

SUSTAINED DIALOGUE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES: AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

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1. Black And White Living Together In Peace

Source: Private collection of the author



2. Introduction and Problem Formulation

South Africa has a very turbulent history related to the interaction between the different groups that live in its territory. Even before the European colonization different

indigenous peoples already occupied South Africa¹ and its relationship was not always peaceful. However, it was the colonization of its territory by European settlers that made this interaction catastrophic.

Dutch settlers first colonized South Africa, and lately it became a British colony. In the nineteenth century the indigenous peoples lost their autonomy to the European settlers and “faced escalating oppression by both British and Afrikaner² populations.”³ And in the twentieth century this oppression became a legalized system of discrimination based on ‘racial’ ideas, the apartheid system. This system was extremely cruel and repressive, and it lasted for over four decades.

In 1994, the apartheid system collapsed and for the first time free and universal elections were held in South Africa. It was the basis of “a peaceful transition of power from a white minority regime to a democratic, popularly elected black majority government”⁴ and the beginning of a new era; an era for public participation in the transformation of the country and its development.

Since the end of the apartheid system the South African government adopted a plan to promote national reconciliation. Firstly, the national reconciliation process was a responsibility of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, however this commission was ceased and the government required the civil society to continue this process.

In order to promote national reconciliation in South Africa it is necessary the engagement of the civil society, but the South African civil society is unique and very complex. It is a delicate combination of the descendants of the indigenous peoples and Europeans settlers, and recent immigrants;⁵ and it still deals with the painful consequences of the apartheid system. The relationship between these different groups can be very intense and conflictual, and it demands measures to promote peace, understanding and development for the entire society.

¹ The main groups of indigenous peoples in South Africa are: Khoikhoi, Ndebele, San, Sotho, Swazi, Tsonga, Tswana, Venda, Xhosa, and Zulu.

² The term is used to refer to the Afrikaans-speaking descendants of Dutch, French and German settlers.

³ Bauer G. & Taylor S. D. (2005) P242.

⁴ Bauer G. & Taylor S. D. (2005) P237.

⁵ These immigrants were mostly from India.

A process that can enable the different groups of the South African civil society to interact peacefully with each other and to engage in public matters, and consequently to promote development in the political and socio-economic spheres is the sustained dialogue process. The sustained dialogue is a process to change conflictual relationships, it is “the instrument that citizens outside government use for addressing the human dimension of conflict to change their relationships.”⁶

To conclude, the history of South Africa is full of clashes between its different groups, which has tragic consequences and results in a very fragile civil society. It is also important to consider that since the end of the apartheid system the South African government adopted the national reconciliation as a process to overcome these tragic consequences and to promote development in the country; however the South African government requested this fragile civil society to assume the responsibility of the process of national reconciliation.

At this point it should be noted that the South African civil society cannot be responsible for the national reconciliation process. Firstly, it is necessary for this civil society to strengthen itself, how is it possible? How does it affect the social fabric? And what are the consequences for the political and socio-economic development in South Africa?

3. Methodological Considerations

The project ‘Sustained Dialogue and its Consequences: An Introduction to the South African Experience’ is a study case, because it combines empirical data and theories to show and to analyze sustained dialogue and consequently its results, such as: revitalization of the social fabric, civic engagement and economic development, focusing on the case of South Africa.

It is important to consider that in order to study more about sustained dialogue the specific case of South Africa will be investigated. This study case was chosen because during my internship at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), from

⁶ Saunders H. H. (1999) Pxxii – xxiii.

August 2005 until November 2005, I became familiar with the concept of sustained dialogue, I had the chance to learn more about it and to conduct interviews with members of IDASA that work daily with sustained dialogue.

For this project first hand data was collected during a series of interviews conducted from September 23rd, 2005 until October 12th, 2005 with members from the Citizen Leadership Programme of IDASA. The objective of the interviews was to learn more about what they have experienced while working with communities in South Africa. However, the main source of information is second hand data, such as: books, specialized magazines, reputable websites etc.

