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## Democracy and Social Integration

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**Dialogue in the Social Integration Process: Building peaceful social relations – by, for and with People**

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## Introduction

There are situations where there is a general perception that something needs to be done to remedy concrete challenges facing society. The challenge may be violent conflict, widespread poverty, rampant inequality and corruption, general failure to respond to human rights (political as well as social and economic) or lack of inclusion and participation in governance. In the same situations, it is common that the means to respond to such challenges are not available to a single actor, such as a government; or lesser still an agency external to the country. Moreover, there is often dispute on both the root causes of the challenges and the potential remedies.

Societies' formal and informal structures articulate and aggregate the normal conflicting interests and perspectives of the citizens. At times this leads to polarization, particularly when the public space is dysfunctional, non-existing, or where institutional mechanisms are weak. In a well functioning democracy, the institutions and practices of governance tend to have an integrative function on society. Where democratic governance institutions are weak, there are lesser levies against social disintegration.

Individuals or institutional representatives of competing or conflicting interests are often referred to as *stakeholders* – at least among civil servants of international organizations working in peace-building, governance and development cooperation. To address major challenges facing society, the stakeholders need to be taken into account. This is particularly the case when a certain stakeholder is required to take an active role in making the appropriate response to a challenge happen.

In the situations described, where social integration is left wanting and challenges seem overwhelming, there are many needs, for instance (1) to resolve or clarify the nature of the challenge facing society, (2) to find and verify evidence, knowledge and information, (3) to come to a reasonable settlement of conflicting interests, (4) to acquire information on all aspects of the challenge, (5) to reveal the conflicting values and deeper basis of a conflict, and (6) to co-ordinate goals and actions in response to the challenge. When an international organization sponsors or facilitates a dialogue process, the ultimate objective is normally to respond to an undefined and broad challenge, such as wide-spread poverty, economic crisis, political paralysis or violent conflict. Such challenges can be addressed systematically through a dialogue process leading to, at best, a higher level of social integration.

## Meanings of Dialogue

The word dialogue is in the first instance simply a synonym for conversation, discussion, or talk. Often when a government or other actor say that they are in dialogue with other actors, they simply mean that they are communicating. Dialogue in this meaning is certainly a phenomenon that is not new to the human race.

Understanding the inherent logic and function of dialogue has been a challenge in several fields of inquiry, including philosophy, linguistics, sociology, social psychology, history, anthropology and even computer science. The concept of dialogue referred to as a method in peace-building, democracy promotion and human development is close to concepts developed in social science, while at the same time inspired by conflict transformation literature and discussions around democratic culture in political science.

Already Plato recognized the importance of dialogue and the challenge of communicating and understanding each other in order to effectively make decisions and coordinate our public life. The origin of the term dialogue is the Greek word *dialogos*. *Dia* means “through” and *logos* means “the word; meaning”. Portraying arguments in a dialogue framework, in which two or more parties engage in an

exchange of organized questions and replies, is long known in philosophy, for instance the dialogues written by Plato to represent the philosophy of Socrates.

Aristotle was at his time concerned with the conversational model of argumentation and its inherent logic, and was one of the originators to the rise of the deductive, non-dialectical, knowledge that has been on the rise ever since the classic period. Dialectic has become associated with the Hegelian view of history as a conversation between thesis, antithesis and synthesis. (This view of history was later popularized by sociologist Karl Marx.)

Max Weber and other social scientists in the positivist tradition of thought asserted that all reliable knowledge must be based on perception, and that there is a clear distinction of fact and value. This is not a theoretical framework in which dialogue can assertively be argued for, since the modern understanding of dialogue is applied to processes where the values and individual frames of reference of the dialogue participants have an important bearing when reality is described.

In the spirit of continuing the tradition of the Frankfurt School of Social Research, Jürgen Habermas advocated an interdisciplinary approach to social science that combines philosophical theory with empirical social research. Habermas is probably the most influential thinker on the role of dialogue in democracy, developed in his theories of discursive democracy and communicative ethics. For Habermas “the dialogue” is an ideal condition; the completely unforced and equal dialogue between citizens would in this context be a norm that we can use to assess how fair relationships between people are; the more un-even and power-influenced the relations between people, the less democratic or fair.

