

Intercultural Dialogue for Sustainable Development

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ABSTRACT

Climate change, new economic and social-cultural issues have changed peoples' lives significantly, forcing states and civil societies to take action which is why sustainable solutions and development are attracting more attention. 'Intercultural Dialogue' has been applied in different fields to build peace, promote education skills and enhance mutual understanding. This study scrutinises why 'Intercultural Dialogue' should be used to achieve sustainable development and comments on its role in different areas, particularly focusing on the work of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) - an organisation which specifically works on this issue in Pakistan. Using analytical and a combination of qualitative methods, the study finds that 'Intercultural Dialogue' has been relevant in sustainable development because it enriches mutual understanding of different stakeholders who deal with issues such as gender, human rights and climate change, gain deeper knowledge about citizen concerns and inform policy.

Keywords: Intercultural dialogue, sustainable development, mutual understanding, SDPI, SDGs.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sustainable Development (SD) is a social and economic plan to develop society without degradation of its natural resources. According to the World Commission on Environment and Development, it provides 'the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (Pugh 1996, pp.30-31). Increasing economic development indicators, such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Gross National Product (GNP), alone does not benefit society holistically (e.g. poor, minorities, disabled people and future generations), and neither does it improve other aspects of life (e.g. education, gender equality, water resources and renewable energy). SD helps balance economic progress and social development of all groups of people, as well as natural resources. It is a complex process because it has to do with cultural and social change in attitudes and lifestyle of people. Secondly, it needs rules and legislation changes. Lastly, the target groups are different from those who make key decisions (like parliamentarians) to those whose life is directly affected by the decisions (like shopkeepers).

The concept of SD attracted the attention of governments and international organisations more than two decades ago. The United Nations (UN) now holds annual meetings to plan SD goals and their purpose. The UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002), and the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (New York, 2015) are among these initiatives. A common point of all these sessions has been that all world leaders acknowledged urgency of the implementation of an agreed plan and agenda for SD, but also recognised that no country has come close achieving complete and holistic sustainability.

In the 2015 UN gathering, international participants proposed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These goals are very diverse and broad - from the elimination of 'poverty' and 'hunger' to 'quality education' and 'developing life underwater'. However, they are criticised for being difficult to quantify, implement and monitor. The scope is broad because the creators of the SDGs have tried to address all the elements of SD which are inclusive of both rich and poor countries. However, it is significant that from 1992 till now, active members of the UN are still trying to set a universal and clear plan which is not without its challenges. This is indicative that there is no universal and default map or guide. The solution lies in creating a method to monitor, understand different viewpoints and to bring different SD stakeholders towards active dialogue.

Executing SD is especially important in developing countries. Pakistan, like other emerging economies, is facing alarming issues such as growing population pressure, deforestation and untenable use of forests, air and water pollution, climate change, and unsustainable and high energy consumption. Pakistan's growing population (212.2 million), combined with a huge rural population (63.33% of the total population in 2018), and significant illiteracy rate (49%), makes the country vulnerable in terms of executing SD or applying the SDGs.

There are different challenges to reaching SD in Pakistan. For instance, weaknesses in capacity building initiatives in areas like climate change, economic growth and gender (Khan and Ali 2019); flawed policies by the state (Ali 2018); as well as weak institutional coordination at every level of government and among SDG stakeholders and units (AwazCDS 2018). Some see democracy and defence as central challenges (Sheikh 2016).

Giving priority to several SDGs has been suggested as a solution.¹ Moreover, organisations and institutions such as the UN and the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz International Centre for Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue (KAICID) emphasise the importance of generating 'dialogue' for different levels of cooperation between states and civil society to achieve the SDGs. The last solution is highlighted in almost every report, manifestation or policy regarding SD.

There are a lot of initiatives (like routine seminars and conferences) in the name of 'dialogue', but unfortunately, most are based on rhetoric and do not add anything concrete to the SD agenda. This paper uses critical analysis of relevant academic debates and sheds light on *the value of intercultural dialogue in sustainable development* by asking the following key questions:

- Do stakeholders differentiate dialogue from other types of communications?
- What is their definition of a dialogue?
- How do they take action regarding dialogue?
- What do they expect from a dialogue?
- Why is dialogue useful for them?

¹ The priorities have been: SDG 1 no poverty; SDG 3 good health and well-being; SDG 4 quality education; SDG 6 clean water and sanitation; SDG 8 decent work and economic growth, and SDG 16 peace, justice and strong institutions.

