

Dialogue:

What to do, what not to do, and how to know
the difference!

A presentation (sort of) to a high-level
Surinamese audience by an itinerant UNDP
employee!

Dialogue and traditional wisdom

- Problems cannot be solved at the same level of imagination that created them—*Albert Einstein*
- When the wind blows, the wise build windmills, not walls.
- “You can’t eat dialogue!”
- Dialogue is at the heart of cohesion; and a cohesive society is already developed!

Definition of Dialogue

Dialogue is a structured, facilitated conversation that fosters relationships and build an inclusive consensus among a wide group of actors.

What can you achieve through dialogue?

- Build consensus around the broad parameters of an issue.
- Create the enabling environment to resolve a specific dispute.
- Create better understanding of issues and positions.
- Build shared empathy, common understanding and relationships.
- Move beyond “hurt,” and towards reconciliation.

The Biggest Challenge of Dialogue

- “They speak very well of you”.
 - “They speak very well of everybody.”
 - “That so bad?”
 - “Yes. It means you can’t trust them.”
- Dialogues do not work unless they are difficult and honest!
- The biggest challenge of dialogue is not to speak to the other, but to speak truthfully to your own true fears and hurt!

What Dialogue is, and is not

- It is a conversation not a negotiation.
- Dialogue are facilitated, not mediated.
- It leads to consensus from which legal actions can emerge, but not laws.
- It is not legally binding, but can provide the means to pressure those who break the consensus.
- Dialogues build convergence, but not suppress points of divergence.

How do we know when a dialogue has worked?

- Participants release public statements identifying points of convergence.
- Participants take joint actions around points of convergence, including developing laws together.
- Participants work together on points of convergence while displaying respect and tolerance for differences; differences do not derail collaboration.
- Participants display respectful and tolerant behavior in public; recognize difference.

What are the ingredients for a successful dialogue?

- Authenticity—you should not be doing it to buy time or to fool yourself!
- Trust—easier said than done!
- Some level of confidence in a process over which you don't have full control! You have to trust a “space,” and its facilitator, instead of your own money or influence!
- Joint ownership—should not be seen as the agenda of one or a segment of participants!
- Everyone has to be able to say their piece!
- But at the same time, dialogues are about mutual understanding, not grandstanding!

How do you prepare a successful dialogue?

- You have a dialogue about dialogue!
- You empower credible intermediaries to do the initial work!
- You ensure a neutral platform or space for the dialogue.
- You ensure that all participants are present on an equal footing: they can either represent organizations, or be present in their own capacity, but a mix is usually not good!
- You take endless lifetimes identifying the right group of participants (you cannot be too careful on this one!).
- You might even want to do a detailed situation analysis, if you are the facilitator or the platform that is hosting the dialogue, so that you are not barking up the wrong tree!
- You get agreement and understanding from all potential participants on the basic objectives, rules, and procedures of dialogue; some basic initial training for all participants in dialogue methods could also be useful.

Some basic mistakes!

- One side or group of participants announcing the objectives or format of the dialogue, and asking the others for their views!
- Dialogue participants being identified by one side or by the facilitator on the basis that they “represent” a “sector” such as labor or youth!
- The facilitator putting a pre-prepared agenda or solutions before the dialogue participants!
- Frustrated participants asking the facilitator to find the fix!
- Coffee breaks not being included in afternoon sessions (just kidding!)

But what about the politicians?!?

- Challenge for politicians: How do you collaborate in the national interest while competing politically at the same time?
- Of what political use is dialogue? What political advantage does it confer?
- How does a consensus built during dialogue relate to the political choices made during elections?