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The Mandela Dialogues: Dialoguing Memory Work

A co-operation between GIZ Global Leadership Academy, commissioned by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), and the Nelson Mandela Foundation (NMF)

REPORT ON THE DIALOGUE IN SOUTH AFRICA, 6-10 NOVEMBER 2013

The dialogue: an overview

Between 6 and 10 November 2013 the Nelson Mandela Foundation and GIZ Global Leadership Academy brought together 26 participants from ten countries¹ to engage in the first of a three-part dialogue series on memory work. The second dialogue will take place in Cambodia 5 -8 March 2014; with the final meeting in Berlin in July 2014.

The dialogue process provides an international forum to discuss the complex personal, collective and professional challenges facing those engaged in reckoning with the past. Through different layers and modes of engagement the process aims to reinvigorate debates about memory work and how we do it; and offer new approaches, new questions and challenges to existing paradigms. The participants' inquiry takes them into the nexus between memory work, dialogue facilitation and leadership development as transformative practices. In this nexus they grapple with personal and collective experiences and engage with the life and legacy of Nelson Mandela.

The participants are activists, analysts and functionaries, with many straddling (over time or at the moment) these somewhat artificial categories. Despite their different national contexts, experiences and professions, the participants shared with the two convening organisations a sense of having reached an impasse in their personal and professional capacities – with there being more questions than answers about memory work. They shared a common desire to grapple with the difficult questions they face in their daily practice and to learn from each other.

While the lines of inquiry that emerged from the dialogue, as detailed below, emphasise the strains and tensions in memory work, what is equally evident is a powerful shared vision – namely, that memory work should be geared to preventing a recurrence of past conflict, injustice or oppression; and to making a future that the next generation will regard as worth the labours that will have gone into its creation.

In locating the dialogues in three countries with very different pasts and very different approaches to dealing with the past, the convening organisations seek to offer participants an opportunity to immerse themselves in each country and engage with a diversity of experience. Through immersion the participants are offered a chance to reflect both on the similarities and differences between these contexts and their own regional, national and local experiences. In doing so, it is expected that the difficult, perhaps as yet even unidentified, global questions about memory work emerge.

¹ The participants came from Argentina, Bosnia, Cambodia, Canada, Croatia, Germany, Kenya, Serbia, South Africa and Uruguay.

The process

Sello Hatang, CEO of the Nelson Mandela Foundation, introduced the South African engagement by noting that despite having had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), numerous informal truth processes, and massive memorialisation, South Africans today find that much of the difficult work of reckoning with the past, and creating a liberatory future, has not yet been done. While much has been achieved to overcome the institutionalised prejudice and injustice of the past, the challenges remain daunting. For instance, the TRC archives and the apartheid archives have been closed rather than unlocked; the education system disempowers more than it empowers; the state seeks to close down access to information; and poverty and inequality are increasing rather than decreasing. In this context, the central question needing an answer is: what kind of society do we wish to live in, and how do we contribute to realising it through memory work?

Over the five days participants were offered an immersion in South Africa and the way the country has attempted to reckon with its past. They engaged with South Africans, saw and visited a range of spaces, landscapes and memory sites: the Nelson Mandela Foundation's Centre of Memory in Houghton, Johannesburg; Nelson Mandela's Alexandra and Johannesburg homes; Alexandra township (Johannesburg); the Cradle of Humankind; the Sterkfontein caves; the Voortrekker Monument (Pretoria); and Freedom Park (Pretoria).

This immersion was intended to surface the tensions and questions about how South Africa has chosen to represent 'the past' for present and future generations, and to offer participants an opportunity to reflect on the similarities and differences between the country of immersion and their own contexts. The intention with this complex and challenging process is to encourage and enable new insights, new ways of seeing and doing.

