

How can we host and facilitate dialogues that are individually and collectively meaningful?

Over the past year, several intense conversations with close friends led us to conceptualize this issue of *Expressions Annual* on 'Tools for deepening dialogue'. So many meetings and conferences are held each year in the NGO sector, with so much time and money spent. Could we do something better? I felt the burning need to explore different practices and tools that facilitate deep dialogue in meetings and conferences, to put the spotlight back on this important, but often neglected, aspect of communication and culture.

Most development work has a pseudo-emphasis on participation from the public. But this so-called dialogue is often nothing more than one-way communication to pass on some pre-cooked message. My experiences of conferences and public gatherings have only confirmed the worst. Panels of experts talk down at participants, rarely making any effort to engage them on themes of mutual interest or to build meaningful relationships. Hardly any creative or collective activities are designed, which touch the emotional aspect of being together or which elicit the diversity present in each one of us. Interaction is limited to taken question-answer sessions. The majority who attend accept *fait accompli* to be mere listeners. It is hardly surprising that most conferences resemble a school classroom with clear assigned roles: givers and takers, sellers and consumers, experts and ordinary members, with pre-determined assumptions about what needs to be discussed and how. Little genuine space exists for spontaneity or veering 'off track'. I am sad to say that I have never come across any public gathering where participants are considered important sources, with enormous amounts of wisdom and knowledge, honed from years of experiences, which could be harnessed for mutual benefit.

Even the revered space of the World Social Forum – an opportunity to meet, learn and network for creating another world – failed to capture the essence of human contact. People had gathered because of their commitment to social transformation, but little space was utilized for self-organizing dialogues among them. Its formal sessions had the clear influence of classroom ideology. More time was devoted to speeches, slogan shouting and intellectual ponderings than engaging with the multiple possibilities connected to our most intimate selves. I wonder if anybody was really listening? It is our collective failure on many counts: our lack of imagination, as well as our lack of trust in people to self-organise according to their specific needs. I see the WSF as representative of the larger development sector. I have found many NGOs who do not believe that their staff members have the capacities or attitudes necessary to manage open time, especially when it comes to their formal gatherings.

This general trend has been continuing for far too long. What do we gain by accumulating more and more information, which is hardly relevant to our daily lives or our deepest dreams? Haven't we all encountered over and over again the same themes of development with the same prescriptions? And yet we do not voice our concerns and frustrations. We never try to put our collective heads, hearts and hands together to imagine new possibilities for our interactions. What stops us from relating to each other as humans? Why the masks of pretension or hesitancy between us? When we meet together, after traveling long distances, what do we aspire for the most?

Some constraints to deep dialogue in the Development sector relate to the funding-dependency we find ourselves in. Dependency allows external agencies to control our agendas and program directions. We are gradually sucked into the world of artificial, fragmented realities, using a Logical Frame Analysis with 'Impacts' and 'Indicators', which funding agencies demand. This kind of measuring and continuously reporting results forces us to limit the ways we engage with each other. So we end up repeating the same canned mantras and using the same meeting formats,

on structure of the Logical Frame Analysis. Slowly, this turns us into paper tigers with superficial notions of 'success'. Little time is available to reflect on the bigger questions, much less to suggest ways to change directions.

The dominant model of meetings also fails to address the crucial elements of a relationship, like the presence and expression of the other(s). In the context of development, where 'empowerment of the other' is considered of prime importance, how is dialogue viewed and what is its role? I very much doubt whether NGO professionals even consider the other(s) as worthy enough to contribute to the conversation — especially if they start by labeling the community as 'backward', 'illiterate', 'rural' or 'tribal'. Having seen this from close quarters, I feel that lack of belief in the capacities of the people, and in the power of dialogue, leads to one-way methods of communication. We talk on behalf of others — instead of involving everyone concerned in a genuine face-to-face interaction. Its not just about bringing diverse people together, we need to figure out ways to build honesty in our communications and trust into our relationships — including among NGO workers themselves.

