

Democratic Dialogue – A Handbook for Practitioners





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Chapter 1.3: Defining Dialogue

As many writings on dialogue point out, the word derives from the Greek *dialogos*, which means through (*dia*) the word (*logos*), or through the meaning of the word. Literally, then, it can describe any communication that uses words to convey meaning. However, as used in the public sphere in the post-cold war context described in Chapter 1.1, the term has come to mean a specific kind of participatory process—one that is particularly well suited to addressing the societal needs described in Chapter 1.2.

This chapter does not attempt to develop a definition of dialogue that is applicable in all instances. Rather, it considers the ways in which practitioners understand the meaning of dialogue and the defining characteristics of dialogue processes, expressed as a set of governing principles, derived from their experience. The chapter also introduces the concept of the ‘dialogic approach’. For people engaged in dialogue initiatives, this is a kind of code of conduct derived from the governing principles. Many practitioners think the dialogic approach can also be an effective way of engaging in other kinds of decision-making and consultative processes in which people are addressing societal challenges.

Definitions

Given the challenges that dialogue practitioners are seeking to address, it is natural that their understanding of what dialogue is should focus on outcomes. OAS dialogue experts, for example, define dialogue simply as a ‘problem-solving process’ that is ‘utilized to address socio-political and economic-based issues that cannot be adequately and effectively solved by one or several governmental institutions alone’.¹⁹ Similarly, on the basis of a broad survey of UNDP personnel, Mark Gerzon

For further reading

Two books by US public opinion researcher Daniel Yankelovich provide a helpful integration of many of the theories mentioned here, with practice-based explanations of and arguments for dialogue processes: *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991); and *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (New York: Touchstone, 1999).

reported that, across a wide variety of specific definitions, there was convergence on essential elements: ‘The critical quality of dialogue lies in that participants come together in a safe space to understand each other’s viewpoint in order to develop new options to address a commonly identified problem.’²⁰ Juanita Brown, co-developer of the World Café process, captures this key quality in simple terms by talking about ‘conversations that matter’.²¹

By and large, practitioners do not rely on theoretical sources to explain or justify their belief in the societal value of these participatory, outcome-oriented processes. Those who do might mention the theory of ‘communicative action’ developed by Jurgen Habermas, or Hannah Arendt’s concept of ‘representative thinking’.²² Others might point to the theory of how conversation creates reality, developed by the evolutionary biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela; to the theories of the philosopher and educator Paolo Freire about the capacity of ordinary people to learn and to play a constructive role in shaping the world they live in; or to Martin Buber’s theories of relationship.²³

For working definitions of dialogue, however, practitioners tend to draw mainly on their experience in the field, and they often define dialogue by describing what it is *not*—for example, negotiation or debate. Increasingly, as the field has formed and practitioners have begun to interact and learn together about their common work, they have recognized the need for definitions that take account of the different societal settings in which they are operating. This is particularly true in the global context, where practitioner networks cross regional as well as national boundaries.

Defining Dialogue as a Distinctive Kind of Process

In his *Socratic Dialogues*, the Greek philosopher Plato described the method his teacher, Socrates, used for deriving truth through a logical sequence of inquiry and response. The core concept in the Socratic method of making meaning through conversation is part of all definitions of dialogue, but that method’s highly structured and rational form of interaction bears little resemblance to the way practitioners characterize it.²⁴ Instead, they tend to emphasize learning rather than discovering truth, and to include the role of feelings such as trust, respect and empathy, as well as the exchange of ideas and thinking, as the basis for developing common understanding.

For example, Hal Saunders of the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue and the Kettering Foundation offers this definition:

Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take others’ concerns into her or his own picture,

‘...in dialogue, the intention is not to advocate but to inquire; not to argue but to explore; not to convince but to discover’.

*even when disagreement persists. No participant gives up her or his identity, but each recognizes enough of the other's valid human claims that he or she will act differently toward the other.*²⁵

One of the most common ways in which practitioners convey a sense of the particular qualities of conversation that define dialogue is to distinguish it from other kinds of conversation, such as debate or discussion. IDEA, for example, in *Dialogue for Democratic Development* (1999), says that 'dialogue is different from debate in that it encourages diversity of thinking and opinions rather than suppressing these notions ... In the practice of dialogue, there is an agreement that one person's concepts or beliefs should not take precedence over those of others'.²⁶ This means, in the words of Louise Diamond of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, that 'in dialogue, the intention is not to advocate but to inquire; not to argue but to explore; not to convince but to discover'.²⁷ Hal Saunders explains that 'debate assumes only one right answer and invests in pressing and defending it; dialogue assumes the possibility of an answer better than any of the original points. Debate narrows views and closes minds; dialogue can build new relationships'.²⁸ Noted physicist and dialogue promoter David Bohm makes a similar point about the difference between dialogue and 'discussion':

*Discussion is almost like a ping-pong game, where people are batting the ideas back and forth and the object of the game is to win or to get points for yourself. Possibly you will take up somebody else's ideas to back up your own—you may agree with some and disagree with others—but the basic point is to win the game ... That's very frequently the case in discussion. In a dialogue, however, nobody is trying to win. Everybody wins if anybody wins. There is a different sort of spirit to it.*²⁹

For further reading

The work of David Bohm and his colleagues offers a specific approach to conducting dialogue (Bohmian Dialogue) and also delves deeply into what makes dialogue distinctive as a process. See David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, ed. Lee Nichol (London: Routledge, 1996). Other writings of Bohm are available at <<http://www.david-bohm.net/dialogue/>>, including an influential article by David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett, 'Dialogue—A Proposal' (1991).

'Debate assumes only one right answer and invests in pressing and defending it; dialogue assumes the possibility of an answer better than any of the original points. Debate narrows views and closes minds; dialogue can build new relationships.'

Dialogue vs negotiation/mediation. Practitioners also find it useful to contrast dialogue with conflict-resolution processes such as mediation and negotiation. Negotiation is 'an official process', suggests Bassam Nasser, a Palestinian working in Gaza. It can end conflict, but it cannot create genuine peace between peoples, which requires qualitative changes in their relationships. He points to the 1979 peace treaty between Egypt and Israel as an example: 'Even now, you do not see peace between the citizens, between people ... In my opinion, it is because an official negotiation process took place, but not anything other than the official negotiation process. So I think negotiation has created

an alternative to armed resistance or conflict, but not peace.’ For peace, there would have to be deeper change, ‘and dialogue would create that’.³⁰

Dialogue is ‘more dynamic, more fluid, and more experimental’ than negotiation, says UNDP practitioner Sayed Aqa. It is ‘a much broader concept than negotiations. Dialogue and mechanisms and processes for it must exist before, during *and* after a conflict’.³¹ In *A Public Peace Process*, describing the Inter-Tajik Dialogue from 1993 to 1999, Hal Saunders enumerates the ways in which dialogue differs from formal mediation and negotiation [bullets added]:

- *The hoped-for product of mediation or negotiation is a concrete agreement. The aim of dialogue is a changed relationship.*
- *The currency of negotiation is defining and satisfying material interests through specific jointly agreed arrangements. The outcome of dialogue is to create new human and political capacities to solve problems.*
- *Negotiations require parties who are ready to try to reach agreement. Dialogue can be fruitful by involving parties who are not yet ready for negotiations but do not want a destructive relationship to continue.*
- *Negotiation deals with goods or rights that can be divided, shared or defined in tangible ways. Dialogue may change relationships in ways that create new grounds for mutual respect and collaboration.*³²

