



One Year In: Reflection on the Ottawa Dialogue’s New Research Programme Spring 2022 Newsletter

In December of 2020, the Ottawa Dialogue launched its Research Programme to strengthen its research agenda, refine its approach to facilitation and dialogue, challenge assumptions in the field and generate innovative ideas on Track Two Diplomacy and multitrack approaches to peacemaking. This Practitioner Piece seeks to explore the growth arc of our Research Programme throughout this past year and explore some of these lessons learned.

This Practitioner Piece is a result of a discussion held between Dr. Julia Palmiano Federer, Head of Research, and Laura O’Connor, Senior Programme Officer at Ottawa Dialogue.



About Ottawa Dialogue

Established in 2009, Ottawa Dialogue is a university-based organization that brings together research and action in the field of dialogue and mediation. Guided by the needs of the parties in conflict, Ottawa Dialogue develops and carries out quiet and long-term, dialogue-driven initiatives around the world. We create forums where parties can explore difficult issues in an analytical, problem-solving way to develop new paths forward. We then work with our partners to transfer these ideas to places where they can make a difference. As a complement to its field work, Ottawa Dialogue pursues a rich research agenda focused on conflict analysis, third party dialogue-based interventions, and best practices relating to “Track Two Diplomacy”.

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Celebrating Milestones

We launched three different publication and knowledge sharing fora. First, our Policy Brief series was launched to engage with leading scholars in the field on emerging issues in Track Two. Throughout the past year, our Policy Briefs have covered the [evolution of Track Two](#), the [information revolution and multitrack diplomacy](#), and the possible role of [Track Two in Myanmar](#), and, most recently, [Peace Historiography and the 1993 Oslo Channel](#). Second, our Occasional Papers series was launched to respond to timely issues with commentary and ideas which arise from the work of our organization and provide reflection space with those working in the field. Our most recent [Occasional Paper](#) is written by Dr. Evan Hoffman, entitled "Some Reflections on the Role of Power in Track II Mediation." Third, our Newsletter series features unique Practitioner Pieces meditating on aspects on the field like building community or debates around inclusion. In each [Newsletter](#), we also feature interviews with leading voices in Track Two scholarship and practice. In addition to launching these knowledge products in house, Dr. Peter Jones and Dr. Julia Palmiano Federer have published articles in leading academic outlets, [exploring ethical issues of Track Two](#), published in the journal *International Negotiation* and the [normative turn in Track Two scholarship](#) and practice, published in *Negotiation Journal*. They also represented Ottawa Dialogue and presented papers at major annual academic conferences such as those of the International Studies Association, the European Consortium for Political Research, the Conflict Research Society.

Exploring New Directions

In 2020, Ottawa Dialogue welcomed [Dr. Aleem Bharwani](#) as a Sabbatical Fellow. Dr Bharwani is a physician (internal medicine) and a clinical associate professor at the University of Calgary where he is the Director of Public Policy and Partnerships for the Cumming School of Medicine and O'Brien Institute for Public Health. He has gone on to lead a number of projects that have focused on the applications of Track Two in the arena of Public Health. Dr. Bharwani is leading a new area of practice-informed research that has to do with conflicts involving civil society groups and governments over Public Health issues. We are developing a dialogue at the community-level in Calgary, Canada, over deeply contested Public Health questions, which feature civic officials and civil society groups both supportive and opposed to Public Health initiatives. Insights

developed from this work will be published and will also inform our work in conflict situations involving civil society actors who are suspicious and even contemptuous of traditional sources of authority and knowledge. Though Aleem's sabbatical is now over, we are delighted that he will remain with the Ottawa Dialogue as a Research Fellow.

