Dialogue and Social Integration: Experience from Ethno-political Conflict Work.

Background paper for the Expert Group Meeting *on Dialogue in the Social Integration Process: Building Peaceful Social Relations by, for and with People*. New York 21-23 November 2005.

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-- Not for Citation --

Introduction

From the humble perspective of a very small institute with rather specialised expertise in the use of dialogue in protracted conflict, what follows is offered as a collection of broad reflections on the ideas behind the use of dialogue in the integration process.

With the very term, social integration, we are already into difficult waters. Despite more than ten years since the first UNRISD paper on the topic, which noted the disputed nature of the term, there is still nothing like consensus on its meaning, form and dynamics:

> (I)t is not clear what exactly social integration is, or what its enhancement
> would entail… Because "social integration" is such a vague and
> ambiguous term, it has been used to represent a wide variety of concerns.

Without revisiting the argument, it is worth stating at the outset that social integration is not an end-state or goal. It is impossible to describe a meaningfully completed state of social integration without raising issues of enforced conformity and the elision of difference and diversity. Rather, such integration can only usefully be represented as a *process*, always ongoing, never finished. Indeed, far from eliding differences, integration of a pluralist society must aim both to establish norms of fairness and inclusion while also respecting diversity and, crucially, finding mechanisms to manage difference without integrating it out of existence.

This sounds like a simple recipe for democracy. And at some level it is exactly that. Democracy implies the non-violent political management of difference (of opinion, of ideology, of identity, and so on) within a fair (integrated) system of rules that apply to all. But we must not forget that, even in the western European bastions of long-established democracies, politics can fail. Street violence in France in the 1960s, and in the UK in the 1980s, was not generated by excluded identity groups within those societies, but by otherwise well-integrated societal groupings (the young in France demanding change, the left in the UK demanding an end to Thatcherite conservatism) who felt some perceived political exclusion. Thatcher was, by any serious definition of democratic rules, a full democrat; and yet some of her democratic policies produced effects of social disintegration, rather than the reverse.

Apart from telling us that integration is a never-completed aspect of even the most solidly established democracy, this observation also points up the limits of the term. Interestingly, in western Europe (whose democracies now generally face much greater diversities of identity within their populations than in Thatcher's days) the preferred term today is "social cohesion," a concept which embodies a more positive and accepting approach to diversity: cohesion *between* acknowledged differences, rather than their integration into something uniform and homogenous.

We can, and should, "integrate" the rules of society, so that they apply to all identity groupings. But we must not try to integrate the identities themselves. So we might more usefully consider "cohesion" as an achievable end-state, than "integration."

However, the central question remains: how is that achieved in a society? The democratic response, of course is: by means of policy formation, political and legal reform: through a process that establishes and maintains the rules of social justice across all social sectors.

But that merely begs another question: how is such policy formulated, how are the rules established, in such a way as to be responsive to diverse opinions and competing interests? The simple answer is, through consultation and dialogue. And so we come to our key theme.

In what way does (or could, or should) dialogue promote this process in order to enhance social cohesion within a pluralist society? We will try to point out two interrelated ways in which this can happen. Firstly, relating more to the *content* of any given dialogue, it is the channel for communicating the range of existing opinions on a given topic, for negotiating through those differences, for finding integrative or compromise agreements that enhance the process. Secondly, looking at dialogue as a *process*, the habit of dialogue itself becomes the accepted basis of engaging on contentious issues, thus generating a *dialogue culture* for managing the process of cohesion, difference and integration of solutions.

In the context of broad social processes, we are talking about dialogue on a large scale. Society-wide, dialogue is rarely the interaction between just two parties; rather, we refer generally to multi-stakeholder dialogue, a long, broad, complex process, as yet imperfectly understood. This problem of scale should, incidentally, alert us immediately to the difficult nature of the challenge involved. Dialogue is a tool, and in many ways a quite simple and straightforward one, which we employ in certain specific ways to generate an interaction over difference. It is a useful tool, and indeed the central – perhaps even crucial – tool of the field of conflict transformation, but it is not the panacea for all ills, nor the magic answer to complex, difficult social processes. It has its limits: it is a channel that can be used or abused, instrumentalised or politicised, to both good ends or bad. And, in keeping with the imperfect world of social politics, it sometimes fails completely. Nonetheless, it has potential and we can examine it to see what that potential might look like for enhancing large-scale social cohesion through a multi-stakeholder process.

