The U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group: Make Agent Orange History
Track Two diplomacy and the case of the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group

Lesson B
Process Discussion Guide

Preparing for the First Meeting of U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin

Discussion points

Five key elements of Track Two talks:

a) Neutrality—Within the context of the dialogue group, the participants must be, agreeably, at a neutral position of power relative to each other; participants must enter the dialogue in good faith with a neutral stance on the outcome of the dialogue, addressing their concerns while leaving personal agendas outside and working toward the larger purpose of the talks; and the convener must not represent any one point of view in regard to the agenda issues.

b) Timing/window of opportunity—Track Two talks are generally in response to timely concerns or conflict, that if not dealt with, will likely escalate or cause opposing parties (often governments) to become further entrenched in their positions regarding.

c) Stakes (more opportunity)—The value of Track Two diplomacy is that it provides all stakeholders with an opportunity to participate in determining an outcome that impacts them and their constituents, whether it is designing an action plan, negotiating terms of an agreement, or establishing policy. A Track Two forum, in the absence of “official” government representation and political pressures that accompany it, often allows for more creativity and outside-the-box problem solving.

d) Discussion channels—Dialogue changes from one way, often top down from a power source, to two-way discussion between neutral participants.

e) Participants’ credentials—The credentials of participants in Track Two talks are an important consideration because of the role participants’ play in influencing governments or other organizations, each other, and the public. Private citizen acting in unofficial capacity are often selected for their expertise related to a relevant field, proven ability to act in a neutral capacity, and/or ability to influence decision-making powers with decisions or proposals generated in the Track Two talks.

Why in late 2006 was Track Two diplomacy a tool whose time had come for Agent Orange?

• Why was it necessary to tackle issues surrounding Agent Orange?
• What are varying viewpoints regarding Agent Orange?
• What role did Ford Foundation play in this dialogue?
First considerations for engaging citizen-to-citizen dialogue:

a. Purpose of meeting — Purpose for enlisting private citizens in Track Two diplomatic efforts must be clear. In this case, U.S./Vietnamese relations were volatile and government officials had too much invested, politically, in their position on the use and reported effects of Agent Orange to appear to be willing to negotiate terms of clean-up efforts.

b. Objectives for meeting — See S.M.A.R.T Goals (below)

c. Participants — Who gets invited, who does not, and why are all important considerations when planning citizen-to-citizen dialogue.

d. Location — Determine a location that is neutral or provides a necessary framework for the discussion

Based on notes from Charles Bailey:

• Preparation for the first meeting included a great deal of time dedicated to trust-building. Prior to the initial formal meeting, delegates spent a few days together visiting sites in Vietnam and dining. Why is this an important piece of convening a group like the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group? What are the cultural implications of allotting time to build relationships?

  Note: Consider Japanese corporate culture and the high degree of importance placed on relationship-building prior to engaging in any type of business discussions.

• The original Dialogue Members were not initially enthusiastic about the meeting. They were concerned about the politics between their nations, varying agendas, and they questioned whether or not they could accomplish the initial goals of the Ford Foundation.

• One of the meeting delegates, Madam Ton Nu Thi Ninh, asked Charles Bailey who will speak first at the first meeting. Why is this important? What are the implications?

Consider S.M.A.R.T. Goals when determining meeting tasks:

Tasks identification starts by asking: “What in the collective experience of participants needs to be done?”

S — be Specific
M — make sure goals and objectives are Measurable
A — be Ambitious and encourage a far “reach”
R — think big while still being Realistic so to encourage success
T — be Time bound by establishing a timeline and realistic but firm deadlines

Invite participants into the process by asking them to establish a code of conduct (sometimes referred to as “ground rules”) and group conditions for dialogue:

a. Establish a code of conduct (operational philosophy). This could be as simple as a set of ground rules developed by the group agreeing to things such as: whomever has the floor will speak without interruption; all participants will come prepared to meetings having reviewed all materials distributed ahead of time; or all beliefs will be honored.
b. Establish procedures and policies of group.
Is the group informal or are they following a rigid format such as Roberts Rules of Order? What are decision-making procedures: Majority wins? Super majority? Consensus?

c. Determine conditions for future discussions:
   • Consider necessary cultural protocols
   • Determine a location that is neutral or provides a necessary framework for the discussion (as in the case of the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group).
   • Frequency of meeting must be considered related to deadlines and timeliness of the topic.