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# **Before the Unspeakable Occurs: Dialogue and the Prevention of Mass Atrocities**

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In the aftermath of the attacks on 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001, Thich Nhat Hanh drew considerable ire from American patriots when he suggested that the first thing that he would do, if given the opportunity to meet Osama bin Laden, would be to *listen*. Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who is known internationally for his teachings and work for peace. Yet in speaking about listening to one's adversary, he was not dismissing the gravity of what had occurred on that tragic day in US history. Instead, he was indicating the importance of *genuine dialogue* for addressing conflicts in today's world.

Listening is at the heart of dialogue. Dialogue is often misunderstood by community workers, policy makers and even by peace advocates themselves. It is sometimes confused with *negotiation* or *mediation*. These are clearly helpful in many conflictual situations, but they are not the same as dialogue.

Dialogue, properly understood, is not primarily focused on finding solutions to a conflict, although this often occurs when good dialogue is taking place. Real dialogue is more dedicated to *building relationship* than to fixing problems which may exist within that relationship. It is an *open and respectful exchange* that seeks a deeper understanding of someone or a group that is unlike oneself. This is why careful listening is such an essential part of any dialogue process. Listening brings awareness and builds relationship. As we listen to one another, we understand more of another person or group's values, ideas and experiences. A dialogue has begun to take place.

For this reason, dialogue is an essential part of a comprehensive approach to the prevention of violent conflict and mass atrocities. It is effective insofar as it *personalises* the adversary; that is, one's adversary *becomes a person* and more human – more like oneself – and a group that was once “foreign” *becomes a community of persons* much like our own. This is especially relevant in situations where minority rights and protection are diminished.

Many studies have demonstrated the link between *dehumanisation* and the commission of genocide and mass atrocities. Combat troops, suicide bombers and death camp commandants must all learn to *demonise* their “enemy” (regard them as evil and less than human) in order to exterminate them. For instance, when members of a group are equated with animals, insects or a disease – through media images, hate speech or politically-motivated messaging – the risk of mass violence is high.

Dialogue has the potential of *(re)humanising* the other by engaging individuals and groups in an on-going process which helps build understanding, tolerance and acceptance. The

more that opposing groups establish bridges between their own experiences and those of the other, the more they will regard the other group as fellow humans to be valued and protected.

Dialogue also helps people deconstruct and understand the narratives that have shaped the worldview of others – and their own – sometimes in violent ways. This means listening to the histories, events and stories that have formed identity and one's sense of *being* in the world. These provide clues to a group's actions and reactions in a given situation that had been previously misunderstood. Past grievances can be addressed. Cultural differences can be explained and misinformation corrected. Conflicts are seen through a wider lens than previously possible.

### *The Power of Citizen Action*

Our recent history has amply shown the limitations of governments and international institutions to address deeply-rooted conflicts. We are seeing that many situations at risk of mass atrocities cannot be addressed by institutions alone. The *Responsibility to Protect* is everyone's business, not just those in government. What often escapes notice when strategies are elaborated for the prevention of mass atrocities is the recognition of the power exercised by non-state actors to affect real change in their own communities.

We must move beyond a heavily institutional approach to dealing with human conflict and take a *more human approach*. After all, human conflict is about *people* and the many interlinking relations between them. If sustainable change is to occur, attention must be given to the primary stakeholders: community members that are affected by the conflict on a regular (if not daily) basis. These have typically been there from the beginning of the conflict, often know the situation most intimately than anyone else and will remain there long after security forces have left, the smoke has cleared and they are left with the task of rebuilding their lives.

It is true that *community members can also be part of the problem*. While many, if not most, will have the interests of the community at heart, they are also purveyors of the ideas, attitudes and prejudices that have brought them to where they are today. This is why a sustained and skilfully facilitated process of dialogue can be critical to affecting lasting change and prevent the worst from happening. The process itself is facilitated by moderators that have been trained in inter-communal dialogue. The moderators, as well as the participants, are drawn from the communities themselves and receive the active

support of civil society. In this way, the dialogue is *embedded in local processes for reconciliation* and is not driven by external actors.

Dialogue is about knowing and understanding one another enough that peaceful relations can be fostered and successfully sustained. *Investing responsibly in civil society to implement initiatives of dialogue in volatile settings is a wise strategy* for donors and policy makers to consider. Such investment is often more economical and produces good results for the long term.

An engaged, educated and vibrant civil society is often the best guarantee against recurring cycles of violence in many countries. Stable democracies almost never commit genocide against their own people. And stable democracies depend strongly on the proactive engagement of civil society for the strengthening of democratic institutions and for instilling values of human rights and respect for the rule of law. Building a culture of dialogue is an essential part of this task.

### *Dialogue is Serious Business*

Dialogue, contrary to what is commonly assumed, is not just a simple conversation between two parties. The Greek words that form our modern word “dialogue” are δία, meaning *through*, and λογος, meaning *word* or *meaning*. The origin of the word dialogue suggests an interpersonal exchange that *pierces through* ordinary conversation to get to a truth that lies deeper than the words that are actually spoken. Dialogue that aims to improve community relations requires more than just a series of discussions over a problem. It requires skilful facilitation and a sustained engagement of community members to work at changing conflictual relationships over time.

In other words, true dialogue is serious business.

