Evaluating Dialogues with Peacebuilding Intent. Substantive Notes.
KVB-Interpeace   24 October 2006

In many countries there is now much '*dialogue fatigue'* and even 'dialogue cynicism' (e.g. Israel, Central America, Peru…). This is a result of too many poorly managed dialogues and/or the perception that dialogues remained ineffective, presumably because they were not perceived to yield anything beyond the dialogue process itself. In many locations it is now advisable to avoid the concept. We use it here for easy reference among ourselves.

A. Considering a Dialogue Process.

   a. *Dialogue is not a strategy.*

   « *Dialogue by itself is a tool, not a strategy.* »
   "Dialogue is only a piece of a strategy, not the whole strategy."

- Dialogue is a tool and a means to an end, not the end in itself. *Dialogue is an instrument for change; it is not the change itself.* It can be applied with different audiences and for different thematic challenges.
- The critical strategic question therefore is whether a proposed dialogue (rather than say negotiation, consultation, popular mobilization and street demonstrations etc.? is 'appropriate' in a given conflict-situation ('*appropriateness criterion*'). Critical here is the analysis of the 'conflict' in its specific dimensions (more general 'context analysis' is not good enough, we need more *in-depth 'conflict analysis'* that looks at historical origins and subsequent evolution but also critically at the current dimensions and actors and the possible short and medium-term scenarios). This also includes the appraisal of whether the timing is ripe, whether there is enough 'political space', and whether key stakeholders can see value in it and would be able and willing to participate.
- If dialogue is only a part of a larger strategy for change, then it becomes important to articulate more explicitly the '*hypotheses of change'*. [1] Why do we believe that certain approaches and actions are likely to produce certain (positive) changes? In dialogues, there are probably commonly used implicit hypotheses of change to do with the effect of facilitated interactions on individuals based on individual and group psychology (transformation in inter-personal relations). More critically important however are the hypotheses of change related to the influence of the dialogue process on the wider socio-political dynamics – hypotheses that are more context and situation-specific (and again refer us back to the central importance of the –ongoing- conflict analysis).

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[1] The term most commonly used here was 'theories of change'. The point was made however that 'theory' is probably an overstatement for something that is not so thoroughly thought through. Hence the change in wording to 'hypotheses of change'.

> **Investing in the 'feasibility study':**
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> A practical problem for good peacebuilding organizations is the difficulty to get institutional donor funding for that exploratory work. The World Bank and other big development organizations would call this a 'feasibility study'; another concept of possible relevance here is 'inception study'. Good donor practice would include the readiness to fund well designed 'feasibility studies' e.g. for projects that are likely to have budgets above a certain $ ceiling per year. On the other hand, a 'feasibility study' should not be turned into a bureaucratic requirement where it can means missing a rare political 'window of opportunity'.

b. The Objectives of Dialogue.

▪ An important objective of dialogue processes may be to bring people together that have been unwilling to meet or unable to talk constructively and therefore to bring about transformations in the relationship (what is called the 'dialogical' dimension or 'generative dialogue'). Still, there was some doubt about whether we should state '*increased mutual understanding' as an objective of dialogue: a*fter all it is possible to 'co-exist' peacefully without understanding each other?

▪ While valuable in itself, improved relations among dialogue participants for us can only be intermediate objectives in a conflict situation. The real objectives lie beyond the realm of the dialogue process itself i.e. what people <u>DO </u>with the new or strengthened collaborative capacities. I.e. ultimately we want to see *changes in the socio-political sphere* beyond the participation in the dialogue process.

c. Investing in the Initial Analysis and Design.

▪ The most productive investment is not in monitoring and evaluation, but in the *initial planning and periodic (strategic) review*. It is about 'frontloading' the critical analysis and setting up the monitoring, but especially periodic review mechanisms from the outset. We should not wait for the end-of-project evaluation to deepen the analysis, when it has no value any more for process management. The initial analyses however also have to be documented, with an element of baseline in it.

▪ What we as designers should exhibit and what the evaluators should be looking for is *evidence of 'strategic thinking'*: a solid conflict analysis that can argue the appropriateness of dialogue as useful instrument at that moment; a wider strategy for change based on defendable hypotheses of change and that understands the linkages between the micro (local) and macro (national); a reasonable baseline description that is used as reference for monitoring purposes; the relevance of the substantive focus of the dialogue and of the choice of participants in a given conflictual situation; periodic strategic reviews that update the conflict analysis, and review the wider strategic objectives and tactical moves to approach them – are all indicators of (explicit!) strategic thinking.