4. Flag of South Africa

Source: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/flags/sf-flag.html>



5. Political Map of South Africa

Source: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sf.html>



6. Overview of South Africa

South Africa is in the Southern part of Africa and it has borders with the countries of: Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, Swaziland and Zimbabwe; and it is strategically located between two oceans: the Atlantic and the Indian, which gives advantages in communication, transport and commerce for the country.

According to the 2001 Statistics South Africa Census the population of South Africa is estimated in 44.8 million people. It should be considered that this population is not homogenous; it is composed by different groups with diverse background, language, culture, religion etc. As a cruel legacy of the Apartheid system the population of South Africa is commonly divided in the following groups: black; white; coloured; and Indian/Asian.

For the study of South Africa the analysis of its demographics is crucial, because the population in South Africa is heterogeneous and deeply segregated; the South African population still suffers the consequences of the division imposed by the apartheid system, and this segregation has tragic consequences.

One of the cruelest systems of discrimination was imposed in South Africa by the Afrikaner-led government; this system is known as the apartheid system. It imposed the segregation of the South African society according to 'racial' groups, and this segregation affected (and still affects) South Africa deeply. And as a consequence of the apartheid system different groups emerged to resist, this resistance combined with different factors (such as: the high cost for the state repression, the economic crisis, international sanctions etc.) led to the collapse of this system.

The transition from the apartheid system to a democratic system was negotiated, in 1994 were held universal elections and the ANC came into power democratically. However after over a decade in power the ANC failed to fulfill the needs of the South African society and it is undermining the democratic system by its long stay in power. Since the needs of the South African population are not being fulfilled by the ANC-led government it is necessary that the population articulates itself once more and engage in public matters. Therefore, there is an arising urge for civil engagement in South Africa.

7. Sustained Dialogue

Sustained dialogue is a process that depends on the interaction of its participants, and it aims to eventually modify conflictual relationships in order to achieve transformation in the political and the socio-economic spheres. It should be noted that this process differs from negotiation and mediation, because it focuses not only on the problems but also on the dynamics of the relationships following the problems and how to change those relationships. The process of sustained dialogue should be considered for organizations, groups or communities that have inherent conflicts or tensions based on different causes, such as: personal, religious, historic, ethnic etc.

Saunders summarizes sustained dialogue as "...a systematic process for political, social, and economic change. Its distinguishing characteristic is that it focuses on transforming the relationships that block collaboration. Sustained dialogue is best suited to those situations not ready for formal mediation and negotiation; it is so, because it addresses the strained relationships that prevent people from talking in the reasoned ways

mediation and negotiation require.”⁷

The sustained dialogue has a comprehensible purpose, which is to modify conflictual relationships in the dialogue group and to establish a plan to spread this modification in a larger scope. Saunders states that the purpose of sustained dialogue “...is to provide an experience in changing relationships within the dialogue group.”⁸ And Saunders continues stating that this experience should provide “...a plan for changing relationships in the larger community. It can produce a shared sense of what kind of community or country current antagonists would like to build together to serve the interests of each.”⁹

7.1. Sustained Dialogue as a Political and a Psychological Process

The process of dialogue must be sustained over time in order to modify problematic relationships; it is only through repetitive interaction of the participants that confidence flourishes and “...people come to feel safe enough to open themselves to a degree that may be painful or respectful enough to give an opposing view a careful hearing.”¹⁰

Once this confidence is established, it is possible for the participants to deliberate together which actions are necessary to modify their conflictual relationship and to extend it into the political sphere. According to Saunders “sustained dialogue is a political and psychological process, first, for changing relationships within a group that is a microcosm of conflictual relationships in the larger body politic and then for designing a political process to change those relationships in that larger community. Sustained dialogue can create power.”¹¹

At this point it should be considered that the process of sustained dialogue is composed by five-stages and it can last weeks, months or years. In brief, the stages are: stage one, deciding to engage; stage two, mapping and naming problems and relationships; stage three, probing problems and relationships to choose a direction; stage four, scenario

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Saunders H. H. (1999) P81.