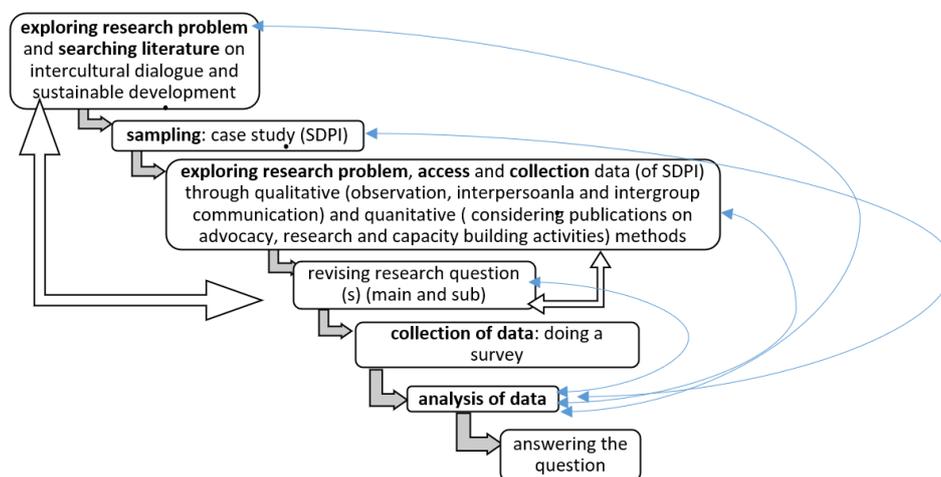
2. METHODOLOGY

The paper is based on ‘non-standardized qualitative research’ process (Flick 2011, p. 54) and follows his seven steps model, including exploring the research problem, researching literature, outlining a research question, accessing data, sampling, collecting, documenting and analysing data. Some of these steps are not linear. For instance, in this study, sometimes data collection and analysis happened simultaneously.

The main question of the study has been formulated through different stages (see Figure 1). **First**, by reviewing academic debates on dialogue and culture, different reflections of intercultural dialogue in a variety of fields were reviewed. At the **second** stage, the case study was narrowed down to the activities and work of an organisation, which specifically works on SD. The Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) was selected for both purposive and convenience sampling values. On the one hand, it is a well-established SD think-tank in South Asia and ranks first in Pakistan in this area; and the staff was open to being part of the survey. **Third**, the research continued with observation inside SDPI and conversations with the staff about how they defined the term ‘dialogue’. Various interpretations were offered, including understanding it simply as a different type of communication such as conversation and negotiation. Moreover, the staff mentioned specific SDPI activities seen as ‘dialogue’, significantly pointing to their ‘retreat’.² Hence, at the **fourth** stage, the SDPI ‘retreat’ (January 2020) was chosen as a further focus. At the **fifth** stage, researchers, advocacy and capacity building staff were specifically interviewed using survey questions and follow-up conversations. Analysis of this collected data was subsequently undertaken.

² ‘Retreats’ are yearly meetings to review past organisational work, plan for the future and work on team-building skills through concentrated discussion and dialogue.

Figure 1: Methodology in Stages



Source: Author's own.

2.1. Research Questions

Important questions tackled in the study include the following:

- Can 'Intercultural Dialogue' play a role to strengthen sustainable development?
- What is 'Intercultural Dialogue'?
- How is 'Intercultural Dialogue' reflected in different academic debates and sustainable development?
- How has 'Intercultural Dialogue' been applied and understood in the work and activities of SDPI?

The survey questionnaire, including closed, open and multiple-choice questions, was conducted based on a classification of question types (McNabb 2009, p. 154) to measure 'affective, cognitive and action awareness.' Table 1 shows how some survey questions were formulated. This was followed by observation of participants to see if they took part in 'dialogue-based activities' such as SDPI's annual Sustainable Development Conference (SDC) and the retreat, which provide opportunities for dialogue, or not.

Table 1: Classification of Questions

Measurements	Type of Questions	Survey Questions	Information Acquired	Extra Measurements
Cognitive	Factual	Have you participated in SDPI dialogue-based activities? Which ones?	Facts about the participants and activities of SDPI	Observation
	Knowledge	Has the retreat provided you with an opportunity to express your viewpoint and be listened to?	Knowledge about what the participants know about the meaning of dialogue, and their dialogue skills	Interpersonal communication
Affective	Opinions	What is the contribution of dialogue in your work? How much is dialogue used as a tool of communication in SDPI's activities?	Participants' understanding about dialogue in terms of their professional work	Interpersonal communication
	Attitudes	What is good dialogue?	Participants beliefs about dialogue	
Action	Behaviour	Have you participated in the retreat meeting? Did you comment? Did you listen?	Knowledge about how people act, what they do, and how they react in certain situations	Observation

Source: McNabb (2009).

