

Christiane Seehausen

Nansen Centre for Peace and Dialogue

DIALOGUE-A TOOL FOR OVERCOMING SEGREGATION

Keywords: Dialogue, Minorities, Segregation

Description

Nansen Centre for Peace and Dialogue has long term experience in use of dialogue in segregated societies. Dialogue is in our understanding a meeting between people where the purpose is to learn from each other. Listening - learning – changing- these are the elements of dialogue. Active listening- listening with full attention on the speaker- is one of the main prerequisites of dialogue. Creating equality among the participants is crucial. Equality increases empowerment of those who feel oppressed or inferior. It also forms the ground for asking good questions.

The multi-cultural society in Norway consists of minorities from 219 different countries and constitutes 13, 1 % of the Norwegian population. Diversity is exciting, but also challenging. Due to cultural and religious differences, prejudices, fear and uncertainty has flourished and to some degree led to segregated living areas in some cities in Norway. In these multi- cultural places, the level of interaction between minorities and majority is often quite low and limited. Beside of that minorities will often find themselves in inferior positions, which confirm their experiences of not being equal. For intervene in this negative situation and prevent major conflicts, Nansen Centre has used dialogue as a tool to create contact, mutual understanding and the experience of equality.

In my presentation I will elaborate around the process and results of our dialogue work in one of the multi- cultural municipalities in Norway.

Objectives of the work

- Overcome segregation through creating interaction based on equality
- Increase understanding through dialogue
- Developing new networks

Tasks

- Building trust and safety among participants
- Encourage cooperation despite differences
- Increase self-confidence and reduce uncertainty

Introduction

This paper presents practical experiences in using dialogue in multi- cultural contexts in Norway. The paper is not based on research, but is knowledge based on experience from a three years project in one of the multi- cultural municipalities in Norway.

Background

Norway has always been a multi- cultural society with national minorities like the Sami people, and foreigners, who have been recruited as experts in different fields. These are for example Germans, who in the 11th century dominated the stock fish trade and Dutchmen, Englishmen and Scots who were involved in timber trade. Much later in the 1970s Norway was dependent on American experts for developing the oil industry.

Beside these expert immigrants, Norway has always had labor immigration from neighboring countries like Sweden and Finland, and later from Pakistan, the former Yugoslavia and Turkey. In addition to labor immigrants Norway as a humanitarian nation has since the 1970, received numbers of refugees from various conflict or post- conflict areas like Somalia, Sudan, former Yugoslavia, Eritrea and Palestine to mention a few of them.

The result of these settlements is that in 2014, 14,1 % of the population in Norway has an immigrant background, representing 221 different countries. (SSB, 2013) The immigrant population is settled throughout the whole country, but the great majority is concentrated around the capital, Oslo.

Skedsmo municipality is one of the places, where many immigrants get settled. Skedsmo offers affordable housing and it has a good public transport systems to Oslo, which allows people to use the large labor market located there. *Skedsmo has a total population of approximately 50 000 inhabitants, whereof an average of 22% represents minorities groups from 138 different countries. (SSB, 2013)*

This amount of ethnic minorities puts Skedsmo on a list of **one** of the municipalities in Norway with the highest proportion of immigrants. This means the municipality has a great potential for innovative development, but it also has the challenging task to create an inclusive society based on equality and respect.

The Nansen Centre for Peace and Dialogue has been working with dialogue in post- conflict areas for about 20 years. Our work started in the 1990s during the war in the Balkans. The motivation at that time was to bring individuals from the conflicting parties together and give them a space for talking about their situation. The result of the work was the establishing of 10

dialogue centers in the former Yugoslavia. These centers are still in progress, working for inclusive societies and against ethnical and religious segregation.

Since that time our center has used these experiences and the method of dialogue in other post-conflict or conflict areas like Afghanistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Kenya and Somalia, where various reasons have led to segregation and discrimination of certain groups within these countries. A general problem is that conflicts and war, creates hate and fear toward the "others" and these feelings will often lead towards a process of segregation. This process might form the basis for new conflicts, because people who live segregated will develop stereotype perceptions and prejudices of each other.

