

IN DEPTH

The creation of dialogical environments

Iñigo Retolaza

Facilitator of dialogue and the transformation of conflicts. MemoriaLab Initiative

In the same way that the (re)production of a conflict is a collective process where different parts of the social system interact in a confrontational and exclusionary way, so is the resolution over time or the transformation of the conflict. This paradox (to solve *the conflict I need to work collaboratively with the other party to the conflict*), is the initial premise for the reestablishment of an environment of basic coexistence. Only when the conflict has transformed us will we be able to transform the conflict.

In this scenario, one of the first steps for the reestablishment of coexistence is based on generating a dynamic where the parties can: i) make collective sense of what happened; ii) heal and transcend the wounds of the past; iii) jointly draw up a shared vision of the future. Now, how can we generate the conditions so that all this can be done?

The practice of dialogue among multiple actors in conflict is based on three fundamental aspects. One is *relational* (the political aspect), another is *rational* (the cognitive aspect) and the third *emotional* (the traumatic aspect). These three aspects reinforce each other constantly, since a relational dynamic based on respect and mutual recognition of the damage done helps the people involved to trust each other and to show their vulnerability while processing their experiences of the past, and to share their aspirations for the future.

“ Only when the conflict has transformed us will we be able to transform the conflict ”

A series of minimum conditions must be met for there to be dialogue:

- **A change in our operating system.** Working from a perspective of dialogue-coexistence involves passing from the principle of *non-contradiction* (either this or that, separation, debate) to that of *complementarity* (this and also that, interdependence, dialogue). All the fragmented truths that exist in the system have their place and relevance, since they help us to see a part of the reality that initially we are not able to see for ourselves. Hence the importance of diversity, inclusion and complementarity in processes of dialogue.
- **Motivation.** The actors in the conflict must have an initial motivation for dialogue, that might be *intrinsic* (an awareness and a genuine intention to change the dynamics of how the parties relate) or *extrinsic* (pressures or incentives that come from third parties). Here the challenge is to combine these two impulses. But above all, the key task is to help the parties to take steps towards dialogue on the basis of an internal conviction that this is the way forward towards coexistence.
- **A solid container.** A process of dialogue requires a basic infrastructure: human, economic and logistical resources; political will and backing; time; institutional architecture, etc. We need to create a container that is solid enough to survive all the stresses that may arise during the process.
- **Diverse and inclusive group.** An inclusive and plural make up in the group helps it to be representative of the system that has to be transformed. It has to be diverse, to be able to integrate all the voices, all the memories and all the experiences.
- **Internal conditions.** It is fundamental to take into account and care for the psychological-emotional aspects of the people in dialogue. The success of the intervention will depend on the internal conditions of these people, and of those that

promote these initiatives. Many actors involved in processes of conflict, where one set of abilities are needed, then enter into processes of dialogue, where the abilities required are different. And the internal conditions of the person who intervenes in a context of conflict are not the same as in a context of dialogue. In order to achieve this transition, it is necessary to process the traumas and emotional blockages that accumulated during the conflict.

– **Generation of exemplary behaviour and initiatives.** Often these types of groups, in this type of context, create space for the emergence of initiatives and leaders that promote coexistence, capable of practising in an exemplary way the behaviours that we need to consolidate in our society.

“ A process of dialogue requires political will, motivation, infrastructure, personal work, diversity, inclusion and complementarity ”

The Memoriallab initiative.¹ Dialogue, memory and social healing for a new coexistence in the Basque Country

What form does all this take in those long running conflicts based on identity? The proposal that we are working on as Memoriallab integrates the practice of dialogue with the management of memory and emotionality. This virtuous triangle (dialogue, memory and social healing) is the basis for the restoration of dynamics of coexistence in Euskadi.

Memoriallab is an initiative for the social construction of memory through encounters between people who –in one way or another, from different places and with different ages, genders and ideologies– have been affected by the context of politically motivated violence we have gone through over recent decades in the Basque Autonomous Community. In these intergenerational and plural encounters, people share their own experiences about political violence and the alteration of civic coexistence. They do so on the basis of personal experience and mutual respect.

