tangible conflicts of interest, structural factors and the struggle for power and influence. It would seem, then, that dialogues must be put in the context of the overall dynamics of conflict and conflict transformation.

Most scholars and practitioners will agree that protracted conflicts can only be effectively transformed through efforts which also address the structural causes and power political aspects of the conflict, in addition to the psychosocial dimensions, grievances and relationship issues. Clearly, due to their emphasis on communication and personal interaction, dialogues are primarily used as an instrument within the psychosocial conflict transformation paradigm. It is therefore within that more narrowly defined conceptual context that I will evaluate their usefulness.

In the following, I propose to examine some of the core features of dialogue projects,

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looking at their variations and implications in greater detail. First I will give an overview of several different ‚ideal types‘ of dialogues, as well as identifying the basic elements of most dialogue processes. Second, I will distinguish between four concepts of dialogue work, a taxonomy which serves primarily to illustrate the practical nature of such projects. Third, dialogue projects will be set in the context of various approaches to handling conflict, in order to better establish criteria for measuring success. Fourth, I will present a number of lessons learned in the course of recent evaluation studies. The questions raised above will be discussed at the end, on the basis of the underlying empirical experience on which this chapter is based.

2. Approaches to the Systematization of Dialogues

The recent literature gives particular attention to two ways of classifying dialogues: First, the identification of ideal types of dialogue and, second, the differentiation of phases according to the typical steps of interaction and communication which constitute a constructive process of dialogue.

Jay Rothman (1998) has proposed classifying approaches to dialogue in inter-group conflicts into three or four ideal types:

• Whether the commonest form of interchange actually merits the name dialogue is doubtful: in a *positional dialogue* the parties articulate their respective views – which may range from differing to diametrically opposed – as positions and attitudes that merely require acknowledgement. As in a parliamentary debate, communication serves primarily to score points, as one argument is set against the other.

• In the case of *human-relations dialogue* the differences of opinion on the substantive issues are relegated to a secondary place and work is instead done at the relational level, focusing on the causes of misunderstandings and the stereotypes which typically arise between the parties. These kinds of dialogues are often preceded by preparatory training sessions on basic mechanisms of perception and interaction in groups. The objectives are mutual acknowledgement of the person and increased respect by each party for the other. What impact this might have in terms of the substance of the conflict is an open question.

• *Activist dialogue* goes one step further. The subjects at issue are sorted and analysed in order to identify common ground, and/or to explore how the parties might contain their dispute through joint action.

• The most ambitious approach is the *problem-solving dialogue*, in which the disputants organize their communication in such a way that they are able to systematically work through the substance of their differences. Where conflicts are highly escalated, this kind of dialogue will generally require the presence of a third party as a co-actor – or indeed as an initiator.

These approaches are more than just a useful way of classifying dialogues according to their prevailing forms of interaction. Taken together, they also emphasize different yet complementary elements of dealing constructively with conflicts through dialogue. In a modified form, one can also conceptualise the different types of dialogues as steps in a process of enhancing the quality of communication and interaction between the dialogue partners (*see* Figure 1). Adherents of the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) Movement have put forward a template of four phases for responding to conflicts through communication:

• The first phase is concerned with formulating the *differing points of view* of the various parties as clearly as possible, securing mutual acknowledgement of these, as well as identifying the substance of the conflict.

- The focus in the second phase is on reflection on the underlying needs and fears of the participating actors, their values, their experiences of conflict and their hopes. Ideally, it should also be possible, in this phase, to develop approaches for securing personal acknowledgement of and insight into the conflicting biographies of the other side.
- The third phase is devoted to the identification of shared *interests* and similar *needs and fears*. It can also be aimed at the initiation of practical cooperation on less controversial issues.
- In most cases the fourth phase requires a lengthy period of preparation, and also personal confidence-building. It involves discussing approaches and ideas for *addressing the substantive issues in dispute*, reflecting on how these approaches and ideas might be implemented and then *initiating practical measures for their resolution*.

Figure 1: Levels of Cooperation in Dialogue Processes

Pre-negotiations
Joint Action
Explorative Problem Solving
Analysing Issues
Mutual Understanding
Contact

Source: McCartney 1986

In the case of protracted conflicts, dialogues between disputing groups will often be structured as a series of dialogue events, sometimes extending over a period of many months or even years. Several models help to conceptualise constructive developments for such a series of events. One of these focuses especially on the character of the relationship between the parties and the success of the joint efforts as the key characteristics, thus interpreting progress as a process of relationship building, problem solving and collaborative action (McCartney 1986):

- Contact and confidence building;
- Empathy for the other side;
- Joint analysis of conflict issues;
- Explorative problem solving;
- Joint activities in the possibility that the dialogue might feed into official negotiations or pre-negotiations.