Analyzing the multi-cultural Norwegian society, our center found that we are facing many of the same problems as those in post-conflict areas we have been engaged in. Stereotyping, racial discrimination and at some degree segregated living areas are also common in the biggest cities in Norway. The conflict level is still low, but many minority groups are suffering in silence, in their struggle to be accepted as an equal citizen.

Debates on immigration, integration and inclusion are often based on a presumption of "we" (Norwegians) and "them" (all new-comers, immigrants) especially those coming from areas outside the western hemisphere. This "we" indicates a set of values, norms and actions, which are assumed not to be part of "their culture"- an assumption, which might create the idea of superior and inferior cultural backgrounds. Linked to that, there is also an unclear perception of what it does mean to be Norwegian.

A well-functioning democratic society needs to be built on equality and respect of all citizens, regardless their religious and ethnical background. The feeling of being treated with equality and respect is subjective. Laws and regulations might give the impression of being safeguarding the equality of all citizens, but the daily life interactions often gives a more nuanced picture.

Creating respect and equality in a community demands long term processes, where all parties are included and listened to. In this process dialogue can be one of the tools. This paper will give an introduction of using dialogue as tool, based on experiences from Skedsmo municipality during the last three years.

The dialogue process

Dialogue is a term used in many contexts, and many conversations are considered as dialogue, although they appear more like discussions. Dialogue and discussions are in other words not the same.

The term dialogue has different definitions, depending on the cultural contexts in which it is used. The word originates from the Greek word dialegomai, which means to converse (dia – through; logos – word, reason). In our Western tradition, dialogue stems from Socrates (479-399 B.C.) and his student Plato (427-347 B.C.). It was a method for gaining insight into the truth, a truth which is inherent in every human being, but which we forget when we are born. Socrates believed that conversation could release this truth. An example: In a dialogue Socrates and the slave Menon converse about what goodness are, whether it can be recognised, developed or learnt. In order to show that recognition involves calling forth knowledge from the consciousness, knowledge which has existed there since we were born, Socrates begins asking the slave

questions about a geometrical figure. Through asking, he entices knowledge from the slave's consciousness which the slave himself was not aware he possessed. That is, he had the knowledge, but had forgotten it at birth. For Socrates, learning through questions and answers – through dialogue – became a means for remembering a truth that we all carry inside ourselves, but in a forgotten form. This has later been called midwifery (maieutics) because it resembles the way in which the midwife assists in delivering the unborn child. (Eidsvåg, 2004)

*“In the beginning is the relation”, Martin Buber wrote in his principal work *I and Thou* All real life is meetings. We must meet others in order to find ourselves. Only through the gaze of others do we see ourselves, because “no eye can see itself.” (Buber, 1923)*

With this sentence Martin Buber touched the essence of dialogue. The “others” are the way of seeing and understanding oneself. But this relation does not necessarily mean that we will find the truths as Socrates were talking about, because the truth is a complex term and depending on perception.

“Do not criticise another before you have walked two days in his moccasins” states an old American Indian proverb. After two days, our comprehension may have changed.

Therefore, our understanding of truth fundamentally involves interpretation. The answers we get depend on the questions we ask. Reality emerges through the cultural spectacles with which we see. At the same time we do not watch from the outside. We are part of the reality that we must interpret, and we live with an implicit understanding of how the world is and what people are like. “The truth” appears through continuous dialogue with the surrounding world that we want to grasp and comprehend. (Eidsvåg, 2004)

Dialogue presupposes that every human being has a suspicion of not understanding the whole picture. This suspicion is useful in the sense that it gives me a humble approach to my own values and norms and the values and norms, of the others. It gives an insight of being part of one culture among several others. This understanding will motivate me to patiently strive to understand the others better. It does not mean to give up what considers being true and right, unless strong reasons convince me to do so.

Dialogue requires some prerequisites. First, a dialogue has to be in a public sphere. This means that everybody involved in the dialogue have the right to take part in establishing the norms and regulations around this dialogue. Secondly -equality. Differences in status, beliefs, and educational backgrounds of others are irrelevant for the dialogue. What counts is the ability to listen and ask relevant questions, not who puts them forward. The third prerequisite is that the participants should be ready to allow themselves to be convinced by the better arguments of others.