⁹ Saunders H. H. (1999) P81.

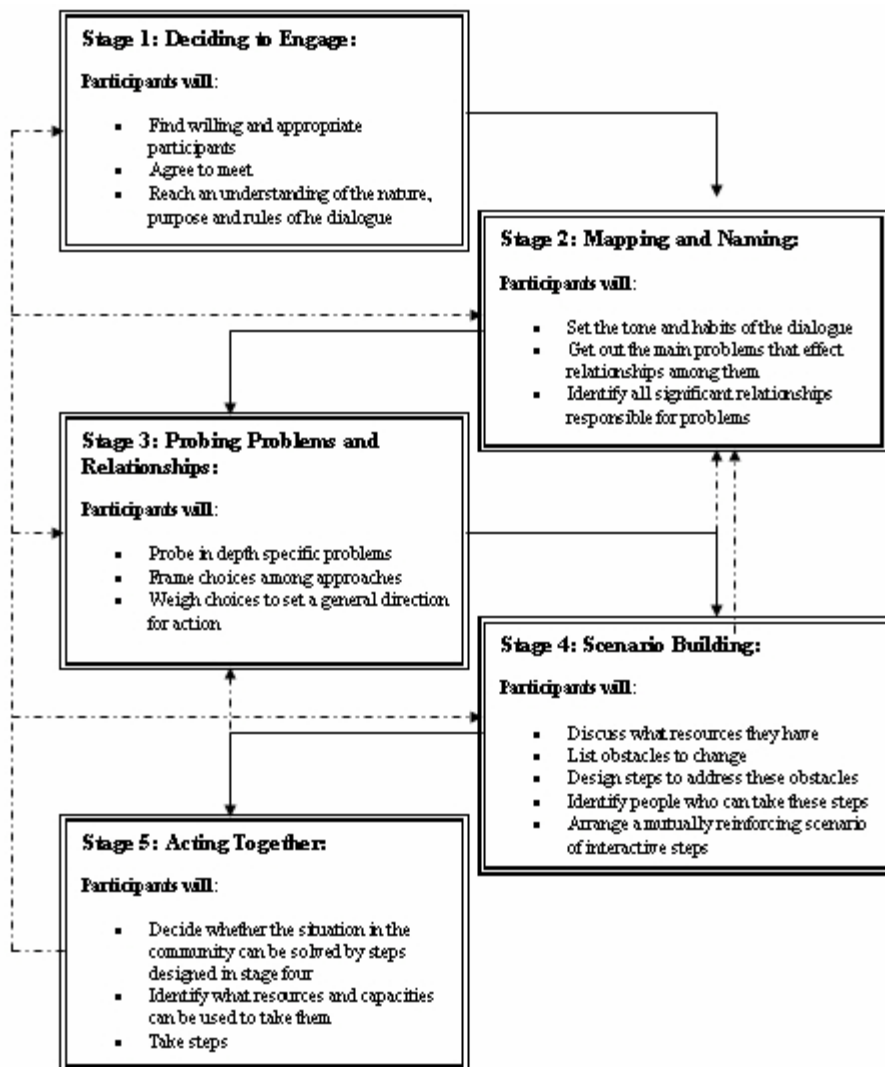
¹⁰ Ibid. (1999) P87.

¹¹ Ibid. P89.

building – experiencing a new relationship; stage five, acting together to make change happen. It should be considered that these five stages are simply a conceptual framework for the sustained dialogue process, which is not a rigid unidirectional model.