Second, together with a small team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and students, we are looking at how Indigenous ways of Knowing and Being around the world can inform conflict resolution research and practice, and how informal dialogues (e.g. Track Two peacemaking) might be relevant in Turtle Island/Canada and other contexts. In its initial phase, we are looking at how informal dialogues and Indigenous ways of Knowing and Being can inform and decenter Western-centric approaches to conflict resolution around the world, including in Turtle Island/Canada. We are building a network of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people working and writing on this topic. To support this research, the Ottawa Dialogue has brought on [Lena Dedyukina](#), a Masters student in the Department of Geography, Environment and Geomatics at the University of Ottawa, who identifies herself as an Indigenous (Sakha (Yakut)) woman from Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in northeast part of Russia. In addition to the work she is doing for us, Lena's MA research focuses on food (in)security in Arctic communities in Canada.

These projects have aligned with our broader focus in Track Two's "alternative" applications in non-armed conflict settings and in the Global North. These projects have further allowed us to apply our interests in inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and critical approaches in Track Two. We hope that this work, and our continued work in 2022, help to redefine the Track Two field and provide innovative perspectives.

Building a Research Programme in a Pandemic: Challenges and Opportunities

Ottawa Dialogue's Research Programme, like all organisations, experienced both highs and lows throughout our first year. Thankfully, the former have far outweighed the latter. Throughout this past year, we've learned, and re-learned, a number of lessons. Primarily, the importance of both building and investing in relationships – remotely and in-person, and the need to look back and appreciate organisational milestones have been two key lessons picked up by our team.

Even though COVID-19 has brought its challenges to building relationships, it's a double-edged sword. Though it's difficult, having a robust, well-trusted professional network can be even more vital in times like these where contingency planning is often necessary. A strong network has also proven important to combatting ongoing isolation amidst the pandemic. However, it hasn't always been enough to build relationships via Zoom, especially with research groups that require more involvement. Much of this work requires slow but meaningful engagement and bridge-building. As the Research Programme moves forward, continuing to invest in relationships with people in our network and new contacts will be increasingly important.

While many aspects of research may be a remote-friendly activity, these travel restrictions have certainly hurt the morale of the research community. In-person conferencing, roundtables, and

networking events have previously been a highly rewarding experience for any researcher. While Zoom talks have remained rewarding and a valuable bridge-building tool, most Track Two scholars would report similar periods of mourning throughout 2021 of in-person activities.

It's also worth noting that Ottawa Dialogue's team has remained remote throughout 2021, to present. Remote work has its perks, but with many members of the team being onboarded at the beginning of the pandemic, some members of the team had not have had the chance to meet in-person yet despite working closely together for over a year. Community-building in Track Two during the pandemic has been an [issue we have written about before](#), and it remains pressing. Being unable to have coffee with your colleagues has been a major drawback. Moreover, perhaps it goes unsaid, the general difficulties this pandemic has brought – anxieties, isolation, childcare responsibilities and adapting to new work habits, have impacted almost all of us. The pandemic was a time for most of us to redefine productivity, and Ottawa Dialogue was no different. As the world became increasingly isolated, learning to focus more on growth and progress became more important than measuring outputs and quantifying “productivity.” In Ottawa Dialogue's case, we've learned the importance of taking time to look back at the accomplishments that have been made thus far and taking pause in appreciation of these efforts.

What Does the Future Hold?

The Research Programme was in an exciting position in December of 2020. Dr. Palmiano Federer was tasked with building a research programme from the ground-up. The vision was to aim high and broad – to cover different concepts, debates, non-traditional applications of Track Two and peace work, and to generally focus on creativity, flexibility, and openness. The Programme prioritizes transdisciplinary, interdisciplinary and problem-driven approaches to research.

In 2022, we look forward most to growing this work and our team and blending this work with our dialogue work. As most of us would likely agree, we also hold hope and optimism for the resumption of in-person work, which truly be a highlight of 2022, if it comes to fruition. We lastly want to emphasize our excitement with engaging with new scholars and practitioners in Track Two and peacebuilding more broadly.

To that end, we welcome engagement with those working in the field. If you would like to be engaged in our work, whether this be through writing a paper or inquiring about our existing work, do not hesitate to reach out.

Dr. Julia Palmiano Federer
Laura O'Connor