Most dialogues take the form of *organized group encounters* of a size that allows face-to-face communication. They are usually conducted with persons below top leadership-level. They are therefore not so much official negotiations as a form of political preliminaries. As a rule, responsibility for the initiation, organization, and direction of the meetings is assumed by a third party. This third party need not come from outside the country; it can also consist of moderate individuals from inside the conflict region.

In the case of highly escalated disputes, or in divided societies, organizing a peaceful coming-together will be difficult, with intervenors often finding themselves unable to successfully get through even the first phase. In the case of protracted conflicts, several meetings will likely be necessary, and intervenors must always allow for the possibility of slipping back to an earlier phase. The need for time, as well as the general fragility of the process, demand from the organizers of dialogue projects a great deal of persistence, as well as a compelling long-term vision and the necessary resources.

The basic idea behind dialogue-based meetings is not new. It was given its initiation in post-1945 Europe, in the context of the paradigm of international intercultural understanding. Then, the prime target group was young people. What drove the endeavour was the conviction that increased contact and interaction between individuals from different backgrounds could help eliminate prejudices and enemy images and create trans-frontier loyalties. Since then, this fairly naïve ‚contact hypothesis' has been supplanted by more sophisticated concepts of ‚intercultural learning' (Otten/Treuheit 1994).

Dialogue-based meetings intended expressly to deal with ethno-political conflicts are a more recent phenomenon, but they draw on similar beliefs. Probably the most influential school of instruction in these methods is the ‚interactive conflict-resolution' or ‚interactive problem-solving' movement (Mitchell and Banks 1996; Kelman 1992; Ronald Fisher 1997). The roots of this approach go back to the 1960s, when various scholar/practitioners began to invite influential representatives of conflicting parties to workshops, in order either to then guide them through the above-mentioned four phases of constructive dialogue in a quasi-academic exercise, or to facilitate this process. Experience with the use of this approach has now been gathered in a number of different crisis regions.

Despite this, there has still been little movement to employ this interactive conflict resolution instrument on a systematic, broad-scale basis. The focus has, instead, been on selective combinations of this approach with other methods of influencing conflicts, as laid out in the following sections.

3. Dialogue Projects in Practice

To my knowledge, no representative or comprehensive overview of practical dialogue projects in conflict regions has so far been undertaken, even at a superficial level. Debates about the usefulness of this set of instruments have so far mostly been confined – depending on the milieu concerned – to specific forms of dialogue. The result has been an academic discussion concerned primarily with interactive conflict resolution, in which the scholar/practitioners set the tone as third parties.

The NGO world, on the other hand, shows a strong preference for combinations of dialogue projects with other practical schemes designed to address the common concerns of particular groups (e.g. women, youth), advocacy events (e.g. peace rallies) or training events. Such documentation as does exist on the conduct and results of dialogue projects initially related mainly to the more academic approaches. Subsequently, the interests of the financial sponsors has led to more extensive documentation of other projects as well.

Once again, from the perspective of ideal types, four practical forms of dialogue projects can be distinguished, with particular reference to the objectives they pursue over and above the communicative purposes discussed above.

3.1 Dialogue projects as grassroots peacebuilding and interpersonal reconciliation efforts

These projects generally relate to the local or neighbourhood level, bringing together people in similar situations and with similar interests (young people, women, trade unionists, the religiously active) or persons who share a similar or interdependent fate because of a violent past (widows and orphans of war, children of victims and perpetrators etc.). The central elements are

personal encounters and the elimination of barriers to communication. The governing idea is human-relations dialogue and the long-term objective is the replication of encounters of this kind, in order to better promote peace from below.

A particularly interesting example of this approach is that of the ‚To Reflect and Trust' (TRT) movement, which brings together children of victims and perpetrators for sharing and exploring ways of integrating the violent past (Bar-On 2000). The effectiveness of projects like this largely depends on the extent to which it proves possible to move beyond single encounters, building up longer-term personal relations and creating more permanent shared structures.

