DIALOGUES IN PRACTICE

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November 1986

APPENDIX II : Dialogues in practice

One simple way of conducting a dialogue is to imitate a good
committee at work. After all, committees are working groups
that try to solve problems, not to beat each other, using dialogues
in the sense used of this chapter   rather than debate as a
verbal form of fighting. The participants are seated around a
table; they are, say, between five and ten in number. They
should not be so numerous that there is too much of a struggle
for scarce time, including squeezing some participants out; nor
so few that he or she who for some time, or during the whole
process for that matter, prefers not to participate, becomes too
conspicuous.

The group elects a secretary or at least agrees on a person to
perform a very important task. He will keep the records of the
deliberations, and very gently ease the group towards conclusions.
In this process maximum sensitivity to the group, and minimum
inclination to impose his own way of structuring the problem, not
to mention solving the problem, will be basic conditions. The
kind of training or abilities associated with Quakers, for in-
stance at their Conferences for Diplomats, are good models to keep
in mind. Somebody is needed to register the "sense of the meeting".

In front of the table there would be a blackboard or a
flip-over chart; any kind of device for symbolic presentation of
what comes out when the group starts functioning, easily visible
to all participants. If the group is literate the symbols would be
words or characters (in such countries as China, Japan). If the

group is illiterate the secretary would have to be able to make quick drawings or other types of representations.

From this point on a distinction may be made between four stages in the dialogue process.

First, the dialogue is entirely free. People say what comes to their minds, for instance in connection with such topics as the meaning of development goals in terms of an ideal society, the development process in terms of what might bring us there and what stands in the way, and development indicators in terms of how we know whether we are in the right or wrong direction. The task of the secretary is to pick out from the stream of words key terms, sufficient to evoke memories of what was said in the minds of the participants. This should be done with no effort at all to structure, just written down as they emerge, in such a way as not to disturb the dialogue. A random scatter would be the best record in this phase.

Second, there is the second round. When the dialogue starts ebbing out and it is clear that people do not have   many more ideas, a little break is called for and the dialogue is then resumed. At this point there will obviously be fewer new ideas, and the secretary can even ask whether this or that idea that comes up is not by chance a rewording of an idea already presented. But after some time it will become quite clear that one has entered the phase of rapidly diminishing returns although more productive groups might call for a third round, etc.

Third, again after a break, an entirely new phase is initiated. The participants look at what it has produced: all the terms of reference in front of them. The time has now come to bring some structure into the set of terms, and this can be done by the secretary asking the group "how do all of these things relate to each other". One way of doing so would be to start drawing arrows, an unbroken arrow for a positive connection ("I think that one has a positive influence on this one") and a broken arrow for a negative connection. Another way would be to group the terms together that participants agree belong together, in time, in space, as concepts of what not. A third approach would combine the two approaches just mentioned, and so on. Incidentally, in this phase some people will get new ideas about the terms of reference, might wish to rephrase some of them, to add or to subtract. But at this point the terms have become the common property of the group, meaning that the group will have a say in such matters. Thus, if somebody wants to add a term because he feels it is missing the group should be prepared to accept this. But one cannot delete a term or change it without the acquiescence of he who originally proposed it and/or the group as a whole. In short, the process should be sensitive to all expressions from the group, not only try to arrive at a common denominator.

Fourth, the final phase where efforts are made to summarize what has been achieved. Some groups can do this simply sitting

around the table, the secretary will take notes and write up the
conclusions as statements. Other groups might prefer to work as
a committee, drafting the conclusion. Still other groups might
prefer to split in sub-committees, for instance addressing the
sub-sets of terms that have emerged in the third phase. What-
ever process is used the result may not necessarily be a consensus
statement. There may be irreconcilable differences in the group,
but in that case it is the task of the secretary to see to it
that there is at least consensus about the nature of the dissent.
It is not enough that somebody says "I disagree". There also has
to be a statement about where the disagreement is located, and
that statement then goes back to the members of the group who
may agree that this is a disagreement. But they may also disagree
in which case it goes back to the point of origin for reformula-
tion until either the disagreement has disappeared or there is
agreement about where the disagreement is located.

What is the role of the social scientist in this connection? This
depends on whether he is fresh to the topic or too experienced, worn out.
If really concerned, he should participate around the table, but as a
genuine participant, not faking ignorance, for instance, not if he
is playing a role. Or he may have acted as the secretary, as the
midwife of the process. In either case the records, that certainly
should be kept, will constitute invaluable material for understand-
ing not only what is on people's minds, but of the process whereby
higher levels of consciousness can be achieved. Looking at the

phases above this is obviously a process in the sense of process-
ing, from the raw material of the terms of reference to the con-
clusion or conclusions, through the use of the word, _logos_.

With a number of such dialogues located in different niches
of   society very rich material should, in principle, emerge.
The task of the social scientist would be to compare the dialogues,
noting similarities and dissimilarities, possibly also compare
similarities and dissimilarities among dialogues in different
societies for similarities and dissimilarities at this higher level
of comparison. However, in the spirit of the dialogue no such
work should be done without referring back to the participants,
not only obtaining their permission but also their collaboration
in formulating the conclusions, the conclusions from one dialogue,
conclusions comparing several dialogues within the same country
and conclusions comparing dialogues among countries.