



POLICY BRIEF

IMPROBABLE DIALOGUE

BUILDING NEW GROUND FOR EFFECTIVE YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN PEACE PROCESSES



swiss
peace

Co-authors
ACHALEKE CHRISTIAN LEKE
BALLO NGOMNA



@Loyocameroon



Local Youth Corner Cameroon



www.loyocameroon.org



info@loyocameroon.org



(237)

650 906 256
690 446 458
620 127 836

Improbable Dialogue: Building a New Ground for Effective Youth Engagement and Participation in Peace processes

About us:

Local Youth Corner Cameroon (LOYOC) is a youth-led civil society organization created in 2002. The organization currently applies research and capacity building among its methodologies to support youth and community development, peace building, conflict transformation, and countering/preventing violent extremism (P/CVE). Over the past years, LOYOC Cameroon has focused special attention on peacebuilding activities, facilitating dialogues and building social cohesion between communities, supporting livelihood programs as peacebuilding tools and putting young people at the forefront of processes.

Note:

This paper draws from field opinions and exchanges captured during the series of Improbable Dialogue sessions organised by LOYOC with funding and support from swisspeace as part of the ENERGY (Enhancing Youth Capacities and Fostering Improbable Dialogue for Peace). The paper brings forth solid recommendations on how this form of dialogue can be used in building a new ground for effective youth engagement and participation in peace process. The brief itself provide concise analysis to inform current debates and decision making. The last part of the brief provides key policy recommendations targeting the government, development partners, civil society organisations and youth themselves to allow readers to quickly grasp the main points.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ongoing conflict in Cameroon’s North-West and South-West Regions has highlighted the critical need for inclusive dialogue processes involving young people to build trust and mutual understanding. Traditional approaches have often excluded youth, exacerbating tensions and hindering peace efforts. In response, the ENERGY Project (Enhancing Youth Capacities and Fostering Improbable Dialogue for Peace) was initiated to promote youth participation in peace and security discussions through innovative dialogue methods.

Improbable dialogue, as conceptualised by John Paul Lederach, transcends traditional boundaries by bringing together diverse stakeholders who may not typically engage. This bottom-to-bottom dialogue creates a safe space for marginalised voices, like youth and women, fostering understanding and collaboration. Participants develop a common understanding of peacebuilding concepts and work towards actionable solutions. The success of improbable dialogue lies in its phased approach, emphasising pre-dialogue preparation, active dialogue facilitation, and post-dialogue follow-up. This ensures sustained engagement and consensus-building among participants. Importantly, improbable dialogue goes beyond rhetoric to inspire tangible action, facilitated by impartial but supportive dialogue facilitators.

Recommendations for fostering an enabling environment for improbable dialogues involve multi-stakeholder collaboration. The government should facilitate community-level consultations, support dialogue toolkits, and integrate improbable dialogue into official peace processes. Development partners can contribute by supporting youth exchange programmes, funding research on improbable dialogue, and fostering communities of practice. Civil society organisations play a crucial role in popularising improbable dialogues, sensitising youth, and creating spaces for transformative dialogue. Lastly, youth themselves must commit to participating in dialogues, mobilising their peers, and leveraging dialogue tools to advocate for peace.

Introduction

Creating safe spaces for young people to build their capacity, exchange ideas, and take part effectively in building trust and mutual understanding has been referred to by peacebuilding practitioners as one of the most effective ways to prevent conflict and build peace in fragile settings.¹ Since 2016, what is today being referred to as the "Anglophone Crisis" has become one of Cameroon's several humanitarian crises that has been raging in the country's North-West Region (NW) and South-West Region (SW). Over time, this crisis has drastically transformed into a violent conflict between separatist armed groups and the Cameroonian military. This has led to an entrenched crisis where communities have been deprived of opportunities for education, socio-economic engagements, and the mass, forceful movement of individuals into other regions.² This has become more complicated as there is growing mistrust and misunderstanding between and among young people, which has contributed to reducing the chances of young people participating effectively in these processes. Young people claim their exclusion is unfortunately a sad reality in the conception, implementation, and evaluation of many of these processes³. "Even in cases where some young people are to be involved, the usual faces are brought, sometimes with little or no opportunity to make contributions" said a young person engaged in peacebuilding.

In an effort to create more opportunities for young people to be imbibed with the culture of inclusive dialogue, Local Youth Corner Cameroon with funding from swisspeace piloted the ENERGY Project (Enhancing Youth Capacities and Fostering Improbable Dialogue for Peace), which aims to encourage youth participation in peace and security discussions through improbable dialogue between youths in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon. During this process, we realise that young

¹ <https://peacelab.blog/2021/04/camerouns-anglophone-crisis-youths-are-the-key-to-peace>

² <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/central-africa/cameroon/250-camerouns-anglophone-crisis-crossroads>

³ Interview with a youth peacebuilder in the South West region of Cameroon

people are more passionate about dialogue when they are engaging their peers from different walks of life and when the process is creative and innovative. Our use of exercises and games in a tailored ‘improbable manner’, made young people trust the process and more committed to finding solutions to the crisis. As was the case in Columbia, improbable dialogues gave opportunities for diverse groups of individuals to dialogue towards transforming and ending the conflict that was faced by a country (Lederach, 2016).