▪ Within Interpeace we also need to introduce/mainstream 'scenario thinking' and alternative strategies and objectives per scenario, in highly volatile situations where at a given moment it looks as if significantly different scenarios can possibly materialize

▪ One critical challenge is how we will link the macro and the micro level dialogues (this is a challenge at the level of our wider socio-political strategy, not

a challenge related to the individual dialogues themselves). The issue works both ways: how will local level dialogues link to the national level, but also how do dialogues within national policy elites link back to local-level actors and realities?? (It is what in Interpeace speak we call 'compressing the vertical space').

- A possibly good practice in planning-design would be to signal the degree of confidence we have in the probability to achieve the various start up, intermediate and higher level objectives we have indicated (this is somewhat implicit in the 'risk' assessment of the assumptions, but it can be expressed in a more explicit manner).

- At the same time, we should not set such high technical standards for 'design' as to make it a Ph.D. level of exercise. There may be excellent and experienced practitioners that are intuitively smart operators but who do not have the skill nor the patience to write it all out in a comprehensive planning document / project proposal. ("*Experience is often worth much more than books*" versus "*Learning through trial-and-error only involves too much error*"!)

- Nor should we be so demanding about comprehensive justification and planning that we ignore and even discourage any 'risk taking'. Dialogues in conflict situations are 'political', and people need to be prepared to take risks. It is up to the proposing party then to make a convincing argument why such risk is worth taking at this time – which brings us once again to the central importance of the conflict analysis. ("*Let not the perfect be the enemy of the possible*").

- Strategic management of a dialogue process requires the *simultaneous management of three critical dynamics*: that within the dialogue group(s), the nexus between the dialogue group and the decision-makers, and the nexus with wider constituencies or the public at large.
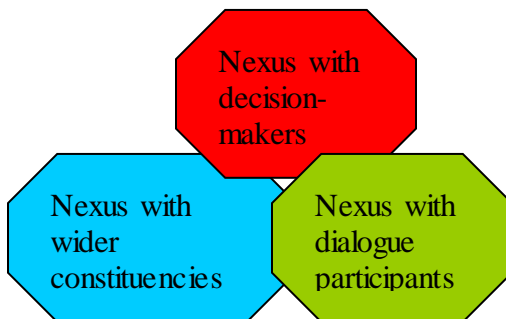
- *Anticipate backlash*: while we try to avoid backlash by being 'inclusive', it is still possible that a certain interest group feels threatened by a dialogue or by the influence and impacts it begins to have and creates a backlash (see below for the Geneva Initiative example as illustration, in Guatemala we may be seeing now stronger attempt of the arms/private security company lobby to influence legislative proposals of relevance to them and in doing so to better counter the FOSS group influence in Congress). Strategic thinking includes anticipating the possible political consequences of a successful dialogue and the possible reactions against it. One mechanism of doing this might be to have a 'devil's advocate / court jester' accompanying the dialogue coordination team whose task it is to constantly ask the difficult political questions.

d.   More Generic and More Situation-Specific Indicators?

▪   A well facilitated dialogue process is very likely to bring about increased trust and changes in the relationship. We can therefore probably see this as a regular and achievable intermediate objective, with some possibility to identify *relatively generic indicators and means of verification* (discourse analysis, observation of body language, participant testimony, video footage analysis where available etc). A critical question however will be whether the dialogue process lead to a 'collaborative capacity' that can continue beyond the facilitated phase (one critical factor here would have been the degree of '*ownership*' that the participants feel over the process – how do we assess that?, as well as '*inclusion*', '*level of influence of the participants* over decision-makers/within a wider constituency', *positioning* such as micro, macro, across levels etc.). The indicators for the effects, influences and impacts stimulated by but that are beyond the dialogue process itself, will differ depending on the substantive topics of the dialogue process (e.g. security sector reform, inter-faith group relations, public expenditure allocations etc.) and depending on the specific situation in which they occur.

Demystifying language:

A 'baseline analysis' simply ask you to describe the '*starting conditions*', the '*initial conditions*' at the outset of the dialogue process, at least about the basic problem that the intervention seeks to address.