7.1.1. Sustained Dialogue as a Five-Stages Process

Source: http://www.sustaineddialogue.org/learn_about_sd.htm



7.2. Sustained Dialogue in South Africa

In 2004, the process of sustained dialogue was first implemented in South Africa in order to overcome the negative consequences of the Apartheid system, such as: the segregation of the South African society into different groups and the resentment

between these groups, and to include the civil society into the process of national reconciliation organized by the ANC-led government.

In 1995, the ANC-led government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act; however this commission was ceased, and the ANC-led government requested the South African Churches to continue the process of national reconciliation. And in 2004, the Gauteng Council of Churches (GCC) and IDASA partnered, and accepted the challenge of continuing the national reconciliation process.

The concept of national reconciliation aims to development a sense of common history and nation to construct a future together; it could be understood that its objective is to bring into life the idea of the ‘rainbow nation,’ which has different ‘colours’ that together form a nation. Regarding to this concept Nemeroff and White states that “(it) is the creation of an ethical memory and common story which in turn allows for a common and desired future: a future where we move beyond living past each other in tolerance to living with each other in appreciation and dare we even propose love.”¹²

And in order to promote the national reconciliation process the GCC and IDASA developed a project based on a series of local sustained dialogues, according to Nemeroff and White “ordinary church members will come together to explore the notion of reconciliation and in doing so begin to chart a way forward for their communities. This seemingly simple approach to the challenge of reconciliation is rooted in the belief that by encountering ‘the other’ in intimate and regular spaces, the transformation of individuals, and therefore communities, is possible.”¹³

In May 2004, this project was initiated with the Reconciliation Initiative Convocation, which was organized by the GCC and IDASA. During this convocation “church leaders and laity from throughout the province came together to deliberate, ponder and plan a coordinated effort to bring the project of reconciliation to the communities of Gauteng.”¹⁴ And the project of reconciliation was developed in order to include

¹² Ibid P20.

¹³ Ibid P19-20.

¹⁴ Moerane, Gift & White, Anastacia: ‘Reconciliation Initiative in Gauteng, 2004’. P05.

ordinary South Africans from different groups¹⁵ through the process of sustained dialogue. For the implementation of this project a Working Group was structured “to assist the GCC and IDASA in launching a series of local dialogues where communities themselves could decide who should participate, choose a dialogue topic, and decide on what actions to take.”¹⁶

7.2.1. Public Dialogue as a South African Tradition

According to Moerane and White “...dialogue is not anything new. Indeed, South Africa has a deep history in it. Whiting this context... IDASA is working with the GCC to help dialogue happen, not to teach church leaders something they did not know of before.”¹⁷ Consequently, dialogue is not a new element that was implemented in South Africa through the sustained dialogue process.

It is even possible to identify the process of public dialogue as part of the South African tradition; because the South African society is used to engage in the public sphere to deliberate about their problems. According to Putu, “people in villages/communities socialize daily and they talk about the issues that affects them and it creates a common understand around the issue... they identify the issues (by talking) and act together to find a solution; they have a more open channel of communication.”¹⁸

And it is important to stress that the tradition of public dialogue is reinforced by the process of sustained dialogue, because this process establishes a strategy to promote dialogue and to include the South African society in the process of national reconciliation. It should be noted that the five stages of the sustained dialogue process establish guidelines to systematize the public dialogue; this process organize the participants, it creates adequate physical spaces in order to promote dialogue in the public sphere and it is sustained over time.

¹⁵ Such as: race, social class, gender and age.

¹⁶ Nemeroff, Teddy & White, Anastacia: ‘Constructing Ourselves, Constructing the Others: The Challenge of Reconciliation in South Africa’ in *AI Practitioner*, August 2005. P22.

¹⁷ Moerane, Gift & White, Anastacia: ‘Reconciliation Initiative in Gauteng, 2004’. P15.

¹⁸ Interview with Mpho Putu, under question 4 [September 26th 2005]

7.3. The Consequences of Sustained Dialogue for South Africa

The transition from the Apartheid system caused dramatic changes in South Africa and the South African society is still adjusting itself as an active element in the democratic state. However, since the implementation of the process of sustained dialogue in South Africa, this process is being practiced and it has direct results on the improvement of the social fabric.

