

Virtual School of Dialogue, Democracy and Peaceful Conflict Resolution

NANSEN DIALOGUE - Steinar Bryn, Ph.D. Lesson I



Ph.D. Bryn, Steinar

Date, place of birth: 21 August 1954, Oslo, Norway

Nationality: Norwegian

Address: Bekkefaret 8, 2613 Lillehammer, Norway

Telephone: 00 47 61 26 54 15 (Work); 00 47 95 17 48 21 (Mobile) steinar@nansen-dialog.no

Present position: Project director of "Dialogue and Peacebuilding" At the Nansen Academy, Lillehammer;

Senior Consultant "Nansen Dialogue Network; Lecturer and dialogue facilitator

Social status: Married. Four children.

Education: Ph.D American Studies, University of Minnesota- Twin Cities, 1993

Current occupation:

1996- ongoing Project Director of "Dialogue and Peacebuilding."

1999- ongoing Senior Consultant "Nansen Dialogue Network"

2004 spring Visiting professor in "Conflict and Communication", Pacific Lutheran University, Tacoma, Washington

As a *project director for "Dialogue and Peacebuilding"* my responsibilities have been 1) to select participants (potential leaders) from former Yugoslavia to participate in training programs in Norway, 2) to design the training program and 3) to conduct the seminars. The challenging part of the job has been the follow-up work, which includes dialogue seminars in the region and the ongoing support of ten Nansen Dialogue Centers in Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo, Bosnia Herzegovina and Croatia.

As *Senior Project Consultant* - During the years 1997-2005 I have conducted more than 100 dialogue seminars, mainly between Serbs and Albanians from Kosovo and South Serbia, between Macedonians and Albanians from Macedonia, more general dialogue seminars in Montenegro and Bosnia Herzegovina., but also joint seminars with larger groups – including seminars in Betlehem and Jerusalem with Israelis, Arabs and Palestinians.

Extensive lists of publications and lectures at conferences in Europe and the United States.

Visiting lecturer at University of Texas, Austin, University of Washington, Seattle, Georgetown University, Washington DC, Amherst University, Massachusetts, Columbia University, New York, Concordia College, Fargo, Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, St.Olaf College, Minnesota, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, Univeristy of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

AWARDS:

1998 The Nansen Academy received the Honourable Mention of the UNESCO Prize for Peace Education, in recognition of its outstanding contribution to the promotion of peace and tolerance.

1999 Received Amalie Laksow's Human Rights Prize

2004 Bridgebuilder Prize for 2004.

NANSEN DIALOGUE

“No realist politics in a civilised society is imaginable unless it is based on love of ones neighbour, mutuality, helpfulness and trust. This is the rock upon which all human cooperation must be built.”

Fridtjof Nansen (“Nestekjærlighet”, 1922)

Dialogue is not theory, but active communication between two or more parties. I will in this lecture describe dialogue the way it has developed through the Nansen Dialogue Network, with a special focus on inter-ethnic dialogue in divided communities. These reflections on dialogue work have therefore mainly grown out of practice in the field, although a major inspirator has been Martin Buber with his small book “I and Thou”. Through saying Thou to “the other” you humanize him/her and he/she becomes an equal with the same rights and obligations in life as yourself. I will (1) briefly describe the background of the Nansen Network, then (2) provide an argument for the need for dialogue in peace building. I will go on (3) to describe the essence of Nansen Dialogue and how (4) it works and a few words (5) about the good Nansen facilitator. Finally a few words about the need for dialogue in all reconciliation work in ex-Yugoslavia. I hope these reflections will inspire a meaningful dialogue between us.

MISSION STATEMENT

NANSEN DIALOGUE will, through applying the ideas and skills of dialogue, empower people who live in conflict situations to contribute to peaceful conflict transformation, and democratic development with promotion of human rights.

NANSEN DIALOGUE is marked by the wish to provide a neutral and open space where the different actors in a serious conflict can meet face to face in truthful and honest communication. The aim is to break down enemy images, as well as to increase understanding of each other’s positions, interests and needs. Facilitators and lecturers try to stimulate the cognitive analysis of the conflict itself and the experience of “the other’s” position. The focus is not on who is right or most guilty, but on how to build respect for democratic principles, human rights and peaceful conflict resolution for future improvement of society. These principles are to be an alternative in political organisation to national chauvinism and ethnic loyalty.

