



Conversations  
That  
Matter



CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE  
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

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**Thank you.**



In an armed conflict, the only path to peace is through dialogue.

As National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Perry Bellegarde points out, dialogue leads to relationships and it is through relationships that we can build anything.

Alice Nderitu knows this better than anyone else.

Ms. Nderitu is an armed conflict mediator. She has mediated more than 90 processes that have resulted in peace agreements between parties that are at war with each other in Kenya and Nigeria.

Ms. Nderitu is one of a few female peace negotiators active in Africa and key to her success is purposeful dialogue. Dialogue that demands preparation, time, patience, concentrated effort and an open mind, coupled with a fearless ability to say the things that need to be said.

We asked the Jack P. Blaney Award Winner for Dialogue Alice Nderitu to join us for our Conversations That Matter about the path to peace through dialogue.

- [Narrator] Conversations That Matter is a partner program for the Center for Dialogue at Simon Fraser University. The production of this program is made possible thanks to the support of the following and viewers like you.

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## Thank you.

- Congratulations on being the Jack P. Blaney Award Recipient in Dialogue. In the course of your career, how important has dialogue been?

- It's meant everything, it's meant everything. And it took me a long time to get to the point where I realized that dialogue that is two-way was the way to solve so many of the problems that I deal with. I work in places where violence is recurrence, an existing problem-

- [Stuart] Mm-hmm.

- In places where people are violently opposed to each other. And for a long time, when I first began this kind of work I used to- when I first began working with people out there with communities, I used to be a human rights educator, still am. But then my approach was very one-sided. I had all the information. I was teaching people about declarations and conventions and telling them "You know, the world has universal values." We have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, we have this and this, so many things. At the end of the day, people kept telling me, "So you taught us all you did, our constitution doesn't have anything of the human rights you are talking about, and that was then, now we have a new constitution in Kenya that has human rights. And they would say, "So you told us that we have rights, "and the policemen should not do this to us, "but they came and did it anyway."

- Yeah.

- "And our neighbors came "fought us anyway and we knew our rights, "so exactly what are you telling us?" They would ask me, "All these conventions "and all these things you are teaching, "how do we apply them here?" Because we're not domesticated in our laws. So I always had this question, I wanted to work with communities and I needed to talk to them about the issues that affected them directly and what to do about them, but I felt like I was so- I wasn't empowering them enough to do something about their situation. And it was really brought home to me when I went to Rwanda and I was teaching them again about the conventions and everything, because that's the way I'd been taught to teach, then one person pointed out that, "Hey a genocide happened "here in 1994, yet the world signed the convention "against genocide, the world ratified, "signed the convention against genocide in 1945. "So then, how why didn't that convention protect us?"

- That's a very interesting question.

- And I really really asked myself, so now, what next? And then one of my colleagues, I then worked for the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights, and Oxford University had offered to sponsor gift

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scholarships for two people from our organization to take an online course that linked human rights and conflict prevention. And my colleague was working on advocacy and he wasn't taking the course and our boss was really angry with him, and I told him, "Let me take the course. "Because I'm here and would like to take the course, "let me take it." That course changed the way my approach completely. Because I was able to now understand the link between human rights and conflict prevention and begin to work with the communities I was working with, communities affected by violence, from a space in which they could prevent violence and they could transform violence, so that then they could use all these rights that I'd been talking about. I finally found something practical to walk towards that position with, the link between human rights and conflict prevention. And then of course peace building. And core to all that was dialogue. People had to speak to each other.

- [Stuart] Right.

- The policemen who are beating up these farmers and the communities that were being violent against each other, at the core of everything, that had to speak with each other. So then, when I began for that course, my assignment, I did an assignment bringing together communities, the police, the firemen, the youth, everybody, in a circle, and everybody speaking to each other. And finally there were results. And I said to myself, "There's something about people speaking to each other." There's something about this dialogue happening. So then it's been improving, I've been improving. And now I'm at the point where I actually get people to dialogue until they sign a peace agreement.

- Gotta get you to hang on for a second while we take a quick commercial break. We'll be right back.

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- So what is it that happens in dialogue, when you say there's something happening there, what is it that happens?

- What is it that happens is that people, as soon as we are able to get people to listen to each other and to shed the judgment, and there's something we call the conflict onion, you peel, when you get people listening to each other. First they come to the table and then the first layer of the onion we say is positions. So they have these positions, "No, we cannot speak "with these people, we've never spoken with them before, "we are not going to. "These people they are all dirty and lazy "and they like to fight all the time "and they are violent and they look down upon us," that kind of thing.

- Right so they have perceptions about somebody, whether they're right or wrong they come into it with that perceptions.

