

United Nations Development Programme
Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean

**Launch of “Democratic Dialogue - A Handbook for Practitioners”
March 26th, 2006: Dag Hammarskjöld Library, UN Headquarters, New York**

**Remarks by Ms. Rebeca Grynspan, Regional Director and Assistant Administrator,
UNDP**

[Check against delivery]

Ambassador Albert R. Ramdin, Assistant Secretary General, OAS

Ambassador Jorge Skinner-Klee, Permanent Representative of Guatemala to the UN

Mr. Andrew Ellis, Director of Operations, International IDEA

*Mr. Tarik Khan, Director, Democratic Institutions and Conflict Division, Canadian
International Development Agency (CIDA)*

Mr. Ebrahim Ismail Ebrahim, Foreign Policy Coordinator, African National Congress

Mr. Max Hernandez, Secretary to the Peruvian National Accord

Colleagues, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am truly honored to join the representatives of the OAS, International IDEA and CIDA to launch our joint Handbook for Practitioners of Democratic Dialogue.

I am especially grateful to the main authors, Ms. Pruitt and Mr. Thomas, the Editorial Board and the hundreds of practitioners of dialogue which contributed to this unprecedented effort, of four international cooperation institutions, aimed to sustain the research and the practice of dialogue worldwide. I realize that this endeavor has not been straightforward so I want to recognize the dedication of all those who have assured the publication of this handbook. In UNDP, I want to express my appreciation for the work of Marc André Franche who helped make this handbook possible and the hard work of Maureen Mayne for her support, notably to organize this event.

In a way, its elaboration has been a dialogue between different experiences, so what we present today is not simply a book on which institutions print their logos, but a truly collective construct.

It is telling that we should launch this Handbook in the Dag Hammarskjöld Library given the vision of our second Secretary General and his firm belief that no matter how dire the situation, genuine dialogue could always bridge the gaps of distrust that divide the world.

Increasing interdependence has further accentuated the complexity of today's global challenges such as climate change, achieving the Millennium Development Goals, deepening democratic governance, preventing violent conflict or tackling terrorism.

Effective solutions to these challenges are not merely technical, they require dwelling into the quality of human interactions and dealing with deeply held assumptions, worldviews and interests.

Throughout the world, but reflecting especially on Latin America and the Caribbean there are at least five reasons which explain the rising need for dialogue:

- First, because of democracy itself. As we become more experienced with democracy, following too many years of dictatorship and in some cases civil war, we need more mechanisms for citizens to effectively take part in the decisions of society.

As Woodrow Wilson argued “the whole purpose of democracy is that we may hold counsel with one another, so as not to depend upon the understanding of one man” and thus dialogue is at the core of democratic culture, institutions and practice. And, our belief in democracy sustains the need for dialogue.

- Second, because of the increasing disenchantment with democracy. As our Report on Democracy in Latin America stressed, democracy is about the full exercise of citizenship. Elections and formal institutions are certainly an essential requisite of democracy, but the universal guarantee of the rights of citizens converting them in agents of their own development is also a must and a pending challenge.

Today, democracy is not delivering as it should, for the poor and in many cases for some impoverished sectors of the middle classes. Dialogue can help bridge that gap by providing the spaces for inclusion and for the design of public policy which considers options and trade-offs for the common good.

- Third, because of increasingly weak political parties. The old structures of political representation and in a sense the mechanism for political dialogue and negotiation seem ill fitted to the new social and political realities. There is an urgent need to recover their role and at the same time make them more inclusive and responsive to the need of finding new mechanisms and structures which can include new actors within the political system.

- Fourth, the increasing social polarization which has lead in some countries to serious crises of governance and even bouts of violence and unrest. At the center of this lack of cohesion is the appalling inequality in societies that massively underinvested in human capital and have been unable to have strong redistributive mechanisms through their fiscal policy and their social expenditures. Moreover, important sectors are not only poor but actually excluded from mainstream development, notably the indigenous and afro-descendents, but also and increasingly so, the youth, where 25% of the young people in the region do not work or study.

- And finally, the winner-take-all political culture which governs many of our political systems. In these settings, the dominant form of interaction is debate and discussion which polarizes instead of bridging. We must transcend what linguist Deborah Tannen calls the “arguments culture” which resembles a verbal battlefield rather than a public space for people to speak AND be heard.

