

Dan Bar-On
International Dialogue Center
Mission and Vision Statement



Summary

The Dan Bar-On International Dialogue Center focuses on dealing with the effects of persecution and wars and on conflict transformation in the present. The main objective is to develop practice, research and training in the following ways: learning about and understanding individual and collective history; facilitating dialogue during and after conflict; research and analysis of social, psychological and political structures and conditions that determine individual and collective behavior in contexts of conflict and war. Special focus will be put on a deeper understanding of asymmetric power relations in the context of enabling dialogue between partners in irreconcilable conflict situations.

The IDC is meant to offer a unique combination of perspectives and dimensions and to fill a gap in the existing variety of institutions. Dealing with the past and learning for the future relies on life story telling as a way to listen to each other, thereby creating dialogue, both within oneself and with others. The IDC will support tracing family history and coping with the past, training groups for professionals, dialogue workshops for groups in conflicts, youth projects and research work. The IDC will be a place for sharing and support; a place for learning about the other, perceiving the complexity in both internal and external conflicts, and tracing ways for coping with past and present traumas. People from various conflict areas are involved in activities and learn from and with each other. The IDC will be based in Berlin, Germany.

Rationale

In conflict and post-conflict settings, there is usually a lack of supportive macro-political conditions for dealing with the past to provide a positive climate for real dialogue to develop. In many conflicts, power relations are asymmetric, a fact which is often not acknowledged by the parties involved in the conflict. This can make a fruitful dialogue impossible.

The way of ensuring retributive justice within post-conflict societies for the crimes committed is quite slow in relation to the intensity and nature of committed crimes. Approaches to restorative justice are rather neglected. Silencing around acts of war involvement by perpetrators, and also the silence of victims can both have transgenerational consequences: the indescribable suffering of victims can be transmitted over generations, and perpetrators' silencing can continuously present a danger, on the individual, family and societal level. Examples for this are numerous and world wide, also in many developed democratic societies that are not marked as conflict or post-conflict settings.

More than 60 years after WWII, descendants of German families are still searching and confronted with news about the involvement of family members in the NS regime - as victims, perpetrators, bystanders or helpers. This process is

sometimes difficult to bear. Many do not know how to research their ancestors' involvement. Some face a burdening legacy in their findings. They often lack support from their families and/or frequently experience pressure.

After the German reunification in 1990 it became obvious that there is a growing need to research about the involvement of family members in the regime of the former GDR, especially the Stasi. These conflicts in many cases cover up personal involvements in the NS regime. Furthermore, a fruitful dialogue between East- and West – Germans is obstructed by yet another asymmetric power structure.

Since the fall of communism the societies of Central East and South-East Europe are still struggling to bring to the public some grave human rights violations that took place during the past period(s). For some of them, the communist period is the most "problematic" in terms of those violations. Others are more concerned with the crimes that took place during the period of WWII, before communism or just recently, as in the case of some countries of former Yugoslavia.

While reconciliation has become a key issue in most peace building activities around the world, it has also proven to be an insufficiently developed concept. It does not easily fit into different social and cultural settings and entails highly complex and long term individual and social processes. Truth and justice, dealing with traumatic memories and remembrance are key elements of overcoming a violent past and constructing a peaceful future. The way a society remembers deeply influences the prospect of stability and development.

Each of the countries in question has chosen its own path how to deal with the past. Institutionally, it is mainly up to the governments to decide which path will be taken (if any). The potential of civil society, particularly in its ability to work closer to the citizens, is often rather underestimated.

Personal story telling and research about one's own family history have proven to be very helpful in the process of dialogue. Laymen as well as professionals can be more supportive for others when they include themselves in this process. As "researchers in their own affairs" they start from their own inner dialogue, learn to listen to their own conflicting stories, understand their ambiguities and the complexity of identities and thereby learn to listen to others. By using the storytelling approach IDC becomes a place of orientation, counseling, education and assistance in research, as well as a supportive network trying to address existing gaps in current policies.

Background

The Israeli psychologist Prof. Dan Bar-On of Ben-Gurion University developed important approaches towards enabling dialogue. The life story-telling approach is based on working with a group of members of conflicting sides, where they present and listen to their family stories. Storytelling within the group enables both: more emotional dialogue and intellectual discussion on common components of the stories.

One of the basic issues in this concept is the understanding of the importance of asymmetric power relations in many conflict situations, in which it is important to stimulate the ability and willingness to develop personal acquaintanceship between members of the group, to listen to each other, and to create mutual awareness and empathy towards the less powerful side (Bar-On, 2006).

The model as such presents the logical progression of TRT (To Reflect and Trust) groups, initiated by Dan Bar-On (Bar-On, 1995, 2000). TRT consisted of descendants of Jewish Holocaust survivors from both Israel and America, on the

one side, and children of German Nazi Holocaust perpetrators, on the other. A very intensive and fruitful dialogue has developed among them. Dan Bar-On then went on to facilitate encounters and communication between Palestinians and Israelis. His cooperation with Sami Adwan, Professor of Education at Bethlehem University, led to the founding of PRIME (Peace Research Institute in the Middle East, Beit Jala) and to impressive joint research and teaching projects (Adwan, Sami & Bar-On, Dan 2004).

