



SPECIAL REPORT

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ABOUT THE REPORT

With an eye to better understanding how and why dialogue programs can be effective, this report synthesizes the key findings and lessons from a commissioned meta-review of dialogue grants funded by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) since 1992. Nike Carstarphen and Ilana Shapiro of the Alliance for Conflict Transformation undertook the evaluation in collaboration with USIP. The report's target audience includes those funding dialogue projects as well as organizations designing and implementing projects that use dialogue as a strategy.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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What Works in Facilitated Dialogue Projects

Summary

- From reducing violent conflict to creating underlying conditions for peace, dialogue has long been used to achieve a broad array of peacebuilding goals.
- Dialogue is a facilitated, conflict-intervention process that brings stakeholders together in a conflict or around a problem or concern to transform drivers of conflict.
- Transfer approaches—the spread of dialogue effects to society—include a focus on the target of change and how change happens.
- An evaluation of grant-funded dialogue projects since 1992 was undertaken using a meta-review approach to better understand how dialogue can be effective in different settings.
- Approaches to dialogue projects have shifted considerably since the early 1990s, including the recent trend of projects focusing to a greater extent on spurring changes at the local level through bottom-up and middle-up approaches, rather than top down.
- A range of factors were associated with the success of dialogue projects. These are grouped around three key themes: who to engage, attributes, and management.
- Highly successful projects more often took an inclusive approach to selecting and convening participants for the dialogue.
- Projects that coupled capacity building with action or advocacy components tended to be more successful at transferring outcomes beyond the participants than those that focused solely on dialogue.
- Outbreaks of violence and unstable security situations were cited as leading reasons undermining project effectiveness.
- Organizations with credibility and strong connections in local communities were better able to reach stakeholders, attract the ideal participants, and secure buy-in from the authorities to hold dialogues.

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- During and after the review and evaluation, several questions emerged that would benefit from further exploration. These relate to public sentiment about dialogues, effective strategies to build organizational credibility, the nature of the conflict drivers, and the relationships between dialogues and outcomes, factors and results, and leader characteristics and the dialogue process.

Background

Over the past twenty-five years, facilitated dialogue has been a fixture in the toolkit of organizations seeking to build peace. From reducing violent conflict to creating underlying conditions necessary for peace, dialogue is used to achieve a broad array of peacebuilding goals. Dialogue is also used across conflict contexts and at multiple levels within conflicts, from between community members on a local level to between policy elites at a national level. It remains an important approach in USIP's work.

In June 2015, the Planning, Learning, and Evaluation team and Grants Strategy team at USIP collaborated on an evaluation effort to better understand how and why dialogue programs can be effective in different contexts. The goal was to enhance future programmatic and grant-making efforts, and to contribute to the evidence of effectiveness for dialogue work so that the broader peacebuilding community could benefit. Previous evaluations had focused narrowly on individual interventions in specific contexts.

The evaluators used a meta-review approach, comparing grant-funded dialogue programs since 1992. Specifically, the review examined what models were effective at transferring the changes among direct participants of a dialogue out to the broader communities or institutions in which those participants live and work. By categorizing and coding many projects across diverse contexts as opposed to a singular project-level evaluation, the meta-review approach provides more credible evidence about effectiveness of dialogue projects overall.

Seven evaluation questions guided the review:

- What are the most common program models articulated by dialogue practitioners regarding how transfer happens?
- Which of the program models are the most effective at creating transfer? Which are the least effective?
- When projects are implemented using these program models, what are the key factors that make the project more likely to succeed, or more likely to fail?
- What have been the most successful and least successful dialogue projects?
- What are the key factors that made these projects successful or less successful?
- Based on all the research conducted, what are the key lessons that should be used to guide the design of new dialogue projects?

To answer these questions, all grant-funded dialogue projects since 1992 were identified. In doing so, the team and evaluators recognized that, over time, many projects used the term *dialogue* broadly, sometimes describing projects that were beyond the intended focus of this review. An operational definition was agreed upon and criteria established for dialogue for the projects included in the dataset.