Skedsmo municipality

As mentioned above, Skedsmo is one of the municipalities in Norway with the highest percent of immigrants..It is also one of the fastest growing municipalities in Norway, and around 60% of the newcomers have a diverse background. Such a situation gives Skedsmo the challenge of using the positive potential of a heterogeneous society, and at the same time preventing segregation and racial discrimination. If successful, the Municipality can get the great opportunity of developing and innovative diverse society based on equality and respect for differences.

In Skedsmo, like in other Norwegian municipalities, there are a many volunteer organizations. Some of them are organizing sport activities for children and youth, others come together for handcraft activities or gather their national groups for cultural activities.

These organizations are important for creating social activities and could be excellent meeting place for the diverse population. But unfortunately this is not the case. Most voluntary organizations are ethnical homogenous, using there gatherings for activities for their own national or religious group. For some of the organizations this kind of separation have not been intentional , while for others – particularly the immigrant organizations – are, understandably enough, using their gatherings for maintaining their language, culture and religion. Without doubt, a firmly rooted identity is the basis for interaction with new cultures, languages and beliefs, while activities together with the majority population give the necessary knowledge for understanding the larger society.

Members of the majority population often perceive themselves as those who know the society, seeing their role as a coach or wizard for new comers or as someone who has to protect what they consider as Norwegian. They often deny the fact that the society has changed dramatically. The recognition of this dramatic change requires new thinking and behavior. In many ethnical Norwegian homes in Skedsmo, especially in the upper middle and upper class, who have the financial strength to live in areas with little ethnical diversity (which often are the most expensive areas), there is, among others, an understanding that the multi-cultural society is functioning good enough, based on their experiences in contact with minorities as craftsmen, cleaning personnel or shop and restaurant workers.

On the other hand the minority population is also quite complex and differs in many ways. In very general you have second generation's immigrants, who are born here and consider themselves as Norwegians, but might have problems to be accepted as Norwegians because of their skin color or their religious background. Others are new comers struggling with the language and culture. There are labor immigrants from many different countries, often well-educated. Despite having a job and an income and as such a foot into the society, they still alienated because of cultural differences and language. The last group is refugees. Some of them have very little education, others well educated, but have large challenges getting their education acknowledged in Norway. Many of them have to start from scratch, which is quite demotivating for a person in their 30 or 40- ties. In addition they often have several health problems. For most of them the goal is to live a good life in Norway, to be respected despite of their differences. The minority groups live different lives, but in spite of that, many have experienced not to be treated with equality in interaction with the majority population. These experiences influence how they perceive the society and might influence their motivation to be part of it.

The dialogue process in Skedsmo started through contact with one adviser from the cultural section in the administration. She had for many years followed up volunteer organizations in Skedsmo and observed that there is little interaction between immigrant organizations and the traditional Norwegian organizations. Her concern was that this situation strengthens the segregation tendencies in the municipality and she was looking for a tool to prevent this development. Through funding from the Directorate of Integration and Diversity, Skedsmo municipality in cooperation with the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue, started up Skedsmo dialogue, a forum for 30 women representing different volunteer organizations. Around 65 % of

the participants had another ethnical background than Norwegian and their age were between 30 and 68 years.

The dialogue process

The first step in this process was gathering 30 women with different backgrounds, beliefs, experiences and positions. This was only possible because of our key- person, an adviser from the cultural sector. Having a key person, who is trusted by the local community, is an important start for a dialogue process. Our key person has been working for the municipality in many years. She is, as mentioned, part of the cultural sector i Skedsmo, and one of her main tasks in all these years has been to follow up the voluntary sector in the municipality. Due to that she came in contact with each new established organization in Skedsmo. Especially many of the immigrant organizations were in frequent contact with her, because of her knowledge to Norwegian rules and laws needed for organizational life. Such service creates trust, although the cooperation not always was without conflicts. Through this cooperation she became an important network, which enables her to identify motivated and interested participants to the dialogue forum. The participants came because they felt safe in interaction with the key person.

The second step was to find a safe and neutral space for the dialogue sessions. In our case we selected a room in the Town Hall. The Town Hall is an open place for all inhabitants and we therefor considered it as the most neutral space in the municipality. In addition to the physical space, it is important to prepare an environment which encourages people to talk and to interact with each other. In our case we offered a nice meal to the group, an action we followed up through two years. Food is a universal need and it creates an atmosphere of wellbeing and kindness. Gradually the women prepared the food themselves. The acknowledgment of their effort strengthened their self-esteem. Beside of that we used time to get known with each other, through a process where each participant got time to present themselves and their organization. Only for that process we used several meetings.