One thing we need to face head-on is that, in the modern discourse, human beings are always referred to as resources — as in Human Resource Development (HRD). Why? In the prevalent industrialized society, the emphasis is on utilitarian value and generating profit. Earlier, 'resource' referred to material objects like minerals, since exploitation and control of nature was man's main preoccupation. Calling human beings 'resources' stems from the same preoccupation. In the NGO sector, HRD is a common refrain.

I once heard that Manibhai Desai of BAIF, a development organization he founded in Pune, raised a question about the term. He thought that human beings are sources, rather than resources. Humans are unique beings with autonomous abilities to develop their own knowledge and skills for the fulfillment of their life's purpose. Each has his or her own subjective universe and a rich deposit of feelings, experiences, imagination and thinking that could unfold according to his or her potential. People are seldom viewed from this perspective, which may be why the current channels of communication are so narrow and rigid.

In my view, dialogue holds the possibility of touching the subjective-ness in a person and of exploring meaning together of our inner and outer works. **Together** is the key word. Rather than relying on one or a few for expert advice, a *co-learning process* starts with each human beings energies, experiences, knowledges and capabilities. Believing that each person has something unique and worthy to offer: this philosophy challenges established hierarchies — especially those that come with degrees, age, gender, caste and urban experience — and allows trust to grow between people. Co-learning also moves us towards wholeness. We are not just 'representatives' of organizations when we gather in meetings. We are whole people, with a range of interests, talents, questions and abilities. Imagine experiencing the power of the whole group and the possibilities emerging from such an unfolding!

I also feel dialogue starts with a spirit of friendship and tries to rise above the constraints of power, status and relational dynamics. It is different from trying to debate or convince the other person. However, it does not mean that one has to agree with the other person all the time. Rather, dialogue means becoming available to otherness, in terms of cultural differences, inter-personal styles, ideas and the unknown. Those wanting to change others should well remember their openness to being changed by the other.

I think it is important to remember that dialogue in public spaces is not just talking. *The way we speak is as important as what we speak.* It has social, cultural, political and spiritual dimensions.

Some of the best dialogue I have experienced has happened through creating a film, planting a garden, chopping vegetables for dinner, singing and dancing, etc. I have seen how such “doing-things-together” processes inspire people to dialogue on matters close to their hearts, listen to possibilities and create fresh perspectives.

At Abhivyakti, we have used some of the tools described in this issue, like Open Space and World Café. Through them, members of our team were bursting with positive energy at our last Annual Meet. They started exploring their personal visions about their lives and the connections to their work. Collectively we started discussing about how Abhivyakti can be transformed into a learning community. Members openly shared what they found empowering and what wasn't. One of the non-empowering elements that were voiced by many was lack of space to dialogue on innermost feelings of hurt, dejection and frustration. It was felt that there was a need for mentoring process to evolve and take concrete shape.

Such tools have tremendous potential to discover how much people have — inside of them and in their communities — to contribute. For example, while celebrating Children's Broadcasting Day, we didn't start by producing something for children. We invited children from different backgrounds to a public garden in Nashik and asked what they thought about being receivers on such a day. While admitting they liked watching children's films, they also expressed a desire to create some media of their own. An intense collaborative session between children and parent-facilitators followed. Different media forms, like stick puppets, songs, skits and photo exhibition, emerged effortlessly, reflecting their ideas, feelings and concepts. These creations were shared with the public who had gathered in the garden. Warm relationships naturally developed, which is only possible with genuineness in dialogue. This insight has come to us from our experiences over the years.

Internally, within Abhivyakti, we began to understand that we couldn't separate our personal selves from our work roles. Any task must have a personal stake; it should arise out of our convictions and intrinsic motivation. Now, we have structured dialogue spaces, not for generating reports, but rather to explore personal engagements and meanings for ourselves, for our teams and for the organization.