Habermas does not give a new definition of the word dialogue. Rather he presents a new theory on how a certain type of dialogue can be used to understand what we mean by “democracy” and “justice”. His theory does not define what these concepts mean, but how they can be examined and commonly agreed to. Democracy and justice thus becomes a procedure in which not the results but the process of arriving at them is important.

A dialogue in the formal philosophical sense is an exchange within a certain structure, following a certain set of rules. In a real life dialogue it is not clear what the rules are. Nonetheless, if dialogue is seen as a goal directed conversation, we can classify the type of dialogue in accordance with its goal. Six basic types of dialogue have been identified<sup>1</sup>: persuasion dialogue, inquiry, negotiation dialogue, information seeking dialogue, deliberation and eristic dialogue. The properties of these six types of dialogue can be summarized as follows<sup>2</sup>:

Type of dialogue	Initial situation	Participant's goal	Goal of dialogue
Persuasion	Conflict of opinions	Persuade other party	Resolve or clarify issue
Inquiry	Need to have proof	Find and verify evidence	Prove (disprove) hypothesis
Negotiation	Conflict of interests	Get what you most want	Reasonable settlement that both can live with
Information-seeking	Need information	Acquire or give information	Exchange information
Deliberation	Dilemma or practical choice	Co-ordinate goals and actions	Decide best available course of action
Eristic dialogue	Personal conflict/ animosity	Verbally hit out at opponent	Reveal deeper basis of conflict

<sup>1</sup> Douglas Walton, *the new dialectic*, Toronto University press, 1998

<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Douglas Walton, *The importance of dialogue theory at the century's turn*, 2000, [http://www.msu.edu/course/phl/492/phl492/fall2002/asquith\\_1/waltonkeynote.html](http://www.msu.edu/course/phl/492/phl492/fall2002/asquith_1/waltonkeynote.html)

Dialogue, as a time-limited deliberate exercise, applied as a tool in democracy promotion and related areas, inevitably contain elements of all the above dialogue purposes. However, each organization working in the field may have acquired their own understanding of what is meant by dialogue. While some agents look mainly for improvements of the quality of the relationship between the dialogue participants, others look broadly on the dialogue process as multi-purposeful, in which issues are clarified, settlements are reached, information is exchanged, deeper basis of conflict is revealed and resolved and best available course of action is identified.

It is a challenge to clearly decide what the purpose of the dialogue is and thereafter manage the process into a type of dialogue that is conducive to the objectives set forth. Typically, complex goals such as “building peace”, “consolidating democracy” and “sustainable development” need a number of types of dialogue within the same process.

## **Democracy, dialogue and social integration**

Support for development of democracy would be easier if it consisted of a unique set of institutions, procedures and practices, but this is not the case. There is no form of democracy that is universally appropriate and the range of democracies that exist today testifies to this.

While there are commonly accepted democratic values that form the basis for all democracies, the actual institutions, procedures and practices can vary depending on a society and its people. For democracy to function, it requires the consent of the people. Therefore, concepts such as inclusiveness, participation, ownership and sustainability are essential for the advancement of democracy. These concepts come together in the idea of dialogue as a foundation on which to promote democratic development. Dialogue is thus an integral part of the democratization process; both an objective and instrument at the same time.

Dialogue is first and foremost, in the context of this expert meeting and paper, an approach and methodology used in peace-building, democracy promotion and development cooperation. In a dialogue for peace, some issues will overlap with the democratization and development agendas. A dialogue that is held to strengthen the democratic infrastructure in a society may help prevent future conflicts but part of democracy building is about strengthening democracy in its own right. The development agenda is dependent on peace and democratization but a dialogue for development also addresses stand alone issues. At best a dialogue in one off the three areas should have positive impact on the other two; minimally, advancement in one area should not have a negative impact on another.