1. Historical Background.

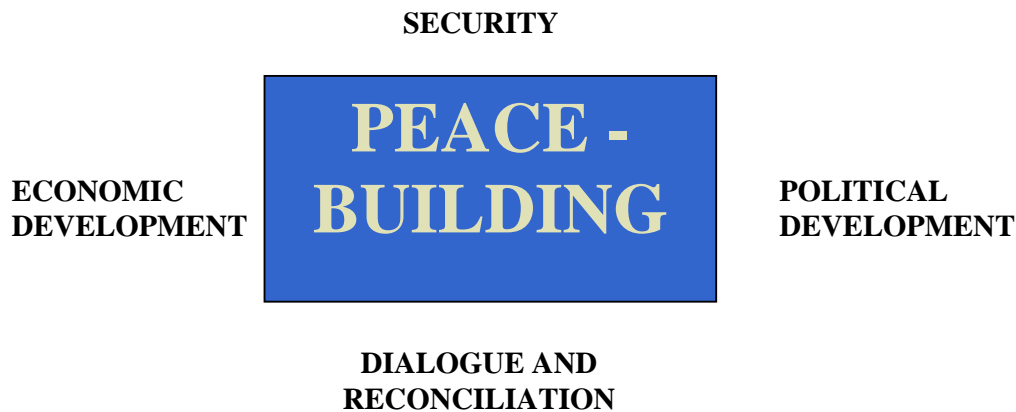
In 1995 Nansenskolen started the project “*Democracy, Human Rights and Peaceful Conflict Resolution*” which aimed to motivate and strengthen potential leaders from ex-Yugoslavia to work actively for democratisation, reconciliation and peace. We soon discovered that one of the strongest aspects of the project was that it provided dialogue spaces where the participants could compare notes, compare their “ethnic truths” and listen to the “other stories”, thereby breaking down the one-dimensional enemy images built up by home education, school education and nationalistic media. In Lillehammer *it became possible for the participants to analyse the break up of Yugoslavia together, and build a common framework in which the possibilities of reconciliation, reconstruction, and preventive conflict resolution were explored.*

In 1999 the Balkan Dialogue Project was initiated. This was a serious effort to channel the knowledge and experience of the participants in Lillehammer into concrete action upon return home. The seminar in Lillehammer was too exclusive for the selected few, and it was the participants themselves who initiated the organic growth of dialogue centres in the region. This started with 8 Serb-Albanian dialogue seminars, the so-called Herceg Novi seminars, from 97-99 and the first Nansen Dialogue Center which opened in Pristina 1998.

The project changed its name to Nansen Dialogue Network in 2003. As of today it consists of 11 Nansen Dialogue Centres. They are in Skopje, Belgrade, Bujanovac, Podgorica, Kosovo (Pristina, MitrovicaS and MitrovicaN), Banjaluka, Mostar, Sarajevo and Osijek. There are 70 full-time coordinators and part-time assistants, 800 alumni all of whom have undergone dialogue training in Lillehammer, and thousands of participants in dialogue activities organized by the Centres. Many of them feel like an active part of the Nansen Dialogue Network. These centres are all locally registered and perceived as local centres, with Norwegian funding and support.

2. The Role of Inter-Ethnic Dialogue in Peace building.

The following model, developed by Dan Smith (2002), illustrates the need of 1) the strengthening of security, 2) economic development, 3) democratisation and 4) dialogue and reconciliation in the process of peace building.



The international community wants the area of former Yugoslavia to be stable, peaceful and democratic with a foundation laid for economic development. This stability is also in the interest of the new states. This demands an effort from the international community to support all these components of the peace building process. This has not always been the case. The international humanitarian organizations tend to focus on the more emergent needs; food, medication and material reconstruction. Local and international authorities focus more on security and economic reconstruction. Dialogue and reconciliation has often been given too low a priority in peace building. The March events in Kosovo 2004 are a good example of what can happen when dialogue and reconciliation is neglected.