3.2 Dialogue projects combined with individual capacity-building

Given the explicit aim of dialogue-initiatives to achieve understanding, it seems obvious that one should also make use of such occasions to enhance participants' skills in interacting constructively with one another. Another factor that speaks for this combination of training and conflict management is the fact that real encounters provide an ideal setting to try out dialogue skills. Such a combination of techniques is, however, not without its risks and disadvantages. For one thing, the target groups for conflictive encounter and for training are not necessarily the same; and secondly, participants can simply become confused if, in the course of a series of encounters, the facilitators fail to fully explain the purpose of the different exercises.

3.3 Dialogue projects combined with institution building, networking, and practical projects

Combinations such as these are usually only possible after the successful conclusion of a fairly long process of confidence-building and work on the phases of dialogue as described above. The task in many cases is either to institutionalise the dialogue in the form of inter-ethnic advisory bodies, reconciliation commissions, or NGO networks, or to set up or build the capacity of individual NGOs. In other cases, dialogue projects provide the starting-point for practical endeavours such as income-generating schemes for groups of the population particularly hard hit by the conflict – unemployed young people, for example.

It is generally agreed that these are all good ways of enhancing the effectiveness of dialogues, as well as of fully realizing their potential to bring about structural change. What is often overlooked, one has to admit, is that these kinds of follow-up measures place different demands on the practitioners involved. Thus, although many initiatives do succeed in containing macro-conflicts through dialogue, they subsequently founder on the internal meso- and micro-rivalries that surface during institution building.

3.4 Dialogue projects as pre-negotiation

The most ambitious dialogue-based undertakings are those that are designed to exert influence on the management of the conflict at the political leadership level. This is precisely what interactive conflict resolution and problem-solving approaches aim to do by holding confidential workshops at which a third party shows influential members of the conflicting parties how to develop insights and ideas, in the hope that this will later facilitate and give new life to the official negotiations. For this latter reason, this approach is sometimes also described as a part of the pre-negotiation phase. In evaluations of the practical results of these kinds of endeavours, effects were

initially only classified as either internal or external – i.e. affecting either those directly involved or the broader context of the conflict. Today, however, discussions on this are significantly more nuanced.

4. Dialogue Projects in the Context of Theories of Conflict Management

How is the success of dialogue projects to be assessed? Chris Mitchell has proposed that the success of pre-negotiation dialogue projects can be assessed at three levels (1993, 82ff.):
- impact on the persons involved (changes in attitude, new patterns of behaviour);
- output, particularly in terms of ideas, proposals, practical measures, etc., that are then incorporated into the process of political goal formation;
- long-term impact on the overall conflict.

Commenting on the first level is relatively straightforward, given that there is by now an established research area of social psychology and group dynamics from which to draw. In practice, however, most evaluation consists of inviting participants to comment at the end of the events, which normally gives a preponderance of undifferentiated communication of positive opinions. Assessments of the second and third levels have so far been based entirely on the case studies conducted by the organizers, as well as on their contacts in the respective conflict regions. For example, Ronald Fisher evaluated 76 reports relating to workshops held between 1965 and 1995 and arrived at a reported success rate of 84 per cent (1997, 187ff.). However understandable this sort of positive self-assessment is, it does tell us regrettably little about just what sort of dialogue will promote what kind of impact and long-term effects, and with what sort of people (including what third party!), at what juncture, and on what scale in order to achieve success.

It seems clear that these questions cannot be answered solely from within the framework of an explicit theory and practice of dialogue, of whatever nature. This points to the broader context of macro-political conflict management (Hoffman 1995).

In general, theoretical investigation of inter-group conflict management is still rather poorly developed. Many concrete questions that have naturally emerged from practical experience in regard to appropriate strategies to be used in actual situations of conflict remain unanswered; there are to date very few useful recommendations based on detailed theoretical discussions and their empirical verification. The most high-profile approaches documented in this context are normative concepts of ‚interest-led dispute resolution‘ (Fisher and Ury 1981), comparative case studies (Zartman 1985) and an empirical-cum-quantitative investigation of the characteristics of conflicts that appear to have been settled peacefully (Bercovitch and Houston 1996). Explicit references to theories of social change or of conflict remain the exception.

This theory gap is especially apparent when it comes to stipulating the yardsticks by which the success of individual activities or programmes of intervention are to be measured. Because of the social complexities, it is extraordinarily difficult to establish a causal link between micro-measures and macro-effects. It is therefore all the more necessary that we find a way to explicitly address the gap and to isolate and examine the unspoken assumptions underlying a large part of conflict management practice and research (Kleiboer 1996; Ross and Rothman 1999). If we fail to do this, there is a very real danger that peacemaking will be equated either with the stabilization of relationships of dominance (Francis 2003) or with the mere smoothing over of social relations.