3. FROM 'DIALOGUE' TO 'INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE': SOME DEFINITIONS

The word 'dialogue' comes from the Greek word *dialegethai* which means 'to conduct conversation' (Linell 2009, pp. 2-3). It refers to two-sided communications like speech or political statement, which is more monologue than dialogue. But what are the main characteristics of dialogue? What makes dialogue different from other types of two-sided communications like debate and negotiation? According to London (2008), a dialogue is the result of a process which involves 'listening with empathy, searching for common ground, exploring new ideas and perspectives, and bringing unexamined assumptions into the open.' It is also defined as a 'conversation aimed at mutual confrontation and understanding of views, and as cooperation in the search for true protection of general human values and work for justice' (Doron 2002).

Stewart (2014) notes that the primary goal of dialogue is 'understanding rather than agreement.' Participants of any dialogue have the willingness and ability to firstly, 'be radically open to the other(s)'; and secondly, 'to articulate their own views'(Ibid.). Swidler (2007) finds that dialogue does not mean that one should hold the same views on a particular subject as the other partner of the communication. It is different from encouragement or reinforcement (Ibid.) and also different from a debate.

A study on Jewish-Palestinian interfaith dialogue presents a chart explaining the differences between a debate and dialogue. In a dialogue, for instance, one is ready to inquire and to learn; while, in a debate, each partner comes to 'tell, sell and persuade.' In a dialogue, one unfolds 'shared meaning', whereas in a debate both sides try to 'gain agreement on one meaning.' Dialogue aims for integration into 'multiple perspectives' while evaluating and selecting the best is the target of a debate. Finally, 'uncovering' and 'examining' assumptions is the main thrust of participants of a dialogue; while, 'justifying/defending assumptions' are parts of a debate (Abu-Nimer et al. 2007, p. 8).

Therefore, a comprehensive definition of dialogue could be a communication between two (or more) sides aiming to express the ideas and thinking of the participants on an equal level. Dialogue does not aim to reach an agreement at the end; though if an agreement is achieved, it shows that the former paved the road for that to happen. It aims at understanding an issue rather than focusing on convincing both sides.

When we add 'intercultural' or 'interculturality', then, dialogue between members of different cultural groups becomes the main purpose. A dialogue of cultures begins with communication among individuals, which represent a specific dimension of culture more than others. This is important since culture is plural and flexible, and not singular and rigid. For instance, a dialogue can be between members of Jewish and Muslim

communities. These members can belong to so-called Arab, Middle Eastern or even Western cultures as well. However, a dialogue between these two communities, in the first place, could have different cultural dimensions: interfaith dialogue or a dialogue of artists and philosophers.

There are different approaches to culture in various disciplines such as Anthropology, Psychology, Philosophy and Social Sciences. In sociology, there are three theories about culture: Functional, Social Conflict and Symbolic Interactionism (Giddens and Sutton 2017). *Functional Theory* views society as a complex and interconnected system. Emile Durkheim explains that society works like the human body. Each organ has a function individually and collectively. Culture functions in society to meet human needs and encourage individuals to obey the rules without question, or inspires critique. In *Social Conflict Theory*, Karl Marx encourages one to think about culture as an institution which benefits some members of a society more than others. Norms are, then, parts of a culture to support the interests of the most powerful members, not the weak ones. The third approach is *Symbolic Interactionism*. Weber believes that class, status, and power help in forming culture, particularly in the industrialisation era. The main aspect of social life is this rationalisation which helps society develop around logic and efficiency. In an organisation/ bureaucracy, one sees that dominant cultures are shaped by hierarchical structure and division of labour indicating that tradition and morality do not play a central role. This structure works as efficiently as possible to achieve the goals of the members of a particular cultural group (Ibid.).

Culture can be also studied in relationship with civilisation. According to Tylor, both refer to elements perceived by a human being as a member of society: '[C]ulture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor 1871, p. 1). Tylor gives semantic and value dimensions of culture, explaining it according to *Development Theory*: 'Stages of culture, industrial, intellectual, political, moral – Development of culture in great measure corresponds with transition from savage through barbaric to civilized life - Progression-theory – Degeneration-theory- Development-theory includes both, the one as primary, the other as secondary- Historical and traditional evidence not available as to low stages of culture [...]' (Ibid., p. 23). Tylor values different cultures; articulates them in a spectrum from *civilised behaviour* to *barbarism*; gives them semantic dimension, and defines them from *low* to *high* civilisations. Tylor is critiqued for categorising civilisations based on 'degree' rather than 'type' (Gable and Handler 2008, p. 28); and using terminology to level human development, beginning in 'savagery' and ending on the highest or at least a standard level of 'European civilization'

(Stocking 1983). Still, some theorists of late 20th and 21st centuries share almost similar views. Lewis (1990) and Huntington (1993, 1996) saw the roots of future clashes through the lens of Islamic and Western civilisations, ignoring the diversity and pluralistic dynamics of each.