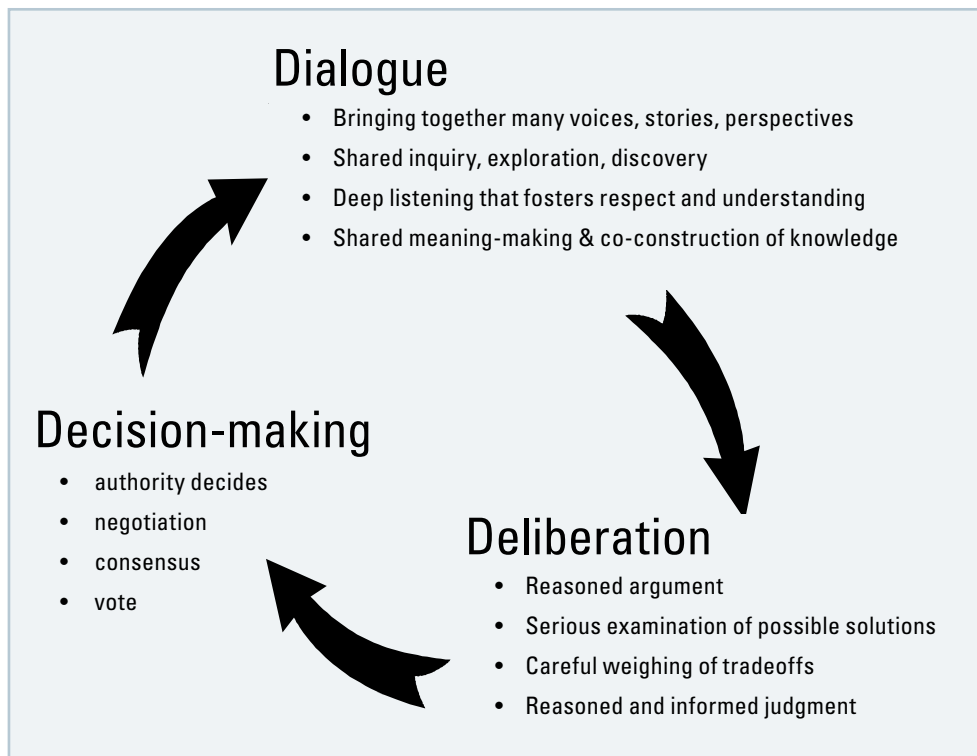
For further reading

On the role of dialogue in peacemaking processes, see Edward (Edy) Kaufman, ‘19 Dialogue Based Processes: A Vehicle for Peacebuilding’, in *People Building Peace II: Successful Stories of Civil Society*, eds Paul van Tongeren et al. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005); and Norbert Ropers, ‘From Resolution to Transformation: The Role of Dialogue Projects’, in Andreas Wimmer et al., eds, *Facing Ethnic Conflicts: Perspectives from Research and Policy-making* (Berlin: Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management, 2003), available through <<http://www.berghof-handbook.net>>.

As these practitioner statements clearly imply, dialogue is not a substitute for negotiation and mediation in conflict situations. Yet they maintain that it is an essential part of conflict resolution and prevention processes, wherein the goal is to build a sustainable peace. In drawing clear distinctions, they argue for both dialogue *and* the other processes as part of a larger peace initiative.

Dialogue vs deliberation and decision-making. Deliberation is the process of carefully considering and weighing the options required to make tough decisions that have significant implications and in which, ultimately, values play a major role—for example, as suggested in Chapter 1.2, in making trade-offs between security and the protection of individual rights, or between economic development and environmental concerns. Dialogue and deliberation are different processes. Like dialogue and negotiation or mediation in a peace initiative, however, they may be best understood as discrete, complementary steps in a larger, participatory decision-making process such as those envisioned in the concept of deliberative democracy. Figure 1.3.1 illustrates this interrelationship.³³

Figure 1.3.1 Decision-making Process



The process illustrated is dynamic. It can take 40 minutes or ten years. As the diagram suggests, the specific act of deciding can remain clearly in the realm of the formal structures and processes of governance, yet be open to being influenced and fed by citizen participation where that is needed to deal with complex issues. In this process, dialogue enables deliberation in a variety of ways. It allows citizens to explore issues together and to deepen their understanding, drawing on diverse perspectives and integrating them into a shared sense of the whole. Emphasizing listening and inquiry, dialogue is a step that fosters mutual respect and understanding, as well as awareness of the different meanings people make of common experiences. The role of this step is to help people develop a more comprehensive vision of reality than they could create alone as individuals, parties or interest groups.

In contrast to the opening, exploring, visionary character of dialogue, deliberation is a process of narrowing. Like dialogue, however, it is a process of joint inquiry and respectful listening to diverse views. ‘The ways of talking and listening are the same in both’, explains Hal Saunders. But deliberation focuses ‘on issues and on choices among possible directions to move in dealing with them’, while dialogue focuses on ‘the dynamics of the relationships underlying the issues and on ways of changing those relationships so groups can work together to deal with specific problems’.³⁴

The differences between dialogue and deliberation may be subtle in practice, but distinguishing between them is useful because it sharpens the focus on outcomes. For example, in describing its Capacity-Building Programme for Sustainable Democracy, IDEA presents a clear picture of the dialogue's role in a larger process that typically produces a democracy assessment and an agenda for reform. Its overview of the programme states that that dialogue is its 'single most important feature'. Dialogue 'bridges the divides across the political spectrum and between the state institutions, civil society and the private sector', and it produces a 'widened space for debate about democratic reforms'. Developing a 'comprehensive, locally owned agenda' is a separate step. The 'widened space' creates the context within which the deliberation required to produce the agenda can take place.³⁵

International IDEA's overview does not use the word 'deliberation'. Indeed, outside the deliberative democracy field, practitioners rarely make these distinctions, at least explicitly. Some say they are promoting dialogue to bring about changes in relationships, while others say their dialogues are intended to reach agreements or determine the best course of action. Still others say they are using dialogue to create a shift in relationships in order to foster agreement and action. This has tended to create confusion about definitions. In part, this situation may reflect something Saunders notes, that it is only since the mid-1990s that people working on conflict and those working on supporting national transitions to democracy realized that 'they labor in neighboring fields'. In approaching the interrelated challenges of governance and 'the political resolution of conflict', Saunders suggests, 'dialogue and deliberation walk hand in hand, while each tackles a different dimension of the challenge'.³⁶ Exploring this distinction further and bringing it into wider use may be an essential step in the maturing of dialogue practice.

Defining Dialogue in a Global Context

As the use of dialogue has expanded across many regions of the world, practitioners are increasingly challenged to develop definitions that bridge cultural divides. One of the strongest recommendations in UNDP's 'Strategic Outlook on Dialogue' is to use 'the term "dialogue" with great awareness of differences in cultural contexts'. One practitioner pointed out, for example, that in the Balkans one must talk about the issues to be addressed, not the process to be used in addressing them. 'If you tried to engage people in some Western-sounding "dialogue" ... it would go nowhere. Dialogue would only get their backs up.' Similarly, practitioners posted to other parts of the world use terms like 'community conversations', 'national sovereign conferences' and 'strengthening of collaboration' to avoid sounding Western and 'elitist'.³⁷

The term 'democratic dialogue' is widely used in Latin America and the Caribbean, where a proliferation of dialogues has focused on strengthening democratic governance. The report of a conference on national dialogue experiences in the region, jointly sponsored by IDEA and the World Bank, uses the terms 'dialogue' and 'democratic dialogue' interchangeably and states: 'To the extent that dialogue is a method, it is clear that without it democracy loses its meaning'.³⁸ Three criteria help to distinguish democratic dialogue from other types:³⁹

- **purpose:** to address complex social problems that existing institutions are not adequately addressing
- **participants:** a microcosm of the system that creates the problem and who have to be part of the solution
- **process:** an open and inclusive dialogue, allowing the building of trust necessary to reach agreements for concrete action.