Through dialogue, within my team, I have discovered so much about myself: my limitations, my ego, and my anxieties to perform and please others. I laugh when I think back on how I would assume unnecessary flashiness to exhibit my superiority! Dialogues have helped me see what I need to change for both peace, as well as excellence, in my work. They made me realize the essence of humility and the challenge for all of us in Abhivyakti to practice it. I have discovered interdependency with others. Lately, we are grappling with how dialogue can contribute to us becoming more mindful, more aware of our internal worlds, of our mental models.

For us at Abhivyakti, the major gain from dialogue has been in the form of our attitude. Sharing experiences with children, parents, rural communities and activists have contributed to sharpening our perspectives about socio-cultural reality and to developing relationships that have tested the rigours of time. Our openness to learning has made us appreciative of the existing plurality and diversity in our midst. More importantly, we have stopped presenting ourselves as experts, whose 'education' justified delivering a planned, packaged service or product to a marginalized, vulnerable Other. We see how our titles and positions would, to a great extent, limit the scope of dialogue. Or how fixating on results, rather than exploring possibilities, would stifle learning. By challenging our so-called privileges and these de-humanising mechanisms, we have learned the importance of being co-creators and co-learners in the processes we facilitate. By turning towards the other — which is at the heart of dialogic process — we look at things from

totally different perspectives. It helps to recognize the potential of others and innumerable possibilities that exist.

As facilitators and members of an NGO, we are concerned with ‘people’s power’. Democracy also aims for people to realize and practice their own power in their communities. But we know how democracy functions today — it doesn’t exactly work like it should in theory. So can we take the challenge to activate public spaces with diverse voices? Not in the way it is practiced today (one-way lectures, meetings dominated by minority voices, narrow campaigns, etc.). But rather, by practicing genuine dialogue, people can speak and be heard in new ways that are not controlled by or dependent on the dominant institutions. These types of exchange have bearing on personal identity, interpersonal relationships, community, society and the entire system. Such space where dialogue happens, in itself, a political act.

Another challenge to activating the public space is the present age of satellite television, which makes us passive receivers and consumers. The growth of television and its increasing presence in our lives led Franco Ferrarotti, a well-known sociologist, to declare an ‘end of conversation’ and suggest that media merely provides a “vocation for narcissism.” Bellah, Postman and others have warned us about increased individualism, self-centeredness, and consumerism as reasons for the decline of genuine dialogue. Media flooding us information and false choices, it has become difficult to influence the social and political order. How do we then see the public space being animated by different voices and real choices? Is it possible for people to come together, listen to each other, accept each other, appreciate differences, expand the boundaries of understanding and explore alternatives?

This is why dialogue — its tools, practices, experiences and opportunities — is the focus of the *Expressions Annual* this year. We have invited different practitioners to discuss their tools and share their experiences of dialogue in the public space. What they offer is a range of insights that have come their way from using the tools. Despite their funny modern-sounding names, most have emerged from traditional culturally-rooted ways of engaging with each other. People have developed these tools by observing the ways communities have meaningfully interacted with each other. Such dialogue spaces, like the vegetable market, the chai stall, the *pan-wala*, the *jagran*, etc. still exist around us, if we choose to notice them. I envision developing more tools in the future based on local practices in our own communities.

In the following essays, the writer-contributors offer insights on the need for dialogue, the way it can be hosted with different groups, and what it can generate. I hope you will feel inspired to experiment with, localize, modify, innovate on these tools, and then share your learning experiences with us. Our different and complex cultural contexts, the pluralistic fabric of our society, open the door to many unique creations, combinations and permutations. No one size fits all; or else, how could it be dialogue? I feel sure that these diverse experiences will make us more aware of the limitation of one-way lectures, arrogant monologues and stale conferences, and invite us to rethink our strategies and practices. Indeed, they might even change the way you see the world.

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