

When dialogue works, what is it that works?

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I would like to thank the organisers for inviting me to speak at this important Dialogue Market.

Allow me to start with a story told by the conflict transformation and peace scholar John Poul Lederach in his book "The moral imagination":

In Northern Ghana two ethnic groups were fighting over a piece of land. The dominant group – the Dagombas controlled most of the land and were represented by a powerful and paramount chief whereas the weaker group the Kagombas lacked official recognised chiefs. The two groups sat together in a mediated session.

The Dagombas' paramount chief arrived in full regalia. In the opening moments of the meeting he assumed a sharp attitude of superiority. He said: "look at them. Who are they even that I should be in this room with them? They do not even have a chief. They are a people with nothing who have just come from the fields and now attack us in our villages. They could have at least brought an old man. But look! They are just boys born yesterday."

The Kakomba spokesman responded: "You are perfectly right, Father, we do not have a chief. We have not had one for years. You will not even recognize the man we have chosen to be our chief. And this has been our problem. The reason we react, the reason our people go on rampages and fights resulting in all these killings and destruction arises from this fact. We do not have what you have. It really isn't about the land. I beg you listen to my words, Father. I am calling you Father because we do not want to disrespect you. You are a great chief. But what is left to us. Do we have no other means but this violence to receive in return this one thing we seek, to be respected and to establish our own chief, who could indeed speak to you, rather than having a young boy doing it on our behalf."

The chief sat for a moment without response. When finally, he spoke, he did so with a changed voice addressing himself directly to the young man instead of the mediator.

"I had come to put your people in place, but now I feel only shame. Though I insulted your people you called me Father. It is you who speaks with wisdom, and me who has not seen the truth. What you said is true. We who are chiefly have always looked down upon you because

you have no chiefs, but we have not understood the denigration you suffered. I beg you, my son, to forgive me.”

This did not end the conflict but this dialogue had an impact on everything that followed and the conflict was resolved eventually.

Unfortunately dialogue is not always possible, does not provide the desired results, or it is inadequate in transforming conflicts

At times, you cannot get the conflicting parties to talk at all. IS does not want to talk peace – and nobody seems to want to talk peace with them. At the moment, there is a so-called radical disagreement between the Palestinians and Israelis, which makes effective dialogue almost impossible.

If one or more of the conflicting parties are not ripe a dialogue will either not occur or it will fail. Ripe meaning that the parties must realise that they cannot achieve their goals by further violence. The current conflict in South Sudan seems to be an example of a non-ripe conflict.

When one party is substantially stronger than the other, this party often does not want to enter into a real dialogue. Therefore, the weaker part tries to create a situation where it is possible to negotiate and uphold a dialogue from a favourable position. In South Africa, ANC and Mandela worked their way to a favourable negotiation position through civil disobedience, international alliances, pressure and even violence.

However, dialogue *can* at times tip the balance from conflict to co-operation or at least peaceful co-existence.

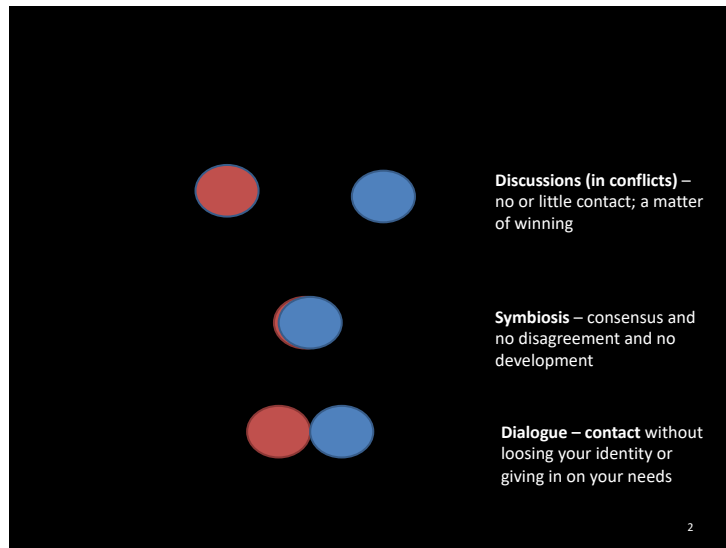
Some years after the end of Ronald Reagan's presidency, George Shultz, who had been Reagan's secretary of state, asked Mikhail Gorbachev, what the turning point in the Cold War had been.

"Reykjavík," Gorbachev answered unhesitatingly.

