

Dialogue Facilitation in North America: A Toolkit

By Laura Rose O'Connor (Senior Program Officer & Research Coordinator) and Josh Nadeau (Research Fellow & Facilitator)

In this newsletter's interview, you will [find a reference](#) to our recent Policy Brief, "Using Peacebuilding Dialogue to Address Sociopolitical Polarization in North America" by Josh Nadeau, in addition to a general announcement of our ongoing work on peacebuilding in Turtle Island/North America. This Practitioner Piece seeks to build upon some of this work and offer a "toolkit" for peacebuilders interested in working in their own communities within North America.

Key takeaways:

- ⇒ **Evolving our understanding of conflict** to include non-armed conflict(s) that exist in North America/Turtle Island, avoiding a hierarchization of conflict and/or a "delegitimization" of certain groups.
- ⇒ **Shifting Understandings of Impartiality** and accepting that, as community members and facilitators, our own biases and backgrounds can and will impact our work, though it also can create space for productive self-reflection.
- ⇒ **Flexibility** in our understandings of conflict resolution and towards resistance to 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".

In the Ottawa Dialogue's past [Policy Briefs](#) and Practitioner Pieces, it has been noted that we as conflict experts from "the West" or "the Global North" often view peacebuilding as a tool to use in response to international, and especially armed, conflict. This, however, has the effect of removing from view non-armed, societal conflicts worldwide, including in our own backyards. Peacebuilding, dialogue, mediation – these are all terms that we, the writers of this piece, believe can be equally applied to our scholarship or practitioner work both internationally and in our own communities.

Shifting Understandings of Conflict

The range of non-armed, societal conflicts that impact countries in the Global North can be broad. For example, there are what is known as *settler colonial* conflicts, which refers to overt, structural or historical tensions in places like Turtle Island (North America)¹, Australia and New Zealand. These have often resulted in deep-running generational trauma and persisting structural inequities within Indigenous communities. Another type of conflict has consolidated around polarized sociopolitical fault lines in North America and much of Europe, pitting the "right" and the "left" against each other along with the various identity groups associated with each. Other issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of globalization or, especially in the United States, race relations have led to massive protests and public anger.

These kinds of conflicts are often overlooked by peacebuilding practitioners and scholars, who are typically concerned with contexts like war or systemic instances of direct violence. We believe that this must change, and accordingly seek to consolidate bridges between research and practice in the spheres of global peacebuilding and North American conflict resolution.

Moreover, while it is inappropriate to equalize (or even justly compare) one conflict to another, it is also inappropriate to hierarchize types of conflict. In other words, while North American conflict resolution scholars or practitioners may make the case for prioritizing international armed conflict in their work, perhaps for reasons related to personal areas of expertise and/or heightened human casualties, it is important to not view such work as more "serious" or noble, especially if it means that societal conflicts at home remain invisible and unaddressed.

Shifting Understandings of Impartiality

Those interested in facilitation may find themselves asking questions concerning their membership or status (also known as *positionality*) in perceived dominant, privileged and/or oppressor groups – for example, as descendants of white settlers in the North American context, or as liberals or conservatives in spaces where only one set of such values is taken as the norm. It's okay to realize that we ourselves are not neutral and that we may not be appropriate facilitators in all contexts. Our personal experiences may lead us to prioritize certain goals in the process, or they may colour our opinion of the "other." If you feel like an issue presents a conflict of interest for you or that you have a bias towards certain sides or outcomes, this can be a space of joint reflection with other practitioners. If you are a facilitator, it doesn't mean that you have to forgo facilitating entirely – it may mean that you can team up with facilitators from other relevant communities to jointly run proceedings. Moreover, greater self-reflection and understanding of our positionality can also lend themselves to international peacebuilding contexts, where North American facilitators are often also incorrectly regarded as "neutral" third parties and/or otherwise unbiased. We all

¹ Turtle Island is the traditional name for North America in many Indigenous nations across the Continent. We use the term "North America" for accessibility purposes.

have histories, and they impact us in different ways that can be taken into account in order to serve various processes in the communities we seek to work with.

Moving Beyond “Rational” Modes of Engagement

Peacebuilders have been accused, sometimes quite justly, of being “stuck in our heads.” Many techniques in the conflict resolution world were developed with the assumption that humans are rational creatures that do cost-benefit analyses to pursue their interests – this can be true, but this is only part of the story. There are many ways to define and experience “rationality.” What may appear rational in some cultures is not in others, and individuals experience the world in many different ways, especially in situations of conflict. Remember that these different processes are in play with everyone involved in an intervention, and that there are fascinating dialogue techniques that engage participant’s hearts, bodies and guts just as much as their heads. These diverse components of our being are just as meaningful in dialogue spaces as our heads – if not more so.

Fluidity

Like any conflict – armed or non-armed – it is not a question of dialogue followed by resolution. Rather, dialogue processes, perhaps particularly in non-armed conflicts, are extremely fluid and ever evolving. Issues like sociopolitical polarization and structural inequities are evergreen, if not constant, with constantly shifting faces and focal points. Accordingly, a single dialogue or dialogue process, even if “successful,” will never be enough to address the changing needs of the communities involved. Creating *cultures of dialogue* should thus be an overarching goal for practitioners aiming to mediate divides within North America’s various non-armed conflicts. While division is inevitable, working to de-stigmatize ongoing discussion among opposing or divided groups or develop peacebuilding capacities among polarized groups is a noble and impactful pursuit for those interested in conflict resolution in North America.

It is important to note that not all dialogue processes will address all relevant needs or conflict dynamics at all times. Some will focus on relationship-building, others on analyzing narratives or the structural causes of particular conflicts. Some may focus on one element to the exclusion of others for the whole process, while others will shift focus over different “phases” of a process. These may all be appropriate, given the context, though facilitators should be aware of what they are trying to accomplish and will often be expected to justify their choices.

Accepting Resistance

Not everyone wants to participate in dialogue, often for legitimate reasons or perceptions. Dialogue may be seen as giving a platform to the other side, a platform that seems dangerous or irresponsible. Similarly, if the facilitator hails from a community seen as “the other side,” this may lead to distrust and suspicion from prospective participants.

Sometimes this is a matter of building trust or showing how dialogue can benefit conflict-affected communities. But it may also mean that “classic” dialogue between two sides isn’t appropriate at the moment. There are other things that can be done, like having dialogues inside communities instead of between them. These dialogues can serve multiple purposes, for example, reaching consensus or building trust within conflict-affected communities, or creating spaces where people can explore, with like-minded

participants, their relationship to “the other” as well as their willingness/reluctance to engage with them directly.

There can also be examples of “indirect” dialogue. *Shuttle diplomacy* (when facilitators act as a go-between for communities who choose not to meet in person) or multimedia tools like long-form podcast discussions with community members can be explored, along with other creative solutions.

Conclusions

This Practitioner Piece is meant to serve as a jumping off-point for those interested in crafting dialogue tools and processes in North America and/or similar non-armed conflicts elsewhere in the Global North. Ideological and identity-based divides can be addressed through dialogue, and the divide between North American peacebuilding literature and international peacebuilding literature can be bridged. Shifting our understandings of conflict, of impartiality, of resolution, and of resistance can all help to create cultures of dialogue that encourage bridge-building and self-reflection in non-armed conflicts.

Should you have any feedback, you may reach out to Ottawa Dialogue at OttawaDialogue@uottawa.ca.