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- And those perceptions are sometimes not based on reality and they'll be some stereotypes that they've had over and over again. So then when we get the communities to speak and then by the second day then now we are, I guide the conversation into, "Okay so what are your interests, so in terms of why you're here?" And then people begin speaking about interests and then the core of the onion is the nib. When you finally get to the nib, then at that point, people are now emotional, people are even crying now. I actually tell them, "This, we call this the conflict onion "because look at you, you're crying now, "you don't even have an onion anywhere near you. "But you are so emotional." You get to the need, people talk about what they really need and that's when people find that actually their needs are similar, that people want their children to go to school, they want markets to stay open, they want to go to hospitals and find medicine. Basics define those commonalities, then we begin building on those commonalities. And sometimes it takes longer, it depends on how deeply conflicted the communities are. And sometimes we achieve some success and then they go back to the same position that they were in because they are so influenced by the world outside. It's also very difficult for us to begin a dialogue with adults, a dialogue that competes with the narratives that have been passed on from generation to generation, from mother to child, and now we are telling them that those narratives are not true. And to prove that they're not true, they keep resisting. Every time you say something, they will want to come to the argument with something else. So at the end of the day speaking to each other, the dialogue, back and forth back and forth, it eventually becomes a point where people begin to understand that until we speak to each other then things happen.

- Right, okay that's once you've got them to the table. But in your experience, in your vast resume, which is extraordinary to read by the way, you've gone into armed conflict environments where you're putting your own safety at risk. And these people aren't even at the point where they're considering talking to one another and yet you got them to the table. How do you get them to come to the table with the idea that we're now going to talk?

- You know every violent conflict has a weak point. There's always somebody who is hurting more than the other, somebody who is in the violence purely because of ego, somebody who feels that something could be done differently and you always have to find that something, that is the weakness in the violence. In Kenya for example, Kenya for years, my country, was a country that violence wasn't associated with us at all. In 2007, 2008 we had violence, electoral violence that split the country.

- In the southern states, right?

- No, actually it's the Kenya along the railroad line.

- Okay, yeah.

- Which is very interesting but that's the Kenya, the most developed part of Kenya. And the country came to a standstill for two months, we were at a total standstill. We couldn't do anything, we couldn't

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go anywhere, you couldn't leave your house, it was horrible. Finding the core of Kenya, Kenyans were embarrassed about it. Because we had always been up there and now suddenly we were being listed among failed states, states in conflict. And there was a moment of collective embarrassment, the whole country was like, "No, no, no, no, we need something to move us "to another level." So that really works for Kenya, even now, that every time when something is happening you'll always get people who are like-minded, who'll want to move forward. And importantly, in other violent conflicts, Kenya too, the business owners are what I would call a weakness in the sense that they have something to protect.

- Yes.

- Always in violence the people you need to be most afraid of are those who have nothing to protect, they don't care.

- Right, because they've got nothing to lose.

- They've got nothing to lose. But the business people, they don't want their businesses destroyed, homeowners don't want their homes destroyed. So they want to come together and create a solution and help those who have nothing to lose to come into the fold. So there's always somewhere. So the key thing is to look at the conflict, study it. By the time I get into a violent conflict, I've studied it from all angles, I've read it, I've spoken to people, so that then I know, what is the chink in the armor, how do I get in there.

- This is our second break, we'll be back in a moment.

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- As I'm listening to you I'm thinking one of the other key components in this is the willingness to spend time to understand and to think it through from a variety of perspectives, before you even enter into dialogue. So preparation and time become important components. Am I right? Because I can't see how you can do this work if you are unaware of what some of those nuanced differences are.

- Absolutely, you have to be very, very patient. Luckily I work for an organization that understands that mediation can take a very long time. We have a team in the Philippines, they've been there for the last 10 years trying to-

- 10 years?

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- Oh yes, oh yes. In many of the processes that I work in, they take a minimum of two years to even get somewhere. You really invest a lot in the preparation, the planning is everything. You have to speak to so many people you have to get so many opinions. You have to paraphrase so many things that people say.

- And do you have to be careful of that, because sometimes if you paraphrase it incorrectly you could ignite an adverse reaction.

- Absolutely, absolutely. Now you have to keep portraying really bad people as good people. So for example, you have two protagonists and each is saying such horrible things about the other. I'll be shuttling between the two of them and telling them, "You know, he actually doesn't think, "those horrible things you are saying about him, "he doesn't think that way about you." And then I'll go to the other person and say the same thing. So by the time they are meeting, their mindsets are, I probably misjudged this guy. But that's not usually the case, like they really, really dislike each other. But it gets to the point-

- Well and in some cases they may want to kill one another as well.

- Oh yes, by the time- I'm talking about people who've actually organized killings against each other, and who'd kill each other if they had the opportunity, and we usually get to the point where maybe a year and a half later, two years later, where I tell them, guess what? You remember when I came to you and I said that this was not his position, it was his position. By which time they are good friends, and they can laugh about it and they laugh and I tell them you said the most horrible things about him, this is what he said about you, this is what he said about you and now look at you you're friends. So then they laugh and they say "Oh you outwitted us "on that one."