Dialogue—as defined for this report—is a facilitated, conflict-intervention process that brings together various stakeholders in a conflict or around a problem or concern, to express, listen to, explore, and better understand diverse views in order to transform individual, relational, or structural drivers of conflict.

To focus the study further, the concept of transfer was defined as “the spread of dialogue effects experienced by project participants to broader groups, practices, or policies in society.” Transfer approaches include a focus on who (or what) was the target of change, and how (through which processes) broader change happens. In this way, transfer can describe changes in individual attitudes and behaviors, relationships and networks, and institutions and policy.

The evaluators adopted a two-pronged approach for data collection. First was an in-depth desk review of all available documentation for the full project set, coding and categorizing projects across a broad range of descriptive characteristics. These characteristics included who was involved in the dialogue and transfer, the types of activities and how they were sequenced, why the dialogue was initiated and the problem it was intended to solve, the level of focus for the dialogue and about what issues, and the approach and methods of transfer. Based on this coding, a typology was established for program models and transfer methods; similarities and differences across other project attributes were also assessed. The second stage involved field research on twenty-three projects in Colombia, Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and Pakistan that included interviews and focus groups involving 129 grantee staff, dialogue participants, and local peacebuilding experts. These efforts focused on long-term project outcomes, the extent and nature of dialogue transfer, and contextual factors affecting projects (such as political climate or events).

To measure the success of projects, each project was rated from one (poor) to five (excellent) on each of these five evaluation criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, sustainability, and significance (impact). The significance criteria was defined as the extent of transfer. Each score was then made into a composite success score.¹

The evaluation effort faced a number of limitations. In particular, the heavy but necessary reliance on project documentation limited key areas of analysis. For instance, selection of which cases to include in the dataset was imperfect because of limited information in the project documentation. In addition, the information in the available documentation was self-reported. As a result, the quality and credibility of the information was mixed. Finally, reliance on project documentation meant that the analysis captured only a snapshot of outcomes at a particular moment for each project. This had the potential to skew results because the relational and institutional changes that dialogue seek to influence can take many years to manifest.

Two other methodological limitations are significant. First, as is often the case in measuring complex changes in complex environments, confidently assigning causality between the successes reported and the project itself was not always possible. Second, the scope of the evaluation did not capture elements outside the bounds of projects that may have influenced success, such as broader public sentiment about peace processes during project implementation. Interviews and focus groups conducted in the fieldwork indicated that broader sentiments about the direction and trajectory of peace and political processes may have had an impact on the perceived success of dialogue projects. For example, interviews in Colombia tended to be forward looking and hopeful about the prospects of dialogue, whereas those in Israel and the Palestinian Territories tended to be more negative with the stalling of peace talks. The evaluation was not able to capture and account for broader public sentiment and hopefulness in different contexts at different times.

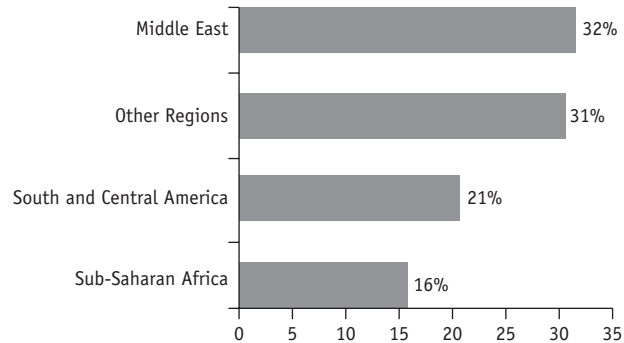
Trends

The set of projects was narrowed to focus on those that included dialogue processes as at least one component of the intervention strategy, those that were implemented during or

after 1990, those funded at more than \$35,000 or part of a larger dialogue effort supplemented by other funders, and those that had enough documentation to review. Many of the projects matching these criteria were not solely dialogue processes, but dialogue coupled with research, capacity building, advocacy, and other activities. Based on these criteria, 105 dialogue grants were ultimately included in the analysis. The evaluation found a number of interesting descriptive characteristics of the final dataset.