The long-term objective of the Nansen Academy is to support the processes of inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation in the Balkans. Nansenskolen is not an actor in the field like other organizations. It is involved due to the organic development of this particular project. The main challenge is not only to develop well functioning local NGOs, the NDCs must be understood as the means to support the processes of democratization and of breaking down the dominant ethnic politics in the Balkans. The larger aim to stabilize the Western Balkans cannot be reached by only diplomatic efforts and agreements. It needs work on many different levels in society to prepare the ground for further integration into Europe.

3. What is Nansen Dialogue?

Except from the inspiration from Martin Buber's "I and Thou" (1922), the Nansen Dialogue concept is mainly constructed from experiences in the field. It is simply a way of communicating which focuses on understanding "the other", rather than convincing them that you are right. This understanding is a prerequisite for successful mediations and negotiations. In the dialogue workshops we attempt to create a space of support and safety, where it becomes possible for the participants to honestly communicate their experiences, feelings and thoughts. In a dialogue on the status of Kosovo, the aim is not to find the solution, but to explore the different standpoints and improve the understanding of why people have such opposing views. This means to practice tolerance and active listening, rather than handing out moral judgements or hunting for the weaknesses in the arguments of your opponent. Then, as the next step, based on this deeper understanding of each other's position, one can attempt to find acceptable solutions for all parties involved and in such a way secure more sustainable solutions. The differences between confrontational debate and dialogue as we have experienced it can be illustrated in the following model:

DEBATE	DIALOGUE
Aim is to win	Aim is to understand
Convince/Argue	Explain/tell your story
Talk	Listen
Hunt for the weak argument	Look for the strength in the other
Make opponent feel insecure	Make opponent feel safe
Moral Judge	Tolerance/Self-discipline
Confrontational body language	Inclusive body language
Change of mind is a sign of weakness	Change of mind is a sign of strength

But to live in the dialogue mode is impossible. There is also a time for debates, but becoming partisans in political debates is not what the centres exist for, and it is hard to take up positions in contentious debates without being regarded as party to one side or the other. But the NDCs know that debates are also an important part of the political world, and they are necessary to provide the very place and space for the important issues to be discussed. The political debate in many parts of the Western Balkans is seriously deficient, which is one of the fundamental problems of the same region. The strategic choice the NDCs have made is to attempt to influence public debate over important issues and specifically to attempt to influence the tone of the debate. When engaging in public debate, the centres will focus on bringing forward facts, providing space for all arguments, and arguing in favour of mutual respect between disputants. The centres will, in short, promote a dialogical way of debating. This way is an alternative to the confrontational debate particularly because it emphasises the need to understand the opponent.

When the dialogue centres have the aim of promoting dialogue and reconciliation in their area, this moves them toward stimulating democratic thinking, respect for human rights (particularly minority rights) and awareness of modes of peaceful conflict resolution. Through this the centres are becoming key actors in civil society in their respective areas. The dialogue perspective stresses the understanding of democracy as much more than just an election and voting system. The essence of democracy is the acknowledgement that you might very well be wrong, that is why the public debates in open spaces are necessary. To rephrase John Stuart Mill – you don't really know your own arguments before you have listened to the counter arguments to your own position. The centers should lend their dialogue space to important discussions in their local communities, even though the discussions are not purely interethnic (like the discussion about the status of Montenegro in 2005).

It is my experience as a dialogue worker that it is easier for people in conflict to engage in an honest dialogue than in negotiations. This model works as a tool. The participants understand the difference. In a dialogue you do not need to give up your positions, still you can more freely explore alternative ways of thinking. Nansen Dialogue differs somewhat from other approaches in this respect (see useful link).

4. How Does Nansen Dialogue Work?

In segregated societies, the information systems are parallel. It is possible to grow up on one side of the river with a home education, school education and later media that provide you with certain “ethnic truths.” If there is no interaction with the people on the other side of the river, who are developing almost the opposite set of ethnic truths, one's worldview is seldom challenged. In a dialogue space, people can simply compare notes, share the explanations they have to different events, confront each other with alternative frames of interpretation. This is why dialogue works.