Recently, however, we have begun to observe somewhat of a *rapprochement* between theory and practice. Indicators of this are evident in various state-of-the-art reviews and in conflict

impact assessment studies (Lund and Rasamoelina 2000) which aim to formulate criteria for the effective use of conflict management measures in established fields of activity such as development cooperation.

Cordula Reimann (*see* her contribution in this volume) has proposed classifying both theoretical and practical approaches to conflict management into three ideal/typical categories. Her taxonomy permits a more precise conceptual classification of dialogue projects and the yardsticks for measuring their success (*see* Box 1). The division that she suggests also makes it clear that successes within one category cannot simply be assumed to apply to others.

The conflict settlement approach aims to secure or adjust the political order in the face of acute or potentially violent conflict, as well as to achieve a viable balance between the interests of the various leadership groups that hold power. Within this framework, dialogue projects can usefully fulfil the function of gauging the scope for official negotiations at the level of advisers and persons of influence. If it then proves possible to move initiatives for dialogue on to a broader footing, and to elicit a positive response to them in at least a section of the media, they can also create an atmosphere conducive to negotiation at this level.

The relatively small number of case studies which examine the general set-up surrounding official negotiations indicates that the results of civil society dialogue projects have so far only rarely been directly translated into official measures. Official policymakers continue to harbour significant psychological and procedural reservations about this form of citizen participation. Appointing persons of trust, on the other hand, – such as elder statesman Jimmy Carter – to carry out semi-official exploratory missions seems to present fewer problems. The influence exerted by dialogue projects must therefore generally be regarded as indirect and relatively long-term. It involves the socialization of potential future leaders, the creation of networks of personal relationships, and the airing of new ideas in safe forums – as demonstrated by Kelman's use of the preparatory measures that preceded the Israeli-Palestine accord of 1993 (Kelman 1995).

This gap between official and unofficial diplomacy is not just an expression of the differing legitimacy and power-political options that exist between states and the realm of civil society. Many protagonists of dialogue-based approaches have observed that it also reflects a fundamentally different understanding of conflict. In their view, protracted conflicts are a clear sign of the failure to satisfy basic needs in regard to security, recognition, and participation, as well as the desire for social change (Burton 1990; Burton and Dukes 1990). It is then the task of conflict resolution to deal not only with the more obvious conflicts over matters of substance, but also with the troubled relations between the parties, in order to set the substantive conflicts themselves in a new context and begin to tackle them as a shared problem.

Dialogue projects are indeed an important instrument of the conflict resolution approach, primarily because its key objectives are the mutual clarification of perceptions and relations and improvements in communication. That said, most dialogue projects turn out to be relatively brief affairs, difficult to sustain over a longer period. Where this is successfully managed, however, it usually significantly increases the likelihood that the process will indeed lead to the creation of a group of people that possess the valuable experience of dialoguing and have come to value close links with the other side. None the less the challenges with which these projects are eventually confronted all stem usually from the question of how the dialogue about the clarification of relations and the analysis of the conflict can then be moved beyond joint (exploratory) problem-solving to encompass practical implementation measures.

The third approach to conflict management builds on the notions of conflict settlement and conflict resolution, but lays additional stress on the need for structural change. From the point

of view of conflict transformation, lasting peacemaking in divided societies and societies traumatized by war requires a broad range of measures aimed, on the one hand, at eliminating socio-economic inequalities and, on the other, at building up political and social capacities that will enable those involved to cope with (ethnic) plurality. Within this framework, dialogue projects can perform a valuable bridge-building function. The main criterion by which they must be measured, however, is the degree to which they help strengthen disadvantaged groups and create a changed dispute settlement culture at the grassroots level. This, in turn, raises the question as to just how and to what extent bridge-building activities and joint activities across conflict divides can have an added empowering impact on those involved.