As was further emphasised by Irena and Ali (2019), youth participation in the peace process is not only having a seat on the table, but rather youth participation can be in the form of inside rooms, around rooms, and outside rooms. In line with this, it was captured that young Cameroonians in the crisis-hit regions prefer to participate in line with the proposed three layers, noting that it creates more opportunity for them. According to youths who participated during the Grand National Dialogue, the appointment of the Cameroon National Youth Council President as the Vice President of the process was a huge success, but it did not leverage the young people who were beside the room and outside the room in local communities.

Thus, this brief demonstrates how transformational dialogue can be when young people from different walks of life and backgrounds are given the opportunity to exchange ideas and collaboratively work together. This policy brief builds on empirical evidence and lessons learned from the different improbable dialogue sessions designed and piloted by Local Youth Corner Cameroon since 2022. It further provides recommendations to national and international actors and stakeholders committed to fostering dialogue and lasting peace in Cameroon.

What is Improbable Dialogue?

An improbable dialogue is a form of exchange that brings together community members or representatives from different backgrounds who may not normally work together or meet to address conflict-related issues. John Paul Lederach, in an interview on *El Espectador* (2021), described “improbable” dialogue as a dialogue that requires us to move beyond only talking to those who are like us and who think like us. These kinds of dialogue use a combination of discussions, exercises, and

games to achieve their objectives. It helps in building trust and understanding and offering a safe space for exchange and mutual understanding. Once this trust and confidence are established within the group, participants can jointly elaborate on new ideas and innovative ways to transform conflicts and build peace. One of the youth participants during the pilot phase qualified improbable dialogue as a “bottom-bottom dialogue.” He claimed that while taking part in the first improbable dialogue session, he did not feel someone was bigger or more important than him.⁴ Another dialogue participant added that the inclusive nature of the dialogue got their attention. He could not believe that, as a bike rider, “I was in the same room with other young people from politics, ministries and others and I was expressing myself with no fear”.⁵

Worthy to note is how improbable dialogue is operationalized in stages: before the dialogue process itself, during the dialogue, and after the dialogue. It requires proper planning with a deliberate interest to allow the participants of the dialogue to decide on what they will want to talk about or reflect on during the dialogue process.

Why do Improbable dialogues matter?

Improbable dialogue guarantees the participation of people who are rarely invited to formal dialogue processes, among other key actors and stakeholders, in resolving conflicts affecting them. This form of dialogue provides an opportunity for marginalised voices and even victims of conflict, such as women and youth, to effectively participate in a bottom-to-bottom or bottom-to-top conversation. “For the days I have participated in this dialogue, I can now pride myself on being a solution-maker. I am happy because this dialogue has gone against the ‘normal Cameroon style’, where people like us will never be invited,” said a participant who is a bike rider.

What makes improbable dialogues even more interesting is the fact that they establish a safe environment for participants to develop a common base of knowledge of concepts such as peacebuilding, conflict resolution, youth participation, and understanding the conflict from different points of view. In the spirit of tolerance, participants learn to acknowledge people’s perspectives while

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Participant in the First improbable Dialogue in Douala, June 2022

working towards finding a common ground for a solution. Most importantly, improbable dialogue evolves from dialogue to action with the support of impartial facilitators who take on the role of creating a sincere venue for discussion. This role is usually a support role (working "behind the scenes" to support the participants during the dialogue), where the facilitator supports the participants to have more substantial discussions. Here, the facilitators create a conducive and reliable environment by structuring and sequencing the dialogue process, facilitating communication, and ensuring confidence-building among participants.

To add to that, improbable dialogue by nature is not a one-off activity but a process that focuses on engaging a small group for a longer period to ensure they build trust and understanding despite their differences. This is done with the objective of finding common ground or consensus among participants in the dialogue. From this, the improbable dialogue setting responds to the concerns of many young Cameroonians, who claim the Major National Dialogue and other local dialogue processes in Cameroon only seem like a one-off activity, with many decisions arrived at in a very short space of time.⁶

The project manager of Local Youth Corner Cameroon noted that, as a youth-led organisation, piloting this Improbable Dialogues was very transformational to them as it took them over 7 months to design the process. He further explained that the improbability of the process is even more reassuring as the participants of the dialogue themselves shape the agenda for each dialogue session using the guide. A youth-civil society leader noted that; "imagine that you go for a dialogue where you see experts but they allow you to rather make proposals in terms of themes, location and other important details of the process."⁷ Sincerely it made we feel important and part of the process he noted. Another dialogue participant noted that as a young person he feels bored when he invited to place were its only speeches, people are too serious and there are no activities to help relax and get to know those they are in the room with. Responding to this, Atefor Jude, noted that in the post test of the dialogue, the participants were triggered by the fact that the exercises and games imbibed in the dialogue session gave them an opportunity to know each other better and also helped them to air out

⁶<https://www.africanews.com/2019/11/01/has-cameroon-s-national-dialogue-delivered-solutions-to-anglophone-crisis/>

⁷ Interview with one of the youths CSO leaders during the pilot phase.

their perspectives while having opportunities to play.⁸ As noted by Sarah (2020) a dialogue process for youth which adopts a guided process blended with innovative and recreation activities which triggers trust building remains very critical for community level dialogues.