Objectives and indicators: you cannot talk about 'indicators' separate from the objectives. '*Objectives' are the change you want to achieve, and 'indicators' the 'signal' of that change. The 'means of verification' is a difficult word to ask you 'how is that signal detected, where will you be able to see it*?' Another important consideration would be 'when do you think a certain signal should become detectable?'

If we acknowledge that indicators are signals of change, then it seems to follow that over time and throughout a process *the indicators also need to change* (evolving criteria of success (e.g. initially an indicator might be that people agree to meet who previously refused to; but in the dialogue process we want to go further than that, so this may not remain the critical indicator of success.

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e.   Change Agents and Project Implementers.

We are in the first place 'change agents', not project implementers. As change agents we need to adapt to the evolving context, conflict dynamics (what we call the management of the political space) and to the dynamics among the dialogue participants as well. Periodic reviews facilitate such adaptive management, and may give rise to reviews of the original project proposal and its logframe.

B. **Proposal Appraisal: The (hidden) initial 'evaluation'**.

When considering evaluation and 'guidance' for evaluators, the tendency is still to think about 'end of project' evaluations. Donor representatives however also 'evaluate' project proposals – possibly in a less rigorous way than would be expected from a formal 'evaluation'.

It is simply not possible for donor representatives to be so 'skilled' in all sorts of topics that they can confidently appraise a large variety of project proposals. Many in addition have such workloads that they can only invest a limited amount of time in appraising proposals. Some will seek advice from their representatives on the ground. Some can draw on conflict or peacebuilding advisors within their own administration, others may make use of a group of external 'experts' also to appraise certain project proposals. Even then, there may still be a more political body within the donor administration that gives the final approval. There is little research into the mundane realities of how donor administrations appraise and decide on project/programme proposals. Specific guidance for donor representatives on appraising peacebuilding proposals seems much warranted, given that this is the more crucial moment, when investment decisions are decided. Subsequent evaluations, particularly end evaluations only appraise retro-actively.

We didn't focus very much let alone systematically on what guidance could be useful for donors at this stage. There are at least some basic attention points to look at:

Scope of the Dialogue	The Proposing Organisation	The Conflict Analysis
- Inter-state conflict or for internal conflict? - For internal conflict: emphasis on dialogue among nationals or among nationals and external assistance actors? - Micro or macro-level or trying to link across levels? - Shorter-term or sustained dialogue process? - Open agenda in its initial phase or immediately a thematic focus? - Emphasis on inter-personal transformation as objective or on creating collaborative attitudes to effect wider change? - Part of larger programme with other peacebuilding components or the main project in itself? - Part of larger programme with relief	- Specialist peacebuilding organization or wider relief & development agency - Specialist 'dialogue' agency or not? - What competencies within the agency to manage/facilitate the dialogue? Track record of the proposing agency? - One indicator of a good peacebuilding organization would be its readiness to invest in conflict analysis and in the assessment of whether dialogue is an appropriate tool and whether the timing is ripe, accepting the outcome that the answer can be 'no' or 'not now'. This would be signal that the organization is not 'supply driven' but carefully considers the added value it can bring in a given situation. - Drawing on national capacities, relying on external 3th facilitation or partnership between international and national agency? - Where does the proposing agency get its credibility / mandate from in the eyes of the key stakeholders?	- Quality of conflict analysis? - Who did the conflict analysis? - Analysis done of previous and/or ongoing dialogues and what works/ed or not? Who was involved in such analysis? - What considerations about the appropriateness of dialogue as instrument, and the timing in the current context?

and development components or not?[2]		

How do we know that a dialogue might be justified? Some suggestions were offered:
- One very important indicator would be 'demand' from the people most directly concerned. After all they are best placed to assess whether it is relevant and appropriate or not;
- Dialogues may be important in prior to a formal peace negotiation process, during a protracted peace negotiation and when a peace (or other) negotiation gets stalled or breaks down (maintain an informal parallel platform where the political stakes are less high, where different sides can continue to meet and focus more on the issues rather than on the power struggle);
- Dialogues can be important when it seems that nothing else is working at the time;
- Dialogues are important for the political leadership to get a sense of where its constituency/ies are, and what political steps are possible.

It is important however to bear in mind that *dialogues can be relevant and appropriate not only in violent times*, but remain so in the long process towards sustainable peace.