To fully appreciate the importance of the Handbook we are launching today, I also believe it is important to underline not only why there is a need for dialogue but also two

fundamental qualities of dialogue which are beautifully exemplified in a variety of cases in the handbook.

- The first fundamental quality is that dialogue is about the inclusiveness of many voices. In a genuine dialogue each person is participating, is partaking of the whole meaning of the group. It is what Martin Buber has called “experiencing the other side” of the relationship and realizing that “there is a growing understanding that human diversity is both the reality that makes dialogue necessary, and the very basis for that dialogue”.

Importantly, to take part in truth, we must see our part in it. Dialogue is about contrasting values, about noticing the assumptions that are active in the group, including one’s own personal assumptions.

- Dialogue processes are about win-win outcomes that benefit the whole created through inquiry, shared meaning-making or co-construction of knowledge .

Now, it is one thing to say and believe that dialogue is needed and is a particularly good way of tackling complex societal challenges and another one to practice it actively.

First because it is not only a matter of having good intentions, there are important obstacles that should be overcome to create the right conditions for a democratic dialogue to take place: let me refer to two such obstacles in Latin America

- One is the state of the social capital, in Latin America polls show a widespread climate of mistrust in interpersonal relations and between different social sectors. This is rooted in our historical experiences and in the belief that there is no “fair play”. No doubt this is linked to the profound inequalities that prevail in the region. 89% of those interviewed by the *LatinBarometro* say that they are “dissatisfied and very dissatisfied” with the prevailing income distribution. A recent Harvard study shows that the more unequal a society is, the lower the interpersonal trust is. So one important element for a democratic dialogue to take place is to show that it is key to improve the “fair play “ in any given society

- The second one is to differentiate what we call democratic dialogue, meaning a genuine dialogue, from other “manipulatory” practices that many times use the same terminology. People are called to talk but nobody listens because the result of the so called “dialogue” has been determined before it started. So a genuine dialogue will have to overcome a kind of skepticism created by false and spurious dialogues.

As David Bohm underlines in his pioneer work, dialogue is “not necessarily pleasant” and it takes real effort.

- Effort is needed to extend your commitment enough to listen to somebody else, to listen very carefully and to not simply be waiting for a pause in which you can counteract what they have said – these are not things that people are willing to practice regularly.

- Effort is also needed to adapt methodologies and design processes to a diversity of contexts and;

- Effort is required to carry those qualities beyond the individual person or process into the sociopolitical culture and the institutions of a society.

The handbook we present today is devoted in supporting those efforts.

It serves as an advocacy tool to demonstrate that dialogue can work and can be an effective enabler of social change. When I met with former President Jimmy Carter in January, he was enthusiastic in counting on a summary of the Handbook to present policy-makers worldwide to show them there is indeed another way.

It is also a tool to support research to advance the field which is relatively recent. We hope it can encourage new areas of research, for example regarding the evaluation of impact.

But its main purpose is to inspire the practice of dialogue; to guide it and offer a full set of options rooted in real life experiences. I opened the handbook to find a precious set of tools for the daily practice of dialogue. Of course, the handbook is far from definitive and it is our hope that future practice will inform and enrich the development of many more handbooks.

Any of our institutions could have published a separate handbook on dialogue, but it is our firm belief that those objectives can be achieved in a meaningful way only if we create, as the international community, a critical mass of knowledge and support for dialogue.

For UNDP, dialogue is not merely an interesting field of work but a central piece of our way of doing our work in democratic governance, poverty reduction and crisis prevention. In this sense, dialogue is not an area of work in itself but rather a platform to enable and reinforce our work across the board.

Because we are all practitioners of dialogue it is our sincere hope that you use this handbook as an invitation to engage in realizing the vision for dialogue spelled out by Kofi Annan when he said “the United Nations itself was founded in the belief that dialogue can triumph over discord, that diversity is a gift to be celebrated, and that the world's peoples are united by their common humanity far more than they are divided by their separate identities. Dialogue can prevail over violence, understanding over indifference, knowledge over ignorance and prejudice.

Thank you very much.

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