While often looked upon as somewhat “soft”, not challenging the deeper structures, dialogue can turn out to have real radical effect because it challenges the very self image and worldview of the participants. It is our experience through our work, that opposing parties believe they have the same set of facts. This means that they believe that the different issues (What happened? Who did it?) are closed issues. The problem is reduced to the other side's denial of the facts. Julie Mertus (1999) describes how the Albanian demonstrations in 1981, the Paracin massacre, the Martinovic case, the alleged poisoning in Kosovo schools had all very different ethnic

interpretations. And she argues that these different interpretations contributed to the war.

In a dialogue setting it becomes obvious that the parties have quite different interpretation of reality, possess different set of “facts” or factoids (“facts” that have been repeated so often that they are believed to be true). The problem is not so much that the other side denies reality, but that they have a quite different analysis of history and the present, and quite different hopes for the future. Dialogue groups provide the necessary cross fertilization between the parallel systems of information, and the “crazy” behaviour of the enemy becomes more meaningful when interpreted within his or her cultural and political context.

The first step is often to realize that the “other” also perceive him or herself as a victim with an accompanying enemy image of oneself as the aggressor. It is not uncommon to discover that people in conflict have one thing in common; their enemy image of each other. This discovery is first dismissed as a distortion of reality from the other side. But through dialogue exercises it becomes obvious that both sides have paid a price for the conflict, and that in certain ways they are both victims, with a common interest in fighting those conflict entrepreneurs who keep the conflict alive.

People in deep conflict are not necessarily open for win/win solutions. They want win/lose, and some might even prefer lose/lose if that means that the “other side” has to pay for what they did. They deserve to taste their own medicine. The suffering of the other side is seldom accounted for in one’s own propaganda system. Through dialogue work participants can learn that the other side already has tasted their own medicine and reach the conclusion that we have both suffered enough.

Through the practice of active listening and tolerance it becomes possible to see that one’s own bitter enemy also perceives him/herself as a victim of forces outside his or her control, and that their political goals represent to them a way out of their misery. This deeper recognition of the validity of each other’s positions fosters mutual respect and makes it easier to enter negotiations. At this point the parties in the dialogue might realize that while they have fundamentally different positions, their human needs and interests have a lot more in common.

A qualified facilitator can assist in shifting the focus from positions to interests, and make the participants realize that they have common interests in economic development, quality education, reliable system of security, improved job opportunities, crack down on corruption, more independent media, clearer separation of politics and business – and a peaceful cup of coffee in the morning.

The next step is to work toward the democratic position that it is acceptable both to fight for and to fight against powerful political positions, like “independence”. One might argue that a political position is born out of one’s own situation in society. It is very logical that a Norwegian farmer is very sceptical to Norwegian membership in the EU, it is very logical that a Norwegian businessman is inclined to be more in favour. In the same way it is very logical that an Albanian is in favour of Independent Kosova while a Serb is in favour of Kosovo as somehow a part of Serbia.

Political debates carry a strong element of stupidification of “the other”. If you do not agree with me, it is because you are less rational, less informed or simply more stupid than I am. A democracy pre-supposes a certain equal respect for the different political positions. The dialogical component can help that process. After a dialogue meeting between Serbs and Albanians, the Serbs understand better why the Albanians want independence and the Albanians understand better why the Serbs cannot accept it. When negotiations are based on a better understanding between the parties, the negotiations have a better chance to result in sustainable solutions. In that way I will argue that dialogue is a prerequisite for successful negotiations.

The Role of the Nansen Facilitator

In our experience and our form of peace education, the general principle is that it is essential that the person in charge of a peace education process gains the *trust and confidence* of the people whom she/he is training, particularly when the topics under discussion are sensitive and make people vulnerable. Without confidence in the trainer they will not feel safe to share important information with each other. There are several ways in which the trainer will gain this confidence of the group: Good trainers need to have solid *knowledge* of the situation and the conflict in which the people he educates live. She/he also needs to show *respect for all sides* involved, by not taking sides in the conflict nor show one-sided sympathy for one group of people. *Patience* is another essential quality for a trainer. There is no "quick fix" in deep conflicts and the trainer should realise that such processes take time in order to maintain her/his motivation and patience with others. This includes taking time to let people tell their stories and express their thoughts and feelings.