One issue of concern is that the written document, with its analysis and proposal, may not be the 'full' one: certain things are not mentioned in the document because they are too sensitive. Here we have one expression of a wider problem that 'paper substitutes for reality and practice'. The risk that *realities and competencies and practices are appraised on the quality of a piece of paper* occurs not only in project proposals, but also with project reports, evaluation reports, CVs etc. etc. In the extreme, 'writing skills' become the crucial element in obtaining jobs, funding, positive scores etc. Certainly for proposals with significant budgets, investing donor time to meet and discuss more intensively and face-to-face with the proposing agent, seems well warranted.

It is of critical importance to note that potential participants in the society also do their own 'appraisals' of whether a certain dialogue proposal touches on strategically relevant issues, is appropriate as a tactic and worth their investment of time, energy, reputation etc. (assuming that we are not dealing with professional workshop goers who as 'rent-seekers' are motivated by the per diems and other perks for the participants.) Indications that key people / key stakeholders from across the spectrum of positions and opinions look favourably at the proposed dialogue would be relevant.

Appraising dialogue proposals is made difficult by the loose use of the word, and the resultant *ambiguity of its boundaries*. The fact that so many things are called dialogue, that in principle anybody can initiative and try to facilitate dialogues, and that quality standards for dialogue events/processes are not widely known, is a problem for donors. The multitude of activities of variable relevance, appropriateness and quality has already become a contributing factor to dialogue fatigue and cynicism about dialogue.

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[2] Two points were made here: a. If a relief / development agency also manages dialogues, then do they have the competence, can there be confusion of roles and confusion of motives (economic incentives to participate); b. The point was made that 'dialogue' can be used to address conflict created by relief and development programming. This however can best be called 'good relief & development programming' and should not make a claim to be 'peacebuilding' if there is no strategic link to the wider dynamics.

Broadly speaking there seem to be two major 'schools' of dialogue: the 'touchy-feely' type whose primary objective is the transform relations among the participants, and the 'political change' one that sees transformed relationships only as a step to create conditions to effect change in the wider socio-political dynamics.

Interpeace would certainly be in favour of a narrower definition of 'dialogue'. CDA can either propose a definition (but look also at the available definitions, and the growing vocabulary related to dialogues e.g. 'generative dialogue, transformative dialogue, sustained dialogue, dialogic qualities in dialogue…') or map out the spectrum of conceptions of dialogue, so that the donor / evaluator at least can more or less situate a specific process within a wider frame of reference.

"If you let everything in the garden bloom, there will be some weeds among it too."

It seems important however to distinguish 'dialogue' from 'consultation', 'debate', 'negotiation' etc. With regard to '*negotiation*' the point was made that there is no serious negotiation process without an element of meaningful dialogue, although not all dialogue needs to lead to a negotiation.

Dialogue and Negotiation.

Some critical differences between 'dialogue' and 'negotiation' have to do with how people are supposed to talk in the respective formats, what they are expected to do with their 'positions' and what is done about the 'asymmetries' especially of power. A 'negotiation' is also a formal process with a formal obligation to honour the agreements reached. Agreements reached through dialogue can be stronger because they should have been free from coercion, but do not carry that same formal obligation. A dialogue should produce greater collaborative attitudes, a negotiation may not.

Appraisal guidance for donors should not be so tight and normative that it leads to *unwarranted 'standardisation' of approaches*, killing all innovation and creativity.

C. **Real-time and end-of-programme evaluations.**

   a. Results-Based Management and Public Accountability.

   There are at the moment three major approaches to increased public accountability (see box). We need to send the message that the most promising even if elusive one remains the *results-based approach*.

Three major approaches to public accountability (from Emery Brusset)

- Project control approach: stringent internal controls, leading to bureaucratization of the project which often itself becomes counter-productive and an obstacle to results. Internal focus on the project rather than its (continued) relevance and appropriateness as catalyst for change.
- ISO 9000 approach: Mechanism of internal organizational quality standards and assurances, mostly adopted within the private sector. Very expensive and labour intensive and limited results.
- RBM and evidence-based impact assessment attempts. We are struggling with assessing the impacts, but this is still the lighter formula of the three.

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   b. Paradigm Inspirations for Evaluating Peacebuilding and Dialogue.