About sustained dialogue in South Africa Nemeroff and White state that, "...our deepest yearning for this project is that it may contribute to reconstructing the web of relationships and the social fabric of society. Within this lie the often-competing claims between justice and forgiveness, a willingness to live together and the need for recognition of past wrongs. What we require is a theology of dialogue that opens up the past and the future in a way that we can construct ourselves while constructing the other."¹⁹ In accordance with this statement it is possible to stress the relevance of the process of sustained dialogue to reconstruct the relationships within the South African society and to revitalize its social fabric.

Consequently, once the social fabric is revitalized, it is possible for the South African society to engage itself in public matters, which can be understood as civic engagement, and to promote political and socio-economic development. According to Moerane and White, "what the sustained dialogue process attempts to do is to first teach practioners how to create the space, then guide peace builders to work with people in the space to change them, and finally assist dialogue participants to go back and change their communities."²⁰

7.3.1. Sustained Dialogue promoting Civic Engagement

The tradition of public dialogue was affected by the recent changes in South Africa, however it should be noted that it was reinforced by the process of sustained dialogue, and this process improves the social fabric, what promotes civic engagement. Regarding

¹⁹ Nemeroff, Teddy & White, Anastacia: 'Constructing Ourselves, Constructing the Others: The Challenge of Reconciliation in South Africa' in AI Practitioner, August 2005. P23.

²⁰ Moerane, Gift & White, Anastacia: 'Reconciliation Initiative in Gauteng, 2004'. P16.

to civic engagement in South Africa Putu states that “people want to be part of the solution in every problem they have, it does not mean only consultation from the government, but also allowing people to participate and to have a say.”²¹ This statement can be understood that the willingness of the people to participate in the solution of their own problems results in the action of the people to improve their lives, which is civic engagement.

Consequently, it is possible to state that the South African tradition of public dialogue is being reinforced by the process of sustained dialogue, which allows the civil society to organize and articulate itself to find solutions for its problem, such as: the consequences of the Apartheid system and reproduction of the background problems.²² The result of this organization and articulation is the improvement of the conditions of life of the South African population, in other words it is development in the political and socio-economic spheres.

7.3.2. Civic Engagement as a Development Instrument

If civic engagement is understood as the citizens participating actively in the solution for their problems, then the civil society is able to promote development in the political and socio-economic spheres. And consequently, it is possible to understand civic engagement as a development instrument.

7.3.2.1. Development in the Political Sphere

At this point, it is relevant to note that the democratic system, which compared to the apartheid system, is more complex. The democratic system requires more engagement from its citizens and the transition to this system is recent in South Africa, what means that the country is still adjusting itself, the people is not totally aware of its role as citizens and that citizenship is an active participation in the democratic system.

And regarding to public participation in the political sphere during the apartheid system

²¹ Interview with Mpho Putu, under question 3 [September 26th 2005].

²² These problems should be understood as: the lack of adequate services delivery - health care system and education system – illiteracy, unemployment and poverty.

Nel states that, “prior to 1994, people who were not white were effectively denied democratic representation and any legitimate means of participating in development activities. In addition, the approach to local government administration and development during the apartheid era provides a sharp contrast to that in the contemporary period...”²³ Therefore, as a result of this denial the majority of the South African population was excluded from the political sphere and the development of the country, and it is just to advocate for the inclusion of the entire South African society in the democratic system, however this system is more complex and the citizens are not completely aware of its rights and duties.

In order to participate at the democratic process the South African population should be aware of how to engage in the political sphere and of the rights and duties of the citizens. With this statement it is possible to conclude that the process of sustained dialogue plays a significant role, because it promotes public dialogue about democratic issues which is sustained over time and eventually the citizens articulate themselves to promote changes and development in the political sphere, such as: engagement in political issues, responsive voting, public manifestations, participation at the local government etc.