These definitions are grounded in experience and echo the way in which many people describe their dialogue work. Even more than ‘dialogue’ by itself, however, the label ‘democratic dialogue’ can present challenges for globally diverse audiences. One objection is simply that the term seems redundant. ‘Basically, dialogue is a democratic process’, says von Meijenfeldt. ‘You cannot have an undemocratic dialogue.’³⁰ Others point out that ‘democratic’ is an unhelpful addition because of its meaning in the geopolitical context of the 21st century. From her base in Hong Kong, Christine Loh of Civic Exchange notes that she can promote the use of dialogue into mainland China as a tool for more effective, robust public decision-making—but not if it is called ‘democratic dialogue’.⁴¹

In addition to being careful about labels, it is important to be aware that the sources informing the practice of dialogue are broader and deeper than the Western European philosophical tradition dating back to Plato and Socrates. David Bohm and colleagues point to research on ‘hunter gatherer bands’ whose gatherings for conversation ‘seemed to provide and reinforce a kind of cohesive bond or fellowship that allowed [the] participants to know what was required of them without the need for instruction or much further verbal interchange. In other words, what might be called a coherent culture of shared meaning emerged within the group’.⁴² Modern life, they suggest, has disconnected people in rich countries from this ancient tradition of community association. But it remains relatively strong in other parts of the world in. For example, Cécile Molinier, UNDP Resident Representative in Mauritania, has noted that in the national dialogue on the Millennium Development Goals that she helped to organize, the fact that dialogue is ‘part of the culture’ there made it possible for people ‘to set aside rhetoric and talk openly’.⁴³

Juanita Brown acknowledges this heritage with a lovely image

... of the open central courtyard in an old-fashioned Latin American home ... [Y]ou could enter the central courtyard by going around and through any of the multiple arched entryways that surrounded this open, flower-filled space in the middle of the house. For me, Dialogue is like entering this central courtyard in the spacious home of our common human experience ... [T]here are many points of entry to the experience of Dialogue. Indigenous councils, salons, study circles, women’s circles, farm worker house meetings, wisdom circles, non-traditional diplomatic efforts and other conversational

modalities from many cultures and historical periods [have] both contributed to and drawn from the generative space that we [call] Dialogue.⁴⁴

In short, we use the terms ‘dialogue’ and ‘democratic dialogue’ with awareness of and respect for the fact that they may not be useful or usable in all settings. At the same time, as explained in the introductory chapter, these are terms that fit the practice and understanding of the institutions sponsoring the Handbook. In a global context where more and more people are using ‘dialogue’ to label virtually any kind of process involving people talking to each other, we believe there is value in articulating our own definitions as clearly as possible, as a basis for the kinds of discussions that can move forward the field as a whole.

Governing Principles: The Defining Characteristics of Dialogue Processes

As stated, we have no intention of constructing and promoting a single definition of dialogue for everyone to use. Nevertheless, there is a real need to differentiate the kinds of dialogue processes that seriously address the needs described in Chapter 1.2 from what some practitioners call ‘fake dialogues’. These may be processes that bring people together mostly for show, demonstrating that opposing parties can sit down together but entirely avoiding the difficult issues that keep them divided. Or they may be processes convened by officials or institutions that would more accurately be named ‘consultations’ or, worse, ‘window dressing’ to make authorities seem to be consulting on policies that they have already decided upon.

Where there is a genuine commitment to use dialogue to create change, however, a number of process characteristics may be considered defining. Different groups of practitioners have produced lists of these guiding principles that differ from the five presented here.⁴⁵ But, regardless of the actual terms used, most lists capture the essence of what these five characteristics convey.

Dialogue processes should be characterized by:

Inclusiveness

This is perhaps the most fundamental principle of dialogue practice. It expresses the underlying assumption that, to the extent that everyone who is part of a problem situation can be involved or represented in a dialogue process, the participants collectively have key pieces of the ‘expertise’ they need to address their own problems, as opposed to being entirely dependent on others for solutions. A related assumption is that, for change to be sustainable, the people in the problem system need to have a sense of ownership of the problem, the process for addressing it, and proposed solutions that result. To develop this sense of ownership, they have to participate in the change process.

The principle of inclusiveness may be expressed in a variety of ways. For example, some practitioners specify *multi-stakeholder dialogue* as a form that assembles all the different groups whose interests are bound up in achieving a successful outcome. To others, inclusiveness means creating a *microcosm of the system* that is sustaining a particular problem or pattern of human relationships. Others articulate this principle in terms of the *perspectives* or *voices* that must be part of the conversation, so as to suggest that a dialogue process can be inclusive without involving literally everyone. UNDP practitioner Selim Jahan advocates using the term ‘broad-based dialogue’ to emphasize this key aspect.⁴⁶



See *Selecting the Participants*, Chapter 2.3.

To IDEA, dialogue processes that promote democracy must be inclusive, because inclusiveness is a core principle of democracy itself:

*Democracy encompasses the state, civil society and the private sector; all share joint and complementary responsibilities for its advancement. Inclusion and participation are two key dimensions of democratization. This inclusive and participatory approach constitutes the basis for a pluralistic partnership.*⁴⁷

Listing inclusiveness as one of the ‘essential elements of dialogue design’, the team in the OAS former Special Program for the Promotion of Dialogue and Conflict Resolution states that ‘an increase in inclusion brings an increase in legitimacy to achieve the desired agreements. All social expression must be heard, including political, economic, social and military expressions, as well as the expression of those who have been repeatedly excluded in the past’.⁴⁸

On the problems created by exclusion

As an example, one practitioner noted the case of Guatemala, ‘the private sector not feeling a part of the peace process and then not bound by the framework that came out of the peace settlement’. Similarly, the organizers of the civic scenario process ‘Destino Colombia’ judged, with the benefit of hindsight, that their decision not to involve either the government or the drugs traffickers in the process limited the impact of the dialogue.

See *Wisdom from the Field – Sources* (p. 236) for the sources of these materials.

As this statement suggests, inclusiveness is especially relevant in contexts where a historical pattern of *exclusion* underlies the societal problems to be addressed. The role of the dialogue process in this context is to give a voice to those who usually have no say in key decision-making processes—such as women, youth, the poor and groups that are disenfranchised on the basis of race, ethnicity or religion—and thus tend to derive relatively little benefit from the decisions made. Yet the principle also applies to dialogues among political leaders and other elite groups. In a dialogue initiative in Ghana, for example, the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy took pains to include all legally registered parties, not just those that had won parliamentary seats. ‘In countries coming out of conflict, or countries with severe poverty, these are national dramas, so to speak, that need to be addressed in a more harmonious way in order to move forward and have greater consensus’, says the Institute’s Roel von Meijenfeldt. In those cases, he suggests, exclusion in ‘the political arena’ is as big a problem as social and economic exclusion for countries striving to build national consensus and move forward.⁴⁹

The insistence on this principle is grounded in the widely held view that inclusiveness is a requirement if a dialogue process is to be legitimate and have a robust outcome. It also reflects the hard-won knowledge that if inclusiveness is not comprehensive, that circumstance can compromise the sustainability of any understandings that emerge.