Asymmetric power structures and resultant divergent narratives make a joint and constructive understanding of the past extremely difficult. This can affect peace building efforts in different conflicts and post conflict settings. Dan Bar-On's approach has become increasingly important in many international dialogue and peace projects in different conflict regions in the world. Practitioners in Israel and the Palestinian Autonomy, Ireland, former Yugoslavia and South Africa have worked with this approach in local contexts. This has been relevant for victims and perpetrators, as well as for practitioners, researchers, social activists and politicians. The approach translates on the basis of a

- deep respect for the specificity of cultural contexts
- sound socio-political analysis
- an acknowledgement of the deep levels of personal and individual involvement and the need to reflect on these, based on social psychology and group work
- understanding asymmetric power relations and how they determine the nature of dialogue.

Since 2006, professionals from various conflict areas around the world have been meeting in Hamburg to study Dan Bar-On's Storytelling Approach in a three year training program of the Koerber Foundation. IDC is an outcome of this activity. It gathers some contributors and participants of this training program dedicated to use their educational and professional competences, to expand and adjust gained knowledge to diverse particular contexts within the scope of the Dan Bar On - International Dialogue Center (IDC).

Objectives

The aim of the IDC is to develop practice, research, and training in the following areas:

1. Learning about and understanding individual and collective history
 - Learning about one's own family history during the Nazi Regime
 - Learning about one's own family history in reference to other historical contexts (e.g. former GDR, former Yugoslavia).
 - Learning about one's own identity/ies within one's family and social context.
2. Facilitating dialogue during and after conflict
 - Offering International Training Courses about Dialogue Work during and after conflict, focusing on individual biographies and the need to learn about conflicting historical narratives. Special attention will be given to understanding asymmetric power relations in dialogues.
 - Development of the concept of reconciliation: International exchange and critical review of the concept, possibilities of practical work.

Special emphasis will be put on:

- understanding the linkages between individual and collective processes
- analyzing different cultural and social approaches to the issue of reconciliation, possibly finding and developing new and better terms
- analyzing the possibilities of dialogue and understanding in ongoing conflicts with asymmetry in power relations, where reconciliation is impossible.
- Dealing with the past: International exchange and research of different cultures of memory

3. Research and analysis of social, psychological and political structures and conditions that determine individual and collective behavior in contexts of conflict and war. This includes gaining a deeper understanding of asymmetric power relations in situations of conflict and dialogue.

Activities

The work of IDC will concentrate on the following activities:

- provide information and guidance on how to access archives for people who wish to learn more about the involvement of their families in what lead up to and during the Nazi Regime;
- facilitate meetings of descendants of Nazi perpetrators/bystanders where the participants can share their life stories and listen to the life stories of others;
- facilitate meetings between descendants of Holocaust victims and descendants of Nazi perpetrators;
- encourage projects of dialogue between young people who come from current and past conflict areas, using the storytelling approach (e.g. from the Balkan countries; Israelis and Palestinians, as well as third generation Holocaust survivors and young Germans);
- support meetings between people from West Germany with people of the former GDR where participants can share their life stories;
- provide training courses for professionals working in various areas of national and international conflict (e.g based on "Storytelling in conflicts – Dialogue Training", developed by Dan Bar-On);
- facilitate international research (particularly comparative researches) and exchange of experiences (networking);
- documentation and process oriented evaluation of practical experiences in different conflict and post conflict settings;
- develop documentation and international exchange on ways of remembering in different political and cultural contexts;
- research collective behavior in conflict, especially in reference to acts of persecution, torture, murder and genocide. This will include a review of "The Psychology of the Holocaust" (Dan Bar-On & Alon Lazar, 2005).

The work of IDC will be open to new settings in addition to those mentioned.

Target groups

Potential beneficiaries of IDC are:

- people interested in own family history and wanting to know more about their own identity construction
- individuals who were involved or affected by war activities
- peace activists
- researchers
- professionals working in the field of peace
- youth.

Human Resources

IDC gathers an international interdisciplinary group of professionals. What connects them is their common interest in creating dialogue in diverse past and present conflict situations and thereby to support peace processes in a bottom up approach.

The initiative for this center came out of the 3 year course "Dialogue in conflict" of the Koerber Foundation, Hamburg, led by Dan Bar-On.

The authors of the above text are

Sakino Mathilde Sternberg, Dipl.-Psych., Psychotherapist, Dan Bar On – International Dialogue Center (IDC), Berlin
Dr. David Becker, Dipl.-Psych., International Academy at the Free University of Berlin
Dr. med. Christiane Walesch-Schneller, Psychoanalyst IPA, Das Blaue Haus in Breisach
Alexandra Senfft, M.A. Middle Eastern Studies, Author and Consultant
Prof. Dr. Lena Inowlocki, Sociologist, University of Applied Sciences Frankfurt/M.
Dr. Tal Litvak Hirsch, Ben Gurion University, Israel
Nejra Nuna Cengic, M.A., Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies, University of Sarajevo
Hanan Ohana, MA, Israel

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