From 2014 to 2018, seven Memorialabs have been carried out (six in the Basque Country and one in Madrid with Colombian people affected by the conflict). An average of 15-18 people participated in the sessions. Dissemination activities of the encounters have been developed, both in the domestic level and internationally, such as seminars, lectures, conferences, workshops, etc.

From the experience of Memorialab we have identified some lessons learned:

- **Intergenerational transmission of conflict and trauma.** Working on memory with a systemic approach allows us to transform and heal the consequences of the intergenerational transmission of unprocessed traumas.
- **Remembering, forgetting and resistance to revisiting the past.** Pain, suffering, contained anger, fear of self-criticism, having lived through social stigmatisation, non recognition of the pain caused, etc. all become resistances to a willingness to remember and revisit the past. These resistances to working with memory, while they are personal, also have a social, political and institutional side. Sometimes we have seen how some individuals who are responsible for these institutions put up resistance to supporting these types of initiatives, partly because they themselves have not finished processing what they have lived through; and unconsciously they resist facing up to this reality. This negatively affects the work on transformation that they can do from these institutions.
- **The power of silence. A two-sided coin.** To the forced silence that reproduces the status quo, we must counterpose the silence of healing, something that creates an intimate space for inner work at a personal and a group level. Memorialab generates a serene atmosphere, where the participants find the right conditions to internally process the consequences of the conflict.
- **Social healing and emotionality.** Memorialab does not aim to be a therapeutic exercise, but it does generate a safe container where people, even in their vulnerability, can find a space to share, feel and heal; to transcend their own suffering and to connect, to a greater or lesser degree, with other suffering and experiences.

– **Living all the roles of the conflict.** The conscious awareness of having exercised different roles over time (ie, victim and perpetrator in different periods and contexts) promotes self-critical reflection, reconciliation with oneself, humanisation and overcoming the consequences of conflict. Consciously knowing, recognising and occupying these roles (victim, perpetrator, witness, beneficiary, etc.) allows us to transcend them, opening the way to a more transformative conversation about how we Basque people can relate to each other today.

This experience has allowed us to identify different challenges and obstacles that must be overcome: the need to overcome fear and shame to speak publicly about the past, breaking the degenerative silence; achieving a greater participation of public institutions and their representatives in the promotion of free civic dialogue, that is not controlled, but open to citizens and the way they want to do things; the promotion of (new) leaderships based on coexistence, dialogue and respect for diversity, the systematisation and dissemination of ongoing experiences, both local and from afar, in order to accelerate the social and institutional learning that is needed; and the need to develop capacities for methodological improvement and for the strengthening of civil society organisations working on dialogue, memory and social healing.

The challenge is great, but so is the prize... and it is in our hands to achieve it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iñigo Retolaza has a long international experience in facilitating processes of personal support, organizational learning and social change between multiple actors immersed in contexts of conflict and high sociocultural diversity. In the Basque Country, Iñigo Retolaza has facilitated multi-actor dialogue spaces on education, migrations, coexistence or diversity, and encounters between citizens aimed at processing the consequences of the Basque conflict (social construction of memory and social healing).

1 Memorialab is a citizen initiative devised and implemented collectively by three long-term Basque organizations in the field of human rights, conflict transformation and culture of peace: Gernika Gogoratuz, Bakeola, Museum of Peace-Gernika. The meetings are energized by Iñigo Retolaza, facilitator with international experience in multi-

stakeholder dialogue processes in conflict contexts. For further information see Retolaza I., et al., 2019, *Memorialab. Encuentros ciudadanos para la construcción social de la memoria*, FGG/BAKEOLA/MUSEO DE LA PAZ: Gernika; Retolaza I., 2018, *Memorialab. Encuentros ciudadanos para la construcción social de la memoria. Una nota de aprendizaje*, not published.

Photography: MemoriaLab Program

© Generalitat de Catalunya