Most projects were in the Middle East (32 percent), followed by South and Central America (21 percent) and sub-Saharan Africa (16 percent). The remainder (31 percent) were implemented in other regions (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Projects by Region



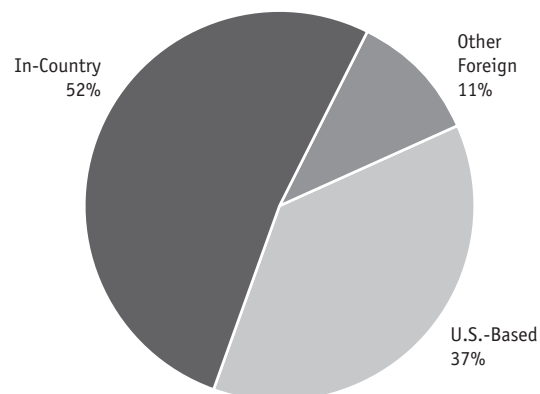
Another interesting point of reference was the level of funding. Of the 105 project grants, one-third were over \$100,000, the greatest share (37 percent) ranging between \$41,000 and \$90,000.

Within the dataset, more than half of grantees were based in the country of focus (see figure 2). Most projects (52 percent) were implemented by an organization based in the country of focus and where dialogues took place. The remainder were based in the United States (37 percent) and other countries (11 percent).

Across these attributes, four broad transfer models cover the types of participants involved in the dialogue and the direction of transfer to other groups or institutions. Not every project had transfer as a stated objective, however. Some focused solely on changes among and between the participants of dialogue sessions.

- Bottom up and out (forty-eight projects). Dialogue participants included grassroots leaders, civil society, and local officials. Project goals were to raise awareness, build

Figure 2. Location of Implementing Group



relationships, and undertake at least some joint action. Activities were typically dialogue and capacity building. The sequence of activities moved from capacity building to dialogue to community action or advocacy. The changes sought were individual and relational, leading to structural.

- Middle out and down (twenty-three projects). Mid-level community leaders, a mix of civil society and local officials, or civil society on its own participated in the dialogue. The goals were to raise awareness, build relationships between groups, work through conflict, and undertake joint action. The primary activities were dialogue and some capacity building. The sequence of activities moved from dialogue to capacity building to community action or advocacy. Again, the changes sought were individual and relational, leading to structural.
- Middle out and up (fourteen projects). Mid- to high-level leaders, a mix of civil society and government, participated. Goals included raising awareness, building intergroup relations, and working through conflict, but extended to making policy recommendations. Activities were primarily dialogue with some capacity building. The sequence of activities moved from research to dialogue to advocacy. The changes sought were relational, leading to structural.
- Top out and down (twenty projects). High-level leaders, both government and civil society, participated. Goals were to develop policy for institutional change. The primary activities were dialogue and policy recommendations. Changes sought were structural, leading to individual.

Approaches to dialogue projects have shifted considerably since the early 1990s. For example, before 2000, more projects sought broader changes at the international and national levels using top-down and middle-up models. Since then, projects have begun to focus more on relational changes at the local level through bottom-up and middle-out approaches. This shift likely reflects broader shifts in conflict dynamics across the globe, becoming increasingly intrastate.

Projects implemented in the last ten years were found to be more successful overall than earlier ones. Dialogue was more often the only activity in the earlier projects but was coupled with other activities and processes in more recent efforts. More recent projects were also more likely to use diverse and varied methods for transfer.

In addition, recent projects focused to a lesser extent on dialogues between high-level government officials. A greater share of projects instead emphasized working with a spectrum of participants and stakeholders common to bottom-up approaches. This shift may be a result of broader trends in the peacebuilding field to work on a grassroots level through local partners.

Findings

A range of factors—including practices, approaches, and relationships—of implementing organizations were associated with the success of dialogue projects. These are grouped around three key themes.