Here, we resort to our own experience at Berghof with dialogue. Our interest in dialogue is intense but specific. Our arena of activity is violent ethno-political conflict: protracted political conflict, intertwined with strong communal identity components, manifest in prolonged periods of organised political violence. Thus, we focus generally on societies at war, where the conflict has become the central, divisive lens through which all activity is motivated and interpreted. In this context, integration or cohesion are often distant goals This focus has given us certain insights into the workings of such conflict and the tools required for its transformation into non-violent forms, but we must be wary of extrapolating too much beyond that rather specific context. Nonetheless, some general comments about the forms, uses and efficacies of dialogue can be offered in the hope that some will be relevant and others will at least provoke reaction.

Classifying dialogue

Dialogues can be viewed as one means, perhaps 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". 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. 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 dialoguing 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 dialogue is not a perfect tool. Critical questions can be voiced. What good does it really do if it involves only, as often happens, a self-selecting set of moderate representatives of parties to a conflict? Even if comprehension and understanding are achieved between influential persons through a dialogue, does the success of the whole enterprise not rather depend on how the follow-up is managed? Do adherents of the dialogue method not risk overestimating and overstating the importance of communication in dealing with conflicts? The ultimate concerns of most disputes, after all, are not simply communication or perceptual issues (stereotypical views, differences of opinion, and varying cultural standards) but rather tangible conflicts of interest, structural factors, and the struggle for power and influence. 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. So there is at least one limitation: dialogue is a tool of politics, not a substitute for it.

Jay Rothman classified dialogue approaches in inter-group conflict into 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 may require the presence of a third party as a co-actor or initiator.

This fourfold typology classifies dialogues according to their prevailing forms of interaction. But additionally, rather than this rather artificial separation, the four forms also emphasize different yet complementary elements of dealing constructively with conflicts through a *multi-level dialogue*. We can also conceptualise them as cumulative steps in a process of enhancing the quality of communication and interaction between the dialogue partners:
- The first phase is concerned with formulating the *differing viewpoints* of the various parties as clearly as possible, securing mutual acknowledgement of these, as well as identifying the substance of the conflict.
- The second phase focuses on *reflection* upon 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 co-operation 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 realisation.

In the case of protracted conflicts, of course, dialogues between disputing groups tend not to be one-off events, but a long series of interactions, over a period of many months or even years, where progress is interpreted as a gradual process of relationship building, problem solving and collaborative action.

Most dialogues take the form of organized group encounters of a size that allows face-to-face communication. They are usually conducted by persons below top leadership-level, and frequently facilitated by a third party who manages the *process* of dialogue (how they discuss), while leaving disputants to insert the *content* (what they discuss). They are therefore not so much official negotiations as a form of political preliminaries.

The basic idea behind dialogue-based meetings is not new: it grew out of a conviction that increased contact and interaction between individuals from different backgrounds could help eliminate prejudices and 'enemy images' and create trans-frontier loyalties. This slightly naïve *contact hypothesis* has been supplanted by more sophisticated concepts of intercultural learning. Although dialogue-based meetings intended expressly to deal with ethno-political conflicts are a more recent phenomenon, they draw on similar beliefs. In the field of conflict transformation, perhaps the most influential school of thought has been *interactive problem-solving*. 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 four phases of constructive dialogue in a quasi-academic exercise, or to facilitate this process. But more than forty years of experience with the use of this approach in a variety of different crisis regions has greatly enhanced knowledge. We could once again summarise such knowledge under four categories.
- *Dialogue projects as grassroots peacebuilding and interpersonal reconciliation efforts*: These projects generally relate to the local or neighbourhood level, involving people in similar situations and with similar interests (young people, women, trade unionists, members of a religion, for example) or persons who share a similar or interdependent fate because of a violent past (victims and perpetrators of warfare, for example). The central elements here are personal encounters and the elimination of barriers to communication. The governing thought is that of the 'human-relations dialogue', and the long-term objective is the replication of encounters of this kind, in order to better promote peace 'from below'.
- *Dialogue projects combined with individual capacity-building*: Given the explicit aim of dialogue-initiatives to achieve understanding, one can also use them to enhance participants' skills in interacting constructively with one another, in a combination of training and conflict management.
- *Dialogue projects combined with institution building, networking, and practical projects*: Combinations such as these are usually only possible after a 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. But dialogue projects can also function as

starting-points for practical co-operative endeavours (income-generating schemes for groups particularly hard hit by the conflict, for example).