- But it sounds to me that you're also finding that common element. As you say, what is that need that they can both focus on and then start to say, okay then how do we solve this problem? How important is it for them to recognize that no matter how violent they choose to be, the other side of the equation is never going to go away and so therefore, it's now time to put aside those differences that can lead to hatred and find a path to work together.

- It's so crucial, it's really the core. And usually sometimes, not sometimes, most of the times, when I'm getting into a situation where there has been violent conflict, I've also gauged the conflict, the violent conflict, in terms of its ripeness, how ripe it is.

- [Stuart] What do you mean by ripe?

- Conflicts, a violent conflict is ripe when there's almost a, what do you call a mutually hurting stalemate, where both parties are still fighting for the sake of ego but where both parties are under tremendous  
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pressure from people, so they have to deal with internally displaced people from their side and both of them have losses, huge losses, on both sides and they're just looking for somebody, like me, to show up. In Nigeria, they usually say, "If it wasn't for that Kenyan woman showing up here "I would not even have come to the table. "But she came all day from Kenya, "we couldn't just ignore her."

- The perfect reason, we were just being polite.

- Yes, they said, "Look at her, she came all the way. "So we couldn't ignore her." Then the other side said, "Oh yes, even us. "If it wasn't for her, and look at her team, "they are working so hard, they are sacrificing so much. "But really you know, we can go back to work to today-" They go on and on but it's usually about ego. It's usually the point where you really feel that this guy is looking for an excuse to get out. And when I say this guy, I mean this man, it's usually men most of the time, who are seen as the faces of war, which also makes what I do unusual.

- This is incredibly exciting and I don't want to take a break, but I have to take one last break. We'll be right back.

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- You are very unusual because you are from far as I can see, the only woman in that part of Africa or maybe all of Africa who's doing this kind of work. Clearly we can take a look at the results and say well it must be an asset but it must also be very challenging when you're in an environment where women are not always given the same level of respect that their male counterpart might receive. How do you overcome that as well?

- When I began the mediating, after I got into the human rights, conflict prevention, peace building, then after the violence we had in Kenya in 2007, 2008, the African Union sent Kofi Annan to Kenya to sort out our issues. And one of the ways he sorted out our issues was creating a number of commissions to deal with all the issues. He created a commission to investigate the electoral issues a commission, a truth justice inter consolation commission and a National Cohesion Integration Commission. And I became a commissioner in the National Cohesion Integration Commission. When we began going out into the field, my colleagues who are all male, I told them, "How is this going to work?" Because we are discussing war and usually war in many communities is seen as men's business. So war and peace making are men's business and it's not women's business so how am I going to cope? And they told me, "Don't worry." So we would get into the room, and they would introduce themselves, like our chairman of the commission would say "My name is so and so, you know me, I'm the chairman. "This is commissioner Alice Nderitu "this is Commissioner Alaki Wako," who was also male, and then he would say, "And Alice is the chair of the session." So then I would sit there so then they taught me, they told

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me men respect authority. You have to speak to people you look at them directly, don't be emotional, focus on the core issue when an issue is raised, don't let it go. Keep going into results, results, solutions, solutions. So they taught me to chair, they even taught me how to sit properly, how to ask people to sit down in a way that doesn't offend them. They told me, "Take charge." So I learned to do it. So for women like me to do this kind of thing, you can't do it without male allies, you can't. You have to have men who'll help you to do this kind of thing. But over and above that for my team in Nigeria, I rely on them so much, for cues. Because when you're mediating a dialogue with armed people, when protagonists are armed people, you have to be so completely in the room. You can't afford to think about anything. My cell phone, nothing, nothing. You have to be there, you have to look at who is speaking to who, you have to look at who is not speaking to who, you have to read their body language, you have to, everybody you have- during tea break, who you have tea with is something you have to think about before the tea. Everything, you have to think about everything. So as a woman doing this, the core thing, the core thing that is expected of me is knowledge and skills. People expect me to have the knowledge and skills to be able to solve their problems. And they also, a lot of people say that "Oh you know women are not accepted as mediators of armed conflict, it's men who do this kind of thing." But I always find that communities who have been involved in violent conflict for a long time are usually desperate for somebody with solutions. It's not a man or a woman, they want somebody with solutions. So when we show up, as soon as I begin speaking to the leaders, especially, they think "Hey, she knows what she's talking about," then issues of me being a woman or not do not even arise. But it's always- Local communities, they marvel, they come they take pictures of me. They say, "Hey this is strange."

- Right, so you touched on one other component there that I think is fundamental in meaningful dialogue and you said you have to be completely in the room. Your attention can't be anywhere else. And dialogue I think to be truly effective has to be a concentrated effort by the people who are involved. And you have just confirmed that that is exactly what it is. And clearly you are doing extraordinary work. I wish I could go on and on and on but I'm already out of time. Thank you very much for sharing. of luck as you move forward.

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