Recommendations for Creating an Enabling Environment for Improbable Dialogues

Enhancing understanding and effective practice through the active participation of youth in improbable dialogues is a crucial domain of interest for the government, national and international organisations, and youth themselves. This interest is part of contributing efforts to lasting peace since the escalation of conflict in the NW and SW regions from 2017 to date.

To the Government:

- As a means of creating an enabling space for improbable dialogues, it is important for the government and other state policymakers (both local and national) to establish community-level consultations involving community members and local government officials. These consultations help to gather the aspirations of the different participants and stakeholders engaging in the dialogue process.
- Conduct follow-up consultations with improbable dialogue participants and local officials to get their opinions on ways to popularise this form of dialogue in the Cameroon sphere and the lessons learned. These consultations should serve as an opportunity to create a bigger avenue for high-level improbable dialogues that can engage state authorities and young people towards complimenting the major national dialogue.
- Support the development of a "toolkit/guide" for similar interventions in other settings, which can accompany communities and institutions in their efforts towards galvanising dialogue

⁸ Interview with Local Youth Corner Cameroon project manager for the improbable dialogues.

processes across the country. Such initiatives can also be taken by institutions involved in creating platforms for dialogue to share and document their experiences.

- There is a need for the government to organise improbable dialogue as an alternative way of building trust and understanding among conflicting parties from different walks of life. The government and its decentralised institutions have close connections to local communities and marginalised groups, and they can provide valuable insights into the needs and concerns of those who may be directly affected by the dialogue process. Such processes should see collective action with CSOs in order to strengthen community buy-in.

To development partners:

- Development partners should support young people in conflict-affected NW and SW regions through exchange programmes, study tours, and internships, promoting cross-cultural learning and knowledge sharing. This form of support will empower young people with insights into conflict resolution, peacebuilding strategies, and community resilience, equipping them with the skills to contribute positively to improbable dialogue processes in their communities.
- Development partners should support research on improbable dialogue by funding and providing technical assistance to CSOs working on this theme. In the same spirit, development partners should strengthen research skills and methodologies among researchers and organizations. This form of support from the side of development partners will help inform policies and interventions that engage youth in constructive dialogue.
- Development partners should support the establishment of a community of practice for dialogue in the youth space. By leveraging resources, expertise, and networks, development partners can play a vital role in nurturing vibrant communities of practice for dialogue. This kind of collaboration will contribute to knowledge sharing, capacity building, and joint action towards addressing development challenges and driving positive change.

To civil society Organisations:

- There is a need for the popularisation of improbable dialogues within the civic space by civil society actors. With regard to the popularisation component of the initiative, it will be important to consider it from an incremental perspective, where we want to consider the political sensitivity and security challenges in the two English-speaking regions. For these reasons, organisations need to work on popularising this form of dialogue within civic space while maintaining a low public profile, only sharing important stakeholders with those that are directly engaged.
- Civil society organisations should engage in the sensitization and training of young people on how to use improbable dialogues to advocate for their participation and to tackle structural issues that constitute the root causes of prevailing conflicts in their communities.
- More so, spaces for improbable dialogue must be created by CSOs with the mandate of empowering young people to counter violent extremism and mitigate radicalization in Cameroon. These spaces should be maintained over time so that they become transformative venues where people can exchange ideas and proposals on how, in concrete terms, collective well-being may be improved. Such spaces for improbable dialogue are important because they will help in collaborative learning and exchange on peacebuilding efforts.

To Youths:

- Youths should commit to avail themselves when opportunities for dialogue arise. They should develop the culture of mobilising their peers from different walks of life to dialogue about the issues they face and propose common solutions.
- Youths should leverage existing tools for dialogue to organise dialogue among themselves. This is critical to imbibing in them the culture of dialogue and setting them apart as a critical community with knowledge and a willingness to support national processes for peace.

Conclusion

For young people to have ownership and control over conflict resolution and the peacebuilding

process, it is essential for the government and other stakeholders to support young people in creating safe spaces that will permit them to meet and build trust and mutual understanding among young people. These spaces will also serve as platforms to reflect on and propose solutions to the peace and security challenges young people face in their communities. The improbability of such meetings makes them unique because they provide a bottom-to-bottom and bottom-up opportunity for people who will hardly meet to discuss peace and security issues. Though this style of dialogue is new to Cameroonian society, youth-led organisations like LOYOC in Cameroon have been piloting this form of dialogue. The success so far serves as a basis to inform future processes. Objectives and community-level dialogue have made participants in this process term it “one of the most appropriate forms of dialogue to engage community members in resolving conflicts among communities.”

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