It is clear from this classification that we are going to have to apply different measures of the success of dialogue projects, depending on the goals and context involved. As is generally the case in conflict management, success is very much a multi-faceted phenomenon. If we accept the conflict transformation assumption that conflicts are transformed through simultaneous result-

Box 1: The Role of Dialogue Projects in the Context of Different Approaches to Conflict Management				
Approach to Conflict Management	**Notion of Conflict**	**Preferred Practical Approach**	**Measures of Success**	**Role of Dialogue Projects**
Conflict Settlement	Conflict as a problem of the status quo and political order	Track 1: Diplomacy and power politics at official leadership level	Results-oriented: political settlements with stabilizing effect	Organizing pre-negotiations Promoting a political climate of understanding
Conflict Resolution	Conflict as a catalyst of social change	Track 2: Direct civil society conflict management, esp. at the middle-ranking leadership level	Process-oriented: improved communication, interaction, and relations between parties; respect for different collective identities	Creating a leadership class with experience of dialoguing Workshops on communication, problem-solving, etc.
Conflict Transformation	Conflict as non-violent struggle for social justice	Track 3: Strengthening capacities of disadvantaged groups to act/deal with conflict, and capacity of divided/war-traumatized societies to integrate	Structure-oriented: elimination of socio-economic inequalities between identity groups; good governance; power sharing; creation of cross-cutting civil society structure; building conflict management capacities at the grassroots level	Practising communication and interaction skills Providing opportunities for encounter and learning between polarized groups Empowering groups

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oriented, process-oriented, and structure-oriented approaches, it becomes clear that projects of this kind will need to be undertaken in parallel at several levels. The model most frequently cited for this in recent years is that of ,peace constituencies' or ,peace alliances' (Lederach 1997). The question of just what contribution dialogue projects in particular could or should make to the creation of peace constituencies has, however, not so far been much discussed. One possible route to the answer to this question is provided by the lessons learned and best practice studies that have examined individual dialogue projects in greater detail.

5. Lessons Learned

The following list of nine ,lessons' is derived from a number of published and unpublished studies (Spencer 1998; Charles Stewart Mott Foundation 1999; Haumersen/ Rademacher/Ropers 2002; Wolleh 2002), as well as on the author's own experiences with problem-solving workshops on conflicts in the Caucasus. For purposes of brevity, attention is focused on those aspects that are of relevance to projects aimed at exerting influence on the political macro-conflict.

- The ambitious goal of a problem-solving dialogue between parties to protracted conflicts can only be achieved within the framework of a *long-term process of work and learning*. Personal confidence-building, clarification of positions and perceptions and reflection on background facts are important prerequisites to any substantive discussion of the material issues.
  A key role is played here by the joint handling of crises – e.g. escalatory processes within the group, as well as threats and other influences from outside – and by the realization that all the participants have similar problems of acceptance vis-à-vis their home constituency. Also important is that all participants have the positive experience of arrangements that are adhered to – e.g. agreements about the confidentiality of the talks or regarding the solution of practical problems. The initiating third party must therefore consider whether it is able to indeed ensure such a long-term process (in practice, this can extend over several years). In a worst-case scenario, one must reckon with the possibility that if there are only a few meetings, or even only one, many problems will be stirred up, but the mistrust of the participants will ultimately be even greater than before.

- If the dialogue process is to get off to a good start, the *choice of the initial protagonists* is also crucial. For one thing, these participants must prove themselves capable of getting some kind of meaningful exchange off the ground – a fact that speaks strongly for the involvement of more moderately inclined spokespersons. For another, this first choice of participants also acts as a signal that will help to determine whether the enterprise is taken seriously or merely dismissed as an outsider's or traitor's venture. There is therefore much to be said for having a mixture of moderate and well networked mainstream people involved in the initial phase.
  At the same time, thought should also be given to the appropriate ways in which hardliners could, in the medium term, be brought in to the process. ,Bringing in' does not automatically imply participation in meetings; it might initially consist solely of efforts to engage the hardliners in a conversation about their concerns and resistance. Those that unequivocally advocate violence would not, in any case, be suitable for involvement in a dialoguing enterprise. It is important, however, to accurately appraise their potential for disruption and resistance.

- Contrary to popular belief, the real challenge of dialogue projects lies less in the effective mastery of facilitation methods and communication techniques during actual encounters than in the *organizational input* required simply to finance, prepare, and conduct these sessions. In the

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context of divided societies and communities riven by factions, the mere announcement of the intention to stage such a dialogue project will often be met with mistrust and rejection, if not downright obstruction by the responsible authorities or holders of power.

Because of this, meetings may well need to be conducted outside the country concerned, necessitating high logistical and financial inputs. In order to prepare for these meetings, third party representatives may need to conduct various exploratory talks on both sides and, through shuttle diplomacy, achieve a consensus at least as to the proposed list of participants and programme. These activities are themselves part of the broader dialogue process, although they all too often take a back seat in discussions about the relevance of these approaches.

