

## Introduction

Of course we were excited. When we met in summer 2005 to talk about supporting the Nelson Mandela Foundation's Dialogue work, we all felt that we were involved in a project of great significance. A project that promised to truly contribute and make a difference.

At that time, Mille, Marianne and Colleen were involved in a wide range of engagements as Dialogue Practitioners. Mille was in the midst of launching a multi-stakeholder "Change Lab" addressing the crisis of orphaned and vulnerable children in South Africa; Colleen was busy managing an extensive dialogue programme at one of South Africa's leading business schools, and Marianne was running an innovative rural learning village in Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, Heiko spent his last two years as a resident consultant at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in Johannesburg, South Africa. He was seconded by the German Government to support the Organizational Development of the Foundation through the German Technical Co-Operation (GTZ). In that year, the Board of Trustees of the Foundation had decided to focus a significant part of the Foundation's work on Dialogue, which is regarded as an indispensable part of the Founder's legacy. During and since South Africa's transition to democracy, Nelson Mandela had exhibited a formidable ability to forgive, along with an awareness of the importance of listening to all sides with a genuine recognition that everyone holds a piece of the puzzle of the future, and everyone needs to be involved in moving forward together.

Jointly with the Management Team of the Foundation, we endeavored to draw on our experience of different dialogue methodologies and approaches to create an overview on the various tools for dialogue, their specific attributes, advantages and shortfalls. We wanted to make sure that it would become a practical and usable resource - instead of an academic exercise - and so we looked for illustrative case studies, easy-to-use checklists and a section that would allow an overall assessment of the tools portrayed so the reader would be able to determine potential usefulness for a given situation.

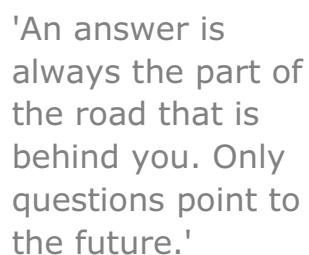
Over and above this immediate mandate to explore ways in which dialogue can be used to address social challenges in South Africa by the Foundation, we were hoping that this material would be useful to

anyone who shares our interest and our desire to improve the quality of human conversations.

The outcome was a report entitled *Mapping Dialogue. A Research project profiling dialogue tools and processes for social change*. We decided to make the report available to a wider audience on the Pioneers of Change website which proved to be an excellent idea. The report received significant attention, and we got positive and encouraging comments and feedback from all over the world. Many communities involved in social development recommended the study and added the link to their sites.

We have, however, always been conscious about the fact that the internet does not reach everywhere. Also, we knew that we might miss out on practitioners who simply enjoy taking a handbook along when going into the field. As a result, the idea for this book was born in a small café in Melville, Johannesburg in winter 2006.

The modern world loves answers. We like to solve problems quickly. We like to have a clear picture of the way ahead. We like to know what to do. We don't want to "reinvent the wheel" and "waste our time". And when we have the answers or a wheel



'An answer is always the part of the road that is behind you. Only questions point to the future.'

Jostein Gaarder

invented, we are keen on passing the information on to others: Through the media, through training programs where teachers pass on answers to students, or through conferences where experts speak on panels while hundreds listen (or pretend to listen) in the audience. This approach to human conversation may be useful for some situations, but for two reasons, it has become particularly problematic when working on the social challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Firstly*, we live in a world of increasing complexity and inter-relatedness, where answers have a short life-span. Not all problems are complex, but most if not all of the major social issues are. Poverty, HIV/AIDS and Crime are perfect examples.

*Secondly*, it seems that people have an inherent desire to solve their *own* problems. Human beings have a living, deep impetus for freedom and self-determination. We find that given the appropriate circumstances, people are usually more resourceful than expected in terms of finding their own solutions to the problem they face. When formulaic responses are imported or imposed from the outside, they meet resistance and often fail. This is partly because they are not exactly appropriate in the given context, but just as much because there is a lack of ownership from people who haven't participated or been consulted in the decision-making.

Even if only for these two reasons, as agents of change, we need to be adept at asking questions, and at talking and listening to each other. These are age-old competencies. For millennia, people in villages across the world have worked through collective challenges, creating solutions through conversation. But many of us seem to have forgotten how to engage in, and be present to, conversations. In these times of information overload, electronic communication, scientific rationality, and organizational complexity, it sometimes feels like we have forgotten how to talk to each other. The art of conversation appears to be on the decline.

The amount of time and resources globally invested in technological development over the past centuries is inconceivable. The results we observe today are equally incredible. Now, at the beginning of this century, we are able to take a look into the origins of the universe through space-based telescopes, discover what happens if the smallest of the smallest particles, protons, collide in particle physics laboratories and marvel at a myriad of other technological wonders created with tireless effort, over centuries and centuries. It seems ironic that, at the same time, we often still communicate and solve problems the same way we did hundreds of years ago. Or, as said above, worse. Looking at the world in 2008, it seems that the evolution of human conversation still has a long way to go.

## **Using this book**

In navigating the field of conversation and dialogue, it became apparent to us that the term is very broad. In one of the interviews on which this book is based, it was pointed out that dialogue includes dialogue with

oneself, dialogue with nature, dialogue with the past and future, and online dialogue. In order to keep the focus, we decided to narrow down to *dialogue methods applicable to face-to-face gatherings of groups of people meeting to address collective social challenges*.

The approaches (or tools) we selected within this focus are diverse in many ways. Some are designed for small groups of 20 people, while others can accommodate up to 1200 or even 5000 in dialogue at the same time. Some focus on exploring and resolving conflict and differences, while others emphasize looking first to what is working and agreed upon. Some are explicitly dialogues between groups while others require each participant to be there only as themselves, as individuals. However, looking across all of these dialogue methods, some clear, common patterns emerge.

All the tools focus on enabling open communication, honest speaking, and genuine listening. They allow people to take responsibility for their own learning and ideas. They create a safe space or “container” for people to surface their assumptions, to question their previous perceptions, judgments and worldviews, and to change the way they think. They generate new ideas or solutions that go beyond what anyone had thought of before. They create a different level of understanding of people and problems. They allow for more contextual and holistic ways of seeing.

The variety of dialogue methods available to us today have emerged in different situations but in response to quite similar needs and discoveries. They are part of a wider shift that is happening as complexity and diversity increase and people become more aware of their interdependence, and hence their need to hear each other, to understand, and to collaborate.

This collection profiles ten Dialogue methods in depth and a number of others more superficially. The book is organized in three parts:

- The first, *Foundations*, offers explanations on the generic foundations for a good dialogue process. These are aspects that are overarching; they represent the basis for the actual toolkit and should be read beforehand.
- The second part is the actual *Toolkit*. This is where you find the in-depth explanation of 10 methods as well as brief descrip-

tions of additional tools. Each of the 10 methods contains a method fingerprint displaying the specific characteristics of the tool, a review of applications, a case example, and our subjective commentary. The methods have simply been ordered alphabetically.

- Finally, our *Epilogue* honors the African tradition of conversation, going to the deep roots and heritage of many of these processes.

**Each of the profiled dialogue tools has a life story behind it. Many of these stories begin with someone posing a question.**

- Given that the coffee breaks seem to be the most useful part of the conference anyway, what if the whole conference was designed similar to a coffee break?
- What is being lost when we just take majority decisions and don't hear what the minority has to say?
- How do the questions we ask shape our reality?
- How do we create a networked conversation, modeled on how people naturally communicate?
- Why are we re-creating the same conference rituals when they are passifying us and limiting our creativity?
- Why are we not managing to bring in the collective intelligence of hundreds of people but rather choosing over and over to just listen to a few expert voices?