

Sustained Dialogue

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Tool summary

Sustained Dialogue (SD) is an ongoing process that builds upon the transformative qualities of dialogue to enable participants to systematically probe and gradually deal with the causes of deep rooted human conflict. Dialogue is understood as a genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn; Sustained Dialogue goes to the next level. It brings together participants from different groups in a repeated effort towards transforming conflicted relationships so that conflicts are constructively resolved.

What is it?

The mantra of political scientists for at least two generations has been “politics is all about power”, with power defined mainly in terms of coercion or control. The new “relational paradigm” sees politics as a cumulative, multilevel, open-ended and continuous process of interaction among significant clusters of citizens in and out of government, within and between communities and countries across permeable boundaries. It is not a strategic chess game. It’s more like a game of squash or racquet ball with four players on a five-sided court with six balls in motion at the same time. Power is generated in that interaction.

Sustained Dialogue has its roots in the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian peace process of the 1970s from which three lessons emerged: the power of a continuous political process to change relationships; the importance of addressing the human, social, political roots of conflict; and the possibility of thinking in terms of relationships between whole groups or countries.

Sustained Dialogue grew in semi-annual dialogues organized by the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force in the 1980s where regular meetings over a nine year period created four opportunities. The opportunities are as follows,(1) creating a cumulative agenda which means that questions left unanswered after a given meeting shape the agenda for the next meeting; (2) learning to talk analytically rather than polemically; (3) generating a common body of knowledge and reason; and lastly, (4) learning to work together.

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Sustained Dialogue differs from most other change processes in two ways. Firstly, it focuses on relationships rather than issues. It conceptualizes relationships as comprised of five components or arenas of interaction and through a dialogue process over a sustained period of time one can get into each arena and change it. The five arenas of interaction are:

- Identity – defined in human as well as in physical characteristics embodied in the life experience that brings each participant to the present moment;
- Interests - both material and psychological, that what people care about and that brings people into the same space and into a sense of their interdependence in achieving their goals;
- Power - defined as the capacity of citizens acting together to influence the course of events without great material resources and not only as control over superior resources and the actions of others;
- Perceptions, misperceptions, and stereotypes about the others; and
- Patterns of interaction among those involved.

Secondly, since relationships require a long time to change, Sustained Dialogue brings the same group of adversaries together repeatedly over time and works through various stages; a process conceived as the discernible pattern through which relationships evolve in a dialogue setting. Defining such a process might suggest there is a technique to be followed by rote. On the contrary however, the purpose is to sensitize the moderator of the dialogue process to work through the relational obstacles towards change with the aim of bringing adversarial groups together on a common ground.

How is it done?

Sustained Dialogue is a political process. The moderator is the steward of that process not just the facilitator of a series of meetings. In order to moderate Sustained Dialogue, one must begin by absorbing the sense of the process behind it. It is not mediation, negotiation, or community problem-solving. The first step in learning to moderate is to change the mindsets from the traditional political paradigm to the new.

1. Preparatory tips to potential moderators

- The potential moderator must first become aware of the people around her/him “buzzing” about a problem. He or she may join the conversation and may begin thinking of playing a catalytic role as the conversation deepens
- A crucial prerequisite for the SD is that the concerned citizens must come to an overwhelmingly expressed view that “something has to be done about this.” It is

even more important that they decide “we have to do something.” When they reach this point, their question will become, “*What can we do?*”

- The potential moderator will have to ascertain whether Sustained Dialogue is the most appropriate strategy. Here one of the key questions that need to be answered is whether the problem at hand is a practical problem with a physical solution or whether there are deep-rooted human issues that must be overcome for constructively addressing the problem. Problem-solving approach or deliberative processes may be more suitable in a community where people can easily talk with each other. Sustained Dialogue is appropriate for people who are radically different, deeply divided, overtly suspicious and profoundly angry with each other that they would not naturally come together to talk.
- If the potential moderator thinks that Sustained Dialogue might be useful, he or she might begin talking about it informally so the concerned citizens can begin thinking about engaging in the process.
- The potential moderator will be wise to assemble a small, informal “moderating team” to share the work. They will begin by talking individually or in small groups with those who are concerned about a problem, to gather ideas about who needs to be in the dialogue. The team will not be looking for people with titles and official positions but for participants who listen to others and to whom they will listen. The objective is to develop a group that represents a microcosm of the problem.
- When a group seems to be taking shape, the moderating team will need to deal with logistical issues such as: whether funding is required; who a suitable convener would be; what neutral ground would provide a comfortable meeting place for all; who the moderator(s) of the meeting will be; what the timing and duration of the meetings will be.
- Place, frequency and duration of meetings will depend on the situation. Experience suggests a range of possibilities. An international or vicious intra-national conflict may require a neutral site outside the country. Since the costs of travel in terms of time and money are significant, it is usually better to conceive of a three-day meeting. On the other hand, a local community conflict may follow a very different format. There are examples of people in a community having met on a specified Saturday morning through lunch on a monthly basis.
- Going by the old adage, “two heads are better than one,” it is prudent for the moderating team to select co-moderators. This is especially important in a dialogue where it is crucial to pick up innuendos, nuances and body language.