Citizens seeking to resolve differences peacefully through dialogue are the essence of democracy. Democracy is defined in two ways. First, it is defined by its principles and its institutions: one person/one vote, free and fair elections, representative government, written constitutions that define division of powers within government and guarantee freedom of speech and assembly, independent judiciary and media. Second, it is defined by its reliance on citizens as political actors to assume responsibility for constructive change. Dialogue is the essence of decision-making in democratic government; dialogue characterizes the interactions of citizens as they engage with each other to do the work that only they can do. Through dialogue, citizens work through their choices in dealing with complex problems, frame problems to be dealt with through formal political processes, develop the relationships that are essential to the functioning of an efficient economy. They generate knowledge by talking with one another and power by acting together.<sup>3</sup>

Peacekeeping was traditionally a response to interstate conflicts, monitoring ceasefires with troops that operated with the consent of parties involved. Peace-keeping has been complemented by peace-building. Nowadays, after establishing a cessation of violence, the obvious but not simple next steps are to disarm warring factions, restore civilian economy, building an effective system of justice and other institutions that permit political contests for political power. The creation of representative government is seen as critical to the effective long-term resolution of armed conflict and the prevention of a re-lapse; the overlap and interdependence between democratization and peace-building efforts is evident.

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Hal Saunders, International Institute for Sustained Dialogue

The first generation of democracy promotion in the nineties focused on elections alone; gradually there has been a realization that a systemic view on democracy building is necessary and that it is required that the actors who will use the democratic governance system are part of designing it. Subsequently, approaches containing an emphasis on dialogue, participation and inclusive processes have been identified as purposeful in strengthening democratic institutions and practices.

Democracy is a system of governance through which relations between the people, their state and the markets are regulated. One single intervention in this system will influence the functioning of the system as the whole. When supporting change from the outside, there should be well developed analysis about the impact of the intervention; whether it furthers democracy and its impact on long term stability and development.

The role of dialogue as an approach in the support for democratic development is of strategic importance. A process in which local stakeholders accept to jointly analyze the big picture, to develop shared longer-term agendas aimed at improving the democratic system and the performance of the democratic institutions, is an ideal type of democratic dialogue. A dialogue process helps to address needs and substantive issues and at the same time it is strengthening the process and way of governance. A dialogue for democratic reform needs to include the existing democratic institutions as well and those stakeholders who are underrepresented or democratically underprivileged under the current framework. A dialogue process is not a substitution for democratic institutions, it is a complement that strengthens social integration and democracy.

### **Dialogue for democratic development – How does it work?**

International organizations are by their mandates required to cooperate with specific countries, in human development, democratization and conflict-management. Most likely, the organization that takes the initiative to organize a dialogue does this in view of a perceived problem. An important aspect of dialogue is its problem-solving function. Dialogue is not only useful in conflict situations; it enhances any problem-solving process that involves multiple stakeholders. The needs to understand and take into account multiple perspectives and aspirations are the norm when it comes to peace-building, democratization and development.

An early and important function of an organized dialogue process is to formulate the issues, challenges and problems that the process will deal with. Problem formulation is not an apolitical process. Engaging those affected by an issue using dialogue methodologies can be a powerful way of learning the different ways people want and need to talk about that issue. An intermediary goal of dialogue is to find a way of naming and framing the issue in “public terms” (rather than professional or technical language) that captures the complex concerns and underlying values of the public. The way an issue is named and framed can predetermine the public’s sense of ownership about, and connection to, the issue. Managerially, it is important to know when to end a discussion on problem definition and start the problem solving. Some participants of the dialogue may lose confidence in the process if it spends an excessive amount of time on definitions.

