

REFLECTING ON 'DIALOGUE': The Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue Seminar 2014.

The 2014 seminar of the Nansen Center in Lillehammer, Norway, took place between 12-15 June. Koenraad Van Brabant was invited as one of the guest speakers and co-facilitators, together with others from Somalia, Afghanistan, India, the Western Balkans and Norway. It brought together some 70 people with very diverse backgrounds: Most of course were Norwegian, native or immigrated, but others had come from Moscow, Kenya, and the countries mentioned above. Some came with extensive experience with peace and non-violence work, others wanted to learn more about it. Several worked abroad but many work in Norway, and there is a strong sense that the Nansen Centre has a responsibility to promote non-violence and peacefulness also in Norway and to encourage Norway to maintain its international role as a peace-promoting country.



The Nansen Centre itself started work in the former Yugoslavia in 1995. Out of that engagement, and through local initiative, have since grown several 'Nansen Centres' in several of the new republics. These create spaces to bring people from across divides together for constructive conversation and action. Integrated rather than ethnically segregated education has emerged as one important focus of work.

Equally interesting experiences of community-based peace work were shared by Aziz Naderi, director of the Sanayee Development Organisation in Afghanistan (<http://www.sanayee.org.af>). Ms. Sushobha Barve from the Centre for Dialogue and Reconciliation in India (<http://www.cdr-india.org>) in turn provided a fascinating account of the years of work across various divides within and about Jammu-Kashmir. Chro Borhan and Ellen Rykkja Gilbert shared, and gave participants some experiential feel for, the approaches that are being used within Norway, to facilitate 'reciprocal integration', and engage people at risk of being violent.

Through but also beyond the sharing of experiences, several substantive questions about 'dialogue' were examined, for example

1. *Do we want to promote 'dialogue' as the core of what we do or is 'dialogue' one approach/'method' among others?*
2. *Does it make sense to work at different 'tracks'?*
3. *Why is there 'dialogue fatigue' and even 'cynicism' about 'dialogue' in various parts of the world?*
4. *Does peace work that includes 'dialogue' produce meaningful 'results'?*

1. Do we want to promote 'dialogue' or is 'dialogue' one approach/'method' among others?

From an IPAT perspective, 'dialogue' is not a 'strategy'. To rebuild some basic capacities for collaborative action across divides, in environments where trust has badly eroded, requires people to engage again and enter in conversation. But not all these conversations will have the full quality of 'dialogue', with its connotations of open and emphatic listening. Interpeace-IPAT approaches use various other 'methods' that encourage inclusive participation and collaborative work on the difficult issues that prevent societies from functioning more harmoniously: individual interviews, public debate, participatory research, participatory polling, sports events, advocacy and lobby etc.

2. Does it make sense to work at different 'tracks'?

From an IPAT perspective, peace work that works at separate levels of society (high political level, community level, or with intermediary organisations) can become part of the problem and reinforce the divides between elites and people and 'leaders' and 'followers'. Interpeace-IPAT approaches work at Track 6 i.e. seek to reduce the distance between top-level power brokers and decision-makers, and populations at large. This has implications for how processes are designed and the skills required from those managing them. This is also essential if we want to go beyond 'personal/interpersonal change', to change at the socio-political level – a critical element identified through the Reflecting on Peace Practice programme of CDA Inc.

3. Why is there 'dialogue fatigue' and even 'cynicism' about 'dialogue' in various parts of the world?

Sadly enough, this has been the negative 'outcome' of too many poorly designed processes to bring people together, and that – ultimately - yield little or nothing in terms for the society concerned. If bad experiences lead to cynicism about dialogue, then peace work has definitely 'done harm'.

There can be various possible contributing factors to such bad experiences e.g. the time is not ripe: groups across divides are not ready to meet and/or are internally arguing about how they see the issues; the convener and or the facilitators are not widely trusted; the agenda has been too predetermined; critical stakeholders may not be present and may feel excluded, while there may also be controversy over how those that are present were actually 'selected'; there is a predetermined time frame that can't adapt to the natural rhythms of a 'process'; it only brings together elites but away from the public eye, so that they remain stuck in self-interest or are reluctant to make bold moves without the confidence they will have enough support; it only brings together people without much power and influence who therefore are not able by themselves to effect meaningful change; the process yields some agreements but doesn't provide further structured support to see them followed through, etc. All of these are potentially fatal weaknesses that can be avoided through careful analysis, smart design and skillful facilitation.



4. Does peace work that includes ‘dialogue’ produce meaningful ‘results’?

There are plenty of experiences, and not only from Interpeace, that demonstrate that strategic peace work (which does not rely on ‘dialogue’ alone) does produce very meaningful results. Various examples were shared that showed meaningful change at the personal and the interpersonal level, between individuals but also within and between social groups. This may include improvements in inter-generational relations, as we see in many societies around the world, including our own, important ‘generational divides’ emerging that can become a destabilizing factor. But such changes also need to translate into something more ‘structural’: better policies and governance as a result of a ‘rapprochement’ of ‘authorities’ and ‘people’; a more balanced historical ‘narrative’ that is attentive to the experiences and perspectives of all groups; a reopening of trade routes or a shared use of water resources; more constructive public and political discourses; institutional reforms or improvements in the way institutions function or policies are implemented etc. The ability to collaborate across divides does not require that everybody agrees on everything, or shares a strong sense of mutual ‘friendship’. It can and will remain partially interest-based. But even if there are deep differences and emotions run high, the reflex is not to grab a gun, but to talk.