A well-structured and closely monitored procedure is necessary for the success of any dialogue. The following stages form a framework for an effective dialogue process, permitting some fluidity to adapt to changing circumstances and dynamics within the group of those who are involved in the dialogue itself.

1. First of all, ***the communities themselves must decide to engage*** in an open and honest process of listening and dialogue with one another. This may appear self-evident, but if the primary actors in the process are not truly ready to move forward, it is useless (and can even be counter-productive) to proceed. Actually, this first stage could potentially be the longest. It typically requires talking with community leaders, explaining in detail the

process, getting their trust and securing their assent. All this can take time, but it is important to *wait patiently for the right moment before starting*.

2. Once there is sufficient support for the dialogue to begin, **a dialogue group is established**, which is composed of 12-15 people that are representative of the conflicting groups. These people agree to meet together over a period of time – often for one, two or more years – to intentionally work at community relations. The purpose is to structure regular and systematic contact with the other community, such that the experience of changing relationships can provide a model and a stimulus for changing relationships in the larger community.

The choice of dialogue group participants is crucial. There must be nearly the same number of participants coming from each of the affected communities. There must be a balanced representation of men and women coming from diverse yet relevant sectors of each community: for example, civic and religious leaders, business people, educators, young parents and respected elders. The dialogue does not formally begin until the group has been formulated and all the members have agreed to participate fully in the process.

The choice of moderators is also crucial. Generally, if the dialogue involves two communities, there is a female moderator from one community and a male moderator from the other. The moderators receive training on how to facilitate the dialogue process, work with group dynamics, what to do when conflicts arise and how to lead interactive trainings on relevant topics.

3. Once the dialogue group and moderators are in place, **the sessions begin**. The first session is often *an extended weekend workshop* to lay the groundwork for the group's work together. Group members introduce themselves and talk about their family, work and hopes for the future of their community. The weekend is highly interactive with small group discussion, storytelling, games and cooking together.

The group goes on to meet every 4-6 weeks, generally for an entire day, where the discussion continues on a variety of topics: exploring stereotypes and prejudices, building trust and how to listen more deeply to one another's experiences. This is the heart of dialogue. *It is never a debate over contentious issues facing the communities* – indeed, debate is really the opposite of dialogue. In debate there are winners and losers; in dialogue the goal is not to win over an adversary but to achieve mutual understanding and respect for one another.

4. The first important task of the dialogue group is to **identify the main obstacle(s) to good relations between the conflicted communities**, including the actors, circumstances and past events that have frustrated reconciliation. Here the focus remains on *building the relationship* and not on problems per se; however, identifying obstacles to the relationship can help the group see more clearly the way forward. It also helps to view the situation more globally by breaking it down to its constituent parts.

It is important not to rush this phase of the process. Sufficient time must be allotted to understanding the web of factors that has led to the conflict to begin with or else the *real* problem(s) can remain elusive. This can explain why some conflicts never seem to be resolved and remain in a vicious cycle of recurring violence. This can especially be true where mass atrocities have been committed. In fact, the *conditions that led to mass atrocities in the first place are frequently still present even after the violence has stopped*. Honestly examining these factors can bring insight that helps prevent a relapse into renewed violence.

5. At some point it becomes apparent that one problem in particular – or a small cluster of related problems – is the most pressing that needs to be addressed in order to improve the relationship. **The dialogue group then decides to focus on the main obstacle to good relations and formulates a plan of action to change the situation**. This does not mean that the situation will immediately improve or that the problem addressed is the only area of major concern. But it *does* mean that if this one obstacle to the relationship were removed or at least its impact diminished, momentum would be created for envisioning a more peaceful future together.

This action becomes the co-project that commits the opposing groups to achieving a common goal. Because it has been identified as a priority concern, there is urgency that it be accomplished in a timely fashion. Where there is success, the communities feel encouraged to go further and take on more actions.

6 Finally, **the dialogue group designs a global vision for changing the relationship along with a strategy for its realisation**. By now the group, once strangers, has come to know one another quite well. They have experienced on-going formation in how to listen more deeply to one another, they have learned to how better analyse the conflict that has plagued their communities, and they have begun to cooperate on some joint initiatives. The time comes when a much broader vision for the future becomes clearer.

The moderators lead the group in a visioning exercise that results in a shared understanding of where they are headed. The vision is realistic, concrete and achievable. It requires a change in attitudes, a new way of relating to one another and a culture of dialogue.

### *Preventing the Worst from Happening*

These steps are not rigid, and the process outlined here is anything but neat and orderly. It could be that a dialogue group successfully passes relatively quickly through the early stages of the process and seems ready to move on to tackling more specific issues. Then something happens within the group that causes it go back to redefining the main obstacle and mapping the actors. The group may even need to go back to the beginning and decide all over again that it wants to go on and engage in this process. Or the group may unexpectedly get stuck in one stage of the process, and it takes some time to move on again.

Such is the arduous though necessary process of dialogue. It is often underrated for its capacity to build trustful and harmonious relations between people, communities and nations. It is overlooked as a tool for promoting social cohesion at home and as an asset to our foreign policy. However, addressing root causes for mistrust and strained relationships must become an integral part of our living together if we are to survive these times of heightened tensions and unspeakable crimes. If we fail in this task, we will destroy one another before we have even learned to *know who it is* that we seek to destroy.