Throughout the dialogue participants worked with the questions that trouble them about the work they do, and the way they do it. After two days of intensive collective work the following shared lines of inquiry emerged:

- how and why do the victims of past violations/conflict often become the perpetrators of the future, and how might this be prevented?
- what must I do now to make sure that history does not repeat itself?
- how do you bring women into peace processes?
- how do you bring marginal voices into the centre?
- has sustainable reconciliation been achieved anywhere, and if so, what does it look like?

These lines of inquiry were pursued individually and collectively through peer group discussion and individual reflection. Using personal biographical work, participants began to link their own narratives to those of their countries and those of others. Intense engagement between participants in small peer groups resulted in new questions, and a close examination of the collective and individual lines of inquiry.

These lines of inquiry are likely to shift in emphasis, and even change through the dialogue series as participants find answers that work for them, identify new questions and ways of seeing and understanding the work they do, and clarify their motivations for doing it.

The dialogue concluded at the NMF's Centre of Memory with an interaction between participants and a group of South Africans who reflect a broad range of perspectives. The latter comprised:

- Dorothy Khosa (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation)
- Elinor Sisulu (author and activist)
- Fana Jiyane (Freedom Park)

- Frank Meintjies (author and activist)
- Kindiza Ngubeni (Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation)
- Leon Wessels (former government minister and post-apartheid human rights commissioner)
- Lisa Vetten (gender activist)
- Nomancotsho Pakade (Gay and Lesbian Memory in Action)
- Ramarwaneng Bodibe (former member of the TRC)
- Sibongiseni Mkhize (Robben Island Museum)
- Sonja Lombard (Voortrekker Monument)
- Yasmin Sooka (former Truth Commissioner)
- Vonani Bila (poet)

These South Africans were asked by the participants to respond to one overarching question, namely, “when South Africa marks twenty years of democracy in 2014, what will you be celebrating and what will you be mourning?” Four subsidiary questions, that emerged from a collective process of intense reflection by the participants, defined the terrain of the dialogue more precisely:

- Visiting the two memorials, Voortrekker Monument and Freedom Park, we were struck by the exclusivity of the national narratives represented in both places. The two monuments stand in opposition to one another, staring each other down, without any apparent effort to reflect each other’s voices, or other marginal voices and experiences. How did South Africa arrive so quickly at this point where one dominant narrative was replaced by another? What would it take to change that?
- Many countries look at the South African TRC as a model, or for inspiration. It is hailed as a success. What was achieved through the TRC? In what ways did it fail and why? And what has been left undone?
- Why is it that the current post-apartheid government has held so tightly to the secrets of the apartheid government? Is it important to force these open? Why, and who could do that?
- What cannot be said, and by whom, in South Africa now?

Through this interaction participants were able to assess their own experiences of, and responses to, the way in which South Africa has engaged with its past, against the views of a broad range of South Africans.

Key questions, propositions, and lines of enquiry

Areas of tension, of disagreement and of consensus emerged during the first dialogue’s many sessions. Key questions, propositions and lines of enquiry are grouped thematically below. These, and other questions yet to emerge, will become the basis for further exploration at the second dialogue in Cambodia.

Healing and preventing a repetition of history

- How can memory work deal with and resist righteous self-victimisation – the assumption of identity as victim that sows the seeds of a repetition of violations? How do we resist the temptation of falling for collective righteous self-victimisation?
- What is regarded as important to remember, and what is not, is shaped by today’s interests and powerful groups within societies. How do we determine what we need to remember in order to heal? And what should be forgotten?

- Is there a healthy forgetting; equally, is there an unhealthy remembering?
- How are the often conflicting imperatives for collective and individual healing reconciled?
- Is it possible to realise sustainable development without exorcising the demons of the past? Is it prudent to move on? Can peace exist without justice?
- Dealing with the past is regarded as essential to building a sustainable peace, yet how can we be certain we do no harm by pursuing and advocating for our work?
- What is the role of memory work in ending a culture of impunity and building democracy?