A dialogue process organized to promote lasting peace, democracy and human development, will have many instances of problem solving and problem formulation. A macro-problem impeding all of the three and that needs resolution may for instance be inequality in political representation. Intermediary solutions to accomplish better political representation are found in a variety of areas, for instance in the education system, in citizenship and voter registration practices, in electoral law or even in media ownership and a number of other areas. A broader dialogue process that addresses a future oriented challenge, such as for instance democracy or sustainable development will not be able to work out specific solutions to address each and every one of these issues. However, the cross-disciplinary nature of dialogue makes it a very appropriate tool in setting a long-term and broad based agenda for reform.

An instance of this is the relationship between the dialogue tool and crisis interventions. In Spanish, a distinction is made between *conflict* (conflicto) and *conflictivity* (conflictividad).<sup>4</sup> In contexts where the risk of violence is high and ongoing or recurring crisis are expressed in destructive ways (a situation of “*conflictivity*”) dialogue can be used to bring the involved sectors together, not to resolve or deal with specific problem or conflict but rather to recognize the patterns of interaction as similar problems arise and use dialogue to think more broadly on how to change these patterns of interaction.

An agenda for reform or a development vision coming out of a dialogue process may have been the official purpose of organizing the dialogue. However, when a new development policy comes out of an inclusive dialogue process, it is likely that the policy has the support by many of the stakeholders that are needed in its implementation. Thus, one can see the purpose of the dialogue not as a means to articulation but as a means of mobilization. In instances of non responsive governance, it is not unusual that civil society organizes dialogue among themselves to generate popular momentum and civic engagement around an issue.

Dialogue plays a significant role in creating the kind of generative energy and creativity necessary that help stakeholders imagine, visualize and ultimately choose from among the different possible futures that await them. It is an added advantage if there is a basic consensus among the key stakeholders, the government in particular, of which future is the preferred one.

Organizations that invest in dialogue processes as a tool do this in support of their broader objectives. To reach an end goal there are intermediary objectives that needs to be accomplished. An important such objective that dialogue tools are used to attain is the ***transformation of relationships***: Dialogue tools are used when dysfunctional relationships between individuals, groups, sectors or institutions block or limit their collective ability to deal with issues. In this case, dialogue is used to explicitly help transform the relationships by helping parties focus on and name the deeply divisive patterns of interaction that need to be dealt prior to being able to identify common ground for more collaborative action. The transformation of relationships is a very important objective of using dialogue as a tool, but it is not an end in itself. The relationships needs changing for society to be able to respond to a challenge, and it is when the challenge is appropriately met that there is proof that the relationship has been changed into one that helps solving common difficulties collectively.

In conclusion, dialogue can be organized to accomplish a variety of objectives, and each one of these may be seen an intermediary objective or a beneficial although not intentional spin-off effect of the process. Organizations working with complex processes and broad goals are very much aware that the impact of a project may go beyond expectations. Seasoned officials advocating for the use of dialogue do not always point the potential transformative powers of the process, but point to the many tangible and measurable benefits that can come out of a professionally organized endeavor. At the same time, such officials may very well be aware of the full potential of human beings to transform themselves and their societies.

## **Some examples of dialogue**

Dialogue is already used as an operational tool for producing change, progress or development in specific areas. In this sense, we can describe dialogue as a political process with a finite timeframe, a limited a thematic scope and the objective to accomplish results in a specific area of social life. In this context, we presume also that there is some organization of the process – a facilitating agent – that can be external to the situation of internal but seen as impartial or evenhanded.

The organizations represented in this expert meeting organized by the United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) are members of what is often referred to as the “international community”.

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<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Philip Thomas

International IDEA, DESA and others are working at the intersection of building lasting peace, supporting democratic governance and cooperation for sustainable human development. Although dialogue processes organized in such a context have their own intermediary objectives, such as articulating an agenda, transforming relationships or solving a multi-stakeholder dispute, the overall ambition of the dialogue is directly related to the mandates of the respective organizations.