Finally, practitioners specify that achieving inclusiveness goes beyond simply creating a diverse group of dialogue participants. ‘It is not simply putting factions around the table’, says Jessica Faieta of UNDP. ‘Just having a chair does not put them on an equal footing.’ She offers as an example the relative weakness of indigenous people in Latin America ‘in terms of capacity, in terms of experience, etc.’ when they enter into conversations with government representatives.⁵⁰ Others cite the power imbalances in Israeli–Palestinian talks and the struggle of Afghan women to find a voice amongst the tribal warlords in the *loya jirgas* (grand councils) that have been held in Afghanistan since 2001.⁵¹

To realize the goal of inclusiveness, dialogue organizers and facilitators must take steps to mitigate these imbalances. ‘Gaps or perceived differences among participants create obstacles for the establishment of an open sphere for dialogue and discussion’, states a report on post-conflict dialogues in Indonesia. Where these gaps exist, the report argues, people are silenced. ‘A key role for the facilitators is to create horizontal spaces for discussion.’⁵² Other practitioners call this ‘levelling the playing field’. It is an essential part of an inclusive dialogue process.

Joint Ownership

This criterion requires, at the very least, that the dialogue process not be, in the words of one practitioner workshop group, ‘an instrument of only one actor, for example the government—to buy time or to accomplish only a government agenda’.⁵³ Similarly, according to Leena Rikkilä, Asia Programme Manager for IDEA, it cannot be merely a superficial consultation: ‘Invite a handful of people and then you talk with them

A fundamental requirement for people to engage fully in dialogue and in working toward change is, in the words of one practitioner, that ‘people need to feel that there is something real at stake’.

and you have consulted with them and that’s done.’⁵⁴ Rather, dialogue is an ‘exchange’, says Elissar Sarrouh of UNDP, even when convened by powerful institutions. It embodies the ‘democratic notion’ that everyone is involved and engaged equally—a ‘two-way street ... not one side dictating to the other’.⁵⁵

Roel von Meijenfeldt argues that successful dialogue processes involve ‘basically empowering people to get into the game of working or shaping their own future’. Reflecting on the recent experience of the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy in Ghana, he said: ‘Through this dialogue you basically assure ownership of the process, and ownership is a commitment towards reform. Without ownership, reform remains a bit of a superficial exercise. But when that ownership is assured, people really take issues forward, and that produces remarkable results compared to other experiences.’⁵⁶

To create this sense of ownership, the dialogue process must provide an opportunity for what one practitioner workshop group called ‘conversations about what truly matters—the real thing’.⁵⁷ A meaningful dialogue, asserted another workshop team of practitioners, ‘should not be a semantic discussion about how to draft an agreement, but a substantive discussion about fundamental issues’.⁵⁸ The Zimbabwean youth dialogue described in Chapter 1 illustrates this phenomenon. The conversations on issues of central importance to the dialogue participants—HIV/AIDS and unemployment—gave them the sense of empowerment to take greater control of their lives in those two key areas and, at the same time, to begin to play a positive role in reducing the conflict surrounding them.

On joint ownership

Interpeace’s project in Rwanda engaged a diverse group of Rwandans in participatory action research to produce, over the course of a year, a report entitled *Rebuilding Sustainable Peace in Rwanda: Voices of the People*. ‘The power of this document,’ asserts the case write-up of the project, ‘is not per se the “originality” of its analysis, but the fact that it was produced by Rwandans on the basis of an intensive process of “nation-wide” dialogues with fellow Rwandans, and presented the—sometimes divergent—views of Rwandans about the key challenges to move to a more peaceful and viable society.’

See *Wisdom from the Field – Sources* (p. 236) for the sources of these materials.

Learning

As one practitioner states eloquently: ‘dialogue is not about the physical act of talking, it is about minds unfolding’.⁵⁹ On one level, this principle addresses the quality of interaction in a dialogue process. It distinguishes a legitimate dialogue from a ‘fake’ dialogue, wherein the communication is all one-way, and from a debate or negotiation, wherein participants focus only on winning as much as possible for their own side.

On supporting learning

‘As an international outsider, we [the OAS] came in and we provided a new space for dialogue and a new space for reflecting on what was going on. And sometimes it’s just as simple as that ... It’s just allowing people to get outside of what their context is always pressuring them to do, and allowing them to reflect and think a little bit more tranquilly, a little bit more analytically, a little bit more reflectively about what is it that they’re trying to do.’

See *Wisdom from the Field – Sources* (p. 236) for the sources of these materials.

Many people refer to this quality as ‘openness’ in the sense that participants open themselves to hearing and reflecting upon what others have to say, to what they themselves are saying, and to the new insight and perspective they may gain as a result. In *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*, William Isaacs describes key behaviours or skills that create this kind of interaction as ‘*listening*—without resistance or imposition; *respecting*—awareness of the integrity of another’s position and the impossibility of fully understanding it; and *suspending*—suspension of assumptions, judgment, and certainty’.⁶⁰

The learning that comes in this kind of environment has a great deal to do with the inclusive characteristic of dialogue that brings together people who do not normally talk to each other and may in fact be in conflict. ‘Through dialogue competing interests can interact in a non-adversarial way’, practitioners point out. Yet the nature of the process points them towards learning, because it ‘is not about pronouncing judgments; rather, it is about listening for a deeper understanding and awareness of the issues at stake’. Another practitioner concurs: ‘Dialogue is a good way of doing a conflict analysis’.⁶¹

Beyond that, as Ramon Daubon of the Inter-American Foundation and the Kettering Foundation suggests, dialogue creates an opportunity for learning through *self-reflection*—‘people beginning to realize that each only has a little bit of truth’. On a larger scale, he notes, this characteristic of dialogue can lead to the development of ‘public knowledge’ that can make positive change more sustainable.⁶²

Humanity

‘Through dialogue our natural intelligence is able to reveal itself. Our humanity is afforded the possibility of recognizing itself’, write the authors of IDEA’s *Dialogue for Democratic Development*.⁶³ Like learning, the humanity of dialogue processes helps to differentiate them from other kinds of interaction. This characteristic has a lot to do with how people behave towards each other when they engage fully in dialogue. It requires empathy—the ability to put oneself in another’s shoes. ‘When people start to make an effort to understand the other, the seed of dialogue is planted.’⁶⁴ And it requires authenticity, as expressed in Bill Isaacs’ fourth key dialogue skill: ‘*voicing*—speaking the truth on one’s own authority, what one really is and thinks’.⁶⁵

In a workshop, teams of practitioners talked about their best dialogue experiences and developed the following list of contributing behaviours.⁶⁶ Dialogue participants, they said, should:

- show empathy—that is, truly understanding the position of the other person instead of reacting to it
- exhibit openness to expressing one’s point of view with respect for the rules of the dialogue
- maintain a respectful tone, even in the most extreme conditions
- have conversations about what truly matters—the real thing
- assume responsibility, individually and collectively, for both the problem and the solution
- unblock emotionally: ‘listening to the reasons of the heart that Reason often ignores’
- have the courage to recognize differences and, even more, to recognize common ground
- demonstrate the capacity to change.

Taken together, these items echo the definition of dialogue offered by Hal Saunders, quoted earlier, as ‘a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn’.⁶⁷ The practitioners’ list goes further, however, in specifying that the interaction and learning not only happen on an intellectual level but involve the whole person. Similarly, when David Bohm and colleagues define dialogue as ‘thinking together’, they specify that their concept of

‘thought’ includes ‘not only the products of our conscious intellect but also our feelings, emotions, intentions and desires’, as well as ‘responses conditioned and biased by previous thought’.⁶⁸ It is these largely unstated and invisible aspects of the human interactions in dialogue that move people to learn and change. In the words of Meenakshi Gopinath, a leading peace advocate and dialogue practitioner based in India, ‘the spoken part of dialogue is only the tip of the iceberg ... if we concentrate too much on the spoken part, then we are missing the essence of [it]’.⁶⁹

As with learning, creating an environment that supports this kind of human interaction among participants is a central aspect of dialogue work. Many practitioners refer to this environment as a ‘safe space’, and they place great emphasis on building a level of trust in the process that will make it possible. Striving for inclusiveness, managing power and status differences to ensure that all voices can be heard, and focusing on issues that really matter to the participants are all critical steps towards accomplishing that. They set the stage for the kind of conversations, characterized by learning and humanity, that make dialogue processes distinctive.