- Many donor representatives (and evaluators) approach peacebuilding evaluation with the (shadow of) a *humanitarian / development evaluation paradigm*. This corresponds of course partially to the reality that a number of relief-development agencies have gotten involved in peacebuilding, because they were told to and because there was money for it. Such implicit or explicit uses of (project proposal formats) and evaluation criteria from the relief-development world are only partially helpful. Certainly dialogue for peacebuilding work has much more in common with international diplomacy, social psychology etc. and its conception and evaluation therefore can better draw on certain fields in sociology, international relations, political science, public administration etc. than on relief and development theory and practices. Rather than taking recourse to the DAC criteria for evaluating humanitarian action, inspiration may be sought in the DAC Guidelines on Helping Prevent Violent Conflict and policy guidance regarding 'alignment', 'partnership', 'policy autonomy' etc. (developed under the broader heading of 'Aid Effectiveness').
- Guidance to evaluators should also not be so strict and normative that it leads to a *premature standardization of criteria and benchmarks*. There is still much to discover and to learn from the diversity of experiences.

   c. Types, Timing and Costs of Evaluations.

- The most useful evaluations, for the dialogue managers and for the donors are *real-time evaluations*, as they have greatest value for adaptive management and learning. However while they will be able to capture some intermediate effects and influences, wider impacts will definitely still be beyond the horizon (as they may also be for evaluations that occur really at the end of the project);
- There is a question of *cost-effectiveness regarding evaluations*: what would be the cost of a strong real time periodic review-real time evaluation system within the overall budget, and how would that compare to the cost of a solid evaluation (including one or more external evaluators) at the end of the project?
- Interpeace's past practice is having an *evaluation process with three components* (evaluation by the dialogue management or dialogue coordination team, participant evaluation by the direct participants in the process and an external eye evaluation). This is interesting because it provides probably a richness of perspectives – while the participatory component would also be in line with our desire to broaden the ownership of the process. What however comes out of such exercises as key learning points (substantively and with regard to types of evaluation)? And is it worth the investment of money but especially time?
- *Longitudinal evaluations* are seldom done, but would make a lot of sense if one wants to capture 'impacts' in the wider socio-political environment, especially if the dialogue remains sustained, for example through a series of consecutive projects/programmes (like our Interpeace work in Guatemala and in the Somali regions). Otherwise of course cause-effects become ever vaguer and attribution ever more difficult;
- Is there however much value in evaluations of single project dialogues? Or would it be for learning purposes not more rewarding to do *comparative evaluations of different dialogues*, either in the same context or across contexts? The comparative perspective would highlight more clearly the finer subtleties of types of dialogue and how they are managed, and the conditions that influence their ability to have influence?
- The 'harmonisation' debate among donors has revamped interest in '*joint evaluations'*. Experience shows however that these are have very high transaction costs because of inter-donor meetings, are burdened with institutional politics and do not substitute for individual project and programme evaluations.

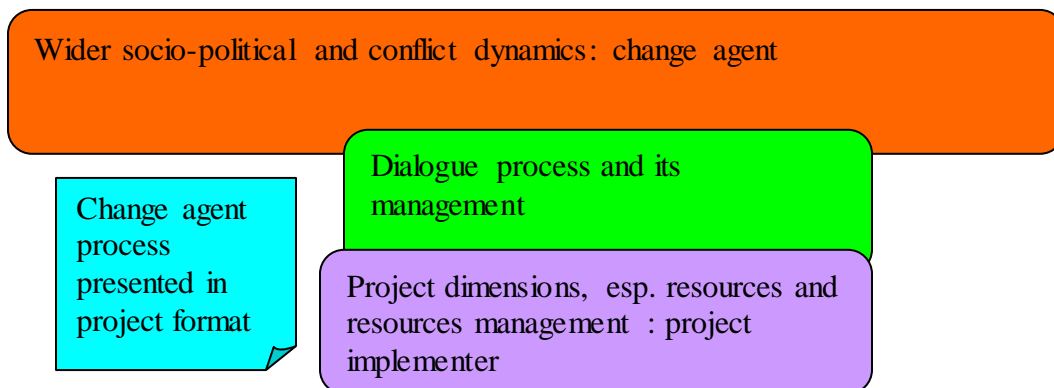d. *An Evaluation is Itself an Intervention with Impacts*.

Evaluating a dialogue process, in real time or towards the end of the project is itself an intervention with its own impacts. This has implications for the timing of the evaluation, for the choice of evaluators, for the style of the evaluation and for how the results of the evaluation are articulated and disseminated. The *first principle in deciding and conducting an evaluation is also 'do no harm'*:
-   Timing: would an evaluation at this moment be disruptive, possibly exacerbate tensions and sensitivities that we are trying to manage, defuse, transform into more trust etc.?