- *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. For example, the third party may offer resources and techniques to encourage influential members of the conflict parties to develop innovative insights and ideas which may break deadlock, or enhance progress, in the official negotiations. This approach is therefore sometimes described as a part of the 'pre-negotiation' phase.

These analyses are offered less in the belief that they are directly transferable to the context of social cohesion, but more in the hope that they might, through adaptation or adoption, stimulate more effective and contextualised dialogue design. However, one more version of classification can usefully be offered here, in Figure 1, which summarises three different approaches to conflict, and their respective uses of the dialogue tool:

Figure 1: Dialogue in Three 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/to 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

It is likely that it is the third classification, conflict transformation, which offers most potential for the cohesion process, not least because it is the broadest formation, opening out
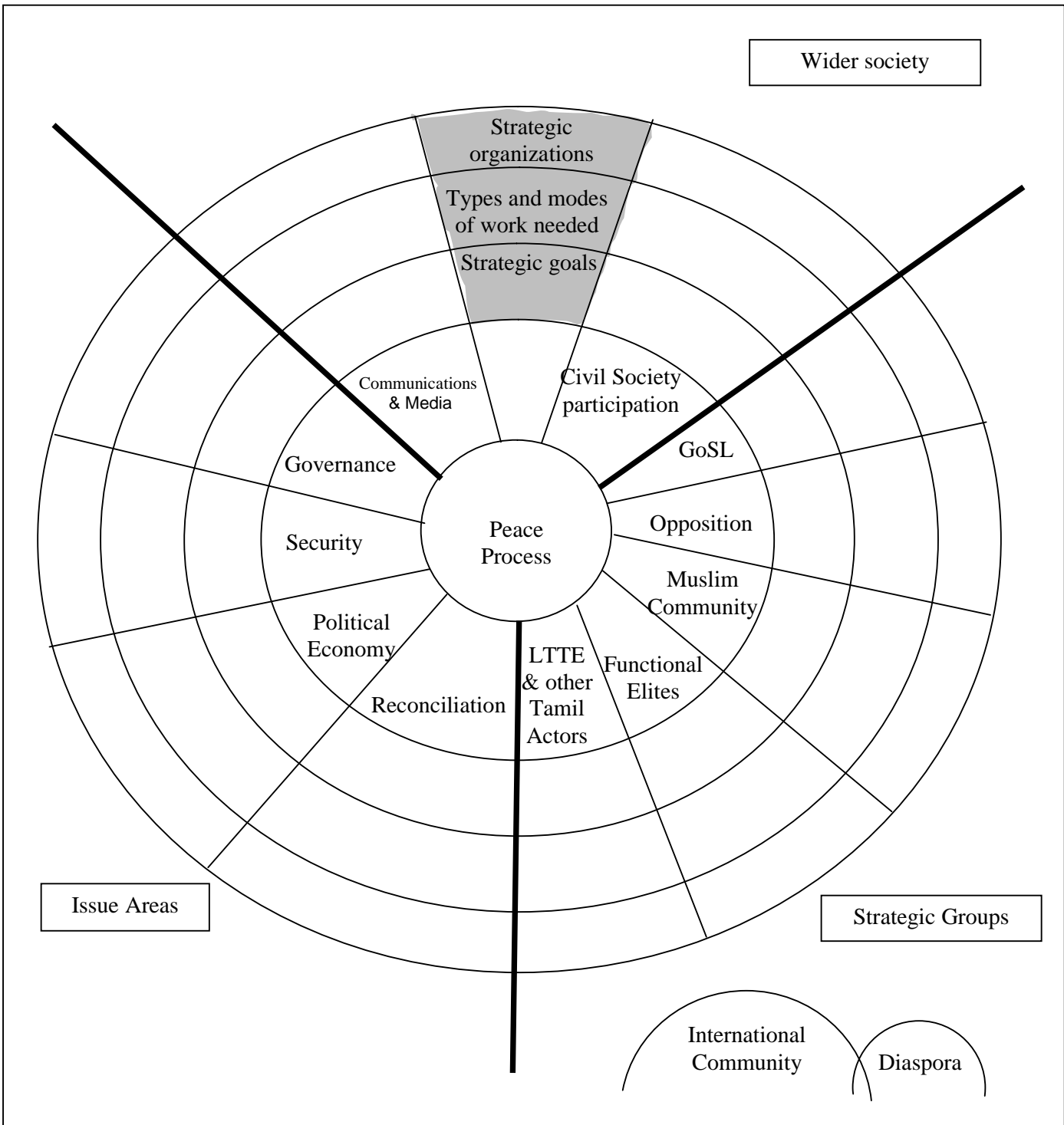
well beyond elite negotiation into civil society, and incorporating structural change, empowering of the marginalised, and generally enhanced communication. However, all three realms or levels must ultimately be energised and linked in a coherent strategy, not least in order to manage the multi-level complexity of the process aimed at improving cohesion.