The facilitation of dialogue, if done professionally, requires financial resources. Such resources are normally found in the development cooperation budgets of bilateral and multilateral donors. Different budget lines have different objectives, according to the priorities of the donor. Common priorities in the international community today are prevention, management, and transformation of conflicts, supporting governance of an inclusive participatory and democratic nature. Members of the United Nations subscribe to common Millennium Development Goals that include poverty eradication, gender equality, combating hiv/aids etc. Dialogue as a tool is appealing to donors particularly when there is a clear relationship between the dialogue process and the advancement of a development goal.

A forthcoming handbook for practitioners of dialogue that is being developed by International IDEA, UNDP and OAS<sup>5</sup> is based on years of experiences and lessons learned in a wide array of organizations, which has been harvested through collections of case-studies and a long series of regional and international expert group meetings. It is difficult to give advice that is both generic and specific when it comes to the organization of dialogue processes, since dialogue is a method that is highly dependent on the context. It is however important to gather lessons learned and build a bank of knowledge for the emerging field of dialogue and an approach and methodology..

Promotion of democracy presupposes cooperation, and the partners in this cooperation must first and foremost create trust and confidence among themselves. Reform of the political system implies a renegotiation of power structures in society and the stakes are high as well as the risks; only those national stakeholders benefiting from the dividends and paying the price of the failures of a reform process have a fully legitimate stake in such reforms. This principle goes well with the theme of the DESA expert group meeting that emphasizes the building of peaceful social relations “by, for and with people”.

In the forthcoming handbook of practitioners of dialogue<sup>6</sup> the following are given as practical examples of dialogue applications, with the objective of building democracy and enhancing social integration:

- **The national conference**, for instance as applied in West Africa in the nineties, is a public forum at which key representatives of political and civic groups are invited to discuss and develop a plan for the country’s political future, preferably on a consensual basis.<sup>7</sup> National conferences are typically designed to address the demands for political liberalization, while at the same time achieving a “pacted” of “managed” transition, often with the incumbent leadership believing that it can maintain control over the process.
- **Impartial facilitation of dialogue for democratic development** has been provided by International IDEA in a number of countries, including Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Indonesia, Georgia and Peru. In a sense, these efforts have been aimed at replicating the dynamics of the often big and circumstantially provoked national conference. International IDEA’s method has been to establish a dialogue group consisting of key stakeholders in the democratic process (government, opposition, civil society organization, political parties, media, business community, etc.) and facilitate a process of democracy assessment which culminates in the publishing and advocacy of a democracy assessment report that is endorsed by all the involved stakeholders. Specific agendas in the democracy assessment report, which can be seen as a road map for democratic reform, are thereafter followed up by the local stakeholders in various ways.
- **Issue oriented dialogue that involves civil society** can be launched by governments can have an effect on strengthening civil society and helping it to articulate its positions. The point of departure of one such process was when the Philippines decided to join Agenda 21. Local, regional and national dialogues were

<sup>5</sup> the programme receives financial support from Cida.

<sup>6</sup> A joint venture between IDEA, OAS, UNDP and Cida

<sup>7</sup> Michael Lund & Carlos Santiso, “National Conferences”, in Harris and Reilly (eds) *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict: Options for Negotiators*, Stockholm, 1998, International IDEA

held to broaden participation and the scope of themes that were discussed. Twenty-six regional consultations and six national consultations over the course of eighteen months emanated in one of the most consultative documents in the history of Philippine policy-making and President Ramos committed to making it the governing framework for national policies and programmes.<sup>8</sup> An important side effect of this dialogue is that it built a network of relationships that later, in times of crisis, allowed the voice of civil society to be heard.