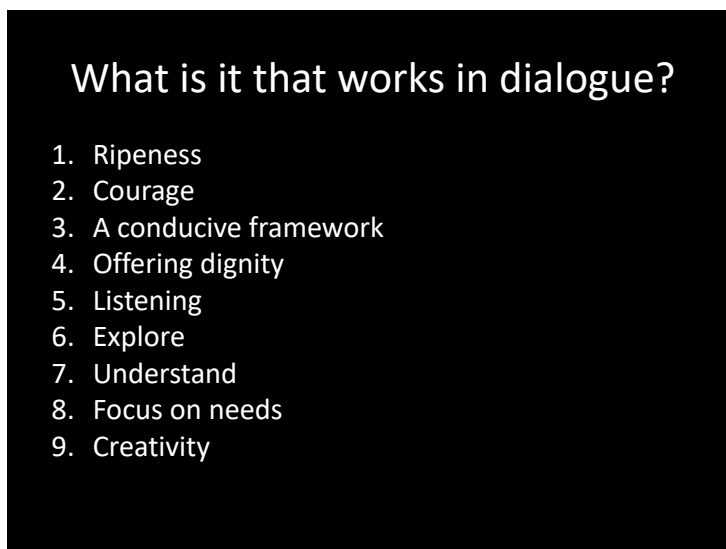
He explained that at their meeting in Reykjavík, Iceland, he and Ronald Reagan had for the first time entered into genuine dialogue with each other — a dialogue that extended far beyond their main agenda, which was arms control, to cover their values, assumptions, and aspirations for their two nations. Gorbachev credited this dialogue with establishing enough trust and mutual understanding to begin to reverse the nuclear arms race.

What is it that works when dialogue works?

In a conflict resolution context – which is the platform from which I am speaking – dialogue work is opposed to discussions and debates, which are characterised by “a battle of words” and the intention of winning over the other party through arguments or negotiation tactics or it is simply a “dialogue of the deaf.” But it is also opposed to at least some consensus processes where people just confirm each other’s points of view – nice but not very developing.



I see at least 9 elements making dialogue work **OVERSIGHTSLIDE**:



1. Getting the antagonists to the dialogue table requires they are motivated or **ripe**: They realise they have more to gain and less to lose from a dialogue based settlement. Or they realise that their fate is interlinked:

At a decisive moment of crisis in the negotiation between Sadat and Begin at Camp David where Begin refused to sign a letter of agreement on Jerusalem, Carter handed Begin photographs of his grandchildren. He looked at each photograph individually, repeating the name of the grandchild Carter had written on it. His lips trembled, and tears welled up in his eyes. He told Carter a little about each child and they were both emotional as they talked quietly for a few minutes about grandchildren and about war. Then Begin said, 'I will accept the letter you have drafted on Jerusalem.'

2. Starting the dialogue is not only a matter of realising that you have too much to lose to continue fighting. It is a matter of **courage** and taking risks. Maybe you lose the support of your people/constituency if you are not a hardliner or if you compromise. It also took courage

for the young man to stand up to the chief and pursue his people's interests in a hostile environment. Dialogue in conflict resolution context is not for sissies and people playing it safe.

3. Creating the **right framework** which includes sufficient time for continuous dialogue, sufficient security for all parties participating in the dialogue, maybe assistance from dialogue experts/mediators and finally sufficient negotiation space: A delegation of top-level Israelis and Palestinians, held numerous dialogue sessions over a period of months mainly in a remote place in Norway hidden away from nosy journalists and the general public leaving them room for manoeuvre and compromises as well as an atmosphere of reciprocity and openness. They created an agreement that lasted until Rabin's violent death upset the political balance again.

4. That the parties decide - often unconsciously - that they are ready not just to hear but to start **listening** to the other party. What tricker this move differs from dialogue to dialogue. The Ghanaian chief decided to listen when he felt both the respect from the young man and the suffering of his people.

5. A modest behaviour and **offering dignity** seems to be a key element in making the opponents listen. The young man dignified the chief although the chief insulted him and his people, which require a high level of **emotional control** and insight into the other person's situation.

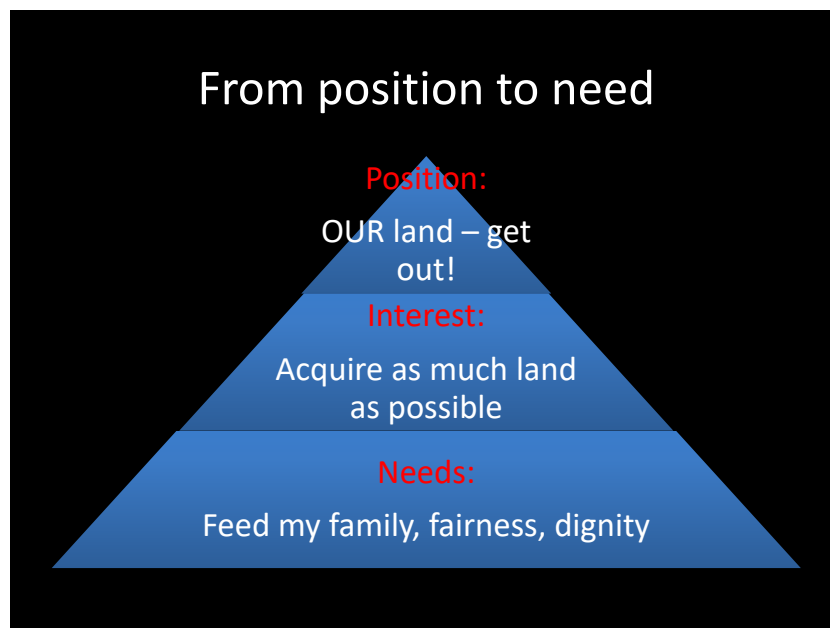
6. Listening actively means not to advocate but to inquire; not to argue but to **explore**; not to convince but to discover. Mediators help opponents listen by asking explorative questions, by summing up the opponents' stories by taking the "toxic waste" - the hard talk - out of the talk, by reframing the conflict as a mutual problem to be resolved by joint cooperation. And the parties' ability to see the openings - doors open very seldom in conflicts so the ability to see them and keep them in focus when listening is of paramount importance.