See *Dialogue Events: Creating a Safe Space*, Chapter 2.4.

A Long-Term Perspective

In Chapter 1.2, we defined *sustainable* solutions to complex problems as one of the critical challenges of effective governance. A defining characteristic of dialogue is the long-term perspective that finding such sustainable solutions requires. Practitioners recognize that the various kinds of crises that afflict societies often require swift action—to stop the violence, stabilize the political situation and alleviate the misery. Intrinsic to the nature of dialogue, however, is its focus on the underlying patterns of relationships and behaviour from which the crises emerge. Working at that level is what creates the possibility of sustainable change, and it takes time. ‘Dialogue is about using time in a different way, in the sense of realizing there are no quick fixes’, says Swedish Ambassador Ragnar Ångeby. ‘Time is needed to make deep change possible.’⁷⁰



See *Short-term vs Longer-term Vision*, Chapter 2.6.

Within the practitioner community, people working on conflict have expressed this principle clearly. Mary Anderson and Lara Olson, reporting on the findings of the three-year ‘Reflecting on Peace Practice’ project, offer the judgement of an experienced dialogue participant that ‘one-off interventions are hopeless and useless’. Anderson and Olson suggest that a multi-year commitment is essential to enable dialogue participants ‘to transfer the personal impacts of the dialogue to the socio/political level’.⁷¹ In *A Public Peace Process*, Hal Saunders lays out an approach he calls ‘sustained dialogue’ and describes a dialogue initiative in Tajikistan that started in the early 1990s and that continues. No less is required, Saunders argues, to transform racial and ethnic conflicts.

In all areas of practice, the emphasis on building capacity at the societal level reflects a long-term perspective. ‘We are talking about creating a culture of dialogue, altering

the fundamental power relationships’, suggests Ramon Daubon. ‘For example, in Sweden when a conflict arises, the default option is a dialogic one on all levels. This is something that developed slowly in Scandinavia in the 20th century.’ The challenge, he notes, is how to go about building that capacity where it does not exist.⁷²

Dialogue practitioners take up that challenge in a variety of ways. In 1996, for example, the OAS launched OAS/PROPAZ (Culture of Dialogue Program: Development of Resources for the Construction of Peace), a project that sought to build a culture of dialogue in Guatemala, both by facilitating dialogues and by providing dialogue training to personnel in a wide range of partner organizations.⁷³ Another approach is that of IDEA and Interpeace, both of which have developed the practice of creating a working group of diverse stakeholders who analyse issues and ways of addressing them. In the process, they build a network of individuals able to articulate a common agenda and make a compelling case for change. These people often become leaders who can continue to work and advocate for change after the dialogue process is over. IDEA considers this aspect of its programme a key to sustainability.⁷⁴ Such approaches often unfold over a period of years. But this time frame is acceptable, even essential, if the approach is conceived, in the words of Matthias Stiefel, former Executive Director of Interpeace, as ‘a long-term process of empowering a society and not as a short-term process of responding just to an immediate problem that may have emerged’.⁷⁵

Practitioners express the underlying principle of a long-term perspective in other ways as well. UNDP’s approach to conflict *transformation* emphasizes workshops to build the ‘skills and aptitude’ for dialogue and negotiation, rather than organizing dialogues or negotiations on ‘the conflict of the day’.⁷⁶ The OAS former Special Program for the Promotion of Dialogue and Conflict Resolution emphasized the importance of taking steps towards the *institutionalization* of dialogue and participation in a number of Latin American countries. They point to laws that require participatory processes in addressing certain kinds of public issues, the creation of official positions such as the ombudsman to promote and facilitate dialogue when conflicts arise, and investment in skill-building for dialogue facilitators and participants.⁷⁷

The Dialogic Approach

The concept of the dialogic approach expands the relevance of the guiding principles—from capturing the essential characteristics of dialogue processes to describing a *code of conduct* for dialogue

Examples of institutionalizing dialogue:

- In 2003 OAS/PROPAZ became an independent entity—the ProPaz Foundation—fulfilling one of the major objectives of the initial project to leave ‘an installed capacity to support [Guatemala’s] peace and democratic processes’.
- International IDEA supported the formation in Burkina Faso of the Centre for Democratic Governance, an independent centre created by the dialogue group to pursue its work of strengthening democracy.
- In Rwanda, Interpeace and its Rwandan partners set up an institution at the beginning of the dialogue process, the Institut de Recherche et de Dialogue pour la Paix, that could direct the initiative, give it national ownership and credibility, and provide long-term sustainability.



See Table 2.1.1, *The Dialogic Approach*, Chapter 2.1.

practitioners and a *quality of interaction* that can be effective in bringing about positive change in many situations, not just those formally designated as dialogues.

The Dialogic Approach as a Code of Conduct

In one sense, the concept of the dialogic approach simply extrapolates from the governing principles on how to go about the work of promoting, organizing or facilitating dialogue processes. In promoting a process that is inclusive and empowering, for example, practitioners must display the same **respectfulness** towards other people, **openness** to different points of view and **empathy**. Creating the trust necessary for people to enter into a dialogue with their opponents, or even with those who are simply different, also requires **transparency**. This is important both in the sense of speaking authentically

and in the sense of avoiding secrecy, or the appearance of it, in one's actions and conversations. 'From early on it has to be made clear that the intent is to have a truly inclusive—and transparent—process', counsel the authors of the case on Interpeace's initiative in Rwanda. When the Interpeace team encountered apprehension in the Rwandan Government about its meeting with the political opposition, it addressed those concerns by 'openly and transparently' sharing what had been discussed in the meeting.⁷⁸

For further reading

Concepts that are closely related to the dialogic approach are:

John Paul Lederach's formulation of 'mediative capacity' in 'Building Mediative Capacity in Deep Rooted Conflict', *Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 26/1 (Winter/Spring, 2002), pp. 91–101; and

Louise Diamond's advocacy of four 'peace principles' that can be applied in the family, at work, in the community and in the world, in *The Peace Book: 108 Simple Ways to Make a More Peaceful World*, 3rd edn (Bristol, VT: The Peace Company, 2003), available at <<http://www.thepeacecompany.com>>.

Enacting the principle of learning by adopting a stance of **inquiry** is another important element of the dialogic approach. Being in inquiry mode involves asking questions not just to advance one's own goals but also to gain understanding. Inquiry like this is not instrumental, practitioners suggest, but it serves one's purpose at a higher level. 'We have to approach [dialogue] not only as a tool, but as a process of being', Gopinath argues. 'In other words, you don't parachute into a problem and say, "Okay, now I'm going to dialogue, because as a result of dialogue, I'm going to expect X outcome." You're going into it as a process that is ever-changing and that is open and malleable and that is flexible. ... It is only when you are able to be both transparent and vulnerable that the journey enhances your ability to envision a new future.'⁷⁹

Taking the Dialogic Approach beyond Dialogue Processes

Interactions that are not formally conceived as dialogue processes can be more or less dialogic. For example, processes of negotiation, mediation, deliberation and decision-making can be more dialogic to the extent that they create environments in which participants representing diverse perspectives can feel included, empowered and 'safe' enough to be transparent in their own communication, open to understanding what others have to say, and able to take a long-term view of the issues before them. The concept of the dialogic approach simply provides language to describe this particular quality of interaction, making it possible to recognize the role the approach can play and to adopt it intentionally whether or not the context is a formal dialogue process.