- **The constitution building process** is an important moment in the democratic development of a country and its society, including both drafting a new constitution or reforming an existing one.<sup>9</sup> Due to the centrality of the constitution both as a social pact and as the foundation of the institutional and legal system of a country, an inclusive process should preferably be a basic element of constitution building. Broad based dialogues endeavored, with different levels of success, to enhance the legitimacy and ownership of the constitution in cases like South Africa, Afghanistan and the Philippines, to mention but a few.
- **Non-institutionalized constitutional dialogue** can be used to launch and strengthen the debate and knowledge on constitutional issues. Such unofficial dialogue (supported by IDEA for instance in Georgia, Nepal and Nigeria) serves multiple purposes: Articulating a vision that serves as a point of reference for further debate and dialogue; building a common vision among pro-democracy forces; and providing a learning opportunity for the involved. When embarking on constitutional dialogue in a polarized and conflict prone society, the magnitude of what is at stake makes the endeavor extremely sensitive. A specific challenge of the dialogue in this context is how to harmonize short-term interests of the stakeholders with a common longer-term interest and vision of the society and state.
- **Political party dialogue** is an emerging field, eminently developed by the Netherlands Institute for Multi-party Democracy (IMD) and other organizations. Political parties are essential institutions in a democratic society, selecting leadership, aggregating the interests of citizens and formulating policies and programmes; they both form governments and hold the same accountable through opposition. Yet, they are among the least trusted institutions in most countries, seen as structures of power and not participation. Inter-party dialogues can aim at identifying and overcoming common challenges in improving the functioning of the political system. The dialogue thus helps create an infrastructure that stabilizes the democratic system. When new and urgent challenges arise, the parties may have reached a level of trust and functionality that enable them to coordinate and act.
- A dialogue process is instrumental in **generating a shared economic development vision** for a country. National development visions are powerful when they pervade the vision of key social actors in economic development (employees, business people, representative organizations of civil society, government and political parties in opposition) and when driven jointly by these actors.<sup>10</sup> Dialogue on development visions can (at best) be a national affair, or can be facilitated by external actors. In some instances the identification of strategies for achieving the Millennium Development Goals has been a useful pretext to engage a country in dialogue that by necessity will need to touch also on the governance system that will manage the progress in development.
- **Dialogue in development cooperation** is becoming very fashionable, although under several different names such as strategic consultation, participatory programming, partnership approaches, etc. International NGOs were the early champions in this field. Working on the grass roots level, they found that involvement of the local community in development projects greatly increased project efficiency, impact and sustainability. Bilateral donors such as the Swedish International Development Agency now require extensive processes of dialogue beyond the traditional negotiations behind closed doors between aid bureaucrats and national government. The Cotonou Agreement between the European Union and 81 African, Caribbean and Pacific countries has institutionalized dialogue and consultation with none state actors in its programming process, emphasizing the need for broad based political dialogue in its key articles. Even the Bretton Woods institutions are embracing participatory approaches, such as the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) advocated by former World Bank head James D. Wolfenson or the strategic communication dimension of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. Needless to say, the Bank's interest in participation is met by skepticism in many quarters.

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<sup>8</sup> Bettye Pruitt, UNDP RBLAC Regional Project on Democratic Dialogue: Promoting Multi-Stakeholder Consensus Building as a Tool for Strengthening Democratic Governance, 2003. Second Learning Workshop of Democratic Dialogue (Panamá, December 2-4, 2002)

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from Guido Galli, International IDEA

<sup>10</sup> Alvaro Garcia "A Country's Vision and Government Programmes", in *National Visions Matter: Lessons of Success*. Proceedings of a Public Private Sector Development Forum held in Santiago, Chile, July 25-27 2004, International IDEA, The World Bank, UNECLAC