Inclusivity and exclusivity

- Every society emerging from oppressive rule or conflict to a stable democracy is faced with the difficult task of fulfilling the needs of justice and healing. We also face the task of recording and representing the past in ways that fulfil the need for social justice. Yet, very often how the past is represented and dealt with is influenced, if not controlled by those holding political power, and/or past elites. We are troubled by the fear that the way in which we do memory work makes us complicit in the creation and reinforcement of a master narrative.
- If there is to be no punishment for perpetrators, then impunity is a great danger. But how do we manage the risk of punishment undermining reconciliation? And if there is to be punishment, does it become a questions of numbers and categories? How many, and who, should be punished?
- How do you use representations of the past to create inclusive futures?
- Is it possible, or even desirable, to tell the stories of those responsible for or complicit in acts of violation?
- How do we use evidence that exposes the culpability of oppressors without legitimising new forms of oppression?
- Any public process also produces new silences and exclusions. Cross-societal dialogue is often missing, and archives can be slow to link to civil society memory work. How do you diversify the voices represented and draw attention to marginal voices?
- Remembering the past is not simply healing and restorative but also painful and divisive. Does memory work need to be subversive to master narratives in order to promote and achieve social justice?
- Being conscious of the way in which memory work is gendered is essential to overcoming marginalisation and exclusion.

Timing and the need for trans-generational work

- Is there a 'right' time to deal with the past?
- What are the costs and benefits of rushing or proceeding too slowly?
- How is memory work enabled outside of formal transitional justice interventions, both before and after such interventions?

- How do you sustain the interest of young people who do not feel that the period of violations/violence/conflict /injustice is their past?
- How can representations of the past avoid taking a pedagogical approach, but instead reflect the interests and needs of the generations that come after a period of conflict, oppression and injustice?
- How do we balance the need to find local solutions with the value of international discourses, structures and expertise?

Archives

- Ensuring access to archival information is essential to resisting the institutionalisation of memory.
- When archives are destroyed after a period of injustice/oppression/conflict and only some remain in personal collections can you have a plural interpretation of history?
- Can memories replace archive?
- Is there an ethical conflict if the documents collected for purposes of archive are used in legal processes?
- How do official archives relate to new forms of collective online recording of narratives?
- How do we ensure that transitions are documented in ways which will enable future generations to interrogate processes which will have shaped them profoundly?

Two cross-cutting areas for reflection

Two cross-cutting areas for reflection emerged in the course of the first dialogue. They can be imagined as part of a 'canvas of practice' onto which the above questions about memory work are scripted. The questions sketch the quest that this group of leaders is engaged in. Reflecting on the nature of this quest led the group to contemplate the implications for self and for those being asked to remember:

1) Sustaining the Passion – Caring for Self

This work cannot happen without practitioners engaging intensively and in the long-term. Often memory work is experienced as a life-long 'calling', both professional and personal. Attending to past harm means longitudinal exposure to the shadow side of the human condition – atrocity, violations, wounds of war - and the consequences of trauma, social fragmentation, loss of livelihoods and of life itself. While this work is most often experienced as deeply meaningful, it also comes at a cost. Practitioners were asking themselves:

- How do I maintain a balance while engaged with generations of painful grief?
- How do we get away from the exhausting feeling of not doing enough?
- How do we work towards change in our societies, especially with a responsibility towards the future, while taking care of those we work with and for, and also of ourselves?

2) Grappling with the Ethics of Memory Work

While many practitioners feel called to this work, they were also aware of their own limitations and power in many situations. Who gives the right or licence to represent the past in a particular way? Remembering certain stories and bringing them into the public sphere inevitably leaves other stories untold, creates silences and exclusions, despite the best efforts at including marginal voices. Awareness existed also of the painful nature of memory recall that was already so evident in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. Remembering the details of past harm comes at a price for those asked to remember, may mean re-living through narration some of the horrors experienced and being left to deal with the emotional consequences of such processes. Questions that stood out for participants in this regard were:

- How do we work with victims in ways that are ethically responsible?
- How do we make sure we are not doing further damage with memory work?

What do we mean by – ‘ethical memory work’? How do we improve the ethics of memory work?