7. Through listening the participants increase their **understanding** of why the other parties do what they do. Understand what was until then unfair and incomprehensible and inhuman. Understanding entails using not only rational analysis but also intuition: "what does the other person really mean; how do I tricker his empathy and not his anger; he might understand my point if I express my self using this and not that allegory."

The chief suddenly managed to understand the other group's reason for fighting - the situation of the Kagomba. He for a moment put himself in their shoes. He became empathic. He could have chosen to continue his degrading attitude because he had the power needed to do so but he chose to understand. When the conflicting parties' mental models and feelings and perceptions are changed - new relations and new behaviour is created. It humanises instead of dehumanises the other and enables us to see the deep human needs behind their actions. Needs they maybe even share. This assist people in not speaking from a position of anger and hate but from a more rational position. The hate and anger might still exist to some extent but the parties' communication is not being controlled by their anger and hatred. And when we are really clever we manage to see hard and judgemental talk as tragic expressions

of fears or unfulfilled but often legitimate needs – maybe that was what happened for the young man in the Ghana case?

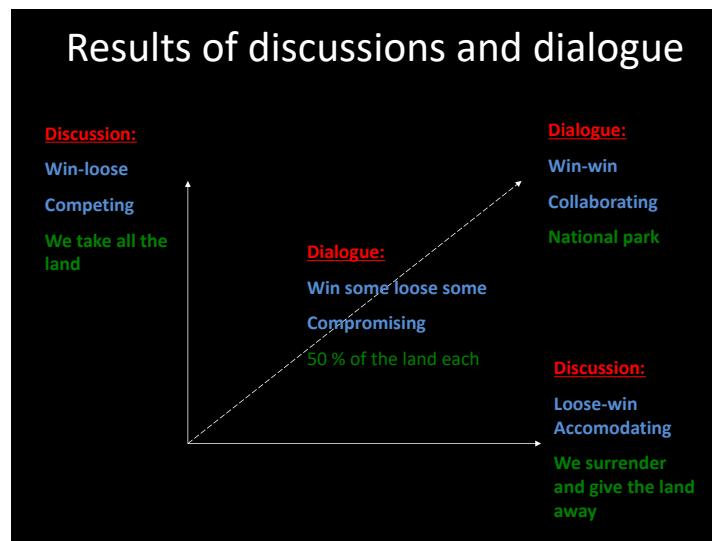
8. Focus on **needs**. Understanding and showing respect for the other does not equal giving up on your own interests and letting the other person or group have it all. The trick is to walk on two legs: 1) *Understand the other and* 2) *negotiate to satisfy your deep needs*. Or put in another way understanding without selling out or losing oneself in the process. The young man did not just understand and show the chief respect. He kept on pursuing his people's interests and need - the need for recognition through a chief. Understanding and negotiating by expressing your needs and interests – NOT just repeating your position, digging in the heels.



When people enter conflicts, they are usually locked in their positions. E.g., “the land is ours – no the land is ours” or “our belief/religion is the only right belief – no ours is.” But dialogue occurs when the parties manage to identify and communicate their deeper interests and needs, which in the case of a land dispute could be economic security, fairness and being treated respectfully as equals. Moving away from a language of accusations and judgements towards a non-violent language focusing on both parties' feelings and needs.

9. Finally, **creativity** is “what works”. Being sufficiently creative in finding **solutions** to problems that works for all parties either in the form of compromises or win-win solutions. E.g., through brainstorming sessions, problem solving workshops and inspiration from conflicts already resolved. The grand old man of conflict resolutions Johan Galtung was involved in mediating in a war between Ecuador and Peru over a low populated remote mountainous area. The positions were “this is our land, get out”. By upholding pendulum diplomacy between the two parties and by finding creative solutions he assisted the parties to agree to make the area a shared national park generating tourist income for both countries. This practical solution met the basic needs: keeping face and dignity, gaining access to the land, and exploiting its economic potential. A compromise could have been to cut the area into two pieces with a militarized zone in between but this would not satisfy the basic needs.

Working creatively on needs level instead of just settling for a compromise on position level is key when trying to understand “what is it that works, when dialogue works”.



Thank you.