- **Dialogue at the local level** in a context of violent conflict, can lead to the creation of patches of non-violent management of contentious issues even if, at the broader national level, or in other parts of the country, the same contradictions have generated violence.<sup>11</sup> A case in point is the “Mesa de Tierras” in Alto Verapaz, Guatemala, where the local dialogue organized by MINUGUA between rich landowners and destitute indigenous peasants managed to contain significantly the levels of violence in the very frequent and often deadly land conflicts. The “mesa” was successful in terms of methodology and impacts on the local level. Yet, it was not able to address the root causes of the conflict: the extremely unbalanced distribution of land in the country and the refusal of the land oligarchy to consider even minimal land reform measures in the framework of the peace process.
- **Crisis calls for dialogue.** In Argentina, in 2002, the national crisis had reached the edge of violent outbreak. The breakdown of the economy led to public protest. Between December 2001 and January 2002 the country saw five presidents come and go. A National dialogue was called for by the president in January 2002, with the objective to change the direction that led the country into crisis. The dialogue, which was facilitated by the Argentine Episcopal Conference and the Argentine Catholic Church, helped to channel people’s anger and disappointment and helped them to work on next steps and possible solutions. During the first six months of dialogue, more than 2000 people representing more than 800 institutions had participated. In concrete terms, the dialogue led to a broadly supported “framework for reforms” and the launching of new social policy instruments such as the *family right for social inclusion* and the *unemployed men and women heads of households programme*.
- **Dialogue bridges between a cease-fire agreement and a more sustainable institution building process.** Such dialogue process can legitimize or de-legitimize the arrangements concluded between the parties who were empowered to continue or cease the exercise of organized violence in the conflict. A dialogue process can be initiated by traditional, non inclusive bodies and be gradually broadened and expanded as the process unfolds. In Afghanistan, the United Nations sponsored the emergency meeting of the *Loya Jirga* – a traditional assembly of tribal elders transformed into a body composed of elected delegates, including women. The emergency Loya Jirga process was plagued by irregularities and violations of the democratic procedure. Many delegates, women in particular, who raised their voice against the power-sharing arrangements of the warlords were threatened or harassed. Nonetheless, the assembly managed, by secret ballot, to confirm Hamid Karzai as interim president of the country and to confer an initial level of legitimacy to the new government.<sup>12</sup>
- **Dialogue builds a peace-constituency** that can influence the combatants in the sense of helping them to transcend their approach to negotiations. As a rule, former guerilla commanders rarely make democratically-minded and consensus building politicians, though the metamorphosis is not impossible. The gender dimension of a peace-building dialogue is particularly important. Women’s groups and associations often initiate informal peace movements long before the official negotiations. Stopping further loss of life and devastation, reuniting families, helping refugees return from exile, making it possible for children to go back to school - may appear more important for them than the objectives of the “struggle” as perceived by the dominant (male) power structures on both sides of the divide. Women’s groups have been particularly strong promoters of peace dialogue and builders of peace constituencies, even though they remain absent from official peace negotiations.

## Conclusions and some words of caution

A common and often warranted criticism of a dialogue process is that it is just talk and it leads to no action at all. When the decision has been made to apply dialogue as a method, the decision maker (rightly) expects that it produces results. People, institutions, groups, parties or movements join the dialogue with the same expectations – they want results. If people participate in a dialogue for democratic reform, a dialogue on development policy or a dialogue on building peace that show no tangible results, the dialogue is starting to abuse its limits as a method. Participants will become disillusioned, with the consequent risk not only to the dialogue process itself but to the system as a whole.

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<sup>11</sup> Adapted from Goran Fejic, International IDEA

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

Dialogue practitioners debate whether transformed relationships lead to tangible outcomes, or whether tangible outcomes lead to transformed relationships. This chicken and egg debate should not stand in the way of the fact that dialogue processes, at best, transform relationships as well as bring about tangible and sustainable outcomes.

Dialogue can result in visible and tangible outcomes, as well as less visible and tangible outcomes. Examples of tangible outcomes are agreements, action plans, joint statements and concrete actions taken by the participants. Less visible or tangible is the trust, empathy and personal transformation that participants develop internally. The intangible outcomes of the process are not necessarily the least important ones, while trust and the empathic relationships affect individual commitments and actions, which in turn is the foundation that enables more tangible outcomes on an aggregated level of society.

From the perspective of organizations promoting peace, democracy and development it is seldom enough to feel assured that the intangible has been achieved. It is a particular challenge for organizers and supporters of dialogue processes to make the invisible seen and the intangible a material fact. Otherwise, the necessary political support for the programme will be difficult to amass. The discrete and longer-term focus of the dialogue approach makes it a hard “sell” to donors, even if there are many these days that recognize that the cost of peace-keeping is much higher than that of conflict prevention.