Who to Engage

Highly successful projects more often took an inclusive approach on selecting and convening participants for the dialogue. These projects engaged not only those directly affected by the conflict or those most willing to participate, but also other relevant and appropriate

This shift likely reflects broader shifts in conflict dynamics across the globe, becoming increasingly intrastate.

stakeholders from the start. When dialogues were perceived to represent only one party to the conflict, implementers had difficulty recruiting from other groups. Projects that took a more inclusive approach, on the other hand, were viewed as more legitimate and often saw higher levels of sustained participant engagement after the project ended.

Successful projects also selected their participants most often, at least in part, by assessing their credibility and influence in their communities. These individuals were better able to facilitate dialogue transfer, leveraging their networks. Interviews with project leaders also indicated that the credibility, professionalism, and legitimacy of their organization in the eyes of stakeholders was also vital to the success of dialogues. Project leads described how their organization's credibility and networks allowed them to continue or expand dialogue efforts despite unfavorable external conditions.

Projects that leveraged dialogue to improve institutions were most successful when they not only engaged midlevel actors in those institutions, but also had the support of key decision makers or leaders with the authority and ability to advance change within those institutions. Importantly, although support from these decision makers was critical to success, no relationship between project success and the direct participation of high-level leaders in the dialogues was evident.

For dialogue projects more generally, the relationship was strong between the least successful projects and those that at one point had explicit support from local authorities, but, at some point during implementation of the project, lost that support. These projects frequently faced implementation delays and subsequently had only limited impact. This finding, however, should not be construed as a blanket recommendation for coordinating with and gaining support from local authorities for dialogues. In other projects, the implementers sought support from authorities but were ultimately undermined when these authorities later interfered for political reasons. This tended to be the case in situations where political space was limited or closing. Thus, although the support of the authorities can pave the way for easier implementation, it has the potential to backfire and undermine the potential for dialogues and their effectiveness.

***The support of the authorities...
has the potential to backfire.***

Attributes of Success

The review highlighted key findings about the conditions and characteristics associated with successful dialogue projects and successful transfer.

One surprising finding was the lack of any significant statistical relationship between project success and the duration of the dialogue processes or of the overall project. One mitigating trend is that the share of sustained dialogue processes (more than one hundred hours or ten days) was greater in the group of high-success projects than that of low-success projects. The lack of a significant statistical relationship should not be interpreted to mean that quick-fix short-term dialogues are a solution, particularly in view of the trend toward sustained processes. Both the literature on dialogue and interviews during fieldwork underscored how important time is for participants to build trust and relationships that facilitate broader changes. Interviewees noted the importance of time needed for participants to build trust and relationships in order to effectively address substantive issues and make real change. The relationship between number and length of dialogues and project success is ripe for future research to better understand the conditions and characteristics that make for successful projects.

No statistically significant relationship could be found between how large a component dialogue activities were relative to other activities in the project and the success of the project.

Outcomes between parties to a dialogue do not de facto transfer to broader institutions or groups.

A relationship does exist, however, between success and the type and sequencing of activities within dialogue projects. Projects that coupled capacity building, such as developing leadership skills or training in conflict analysis, with action or advocacy components tended to be more successful at transferring outcomes beyond the participants than those that focused solely on dialogue. The former approach also tended to achieve greater sustainability than dialogue by itself. Taken together, this indicates that outcomes between parties to a dialogue do not de facto transfer to broader institutions or groups. Achieving transfer and ensuring sustainability may require more intentionality—including a planning for the means and mechanisms by which transfer will happen—and pairing dialogue with other tools.

Some dialogue projects sought to train participants to facilitate dialogue processes on their own. In these instances, projects that provided sustained support, coaching, and mentoring for the facilitators as they carried out their own dialogues achieved higher levels of transfer and sustainability. Such projects were more successful when the participant's training came under well-tested and rigorous training curricula.

Approximately 40 percent of the least successful projects described significant problems with violence and security concerns that affected project implementation. Only 12 percent of the most successful mentioned similar problems. Outbreaks of violence and unstable security situations were cited as leading reasons undermining project effectiveness.

Planning and Managing

A number of findings emerged that helped unpack the relationship between the success and sustainability of dialogue projects, and how implementers planned for and managed projects, and built partnerships to strengthen dialogue efforts.