Dialogue is, hence, a subset of culture, whether as a functional, social conflict, symbolic interactionism or civilisational aspect. Each dialogue participant has more than one culture (type), and hence, is culturally diverse. For instance, during an interfaith dialogue, religion is not the only factor shaping the identity of participants. Culture is not solely shaped by religion, ethnicity, language and geography. Rather, it is impacted by all of these collectively. Someone who works in the field of development, not just 'ideology of sustainable development' (Platonova 2013) may shape her/his culture and belief in feminism, bureaucracy and diplomacy, while at the same time being Muslim, French and a diplomat.

'Interculturality' brings a new aspect to understanding dialogue - a dialogue of people with cultural differences. 'Intercultural' is quite different from 'intracultural' dialogue. 'Intracultural' applies to communication/relations between people of the 'same' culture or those who have a culturally 'similar' background, for example, communication between Muslims. 'Intercultural' communication is between different cultural groups, for example between Muslims and Christians. However, this categorisation is also problematic. Is the dialogue between a Christian and a Muslim an inter- or intra-cultural one? Do they share more differences or similarities? Sarbaugh believes that there are no two persons who are different in every characteristic and no two persons who are alike in every characteristic. One can establish a continuum with a pure homogeneous pair at the one end; and a pure heterogeneous pair on the other end. Only then, is one able to recognise whether there are more similarities or dissimilarities between two persons. If they have more dissimilarities than similarities, their communication is intercultural. If they share more similarities, then, their communication is intracultural (Sarbaugh 1993, pp. 7-8). According to Leeds-Hurwitz (2014), intercultural dialogue is mostly used by 'diplomats describing an ideal world, rather than as a statement of current reality.' The term has also been used for cooperation between nations and/ or among cultural groups within national borders.

4. INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN DIFFERENT FIELDS OF STUDY

The term 'intercultural' dialogue has attracted considerable attention. International organisations such as the European Union (EU) and the United Nations (UN) have worked on it more than others. The year of 'Dialogue among Civilizations' by the UN,

symbolically illustrated a culmination of global attention towards the issue at the beginning of the 21st Century. Establishment of the Alliance of Civilizations in 2005 by the UN and naming 2008 the ‘European Year of Intercultural Dialogue’ also illustrated a worldwide effort to draw attention to intercultural dialogue. References to intercultural dialogue and related phrases have appeared in talks of Director Generals of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) since the 1980s, reaching the highest point in 2001 and fluctuated up to 2015 (Bloom 2013, p. 4). The number of UN documents containing terms like ‘racism’, ‘interfaith’, ‘security’ and ‘interreligious’ in combination with ‘intercultural dialogue’ increased between 2000-12. ‘Racism’ was a key argument from 2000-04, and then from 2008-12, ‘security’ became an issue closely connected with the concept of intercultural dialogue (Bello 2013, p. 4). The issue was also taken more seriously by some governments after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Puchala et al. 2015).

Studies that reflect on cultural dialogue are of two types. Some argue that dialogue is an abstract and theoretical concept. Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* develops the idea of dialogue among different groups of society for the elevation of rationality. In a society, in which communicative action is at the centre of communications, rationality is no longer limited by state and media as discussed in modern philosophy. It emerges out of a dialogue, which he calls ‘argumentative speech’ or ideal speech (Habermas 1987, p. 356).

The second type of studies deliberate on dialogue practically to reach specific aims in social life including peace and co-existence (Ayoub 2004; Güzelmansur 2009; Kaulig 2004); conflict resolution in multi-ethnic societies (Seidova 2011); promoting integration amongst immigrants, especially in the European context (Foote 2005; Pinheiro 2008; Wilk-Woś 2010); raising regional and global security (Atwan 2010; Bourquin 2003); development of the educational system (Yaron 1993); and civil society (Anderson 2010; Itad/COWI 2012; Kaur-Stubbs 2010) and women’s rights (Jaggar 2005). Some studies consider the dialogue between Muslim and Western countries at a macro level, like those of Foroutan (2004) who addresses cultural dialogue as a contribution towards resolving cultural conflicts. The role of intercultural dialogue in the foreign cultural policy of Iran and Germany from 1998-2013 has also been studied showing that ‘education’ is a suitable context of intercultural dialogue at the international level. Germany, with a democratic political system, has an integrated foreign cultural policy, and therefore, a better chance of benefitting from intercultural dialogue as an opportunity to develop a favourable image abroad. This is different from Iran where the political system is rather fragmented (both authoritarian and democratic)

and does not have a clear foreign cultural policy. Hence, it has fewer opportunities for intercultural dialogue activities compared to Germany (Kamali-Chirani 2019).