In putting forward the concept of dialogue as a philosophy, practitioners understand that organizing a dialogue process is not the best response in every situation. In all instances, however, the dialogic approach offers an alternative to the use of force—be it force of arms, force of political or economic power, or merely force of argument. And practitioners believe it is a more effective alternative. They do not promote the use of

The concept of the dialogic approach simply provides language for describing this particular quality of interaction, making it possible to recognize the role it can play and to adopt it intentionally whether or not the context is a formal dialogue process.

dialogue or the dialogic approach just because they want to be nice to people or cultivate friendly relationships. Rather, as Chapter 1.4 describes, they believe it is the best way—indeed the only way—to bring about the kind of change required to make headway against the societal challenges they care most about addressing.

Chapter 1.4: How Dialogue Contributes to Change

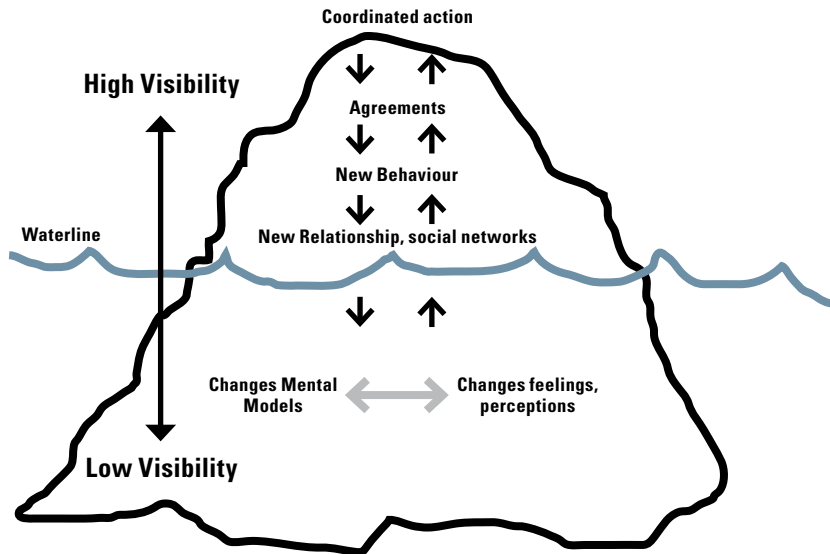
Dialogue practitioners are people seeking change. As Chapter 1.2 describes, the change they seek may be greater societal capacities for cooperation, peaceful conflict resolution or democratic self-governance. Alternatively, they may conceive of change as making progress against a variety of social ills, such as poverty, inequality, crime or disease. Or they may frame it broadly as economic development or human development. This chapter addresses the question of why they believe that dialogues—participatory processes with the defining characteristics set forth in Chapter 1.3 as governing principles—are effective in making those kinds of changes.

Levels of Change

As Bassam Nasser noted about the 1979 Egypt–Israel peace treaty, the formal treaty brought an end to armed conflict—a concrete change of great significance. But achieving a lasting peace, Nasser asserted, will require change that goes beyond a formal agreement between governments to touch the hearts and minds of Egyptians and Israelis. Similarly, contemplating the kind of approach likely to be effective in the complex work of democracy-building, IDEA project evaluator Geert van Vliet suggests that it must be one that is able ‘to foster complex processes of change in attitudes, in values, in modes of interaction ...’.⁸⁰ Both these observations highlight a fundamental premise of dialogue work: that the more personal, intangible, but deeper level of change is essential if there is to be a sustainable impact on the kinds of complex societal challenges that dialogue practitioners care about.

Many people use the image of an iceberg to convey the idea that often the visible characteristics of an entity or phenomenon are only a small portion of its totality, and that it is important to be aware of those aspects we cannot readily see. We use this Iceberg Model of change, developed by Katrin Käufer and Otto Scharmer, to emphasize the point that visible and invisible changes are connected and often interdependent.⁸¹ At the deepest level, shifts in feelings and perceptions open up people to the possibility of change.

Figure 1.4.1 The Iceberg Model: Levels of Change



Source: Based on the model of Katrin Käufer, adapted from Otto Scharmer, 'Organizing Around Not-Yet-Embodied Knowledge', in G. v. Krogh, I. Nonaka and T. Nishiguchi, eds, *Knowledge Creation: A New Source of Value* (New York: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 36–60.

Some of the most powerful examples of such shifts come from dialogues among parties to violent conflicts. For instance, Meenakshi Gopinath described this experience from her work in the contested area of Kashmir:

I was with a group called ... Women in Security, Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP). We [agreed we had to] look at breaking the silence on the conflict in Kashmir. These were groups of women who always continued to blame each other, each other's community for their predicament. For example, the Muslim women in the valley blamed the Hindu community for what had happened to them. The Hindus who fled the valley blamed the Muslims for having driven them out of their homes and for ethnic cleansing and so on.

But when they came together in a safe place, which was [away] from their immediate environment, and they began to hear each other's narratives and pain, they realized their pain does not cancel out somebody else's pain. In other words, they both are going through a certain level of deprivation ...

Now, at that moment, something happened where the women who were listening to each other's narratives ... their whole body language changed, and a couple of them shed

tears when they listened to what had happened to what were their erstwhile adversaries. And they found that there was a commonality of human experience. I think that was a very moving turning point ... [Where] they never used to make eye contact with each other, [they] began to acknowledge each others' presence. And so the 'othering' process which had translated into body language and the kind of guarded adjectives that were being [used], all that began to melt. I won't say they hugged each other and embraced each other, but the walls of antipathy [came down].⁸²

Louise Diamond, co-founder of the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy and of the Peace Company, provides another example from a conflict situation—a dialogue she facilitated in Bosnia in 1996, immediately after the signing of the Dayton peace accords.⁸³ The dialogue group included a young Serbian soldier and an older Bosnian Muslim woman, ‘a kind of earth mother, suffering, grieving, and saying, “what have you done to the men in my life?”’. The young man insisted that he had fought only because he was forced to, but the woman remained very angry and hostile towards him over the course of several days of the dialogue workshop. At one point, however, the soldier withdrew from the group and then returned having written a poem about his own pain and the unnecessary suffering of war. ‘This melted the woman’s heart’, said Diamond, and the two became close friends. Diamond described how this shift went beyond the change in feelings experienced by those two people to effect a change within the group in the way people thought about the conflict:

We went back to Bosnia after three months and then again six months later, and we asked people who had been in that workshop, ‘What stands out for you, what do you remember?’. 95% of them said that they would never forget that woman and that man, and the statement of reconciliation that had happened between them. It was personal for the two of them, but for every one else in the room and at a larger level it was totally symbolic of the archetype of the soldier who really didn’t want to kill people and the mother who suffered, the victims of war.

What Diamond points to in this example is a shift in ‘mental models’—the underlying assumptions that shape the way people experience and interpret the world around them. In these two conflict stories, the shift might be described as moving from hating and blaming one’s enemies to seeing war itself as the enemy, with victims on all sides. A somewhat different example comes from Philip Thomas’s account of an experience in dialogue work in El Salvador. Some months after the conclusion of a dialogue process,

For further reading

The term ‘mental models’ comes from the field of organizational learning, in which there has been much study of the use of dialogue as a tool for organizational change. To start exploring this work, see Peter M. Senge et al., *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*, 2nd edn (New York: Doubleday, 2006); and William Isaacs, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

For another perspective on the civic scenario projects that Käufer analyses, see Adam Kahane, *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kohler, 2004).

one participant saw on television the police beating up a union member who had also participated in the dialogue. He immediately called a friend to say ‘this is wrong’. Later, he reflected on what had made him feel outraged in that instance, which was not unlike scenes he had witnessed before. He noted that he had been moved not so much by the personal connection to the union leader as by a changed perception of what is acceptable behaviour in a democracy.