Dialogue is a joint project and cannot contain any hidden agenda. Everyone involved must be invited to participate in deciding the goal, topic, working methods and schedules. This creates a sense of security and gives ownership to the project. Attempts of manipulation undermine all trust and are destructive to any dialogue. The participants in the Skedsmo dialogue process used time to get known, and discussed and negotiated how they wanted to develop the process. For example did they have to find the topics they were interested to talk about. Several participants wanted to have experts to give introductions to them, but through a joint process they decided to base the dialogues on presentations of their knowledge and experiences. This decision was quite important for the development of the group process, because each participant had to choose a partner; they never had been worked with, for preparation of the presentations. For several participants this was a totally new experience. Especially for some minority representatives who previously had been sitting in a group with people from the majority population.

The third step in the dialogue was to ensure that all participants were *equal*. No good dialogue will take place between the master and the slave if the master insists on being master and the slave accepts being the slave. In the event of major differences between the participants' education, level of knowledge and status, one has to establish human equality through addressing each of the participants with openness and interest. Giving this attention, regardless of status,

position or educational background creates a feeling of being treated with equality. Interaction based on equality is a perfect foundation for trust building. Trust and equality are interrelated. Trust is also something which can be spread into group. The facilitators trusted the participants and recognized them by being attentive and listening and this behaviour influenced the rest of the group. When trust first was established through attention and listening, each participant discovered similarities in each other's life. Like daily struggles with teenager children or the difficulties in combining work and family responsibilities. This opened up the "door" for seeing the other from a different perspective- not only as someone who is different, but more as someone who is equal, with a universal set of emotions and needs, among others the need of being treated with equality. Understanding that our basic needs and emotions are universal was the step which encouraged the participants to treat the others with equality.

The fourth step was to establish the will and ability to listen. If nobody listens, nothing that is said will be of any use. Being ignored always feels painful and degrading. Dialogue requires empathetic listening in order to understand the others. Listening does not only mean to hear the words the others are saying, but also to recognize the tentative, the uncertain, the unfinished. Active listening was challenging for the participants in the Skedsmo dialogue. A good listener has to battle inattention, impatience and self-centredness – a difficult task in a world where such behaviour is the most common. Active listening includes asking good questions. Good questions put us on the track of something we do not know, but would like to know and should know. An honest question as "How is life for a foreigner in Norway?" can be the starting point for a new and changed understanding. Talking is important, but doing things together strengthens the relationships even more. The participants in Skedsmo dialogue had to prepare joint lectures and presentations; they planned and arranged events like the celebration of the 8th of March and other cultural activities. Minorities and majority were working together for common goals-for some this was a bright new experience.

The fifth step in that dialogue process was to ensure sustainability. Starting up such a process is binding. Organiser and facilitators have to prepare the ground for a continuation of the process. This was done by involving the participants from the first moment so that they felt responsibility for the group, and responsible for the impact the work will have into the community. Sustainability- processes also need to be anchored into legal bodies or organizations. In our case both the administration and the political level in the municipality secured funds and structure for further processes.

Achievements

In our dialogue processes we try to cover four levels of achievement. Those levels will be worked on all at the same time. I will use these levels to explain our results in the Skedsmo dialogue.

The first level is the individual level

The objective here is to transform the individual to:

- Help individuals to grow and develop greater self- awareness
- Educate to broaden the competency and knowledge base
- Make explicit and examine assumptions, mindsets and mental models

In the Skedsmo dialogue process the individuals (the participants) gained increased self-awareness particularly related to communication. The participants learned to communicate in different ways, a competency highly needed in their lives. Mental models and mindsets were changed through intensive listening processes. The interaction in between participants with different ethnical backgrounds, gave a broader understanding of each other's perceptions. Presentations of the organizational work, gave insight in previously unknown approaches like the study of Islam from a female point of view. These new realizations were important for thinking through assumptions and prejudices.