Dialogue is also reflected in research and critical thinking, e.g. 'dialogical logic' which is a systematic study of dialogues where 'two parties exchange arguments over a central claim' (Keiff 2011). Another relevant example is the 'philosophy of dialogue' by Martin Buber. Buber (1937) argues that human existence is based on relationships as it results from an exchange of thoughts between 'man' and 'man'. Buber's dialogue approach is reflected in the pedagogical field including qualitative research and phenomenology (Fife 2015), and educational techniques.

Intercultural dialogue has been linked strongly to fields of religion and faith studies, via terminologies like 'dialogue among religions', 'interreligious dialogue', and 'interfaith dialogue'. Some studies characterise dialogue of religions into four types: a dialogue of life; dialogue of actions; dialogue of theologian exchange; and dialogue of religious experiences (Güzelmansur 2009, pp. 539-541; Kaulig 2004, p. 78). 'Dialogue of life' is amongst people of a specific religion who live in a neighbourhood with people of another religion, and have an open interaction with one another. They face joy, suffering and human problems together, and try to solve them through dialogue. 'Dialogue of actions' is between Christians and non-Christians in their attempts to achieving development and progress in the society in which they work and live together 'Dialogue of theologians' is among experts who want to deepen their understanding of each other's religious heritage. In this case, the dialogue is a tool to learn about each other's religion. 'Dialogue of religious experience' is among people who have roots in a specific religious tradition and share their experiences about their spirituality. For instance, they explain to people of other religions how they think about and believe in God. This kind of dialogue is not solely for theological and moral, but also social reasons. Güzelmansur (2009, p. 539) argues that one of the motivations of Christians (Catholic Church) and Muslims to participate in such a dialogue is the need to have a peaceful and friendly relationship and co-habitation in a plural society. The Catholic church declared that Christian and Muslim encounters have the following four aspects:

1. perception, meaning that it promotes the perception that there are mutual fears between the two sides and there are plural features of Islam;
2. information, meaning that it provides opportunities for mutual understanding, common social and cultural tasks, as well as the necessity to help in specific fields such as kindergarten and hospitals;
3. self-assurance and testimony of faith, meaning it guarantees each partner that his/her faith is secure; and

4. cooperation, which means that it extends the ethic of cooperation towards each other (Ibid., pp.241-246).

The conditions for such dialogues are ‘understanding and empathy’; ‘belief in dynamic nature of truth’; ‘belief in the common ground or goal of all religions’, and ‘recognition of the other religion as a source of truth’ (Cornille 2013). According to Kandel (2005, p. 223), specific conditions of dialogue include: ‘Dialogue can be successfully directed, if both sides are honest, credible, open, have the readiness to take risks, firmness in ones’ convictions, reciprocity, preparedness to listen and self-critique, as well as a tendency to cooperate to answer practical questions.’

Most of these studies fail to combine the practical and theoretical dimensions of implementing intercultural dialogue in human relationships. The studies concentrate more on expectations on dialogue rather than the results. Nevertheless, the common thread between them is that dialogue has been used as a tool to maintain mutual understanding and guarantee equal rights of partners. Intercultural dialogue in sustainable development has also been studied but to a lesser extent as discussed in the next section.

5. INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN THE CONTEXT OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (SD)

This section will reflect on the role of intercultural dialogue in SD in academic debates. Values, worldviews and knowledge are linked to culture. They are central to SD because they, especially in multi-ethnic societies, build mutual understanding and human experience. Thus, the promotion of dialogue leads to sustainable futures. However, culture can be challenging as development policies do not always identify and accept culture as a valuable means towards achieving sustainability. Policies are often rigid and need time to adapt to cultural diversity. A UNESCO study points out that ‘policies that truly engage with culture should confront the double challenge that cultural diversity presents’ through the promotion of ‘creative diversity’ on the one hand, and ‘peaceful co-existence of culturally pluralistic societies’ on the other (Tilbury and Mulà 2009, p. 2). Dialogue among different cultural communities needs to be promoted in the development sector as it confronts different values and worldviews of people, and helps to nurture possibilities of new ways of living and a sustainable future.