7.3.2.2. Development in the Socio-Economic Sphere

It is relevant to note that civic engagement establishes the relation between public dialogue and economic development, because this engagement revitalizes the social fabric and allows the civil society to articulate itself to pursue its objective. According to Matthews, “the importance of economic development is obvious. Many studies have shown a correlation between the vitality of the society citizens create among themselves (the civil society) and economic well-being.”²⁴

8. Conclusion and Perspectives

The objective of the project ‘Sustained Dialogue and its Consequences: An Introduction to the South African Experience’ was to briefly present the concept of sustained

²³ Nel E. (2004) P27.

²⁴ Mathews, David: ‘Public Life in Other Countries’ in Connection, Summer/Fall 2005.

dialogue through the specific case of South Africa. In order to achieve this objective an overview of South Africa and the concept of sustained dialogue were presented.

It is important to stress that the case of South Africa is complex and filled with particularities. South Africa is a country that was colonized by European settlers and since the beginning of its colonization the indigenous peoples were conquered or subdued. However, the establishment of the apartheid system, which was based in 'racial' discrimination, turned these relations dramatic and resulted in cruel consequences, to be known: the deep segregation of the South African population, mutual distrust between the different South African groups, decline of the social fabric, lack of civic engagement and public participation, etc. The apartheid system collapsed and it was substituted by a democratic system, but the democratic system requires more engagement from the South African citizens, which were not prepared to participate actively in this system.

It is important to remember the role that the GCC and IDASA played in introducing the process of sustained dialogue in South Africa, and motivating the South African citizens in engaging in the democratic system, and consequently to revitalize the social fabric and to promote development in the political and socio-economic spheres.

And regarding to sustained dialogue it is crucial to consider that it is a peace-building process based on public dialogue sustained over time. It should be stressed that public dialogue is not a new element introduced in South Africa through the sustained dialogue process; on the contrary, it is an element of the South African tradition. The direct consequences of the sustained dialogue process for South Africa are: the revitalization of its social fabric and civic engagement.

It is through the civic engagement that it is possible to establish the relation between the sustained dialogue process and its indirect consequences, such as: political and socio-economic development; therefore it is possible to conclude that in South Africa the civic engagement plays an important role for the development of the country. However, it is necessary that the South African population become aware of the benefits of sustained dialogue and engage themselves in dialogues in the public sphere and sustained over time to generate solutions for their problems, it is essential that the South African

population cooperate to generate development and to improve its standard of living.

After the study of the South African experience in sustained dialogue it is possible to state that South Africa has good perspectives in civic engagement and consequently in political and socio-economic development of the country. South Africa has a turbulent past that left cruel consequences, however the relative peaceful transition from the apartheid system to the democratic system was a superb begin for the new phase of the South African history.

It is true that the South African social fabric declined and that public participation was null during the apartheid system, still the introduction of the sustained dialogue in the country is one of the elements that facilitated the revitalization of the social fabric and promoted civic engagement, which resulted in public participation and development in different spheres.

If South Africa continues to follow the path inaugurated with the relative peaceful transition to the democratic system and to dedicate more efforts on the public participation, process like sustained dialogue will flourish throughout the country, what will result in development for the country and direct benefits for the entire South African society.

To conclude, despite of the extremely negative past South Africa has a brilliant future if it maintains the democratic system and if the entire South African population is included in this system. And in order for this inclusion to happen it is necessary to promote the national reconciliation through peace-building process, such as the sustained dialogue process that was implemented by IDASA in partnership with the GCC.

The sustained dialogue is an ongoing process and it can last for years before resulting in obvious modifications of the South African situation. However, it is valid to state that this process results in political and socio-economic development for the country; it is only necessary for this process to multiply over the country and to be sustained over the years to imply in comprehensible modifications in South Africa.

9. A Better Life For All

Source: Private collection of the author



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