In an analysis of three civic scenario projects—the Mont Fleur project in South Africa (1991–1992), Destino Colombia (1997–2000), and Visión Guatemala (1998–2000)—Katrin Käufer points out a variety of mental model shifts. A participant in Destino Colombia experienced ‘at a personal level ... the most beautiful acquisition ... to understand and to discuss all subjects without having anyone get angry and without killing each other’. A black South African who, under apartheid, had ‘lived only for tomorrow’, began to apply the scenario concept in her own life and to consider how ‘my actions today ... would help me fulfil my dreams for the future and for my children’s future’. A Guatemalan revised his view of his country’s history in response to the carefully documented account of a professional historian, one of the experts who provided input to the Visión Guatemala dialogues.⁸⁴

Increasingly, people have come to the recognition that concrete steps toward change, such as treaties and other agreements, constitutional reforms, policy initiatives or legislation, are necessary but often not sufficient to meet the challenges societies are facing. To take hold, they need to be grounded in deeper change at the personal level, and this is where dialogue has a particular role to play.

As a result of these kinds of changes, people look at the world through a different lens, and the new perspective can have significant effects on their relationships to others, on their

behaviour, and on the impact they have in the world, individually and collectively. The ‘learning histories’ of the three civic scenario projects, on which Käufer’s analysis draws, enable her to document these effects.⁸⁵ For example, in South Africa, a coalition of dialogue participants, including conservative white businessmen and radical leaders of Nelson Mandela’s African National Congress, came together to promote the vision that emerged from the scenario process—a vision of inclusive democracy and of slow but steady economic development that would benefit all. Similarly, in both Colombia and Guatemala, participants in the dialogues forged lasting relationships. They considered themselves a network and they joined forces in projects to advance the shared objectives that had emerged from the scenario-building exercises. In Colombia, a group of businessmen came together to establish a foundation named Ideas for Peace. In Guatemala, various combinations of Visión Guatemala participants collaborated on constitutional reform, reform of the national university and the creation of a research institute with a mission to fight poverty.

Appendix 1 of this Handbook provides many more examples of dialogue results that cover the full spectrum from intangible to concrete, invisible to visible. Taken together, they convey a picture that confirms the message of the iceberg image—that these different levels of change tend to be interconnected and interdependent. Nobody wants a dialogue process that is all about personal transformation, with no concrete

outcomes. Increasingly, however, people have come to recognize that concrete steps towards change—such as treaties and other agreements, constitutional reforms, policy initiatives and legislation—are necessary but often insufficient to meet the challenges societies are facing. To take hold, such initiatives must be grounded in deeper change at the personal level. This is where dialogue has a particular role to play.

How Does It Work?

The core dynamic of change in dialogue processes involves people acquiring some perspective on their own thoughts and thought processes, and on the way those thought processes shape their perceptions of reality. As David Bohm, Donald Factor and Peter Garrett point out, most of the time people do not have that perspective: we simply think, without being observant of the forces—such as memory, belief, emotions and culture—that influence our thinking:

The core dynamic of change in dialogue processes involves people getting some perspective on their own thoughts and thought processes, and on the way those thought processes shape their perceptions of reality.

We can be aware of our body's actions while they are actually occurring, but we generally lack this sort of skill in the realm of thought. For example, we do not notice that our attitude toward another person may be profoundly affected by the way we think and feel about someone else who might share certain aspects of his behavior or even of his appearance. Instead, we assume that our attitude toward her arises directly from her actual conduct. The problem of thought is that the

kind of attention required to notice this incoherence seems seldom to be available when it is most needed ... Dialogue is concerned with providing a space within which such attention can be given.⁸⁶

Within that space, the impetus for noticing how one's own thought processes are working comes from the input participants receive from each other. 'Each listener is able to reflect back to each speaker, and to the rest of the group, a view of some of the assumptions and unspoken implications of what is being expressed along with that which is being avoided', the Bohm group states. Often, this awareness comes to the listener in the process of hearing another's story. Hal Saunders describes this phenomenon as follows:

Through dialogue each group can begin to recognize the feelings and perceptions of the other. The rigidity of their own pictures loosens. Each group becomes more able to listen. In many cases, the telling of personal stories can play a vital role in compelling people to pay attention to facts they would rather ignore. As participants modify their own pictures of reality, they may begin to see past behavior as counterproductive.⁸⁷

The practical significance of the governing principles set forth in Chapter 1.3 lies in the role they play in creating that 'space within which such attention can be given'.

Inclusiveness is basic. It brings into the space the diversity of perspectives needed to challenge participants' habitual modes of thought. 'As a microcosm of the larger culture, Dialogue allows a wide spectrum of possible relationships to be revealed', write Bohm and his co-authors. 'It can disclose the impact of society on the individual and the individual's impact on society. It can display how power is assumed or given away and how pervasive are the generally unnoticed rules of the system that constitutes our culture.'⁸⁸



See *Dialogue Events: Creating a Safe Space*, Chapter 2.4.

But the environment must be right for people to make the effort and take the risk of scrutinizing their thought processes. They need to feel they are having conversations that matter—not just talking superficially, or 'for show', or to serve the purposes of one party only. People also need the encouragement and support to develop or tap their capacities for voicing, listening, respecting and suspending, and to create a safe space in which they can open themselves to learning and relax into appearing as a whole human being, emotions included. Finally, they need sufficient time for the change process to unfold naturally, at its own pace, and particularly for participants to overcome their natural resistance to change. The members of the Bohm group caution that the change sought cannot be forced or predetermined. 'Nevertheless', they say, 'changes do occur because observed thought behaves differently from unobserved thought'. Some of the most significant changes, Hal Saunders points out, often take place in the time between dialogue sessions, when people have time to integrate and work with the new perspectives they have gained in the process.'⁸⁹

'Changes do occur [in dialogue processes] because observed thought behaves differently from unobserved thought.'

The Dialogic Moment

Practitioners' explanations of how change occurs in dialogue processes are often expressed as stories of notable, breakthrough events that shift groups towards greater understanding. These are 'dialogic moments'. The melting of the Bosnian woman's heart by the young Serbian soldier's poem was such a moment. In the Kashmiri women's dialogues described by Meenakshi Gopinath, the moment occurred with the shedding of tears over the stories of deprivation and suffering told by women on the enemy side.

The OAS case of the San Mateo Ixtatán dialogue in Guatemala, presented in Chapter 3.2, describes such a moment and its outcome:

In a defining moment of the talks, the parties were able to share with each other the pain and suffering the [36-year-long civil war in Guatemala] had caused. They spoke of the harmful effects of the conflict in their lives, communities, and throughout the municipality. This honesty exposed many people's feelings and actions in the conflict and the civil war, but the exchange did not cause a stalemate or an interruption of the process. Instead, participating in the open environment produced the Agreement of Coexistence as each party acknowledged and recognized that the war had caused suffering on both sides.