The second level is the relationships:

The objective here is transforming relationships by:

- Conflict transformation
- Build trust
- Promote respect and recognition
- Change patterns of dysfunctional relations
- Increase awareness of interdependence

Dialogue is a relational process. Each step in the process is based on the relations between the participants, and the participants and the facilitator. Trust was build up through deep listening and openness throughout the process. Increased trust enabled more respect for each other's differences and lifestyles. The participants spent less time in giving advises to each other, rather they became more aware of supporting good ideas and approaches. Through joint activities they recognized their interdependence, important for the further development of this process.

The third level is the culture:

The objective here is transforming collective patterns of thinking and acting by:

- Change the norms and values that sustain patterns of exclusion
- Explore and transform collective habits of thinking and behaving
- Promote more inclusive participatory culture
- Transform overly simplistic and distorted discourses

On this level we probably experienced most changes. In the beginning of the process the norms and values were based on distinctions between being part of minorities or the majority. Over time these impressions got more differentiated. Both parties discovered more similarities in values and norms, which led to a better understanding of each other. Some topics even created unusual cohesion against common norms in the Norwegian society. That was the case when the group talked about the extreme sexualized focus on young women. By elaborating on this issue the participants (most of them mothers) agreed that there is a need for resistance against this

development. By getting to know each other as individuals, the participants were able to rethink their collective perception of the others. For some of the Christian Eritrean women, the interaction with Muslim women from Pakistan and Afghanistan, gave them a more comprehensive picture of what it means to be a Muslim women, than what they had learned about this “group “in their homeland. These changes of perceptions created a more inclusive behavior, which hopefully will affect their daily life.

Fourth level is the structures and systems:

The objective here is transforming structures, processes and mechanism by:

- Reform processes at the administration or/and political level
- Promote changes in the structural planning of future actions

A sustainable change process depends on an interaction between the grassroots level and the structural level. Those two levels are interdependent. The Skedsmo dialogue process started as an initiative from one adviser from the cultural sector in the municipality. She included participants from different grass- root organizations. The funding for this activity was given from a higher structural level at the Norwegian government. Their intention was to support a process, which could be of interest for other municipalities. The Nansen Center delivered the professional knowhow for the process. Through the process the local administration and political level got interested in the method and decided to continue the development of the dialogue forum, independent from the first funding. The forum influenced the structural planning, through being part of the municipality’s action plan for an inclusive society. This means that the dialogue forum promoted changes and motivated the administration and the Major to use the method as one of the tools for developing a diverse municipality based on equality and respect.

Conclusion

Dialogue is a tool for overcoming segregation. In this paper I described the process from a three year project in one of the multi- cultural municipalities in Norway. The ethnical segregation in some Norwegian municipalities is not required from any national or regional political leading institution, but rather an unconsciously structural development, pushed forward by a housing marked controlled by financial interest. The result of this is living areas (with cheap or rented apartments) with a high percentage of immigrants and others areas (more expensive) where the main group are ethnical Norwegians. These living patterns limit the daily life interaction between minorities and majority and thereby important experiences for develop better understanding for each other’s differences.

Engagement in voluntary organization could help to overcome this situation, but unfortunately many of these organizations are quite homogenous. Each organization has their own program and workspace and in a democratic society it is impossible to force people, who choose to be engage in their leisure time, to get part of something they are not interested in. The only way, as a wise adviser in the cultural sector discovered, is to motivate members of different organizations to come together for developing common activities and learn from each other.

Dialogue was chosen as the method, because it is based on equality and respect for each other. In a dialogue status, position, ethnical or educational background is frivolous. What matters are the

willingness and openness to listen and enough curiosity to ask good questions. The best conversation happens when both parts develop a new understanding for each other. Skedsmo dialogue has shown that dialogue is a tool for overcoming segregation tendencies. In Skedsmo dialogue the most talkative started to listen, those who thought that they were in a better position, because of their background or knowledge of the Norwegian society became insight in life stories, which made them more humble and less cocksure, the most vulnerable and silent started to talk, and all of them achieved a safer approach to differences. These are the first steps for overcoming segregation.

Bibliography

1. Statistics Norway (2013) Migrations 2013 on www.ssb.no
2. Eidsvåg, I. (2004), Understanding the Other, (p.10-11) Lillehammer: Nansen Centre for Peace and Dialogue
3. Buber, M. (1923), I and thou (p.26) New York: Charles Scribner's Sons