Education for sustainable development is the next area which can be promoted through dialogue. Since there is a need to re-think the dominant models of teaching, practice and communication and challenge the short-term approaches and limited understanding of life and living systems, intercultural dialogue can contribute significantly to the field of education for SD. The UN created significant momentum under its ‘Decade of

Education for Sustainable Development (DESD)' to encourage governments to develop innovative education models for sustainable development policies and programmes. DESD was launched for 2005-14 and aimed to integrate the principles and practices of sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning and to encourage changes in knowledge, values and attitudes with the vision of enabling a more sustainable and justice society for all (Huckle and Wals 2015). However, results of some studies show that DESD's aims were not achieved. A study investigated relevant programmes in seven countries, including Pakistan, and found that intercultural dialogue is acknowledged, but 'rarely' promoted explicitly in Education for Sustainable Development policies (Tilbury and Mulà 2009). DESD was successful in highlighting the role of culture in education programmes, but still 'failed to acknowledge or challenge neoliberalism as a hegemonic force blocking transitions towards genuine sustainability' (Huckle and Wals 2015). According to them, education has to be outlined within four dimensions:

1. Scale dimension introduces students to the global society and how personal and collective decisions have impacts on distance humans and even non-humans.
2. Ethical dimension requires students to recognise sustainability as a normative notion and consider principles which might enable the development of a global society based on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace.
3. Relational dimension focuses on the social construction of such concepts, such as sustainability and citizenship.
4. Political dimension focuses on issues of social and environmental justice first raised when considering ecological footprints.

By enabling a programme through these four dimensions, education can be an effective vehicle to promote democratic global governance and sustainability. The study showed that some education disciplines are fit to initiate dialogue and can be efficiently applied through it. Ecopedagogy is another discipline which combines the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire with future-orientated ecological politics involving teachers and students carrying out projects in the classroom and community that open spaces for dialogue and allow critical analysis of the discourses surrounding sustainability (Ibid., p. 493).

Another study explores how SDG5, quality education, can be reached using dialogue-based activities as part of the pedagogic methods of a Finnish university. The activities are targeted to develop students' understanding of global education, citizenship and potential dispositions towards global responsibility. The students participate in an international seminar, with purposefully planned participatory activities and cross-

cultural dialogues, and reflect upon their learning about the global process in assignments. The study illustrates that students ‘learned about the global Education for All process and targets, and reflected on the general and personal significance of the process as well as the connections between the local and global.’ The results of the study indicate that dialogue-based learning activities guide students to develop their understanding of global education and to position themselves as responsible future education professionals (Lehtomäki, Moate and Posti-Ahokas 2018).

With regards to attaining SDG11, sustainable cities, there has been an initiative called the ‘Sustainable Cities Dialogue’ organised by UN and other international organisations within the framework of the United Nations Advisory Committee of Local Authorities and the Global Taskforce of local and regional governments. Among diverse results, it is significant that the participants reaffirmed that an enabling political, legal, institutional and financial framework is needed for the achievement of SDG 11 and the urban-related dimension of the 2030 Agenda. The common point of the meeting was the main role of ‘urban governance’ (UCLG, UN Habitat and Global Taskforce 2018), and necessity of high-level dialogues on issues such as ‘right to city and inclusive territories’; ‘opportunities for all culture and city diplomacy’; ‘territorial multi-level governance and sustainable financing’; and ‘resilient and sustainable cities capable of facing crisis’ (Ibid., pp. 30-48). The ‘Sustainable Cities Dialogue’ was not just a great opportunity to discuss the role of multi-governmental institutions in creating sustainable cities, but it offered rich possibilities to different stakeholders from all over the world to develop networking opportunities for the future. 350 participants from more than 25 countries, including 70 local elected officials, ministers, more than 40 national government officials and a range of international partners participated in the event (Ibid., pp. 60-61).

Intercultural dialogue can, despite difficulties, play a role to foster SD planning through education by addressing target groups not just pupils and students, but also civil society. Furthermore, it can assist in reaching SDGs, by targeting (among others) authorities who are directly in charge of local governments. As mentioned in academic debates above, this is a difficult task for it has to do with characteristics of planning and coordination of activities between stakeholders which may have structural limitations. The idea of adding dialogue as a communication option in the field of SD should not, however, bring over-expectations to solve all the problems at once. Moreover, SD itself has cultural connotations and interpretations demanding deep coordination at the local, national, regional and international level. The next section focuses on the role of dialogue in the work of an institute which works in Pakistan promoting a culture of SD.

6. INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE IN THE CONTEXT OF SDPI'S ACTIVITIES

This section explores the role of intercultural dialogue at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) in Pakistan. SDPI is a not-for-profit organisation which has been exclusively focusing on SD issues since 1992. It has been ranked as the 1st in Pakistan; 15th among South East Asia and the Pacific; and 52nd best independent think-tank in the world in 2020 (McGann 2020, pp. 93 and 237). To improve its ranking each year, it has dealt with challenges such as resource constraints, and growing competition. SDPI empowers local communities by promoting programmes which support the rights of minorities; enhance environmental resilience; support local innovations for sustainability and learning; and strengthen community voice.