Empathy is essential in order to have proper understanding of what goes on in a group of people, and to get people's confidence and trust. *Self confidence* is also important when working with difficult topics, - without believing that he/she can contribute to positive change, it is difficult to gain other people's trust. The trainer needs to have the *capacity and energy* to maintain focus through emotionally challenging processes. A good support network with which he can discuss challenges of the education process, is very useful in this regard. Another essential quality of a good trainer is someone who "*lives like she preaches*", e.g. if dialogue is the main aim of the education, it is important that the trainer aims herself/himself to be a good listener and has good communication skills. Equally, if democracy is the topic, it is important that the trainer aims to have a democratic practice. When theory and practice correspond, it is easier to believe in what the trainer is trying to communicate to the group.

The trainer will have a much stronger effect, if *he/she believes* in the values and principles he/she is teaching, and even more so if the trainer seem committed to fight for these values. See the text Nansen Dialog for further description of the context and principles of this way of working.

Many people ask me if I have a difficult job. It is difficult to recruit the right participants, but when people are gathered in the dialog room I feel very confident in the dialog process itself. That process brings the people closer, increases their respect and understanding of each other. That process makes it possible to see a common ground. The dialogue itself has a liberating effect on the participants. Furthermore dialogue stimulates action. As a bridgebuilding tool it breaks down the ethnic organization of politics and stimulate multiethnic action. Most of the projects the NDCs are involved in have a clear multiethnic dimension. Dialogue is more than just words.

The main target groups for our dialogue work are teachers, journalists and municipal politicians, administrators and workers. It is important to anchor the dialogue work in institutions, in order to provide proper arenas for further cooperation and to implement a meaningful change.

The role of dialogue in the future of ex-Yugoslavia

While the inter-state conflicts are settled in ex-Yugoslavia, challenges remain with regard to refugee- and IDP-return, inter-ethnic relations, sustainability of achieved returns, as well as the development of an inclusive and non-confrontational political discourse. The continuing strength of a narrow nationalism in the political discourse and the continuing allure of ethnically exclusivist politics are very visible in each country, and in the region as a whole. Additionally, increased ethnic tension in the Sandzak region, instability and inter-ethnic division in Macedonia, Kosovo and Southern Serbia, as well as persistent distrust and lack of inter-ethnic co-operation in Croatia and B&H, emphasise the need for continuing conflict prevention and reconciliation efforts at the community level throughout the region. Dialogue and reconciliation work will be necessary in the years to come. Dialogue is an underestimated tool because it does not produce immediate effects. I used to stress that we must not forget dialogue and reconciliation! After ten years of experience with peace building I would argue much stronger: How is peace building at all possible, if it does not include a strong component of dialogue and reconciliation?

Literature:

Dan Smith, *Towards a Strategic Framework for Peace building: Getting Their Act Together*, Evaluation Report 1/2004. Oslo, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004 p.28
Julie Mertes 1999 “Kosovo – How Myths and Truths Started a War”
Martin Buber 1922 “I and Thou”
Group of authors 2005, “A little book on Dialogue” Nansen Dialogue Centre Montenegro

Useful link:

<http://www.co-intelligence.org/P-dialogue.html>

Questions for reflections and discussion:

- Do the principles of dialogue apply equally in micro-settings like in our family, in our relationships, at our work place and in our neighbourhood?
- Is it morally correct to enter into a dialogue with our perpetrator? Are there situations which simply are beyond reconciliation?
- Does dialogue require a balance between the participants (verbal, intellectual, financial etc.)?
- Is dialogue a skill one can learn?
- How do you rate the dialogue skills of your representative politicians?
- Have you experienced a dialogue meeting where you have truly changed your perception of someone you considered to be your enemy?