Furthermore, it would be desirable to have a mixed team in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, etc. For Sustained Dialogue on college campuses, some students are trained as moderators while other students assume roles as leaders and organizers. Such an arrangement might be appropriate in a divided community too, if suitable individuals can be identified and trained.

- The progression of experiences through which relationships evolve generally comprises of five stages that are neither rigid nor linear but are only like guideposts to facilitate the dialogue process. The participants travel back and forth mentally across these stages in the light of new experiences, while reaching progressively deepening levels of self reflection. Before the dialogue begins, the moderators have to internalize the five-stage process and may have to adapt it to suit local conditions and culture while carefully preserving the essence of the Sustained Dialogue process i.e. the focus on relationship and the concept of the stages.
- It would be important to keep careful records of each meeting. Moderators can write an analytical memo immediately after each meeting, recording their thoughts both on what transpired in the meeting and the point at which the next meeting might start.
- The possible duration of a Sustained Dialogue process depends on the situation. For instance, the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force held forty dialogues between 1982 and 2009. and another 37 three-day dialogues between 1993 and 2005 involving representatives from the civil-war ridden Tajikistan, a part of the former Soviet Republic

2. *The five-stage process of Sustained Dialogue*

- Stage one - Engaging: Also known as a “dialogue about dialogue,” it is a complex of process of informal exchanges in which participants gradually conclude often with the help of an external catalyst, that they must talk together about a problem in a more organized way.
- Stage two - Mapping relationships and naming problems: Participants come together under a moderator’s leadership to vent their feelings about a problem and its causes and to develop a complete picture of what is involved. The stage concludes after lengthy exchanges when one of the participants says, “what we really need to work on is. . . .”
- Stage three - Probing problems and relationships: Stage three involves more disciplined exchanges in which participants probe the dynamics underlying the

relationships that cause their problem. These exchanges pave the possible ways into those relationships in order to change them. The participants attain a sense of direction to guide the next steps.

- Stage four- Designing action: Participants visualize and design a scenario of interactive steps to be taken in the political arena while drawing elements of the community into a process of practical steps that can potentially change troublesome relationships.
- Stage five - Acting together: Participants devise ways to transfer that scenario into the hands of those who can act on it.

Benefits

- Given that Sustained Dialogue is mostly applied in severely conflict situations, the ultimate benefit is peace and reconciliation.
- Sustained Dialogue process can produce other incremental benefits such as defusing of tension, decrease in violence and a more humane relationship between groups in conflict.
- Sustained Dialogue can also be integral to peace-building in the post-conflict phase, and to transform the dysfunctional relationships that prevent organizations or communities from working effectively.
- It can be used as a learning aid to inculcate the values of democracy amongst students and youth to help them relate productively to those who are racially and ethnically different than themselves

Challenges and lessons

The greatest challenge is to change the mindset of funding organizations that demand demonstration of a specific “product” from a Sustained Dialogue whose main purpose is to transform dysfunctional and destructive relationships. The main ‘product’ of Sustained Dialogue is changed relationships. Many participants begin to play more constructive roles in society as a result of the dialogue experience. But it is difficult to claim that it is on account of Sustained Dialogue. Many factors are at work in a complex political situation. It is most often impossible to demonstrate a direct cause and effect relationship between the dialogue and the change and moreover, many process and behavioral outcomes are often not tangible.

Key resources

Parker, P.N. *Sustained Dialogue: How students are changing their own racial climate*
<http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/112561340/abstract>

- ☞ In this priced journal article, Parker describes how Sustained Dialogue, used in the past to ease international tensions, is finding its way into colleges and universities that wish to change unhealthy race-based attitudes and behaviors. The campus approach brings small groups of students from widely different backgrounds together for a year of deep conversation.

Pioneers of Change Associates, Johannesburg (2006). *Mapping Dialogue: A Research Project Profiling Dialogue Tools and Processes*

<http://www.docstoc.com/docs/3754237/Mapping-Dialogue-A-research-project-profiling-dialogue-tools-and-processes>

- ☞ This is a very useful dialogue related tool-kit for practitioners and includes a concise description of Sustained Tool with a case study. To freely download the pdf document, one has to register with docstoc.com

Saunders, H.H. *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts*. St.Martin's Press (1999)

http://www.amazon.com/Public-Peace-Process-Sustained-Transform/dp/0312219393/ref=pd_rhf_p_t_1

- ☞ This offline book provides citizens outside government with their own instrument for transforming conflict. Saunders outlines a systematic approach for citizens to use in reducing racial, ethnic and other deep-rooted tensions in their countries, communities and organizations.