Even though activities at SDPI are rarely formulated using the term 'dialogue', participants of the study believe that it is at the heart of the advocacy, research and training programmes of the Institute. Examples mentioned as dialogue activities include the following:

6.1. Sustainable Development Conference (SDC)

SDPI has been organising different dialogue forums, for instance, the SDC, for the past 22 years, providing a forum for dialogue for SDPI and national, regional and international researchers, practitioners, policy-makers and academia. It has focused on different issues such as digital society, securing peace and developing prosperity.

6.2. Policy Advice to Government

SDPI organises different initiatives to enrich the knowledge of different governmental institutions regarding new challenging topics. For instance, the Institute participated actively in the Women Parliamentarian's Caucus initiative and Alliance against Sexual Harassment. It also initiated the non-Muslim Parliamentarians' Caucus which aims at promoting co-existence by eradicating structural discrimination against non-Muslims and promoting non-Muslim sensitive legislation in Pakistan (SDPI 2015, p. 8). The Parliament tabled a bill about non-Muslims and the education they receive in the National Assembly based on research conducted by SDPI. The bill proposed establishing a National Commission on Education of Minorities. The Green Parliamentarians' Caucus (2016-18) is the next initiative which addressed domestic issues related to climate change (SDPI 2018, p. 19). The main objective was to provide parliamentarians with a platform to hold dialogues on environmental and SD issues. The Pakistan Climate Change Act 2017, passed by the National Assembly, was a result of the dialogues in this caucus.

6.3. Media

Another dialogue based-activity of SDPI is SDTV, a web-based media platform of the Institute which produces live-stream seminars, discussions, talk shows, reports, documentaries and social media videos on diverse issues like the Afghan peace process, youth and peacebuilding, governance reforms, and Pakistan-India dialogue.

6.4. Center for Learning and Development (CLD)

The next dialogue-based activity is implemented by CLD, with local and international organisations in the form of training, workshops and seminars. The Center conducts different workshops and training courses which are relevant to dialogue skills, such as social change management, community mobilisation, impact evaluation and cultural diversity, and courses to promote problem-solving, decision-making and interpersonal communication skills.

6.5. Track-II Dialogues

Moreover, SDPI remains the founder co-convenor of the South Asia Economic Summit and Track-II dialogues between Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan on climate change, food security and water resources.

6.6. Retreat

The retreat is an annual meeting at SDPI which lets the employees (heads, researchers, advocacy and capacity building staff) reflect on their current work and their short and long-term plans. This meeting was mentioned significantly by participants of the study as an example of ‘dialogue’, because it enables them to get involved in the future visioning about SDPI, despite conflicting demands and increasing work pressures.

SDPI’s staff emphasise that dialogue is a fundamental part of their work. In a survey³ conducted with researchers, advocacy and capacity building staff of SDPI, 81% shared that the main part of their professional work is based on dialogue (Figure 2); and 18% saw dialogue in 75% of their activities.

36% of those employed at SDPI mentioned the enhancement of ‘mutual’ and ‘multilateral understanding’ as the main aspect of a ‘good dialogue’; while the rest highlighted ‘respect’, ‘bringing new ideas’ and ‘logic’. The participants of the survey pointed to different activities as a good opportunity-provider of dialogue, such as the

³ According to the Human Resource Department of SDPI, 60 people worked in the Institute at the time of the survey, 40 in research, advocacy and capacity building sections. 25% responded to the survey.

SDC and Fellows Research Council meetings. However, the retreat, which takes place once a year, was in their view central:

I am generally too shy to comment or express my views in a group, but I did share it with Executive Director in the break, which he appreciated and encouraged me to participate publicly.

Female respondent, aged 28

This is an indication that the retreat provides not just a formal opportunity for expressing views, but also informal opportunities. The retreat, according to participants of the survey, created opportunities to understand and to be understood by others:

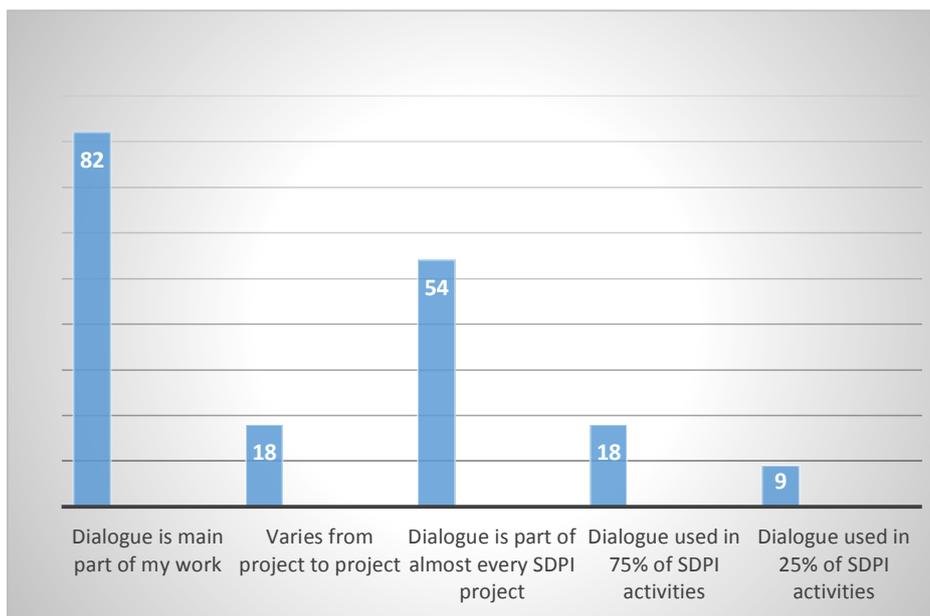
It helps me (to) understand others.

Male respondent, aged 52

Senior management seems to be very keen to understand what their colleagues wanted or plan.

Male respondent, aged 40+

Figure 2: Role of Dialogue in SDPI's Activities



Source: Survey data.

Although many respondents considered the retreat as a dialogue-based activity or an activity which gives an opportunity for dialogue, there are some elements of the retreat which are not dialogue-based and should not be. For instance, generally speaking, a typical retreat should have an invitation list, each employee doesn't need to participate. On the other hand, the attendance of some employees because of their involvement in different projects is crucially important. Deciding the time and site of the retreat needs to be discussed with staff. Perceiving the retreat as a dialogue opportunity is relevant given the knowledge of the respondents about what dialogue is - a specific communication type/tool. Many of the participants mentioned mutual understanding as a goal of dialogue, and listening as the main expectation. However, this could not be determined. Nevertheless, motivation and curiosity, to understand and apply dialogue among the participants, were high. Analysing the responses offers the following insights:

1. There are rich dynamics of intercultural dialogue in the work of SDPI. These dynamics include adding dialogue as a vital type of communication into different initiatives such as Parliamentary Caucuses, conferences and the retreat.
2. The respondents believe in the importance of dialogue and express their motives and ideas through reasons and with detail.
3. The definition of dialogue is unclear to the respondents and needs to be enhanced.
4. 'Dialogue' as a formal tool for SD is not being used, for instance, in education. This can be due to limited reading or/and study in this regard.

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated the role of intercultural dialogue in sustainable development in general and in the work of the Sustainable Development Policy Institute. The study recommends that intercultural dialogue can be integrated into the Institute's ethos by:

7.1. Promoting Education for Sustainable Development

Although dialogue has been a significant part of SDPI activities, it should integrate dialogue skills into the research and education culture of its staff as well as its stakeholders such as civil society actors, students, teachers, academics as well as government officials. Capacity building of staff should be undertaken to learn about, apply dialogue skills and then combine them with key issues such as coping mechanisms for the Coronavirus pandemic; critical thinking; anti-discrimination; and localising SDGs for target groups which work on governance, energy, gender, food security, peace and conflict resolution.

7.2. Strengthening Networking of Stakeholders at Local and Regional Levels

Achieving the SDGs is almost impossible without having coordination and cooperation with and sharing information within different levels of governmental organisations and civil society at the local, regional and international levels. A tool to make this cooperation effective is networking. For developing effective networks, dialogue is vital.

7.3. Taking Advantage of International Stakeholders

Islamabad is an international capital. 79 diplomatic missions are located in the city. Many international organisations such as the United Nations, The World Bank and European Union have offices in the city as well. SDPI can use its prestige and the trust it has earned by organising a regular ‘SDPI Dialogue Forum’ and invite different international stakeholders for discussing SDGs and challenges in their application in different cultural contexts. Discussions should be two-way between international and Pakistani participants. This will strengthen mutual understanding as well as showcase the soft image of the country, and consequently, make a positive contribution to Pakistan’s foreign policy.

7.4. Advising the Government to use Dialogue at Different Levels

SDPI should conduct research and develop proposals for the government regarding the importance of intercultural dialogue. It should encourage the government (at the federal and provincial level) to utilise intercultural understanding through dialogue for its development projects and programmes, especially those for the rural areas; crisis management; enhancing its foreign policy and soft power.

8. CONCLUSION

Pakistani society is ethnically, culturally and socially diverse. This diversity brings rich dynamism to the potential of intercultural dialogue, making the execution of sustainable development difficult to plan but not impossible. Institutes, like SDPI, can go a long way in making this difficult task a much-needed reality in the implementation of sustainable developments projects and plans at the organisational and local level in the country.

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