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INCREMENTAL STEPS TOWARDS TRUST
An Interview with David Plumb

Linda Botha with Pablo Lumerman

This interview is no. 11 of 15 in a series of Reflections from Practice that ACDS produced for ACCESS Facility. The series shares insights on company-community dialogue and rights-compatible, interest-based conflict resolution from senior practitioners. Please cite as Botha, L. with Lumerman, P. (2015). Incremental steps towards trust: An interview with David Plumb. Reflections from Practice Series No. 11 (B. Ganson, ed.). The Hague: ACCESS Facility. Accessible from Scholar.SUN.ac.za.

David Plumb is director for Latin America at the Consensus Building Institute (CBI). David is a mediator, facilitator, trainer and researcher specializing in consensus building, negotiation, conflict resolution and designing stakeholder engagement strategies. He helps to lead CBI's Corporate Community Engagement practice and has experience managing complex natural resource disputes and public policy issues in the U.S., Africa, Latin America, and Europe. David is a bilingual Spanish speaker and currently lives in Santiago, Chile. A Fulbright scholar, David holds a BA in Politics and Latin-American Studies from Princeton University.

Question: *What is one of the more significant issues you face when you are facilitating company-community dialogue?*

Answer: Moving beyond the distrust that pervades company-community dialogues.

Lack of trust is a recurring theme during many dialogue processes. Distrust exists between companies and communities, between governments and communities, and amongst community members themselves. Dialogue facilitators are also often viewed with suspicion.

This is in part because today's dialogue processes take place in the shadow of the injustices and bad practices that took place decades earlier. Bad corporate behaviors, unresponsive governments, communities at loggerheads with each other and dubious consultants have left their mark on people's collective memory, resulting in an atmosphere of wariness.

This creates a legacy in which people are hesitant to engage in conversations with companies. Given this context, as a facilitator, you can't rush in and expect people to welcome you with open arms. You have to start by exploring the kind of actions needed that might build incremental levels of trust. This step might seem obvious, but many people forget about the historical baggage and the need for trust building, and then they wonder why nobody shows up at meetings.

To design a dialogue process, one needs to start with key questions: *How can we start to jointly identify the issues and the conditions for a constructive interaction? How do we move forward without dismissing people's fears? How do we make this conversation more human?* My job is to create a space where all actors can begin to find answers to these questions as we embark on the long and slow journey of developing trust.

Question: *What is an example of this challenge?*

Answer: The interaction between a fishing village and a large solar energy project.

In northern Chile, a company wanted to build a project that would store solar energy by pumping large amounts of seawater uphill into a reservoir during the day, and creating hydro power at night by letting the water fall back into the ocean. A neighboring fishing village was extremely skeptical of this proposed development and its potential impact on coastal fishing resources. Historical legacies ran deep. The village had the experience of coal-fired power plants and mining ports coming into neighboring communities and impacting the environment. Community members assumed their concerns would be ignored, as had so often been the case.

The energy initiative was founded by a group of Chileans in their early 30s who realized they had to break the existing paradigm of company-community interaction along the coast. Companies typically negotiated a compensation payment with fishermen and discussed environmental issues with government authorities. This type of interaction didn't address the mistrust between actors nor the underlying concerns of the communities.

The energy storage project sought a different approach. It invested in two years of constant dialogue with the community while it was undertaking its environmental studies and defining key elements of project design. Project engineers at times found the conversations uncomfortable, and none of the actors were accustomed to this kind of interaction. The dialogue required real engagement with people, not just communicating information to them. It also required spending time to understand

each other: *What history shapes us? What are our dreams? What do we worry about? What are our core interests?*

Question: *How did this impact the parties' ability to achieve rights-compatible, interest-based outcomes?*

Answer: Parties were able, over a long period of time, to articulate their interests and explore different options for making the project compatible with the community's interests.

The parties' patient approach allowed them to educate themselves about different relationship and benefits-sharing models and visit other communities that had gone through similar experiences. Together they started questioning the dominant paradigm in Chile, which focused almost entirely around a financial compensation payment.

Community leaders asked the company to fund technical advisers to help them better understand the environmental studies, as well as a lawyer to help them negotiate and write a benefits agreement. In the end, the company agreed to these requests, betting that a more empowered community is a better dialogue counterpart.

The first two years of the discussion centered around environmental and project design issues. The parties made the most progress building trust when fisherman and other community members were directly involved in conducting studies and reviewing design options. The constant, direct and structured interaction helped the community and the company understand more clearly their respective interests and priorities. The parties also worked out a long-term benefit-sharing arrangement.

There were plenty of obstacles along the way. Some people on both sides felt frustrated by the seemingly slow process and wanted to "cut to the chase" and talk about money. Also, some community members didn't feel represented by existing community leadership, and sought a direct conversation with the company.

But at the heart of many company-community disputes is a sense of vulnerability that communities feel. The steps taken to level the playing field and address this perception helped create the conditions for a constructive dialogue about the issues that matter most.

Question: *The answer to what question would have helped you be able to more effectively intervene as a third party?*

Answer: How do we stand up and fight for what we believe in, while having the humility to sit down and talk with those we disagree with?

Despite the fact that I increasingly see companies engaging in exemplary dialogue processes, some try to take short cuts. We still need activists and human rights defenders to be vocal about these injustices and asymmetries of power. Throughout history, political activism and social movements have been a major source of societal transformation.

However, we must think about how we can move beyond adversarial approaches. Aggressive, confrontational advocacy is an essential part of change, but we also need people who can build bridges between opposing sides. We have to be able to work together to create something we can't even imagine yet because we haven't had that conversation with each other. So many opportunities remain unexplored, since a truly generative discussion is not possible if we are all sitting in our respective trenches. I saw this with the fishing village. Despite resistance, there was enough of a critical mass amongst people who were willing to engage the other actor to explore ideas, even as mistrust remained high. This made a creative dialogue possible.

Maintaining a sense of humility and openness can be tough when you are working through a complex conflict situation. We all need to accept that we are not the only ones who believe in something, who propose to know the "truth" about a situation. People in conflict situations need to cultivate a mindset that allows them to passionately defend what they believe in, while staying in the conversation in a constructive manner. I believe a thoughtful combination of humility and passion are the key ingredients for growing a healthy dialogue culture all over the world.