Saunders, H.H. *Politics Is about Relationship: A Blueprint for the Citizens' Century* . Palgrave McMillan Publishing (2005)

<http://www.amazon.com/Politics-about-Relationship-Blueprint-Citizens/dp/1403971455>

- ☞ This offline book presents an eye-opening approach to politics, focusing on the cumulative, multilevel, open-ended process of continuous interaction over time in whole bodies politic across permeable borders, either within or between countries.

The International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, USA
www.sustaineddialogue.org

- ☞ The International Institute for Sustained Dialogue is an independent organization formed in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation. The Institute helps citizens around the world to transform their conflictual or destructive relationships and to design and implement sustainable change processes.

The Sustained Dialogue Campus Network (SDCN), U.S.A
<http://www.sdcampusnetwork.org/>

- ☞ The Sustained Dialogue Campus Network's mission is to help university and high school students create a healthy and open climate on their campuses. SDCN trains, mentors, and connects student leaders who work through dialogue to design cohesive, engaged, and diverse communities nationwide.

Sustained Dialogue: It's not Just Talk...It's a Social Movement, a video documentary produced by SDCN, USA.

<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=235818602816201866#>

- ☞ This 14 minute video serves as an introduction to Sustained Dialogue as a process, and to the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network (SDCN).

Case studies

Sustained Dialogue in Tajikistan (1993 to 2005)

The Sustained Dialogue Process in Tajikistan was launched in March 1993 with the establishment of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue (ITD), an unofficial intervention to deal with the Tajik conflict. The dialogue was initiated by the members of the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force. From 1993 to 2005, the Sustained Dialogue Process in Tajikistan has been involved in the four major phases in Tajikistan's peace-making and peace building processes. Three members of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue participated simultaneously in U.N.-mediated peace talks. The peace treaty included an option they had defined i.e. establishment of a National Reconciliation Commission to oversee implementation of the treaty through a three-year transitional period.

After peace was declared in 2000, key members of the Inter-Tajik Dialogue registered an NGO, the Public Committee for Democratic Processes. It has formed sixteen Economic Development Committees across Tajikistan. It held three years of seminars for three professors from eight universities to establish centers for conflict resolution in each university. Along with several U.S. scholars, the Group published a textbook on conflict resolution in Tajiki that is a mandatory reading for all students entering Tajik universities in the field of social sciences.

For more information, refer to, *the Sustained Dialogue Process in Tajikistan: 1993- 2005* A paper by Randa M. Slim of International Institute for Sustained Dialogue, presented at Expert Group Meeting: "Dialogue in the Social Integration Process: Building Peaceful Social Relations – by, for and with people" held in New York, on 21-23 November 2005.

<http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/sib/egm/paper/Randa%20Slim.pdf>

http://www.sustaineddialogue.org/programs/tajikistan_dialogue.htm

A project using Sustained Dialogue for development in Rural South Africa

The aim of the project was to promote development in a rural area of the KwaZulu Natal Province of South Africa Using the methodology of Sustained Dialogue, this project engaged a cross-section of leaders from several villages to reflect on past development efforts, design and implement new projects, and then evaluate their success. This project shows that a key contribution that action research skills can make is helping communities to see development not as a destination characterized by material conditions, but rather as a process of learning that results in economic advances.

For more information, refer: Nemeroff, T. *Generating the power for development through sustained dialogue: An experience from rural South Africa*. In Action Research, Vol. 6, No. 2, 213-232 (2008),

<http://arj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/6/2/213>



The Arab-American-European Dialogue (AAED)

The Arab-American-European Dialogue (AAED) group consists of individuals from the Arab region, from Europe and from the United States brought together in their personal capacities by the International Institute for Sustained Dialogue in a continuing series of meetings. The aim of this sustained dialogue is to analyze currently adversarial relationships and to work together to devise and propose ways of assisting the evolution of those relationships in constructive and mutually beneficial directions. The AAE dialogue was launched in March 2004 and is now in its third year of operation. It has tackled a variety of important topics including among others: reforms in the Arab region, electoral processes in Arab countries, the relationship between state, religion and society in the West and Arab region, and an issue cluster dealing with terrorism, violence and occupation.

For more information, Visit: http://www.vintob.com/taaed/articles_details.aspx?id=148
& http://www.sustaineddialogue.org/programs/arab-amer-euro_dialogue.htm