- A dialogue is supposed to bring about transformations and change: an evaluator therefore cannot focus on a 'snapshot' in time, but needs to see the current situation in a broader perspective;
- The evaluators need to be very well versed not only with the context but also the conflict – as seen and experienced by the internal actors. A combination of well chosen internal and external evaluator(s) seems desirable. The internal evaluator can pick up and interpret meanings in what is said but also in the body language and in what is left unspoken, and understands the historical references, emotional impacts etc. of her or his interlocutors. An outsider can bring an element of perceived 'impartiality', more reflective distance from the dynamics under discussion, possible fresh perspectives and relevant comparative knowledge from other dialogue experiences;
- Evaluators need to be aware of and sensitive to the emotional dimensions of dialogue processes;
- Evaluators discuss the wording of their findings with the dialogue management team, to ensure that sensitivities are not unnecessarily exacerbated by a choice of words or phrasing;
- Interactive and more open dissemination and discussion of findings may precede finalization of the draft.

e. *Designing and Doing the Evaluation.*

- The following graph may help *select some focus areas for an evaluation*, with attention paid to some critical aspects of the project management (e.g. quality and composition of the project management team, cash flow influence on dialogue etc.), to some critical aspects of the dialogue process and how it was managed (e.g. overall socio-political profile of the participants, facilitation skills, outputs of the dialogue etc.), and to some critical aspects of the interaction between the wider dynamics and the dialogue, with the wider dynamics impacting on the process (e.g. slow down of the dialogue in times of high political tension or during an election year etc.) and the dialogue process also influencing the wider dynamics (e.g. supporting a formal negotiation process with substantive consensually agreed input, changes in policy, institutional changes etc.)

Wider socio-political and conflict dynamics: change agent

Dialogue process and its management

Change agent process presented in project format

Project dimensions, esp. resources and resources management : project implementer

- We need to bear in mind – and remind the evaluators- that as managers of a dialogue process we intend to be '*change agents'*. Change agency processes however had to be presented in project formats. But our role as '*project implementers'* is ultimately secondary to the primary role of 'change agent'.
- It is certainly possible to identify '*quality standards' for dialogue facilitation* (the basic competences criterion).
- A critical area for evaluation are the '*linkages'* of any dialogue process – towards the macro and the micro-level, and towards other peacebuilding interventions.
- It might be more realistic to expect from an evaluator '*independently verifiable evidence*' of achievements, rather than the ability to perfectly 'measure' them.
- *Direct testimony from participants* (and well chosen non-participants) in the dialogue process may be a valuable source of information and verification for evaluators. But we need to be alert to the fact that people may want to take personal credit for a change and therefore deny the instrumental role of the dialogue, or have other reasons to provide a non-objective picture.
- Evaluations tend to have '*recommendations*'. It is also possible to adopt a different evaluation style and just state findings and the implications but leave it up to the dialogue management team / change agents to draw out what it wants to do on that basis.

f. *The Overall Appreciation?*

- There is an inevitable element of 'appreciation' in any evaluation, when various strengths and weaknesses tend to be weighed up to provide a sort of overall 'balance sheet' statement. This is particularly problematic because it is heavily influenced by the time frame considered and by (often implicit) expectations (Is the glass 'half full' or 'half empty'?). The exercise can be particularly problematic when a process has been very successful in its outcomes / specific objectives but seems to have had negative wider 'impact'. A good illustrative example of this would be the 'Geneva Initiative'.

The Geneva Initiative: success in outcomes, failure in impact ??

The 'Geneva Initiative' was a non-official process of encounter, dialogue and negotiation between a group of Israelis and a group of Palestinians. It produced an agreed blueprint of what could be a realistic 'end state' for a formal Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. In that sense it was highly successful in its outcome. However there was a backlash among Palestinians for example because of significant concessions made over the right of refugees to return, while on the Israeli side the initiative prompted Sharon and the ruling Likud to shift to 'unilateralism'. The overall impact (so far) therefore seems to have been negative rather than positive. Does this invalidate the 'Geneva Initiative' and the investments made in it? What is the overall appreciation of it?

NB. The interesting point of course is whether the process could have been designed and managed in ways that would have diminished if not totally avoided the respective backlashes.