A Systemic Approach to Dialogue

All this may or may not be interesting, given its narrow context. However, one of Berghof's key recent sources of learning on this subject has been an intensive, long-term engagement in Sri Lanka. The realities of that very complex and protracted conflict have forced us to reflect deeply on the meaning and effectiveness both of intervention and of dialogue. The result has been the emergence of a complex, multi-level, multi-issue and multi-actor model within which we situate our endeavours. One key element of this has been the realisation that only a properly multi-stakeholder engagement can embrace all the constituent elements of the context. From this has emerged what we now term our systemic approach to conflict transformation, an approach which has been tried and tested in Sri Lanka and which we are now examining for adaptation to other contexts. The essence of the approach is presented in Figure 2. While it can be criticised for its very complexity, at least it avoids the all-too-frequent criticism of such models as being simplistic. But, we stress, its complexity is what has made it coherent and responsive to the realities it deals with, and acceptable to the protagonists in the conflict.

The design of the spider-web diagram, with five core issue areas (peace process, governance, security, political economy and reconciliation), five stakeholder groups (Government of Sri Lanka Parties, Opposition Parties, Muslim Actors, Functional Elites, and LTTE and other Tamil Actors), aspects of the wider society (civil society participation, communication & media) and two combined issue/stakeholder areas outside of the diagram (International Community & Diaspora) functions as a navigation scheme for informing our work and structuring the division of labour. We do not cover all potential topics within these issue areas at similar intensities, nor do we work with all stakeholder groups in similar ways. The key point of this schema is that it helps us to strategically focus our work at a particular time and space based on a comprehensive and "systemic" understanding of conflict transformation and peacebuilding. To be specific, it gives us the framework within which the dialogue channels, bi- and multi-lateral, must be constructed and operationalised. All activities within the framework aim to link issue-centred approaches with stakeholder-centred approaches. Our interest is to enhance the capacities of all principal stakeholders with respect to issue-centred problem-solving through dialogue. It summarises our approach to multi-stakeholder work, while at the same time acknowledging the complex, multi-dimensional necessities of such dialogue. It is offered here as an example of a workable system for such complexities, but also as a warning that while dialogue is a simple tool and can be simply modelled, multi-stakeholder dialogue is a challenge to simplistic models and frameworks.

Figure 2: the Systemic Approach to Dialogue in Sri Lanka

Wider society

Strategic organizations

Types and modes of work needed

Strategic goals

Communications & Media

Civil Society participation

Governance

GoSL

Security

Peace Process

Opposition

Muslim Community

Political Economy

LTTE & other Tamil Actors

Functional Elites

Reconciliation

Issue Areas

Strategic Groups

International Community

Diaspora

Conclusion

We mentioned earlier that dialogue serves as the channel through which the *content* (the issues in contention) can be managed. But we also commented on the process side of the tool: that the habit of dialogue can itself enter the culture. One of the most important conceptual

contributions which the dialogue approach can make to the creation of a pluralist society that manages cohesion across diversity is that of generally promoting a dialogue-based culture. This means that the characteristic elements of interest-led constructive dialogue should not just be used to positive effect in a handful of inter-group projects, but should become a basic paradigm of political culture. In this way, dialogue can, and should, be totally instrumentalised, but in a co-operative and agreed way that includes, and benefits, all sectors of society. It then becomes a means for channelling and facilitating peaceful social relations. Thus used, it will also enhance the embedding of a truly democratic culture across the society, one of the strongest guarantees that the society, whatever its differences of opinion, belief or identity, will manage its diversity peacefully and be increasingly proofed against any resort to, or acceptance of, non-peaceful methods of conflict management.