Often, what practitioners describe is one individual precipitating a dialogic moment by breaking through polite conversation to speak honestly, taking the risk of being emotionally vulnerable or bringing forward values that evoke our common humanity. UNDP Resident Representative Cécile Molinier recalled such an action by a participant in the Mauritania dialogue on the Millennium Development Goals presented in Chapter 3.4. The representative of a human rights organization, which had not yet been recognized as a legal entity, was in the dialogue circle with a number of high-level officials—the first time he had ever been in such a setting. ‘He spoke in a moderate fashion’, recalled Molinier. ‘He said he was not just defending black slaves, but all people who were helpless and had nowhere to go. He was looking to the people in authority to help him help them.’ This individual created a shift in the group, because ‘they sensed he was really being genuine. There were many moments like that, when people put down their defenses’. Those moments, Molinier said, were what made the dialogue work.⁹⁰

Field research conducted in the mid-1990s as part of the Dialogue Project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology confirms the practical wisdom of these explanations of how change comes about. After poring over transcripts of hundreds of hours of conversation, the research team came to the conclusion ‘that dialogue exists not so much in the exchange of words and ideas, but in fundamental shifts in the direction of the conversation’. These shifts occurred, the team noticed, when ‘certain persons, alone and together, appeared to catalyze the group toward insight [or when] certain facilitator moves assisted the group in seeing its own shared situation and reflecting together’.⁹¹

These ‘key episodes’ or turning points are critical for the impact they have on individuals and on the dialogue group. Looking back on a dramatic moment in the *Visión Guatemala* dialogues, an interviewee told the project historian that, as the result of that event, ‘the group gained the possibility of speaking frankly. Things could be said without upsetting the other party. I believe this helped to create a favorable atmosphere in which to express, if not the truth, certainly each person’s truth’. Nine years after the conclusion of the Mont Fleur civic scenario process, the learning historian found in interviews that a number of the participants ‘remembered exact dates and times of the shifts in their thinking’. To a great extent, the craft of dialogue work described in Part 3 aims to set the stage for moments with this kind of effect.⁹²

From Personal Change to Societal Change

The sense of urgent societal need that drives most dialogue work makes the translation of individual-level changes into societal-level changes of the utmost importance. Yet the field still has a long way to go to document and understand the relationship between these two levels of impact. For now, on the basis of the materials assembled for this Handbook, two patterns seem important.

Impacts from shifts in mental models. The Iceberg Model provides a visual representation of the explanation most practitioners give of how deep changes in mental models, feelings and perceptions that take place ‘below the waterline’ provide the foundation for changes that are more concrete and visible. In the new thinking, relationships, networks and behaviours that emerge from dialogues, practitioners see the kinds of individual-level changes that can translate into larger impacts, along the lines described by Käufer in her analysis of three civic scenario processes. Practitioner accounts of dialogic moments are replete with powerful examples of the shifts that have occurred, and many of the positive outcomes reported in the cases supporting this Handbook flow from these key shifts. For example:

- rural and urban factions in a war-torn region of Guatemala finding creative ways of overcoming obstacles and creating a municipal government that served the interests of all⁹³
- opposing political parties in Panama agreeing to compete in elections on the basis of how, and how well, each would implement a common national agenda⁹⁴
- coalitions of erstwhile enemies cooperating to promote a democratic reform agenda in Burkina Faso⁹⁵
- former Marxist revolutionaries and conservative businessmen together advancing a shared vision for equitable, sustainable economic development in South Africa.⁹⁶

While most of these cases mainly involve educated elites, changes such as increased capacities for peaceful management of conflict and active participation in government are also familiar in community dialogues, such as those conducted by the OAS in Guatemala and by Interpeace in Rwanda. Ramon Daubon points to the experience in Latin America with participatory budgeting. In Peru, he notes, the law mandating citizen engagement was very threatening to the mayors, even though only 20 per cent of the budget was subject to the participatory process. ‘They were opposed at first—they would lose power; it would be a mess. And it *was* a mess at first, with everyone advocating for his or her own interests.’ Now, however, the process has begun to work well, as both sides have developed capacities for cooperation. Daubon paraphrases the words of one mayor: ‘Now the citizens are committed to the decisions that are made. Government is better, and if things don’t work as everyone thought they would, people accept that rather than just blaming me.’⁹⁷ In that town, the aggregate shift in attitudes of both the citizens and the mayor created what was, in effect, a new social contract for managing town affairs cooperatively.

Impacts from results. Daubon’s example highlights another way in which the effects of dialogue processes can reach the societal level—the positive effects of positive outcomes. On the one hand, the mayor points out that the decisions reached collectively through the participatory budgeting process are ‘better’ than what he was able to produce

through government-as-usual. On the other hand, people accepted the outcomes—both good and not-so-good—because they felt ownership of the decision-making process and the decisions themselves. Similarly, the case of the Mauritanian dialogue on the Millennium Development Goals, presented in Chapter 3.3, emphasizes the creation of a ‘critical mass’ of citizens who have ‘learned about dialogue as a tool to get constructive and fruitful discussions on different themes’ as a significant step towards building ‘a strong basis for a culture of participatory governance’.

Over the long term, practitioners envisage that, as dialogue processes prove their value and proliferate, more and more people will gain positive experience with dialogue and embrace it as the preferred approach for addressing *any* complex societal challenge. For instance, Ragnar Ångeby talks in terms of building the capacities for ‘resilient societies’ that can work cooperatively to meet any challenge that may arise.⁹⁸ Similarly, Carmelo Angulo, then UNDP Representative in Argentina, describes a ‘dialoguing democracy’ in which dialogue is the dominant *modus operandi* at all levels of governance.⁹⁹

From the field of deliberative democracy, Philip Thomas provides a list of ten positive outcomes that flow from successful processes involving large numbers of ordinary citizens in public deliberation:¹⁰⁰

1. closing the gap between ‘experts’ and the public
2. moving from distorted, simplistic understandings to revealing and accepting the complexity of societal challenges
3. setting higher standards for public discourse
4. shifting focus from competing interests to the common good
5. strengthening the public’s capacity for reasoned decision-making
6. bringing values into deliberation and decision-making
7. increasing citizens’ sense of efficacy
8. strengthening relationships among citizens, issues, institutions and the political system
9. placing responsibility for public policy with the public
10. creating opportunities for transformative learning and systemic change.

Conclusion

The end of the cold war ushered in a period of great hope and optimism in the world—that nations that had been governed largely as satellites of one superpower or the other could begin to chart their own courses; and that ordinary citizens could begin to assert their rights and needs in the public arena. ‘The end of authoritarian regimes after the cold war, created openings for more bottom–up approaches’, reflected Special

Representative of the UN Secretary-General to Sudan Jan Pronk. ‘Regime change could take place without violence. The middle strata between grass roots and elites—civil society and business—could start to play a new role. They could also be active in ideas and raise issues such as gender and the environment. This was a great new opportunity, in practice as well as theory.’¹⁰¹

After more than 15 years, however, there is considerable frustration at the national and global levels at the extent to which there continues to be ‘old wine in new bottles’: democratic structures that still operate according to the traditional rules and routines of elitist, top–down power politics. The catalogue of seemingly intractable problems presented in Chapter 1.2 attests to the concrete results of this discouraging pattern of business-as-usual. There are, to be sure, inspiring examples of change. But there is a pressing need for change that is deeper, broader and more sustainable if the promise of the end of the cold war is to be realized.

This Handbook and the body of practice it draws upon represent a response to that need, one that is focused not on any one issue or particular structure but on a *process* for addressing a wide range of issues and for operating within diverse structures to produce more positive results. Part 1 has defined the process, which we call dialogue, and has set forth an understanding of the needs it addresses, how it works and what it can accomplish, on the basis of the conceptual constructs and practical experience of people who have been using it. Part 2 ventures into the details of dialogue processes to offer guidance on how to explore, design, launch and execute an initiative, again drawing on the accumulated experience and wisdom of practitioners. It also addresses some of the challenges people face in doing this work. Part 3 presents an overview of a broad array of dialogue initiatives and three in-depth cases, so as further to ground the reader’s understanding in the practice field.