Organizations that had credibility and strong connections in the communities and contexts where they worked were better able to reach a wide array of stakeholders, attract the ideal individuals to participate in dialogues, and secure buy-in from authorities to carry out projects when necessary. These groups were also better positioned to collaborate with local and international organizations, and create opportunities for partnership.

Relatedly, strategic partnerships between implementing groups correlated with highly successful projects. These include partnerships with international organizations or other local organizations that filled capacity gaps for the implementers, particularly in providing access to existing networks of local actors and parties to the conflict. Partnerships, when undertaken strategically, also minimized duplication of efforts through coordination while creating more opportunities for transfer.

Successful projects more often worked in a partnership model with dialogue participants, giving them leadership and decision-making roles in the project. By encouraging ownership and supporting participant ability to identify and respond to local needs, projects adopting this model were associated with higher levels of sustainability and improved chances of transfer.

Certain program management practices also influenced the success of projects. Implementers of successful projects often applied a flexible, adaptive approach to decision making that included regular reflection on the activities, successes, and challenges. By encouraging staff, and in some cases participants, to reflect on the dialogue sessions, projects could reshape their activities in response to relevant changes in context. By using adaptive management approaches, organizations were better able to respond effectively to unexpected security developments (such as shifting locations or activities) and drawing on organizational connections within the communities (such as tapping existing networks to find other participants or relocating dialogue sessions if a location became too dangerous).

A correlation was also evident between projects that did not adopt adaptive management practices and those that failed to contingency plan for risks, including transitions from relative stability to active violence within the implementation context. The projects managed by organizations unprepared for emerging security challenges were more acutely and negatively affected by these developments (such as canceled sessions or decreased participation), and were generally less effective. Contingency planning helped avoid and mitigate operational setbacks caused by escalating violence and security challenges by building a roadmap for implementers in the event of impediments.

Other aspects of project management also influenced project success and chances for transfer. The likelihood of transfer was diminished, for example, when participants had elevated expectations about the length and time commitment of the project that were not met. Participants were discouraged when they expected a dialogue project to be a long-term investment but the project did not continue beyond the initial funding period.

Implementing organizations that did not have standard processes to manage staff turnover were often unable to preserve relationships with participants. This in turn undermined participant trust in the organization and, by extension, the dialogue process. These two examples highlight the importance of clear communication and maintaining trusting relationships between implementers and participants. Such relationships are key in successfully transferring outcomes to broader groups.

Finally, sustainability and transfer are linked: higher sustainability scores were significantly correlated with higher levels of transfer beyond the immediate dialogue participants. Implementers improved sustainability in one of two primary ways: first, through seeking additional funds to expand the scope of the project or continue the existing activities; second, by planning activities and working through existing local mechanisms and structures. For example, one project in Israel and the Palestinian Territories that initially ran discrete youth peace camps improved the sustainability and transfer of the project through regularly engaging alumni in follow-on activities.

Recommendations

The evaluation offers the following recommendations for practitioners and funders.

For Practitioners

Implementers should have ample access to and credibility with parties to a conflict. This is important not only for the dialogue process itself to be successful, but also to ensure that dialogue activities are even viable during the project design stage. If gaps exist in either the access to or credibility with conflict parties, implementers should engage in strategic partnerships to address these needs.

For dialogue projects seeking institutional change, garnering support and participation from decision makers in those institutions before project implementation is critical. Projects should have a clear strategy for how they engage these decision makers from the start.

Dialogues should not limit participation to those directly affected by the conflict, but instead also find strategic ways to engage a broad array of stakeholders, for example, hardliners in addition to just moderates, either before or during the dialogue. This does not mean that armed actors should be included in dialogues; they have, after all, the potential to play a spoiler role. The point is simply that projects should not limit dialogue participation to those most willing to participate or to moderates.

Regularly monitor the context in which the dialogue is occurring and be prepared to strategically adapt when there are changes relevant to the project, particularly in a worsen-

ing security environment. Operationalizing feedback loops and contingency planning can help mitigate some of the negative impacts when latent conflict becomes active conflict.