- Any intervention, however well-meaning, has both intentional and unintentional consequences. Initiators of dialogue projects therefore bear an *ethical responsibility* to carefully consider the consequences of their actions – especially those consequences which, though unintended or unforeseen, will nevertheless range from the conceivable to the probable. First among these is the task of working out and minimizing the security risks imposed on the meeting invitees. In highly asymmetrical conflicts, for example, participation in the dialogue will often lead to the weaker party adopting a more radical stance. Finally, any third party intervening in an acute conflict will have to consider the problem of maintaining its ‚multi-partiality' especially when confronted with massive human rights violations by one or the other side.

- In general, the interactive conflict resolution movement has been dominated by a specific type of problem-solving workshop with a facilitation style which is strongly influenced by the academic-analytical, and sometimes dogmatic, world of the initiators (Fisher 1997). Given the wider practical experience that we have now been able to gather, however, there is much to be said for setting the *intervention methodology* in dialogue projects on a much broader and more flexible basis. It would, in particular, be a good idea for the wealth of experience gained in adult education, intercultural learning, group dynamics, counselling, supervision, and mediation in the narrower sense to be put to use in producing an active form of dialoguing.

  This process begins with the question of the appropriate composition of the team, as well as an examination of the normative messages that necessarily emanate from the behaviour of the team when the team itself is faced with conflicts. It continues with uncovering the different currents within the group dynamic. This is important because resistance to *rapprochement* in dialogues often expresses itself subliminally, as an apparently sudden hardening, or by the raising of unexpected new topics of discussion. Finally, the process also touches on the question of how much or how little the dialogue should be geared towards the identification of concrete problem-solving strategies.

- One method that is now quite frequently employed to encourage changes of perspective amongst participants in dialogues is the incitement to *reflect* on a *similar ethno-political conflict* and on the insights that can be drawn from this. The underlying idea is that it is often easier to understand the point of view of all the parties involved, as well as to come to a less prejudiced appraisal of the overall situation, when considering a conflict other than one's own.

  It is then often possible, as in a mirror, to identify new aspects of one's own conflict situation. Ideally, the analogous case will be one in which work is at a more advanced stage, so that one can then ask which settlement aspects might well also be suitable for one's own conflict. In practice, however, the process is usually not as smooth as this. Participants stress the uniqueness of their conflict, feeling that any attempt at comparison might rob them of an essential part of what gives their own case its meaning. None the less, in retrospect, participants often cite these thought experiments as amongst the most important for any breakthroughs achieved during the dialogues.

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- As explained above, the macro-political effects of dialogue projects are notoriously difficult to assess. It is therefore all the more important to take a closer look at the possible impact of this work on the *meso-social level*. One of the key measures of success here is undoubtedly the degree to which intervenors succeed in increasing ownership of the dialogue process by the participants and their respective affinity groups or organizations. Do they manage to integrate the dialogue events systematically in their endeavours to clarify perceptions, positions and events, to analyse options and to explore common ground?

  Such an objective cannot be met simply by increasing the participants' level of involvement in the design of the seminars. It also requires that the dialogue sessions be fleshed out and complemented with additional opportunities for preliminary and follow-up activities, for more in-depth treatment of individual topics, and for skill-building by the participants. Possible mechanisms through which this could be enabled are local back-up forums, working groups, and training sessions. Another possible measure of success is the expansion of the circle of participants, both in terms of the numbers taking part or the subsequent replication of similar approaches, especially in terms of movement closer to the Track 1 level. In practice, the goal is to strike an appropriate balance between achieving a solid nucleus of people who will provide new impetus for conflict resolution, and at the same time continually extending this circle (outreach).

- In divided societies and communities traumatized by war, dialogue projects will sooner or later be confronted with the question of how their work and the impetus they have provided for practical measures can be *institutionally anchored*, in bodies that will replace the temporary forums set up by the third parties in the initial phase. Without this kind of institutional anchoring, there is always a real danger that the initially positive effects of the dialogue will eventually fizzle out. Institutionalisation of the dialogue can of course take very different forms, ranging from semi-governmental inter-ethnic commissions, through joint task-forces to multi-ethnic NGOs.

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- But probably the most important conceptual contribution which the dialogue-project approach can make to the creation of peace constituencies or peace alliances is that of generally *promoting a dialogue-based dispute culture*. This means that the characteristic elements of interest-led constructive dialogue described at the outset should not just be used to positive effect in a handful of inter-group projects, but should become a basic paradigm of political culture. It has become a hallmark of many ethno-political conflicts – the Middle East is a case in point – that real transformation will only be possible to the extent that a constructive dialogue takes place among the parties to the conflict.

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