Rather than an implementer-beneficiary model, consider a participant-as-partner approach, in which participants to dialogue and follow-on activities are provided an opportunity to shape and make decisions about the project and activities. This approach improves chances for sustainability and transfer.

In projects that train others to facilitate dialogues, participants should have sustained support and mentoring as they begin to convene their own dialogue work. Discrete trainings alone are not enough to fully prepare individuals to conduct facilitated dialogue projects.

Linking dialogue with capacity-building components as well as advocacy or joint action increases the chances of transferring outcomes beyond dialogue participants.

A plan for transfer should be built into the design of dialogue projects, one that includes several approaches and ways of transferring the outcomes of the dialogues to others. Doing so will improve the chances that transfer will happen and improve the chances of sustainability of dialogue outcomes.

Time and space should be budgeted for reflection throughout the project's implementation, allowing the project to adapt to the changes in the context and conflict.

For Funders

Before funding dialogue projects, donors should assess whether implementers have the necessary access to and credibility with parties to the conflict and to other organizations operating within the conflict context. Donors may consider playing the role of convener to connect grantees with other organizations that share approaches and goals. These connections can help improve knowledge sharing, foster strategic collaboration, and reduce duplication of efforts.

Donors should ensure that implementers have considered the ripeness of the context for dialogue activities, including a careful analysis of the specific conflict dynamics and actors involved, the presence of existing dialogue processes and mechanisms, and the broader political environment.

Consider funding dialogue projects that complement or work within existing conflict-resolution mechanisms or those that coordinate with other programming working toward similar ends to address existing gaps. This will improve chances for sustainability, as will facilitating opportunities for grantees to secure follow-on funding.

Donors should leverage their position and networks to help implementers secure buy-in, funding, and build support as needed among key actors and decision makers where the project is implemented.

Donors should build contingency planning and risk analysis into proposals and program design. Ensuring implementers have adequate plans in the event of a transition to active conflict can buffer against some of the damaging effects a descent into active conflict can have on the ability of dialogues to be successful.

Donors should encourage adaptive management and reflective practices by building in tools, resources, and space for implementers to adjust strategically to risks, opportunities, and challenges that present themselves during the project.

Donors should work with implementers to develop sound and shared theories of change for dialogue projects and transfer, which can be revisited and adapted during implementation. In addition, donors should support implementers developing and carrying out monitoring and evaluation plans that monitor the context, outcomes of the project itself, and the

degree of transfer. This will guarantee a shared vision for the project and lay the foundation for more robust learning during and after implementation.

Looking Forward

During and after the research, several questions emerged that would benefit from further exploration.

- Is there a relationship between the number or duration of dialogues and the outcomes of the dialogue and broader transfer? If so, what is it?
- How can broader public sentiment about high-level peace and political processes influence the success or failure of dialogues?
- Do factors that influence the success or failure of transfer, generally, have differential results depending on the specific type of transfer?
- What specific knowledge, skills, and traits of individuals associate with leading more effective and successful dialogue processes?
- What strategies are effective for organizations to build the necessary credibility and networks within a particular place that increase the likelihood of leading effective dialogue projects?
- Do the factors for success or failure of dialogue processes and transfer change depend on the nature and kind of conflict driver the dialogue is seeking to address?

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Note

1. These criteria were developed using OECD-DAC's Evaluation Criteria. The *significance* criteria was adapted from *impact* to refer specifically to the concept of transfer. The collected data were triangulated, analyzed by multiple researchers, and interpreted using qualitative and quantitative software. Triangulation of data sources, collection methods, and both qualitative and quantitative analyses improved the validity and reliability.

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Of Related Interest

- *Atrocity Prevention through Dialogue: Challenges in Dealing with Violent Extremist Organizations* by Sofia Sebastian and Jonas Claes (Special Report, August 2016)
- *National Dialogues: A Tool for Conflict Transformation?* by Susan Stigant and Elizabeth Murray (Peace Brief, October 2015)
- *Reconciliation in Practice* by Kelly McKone (Peaceworks, August 2015)
- *Local Peace Processes in Sudan and South Sudan* by Jacqueline H. Wilson (Peaceworks, May 2014)
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