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Safe Spaces in Unsafe Environments – Facilitating Dialogue and Reflection at the UN Climate Conference

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The co-creative reflection and dialogue spaces hosted by RIFS researchers at the UN Climate Conferences provided “safe-enough” spaces for fruitful dialogue and collaboration.

In our recent publication “Safe Spaces in Unsafe Environments – Experiences from COP26 About Hosting Inclusive Spaces for Deep Encounters and Reflection”, we summarize our experiences with designing and facilitating “safe-enough” spaces for fruitful dialogue and collaboration at the UNFCCC COP. Two key observations that we make in this publication are that relationship-building can significantly deepen the quality of discussions in these spaces and that acknowledging the unsafety of a space actually helps to build more safety among people.

Complex challenges require the cooperation of many disciplines and perspectives in transdisciplinary processes. The research group TranS-Mind explores structures, mindsets and practices (“transdisciplinary process knowledge”) that enable groups of people from diverse backgrounds to engage in constructive cooperation, knowledge integration, and problem-solving. A key dimension of this research is the question of how people with different backgrounds and potentially diverging viewpoints and interests can be supported in building trustful relationships as a foundation for potential subsequent collaboration.

The UNFCCC climate conferences (COPs) are among the most prominent global arenas for international collaboration on sustainability. Here, tens of thousands of experts and stakeholders from all over the world get together for two weeks to address the challenges of global warming. A programme of side events takes place parallel to the political negotiation process. While these side

events are conventionally set up as a sequence of frontal presentations or panels with little interaction between presenters and participants, the RIFS has been hosting a “Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Space (CCRDS)” at these conferences since 2018.

The CCRDS sessions aim to help participants build relationships for mutual learning within the field of climate action and strengthen their sense of agency. The sessions feature a variety of formats, drawn from different methodologies, including circle dialogues, worm data formats, systems constellations, meditations and practices from deep ecology and psychodynamic coaching. In this new publication, the authors – who come from different disciplines, age groups and cultural backgrounds, from natural sciences to psychology, from activists to business and public administration – reflect and summarize what they have learned through facilitating these sessions.

A starting point for our learnings was that participants often came into the CCRDS sessions with a lot of accumulated frustration from the subjective sense of a dysfunctional culture of communication at the COP. Many participants had experienced or witnessed phenomena of injustice or transgressions and generally a lack of listening and creativity. A key issue for the facilitation was therefore to start the sessions in a way that allowed the participants to transition from their frustration (and often complain) into a mode of constructive relationship with the other participants. A significant amount of time was usually spent in smaller groups (typically duos or trios) or in silence to “arrive” in the space and be open to meeting people in a way that differed from the culture that was perceived as dominant in the COP venue. This phase of arriving often included practices like connecting to one’s body (e.g., breath or physical

sensations) or practices of personal relationship building (storytelling about the origin and meaning of one's name, for example). These kinds of practices helped to 'clear the air' and create conditions in which participants were ready to calmly discuss more substantive issues, listen to each other, and build constructively on others' comments and contributions.

The authors also reflect critically on the constraints faced by facilitators in this and similar contexts. At the climate conferences, for example, sessions were usually held on an open-door basis and were frequently affected by various disturbances (background noise, interruptions etc.) as a consequence. Many of the co-authors reported that a practice of awareness (i.e., including a short meditation about background noise rather than simply trying to ignore it) helped participants build focus for the conversation and made them less receptive to disturbances. It also became clear that allowing participants to join the conversation mid-session can be detrimental to the safety of the space and the participants who had previously spent time building trusting relationships. People arriving late often brought the exact mental state into the conversation that the other participants had previously had time to "leave behind". As the aspiration of the session was to be as inclusive as possible, facilitators experimented with various practices to allow people to join the conversation at certain stages during the session without impacting its safety.

One of the most promising learnings from the CCRDS experiments was the experience of witnessing people from very different cultural backgrounds building trustful relationships during our sessions. Despite their often conflicting viewpoints, people from different countries and global regions were able to connect with each other in ways that allowed for mutual understanding and constructive

exchange, a capacity that often cannot be taken for granted in the context of the climate conferences.

With the work presented in this article, the authors intend to encourage other researchers and stakeholders to explore new forms of engagement and communication outside their “comfort zone” or professional training. While the COP is a challenging venue and does not “invite” relational approaches and deeper encounters of the kind pursued by the authors, the experiments described in this article were subjectively experienced as a very meaningful way to engage with other stakeholders at the COP.

The learnings gathered since the inception of the Co-Creative Reflection and Dialogue Spaces have contributed to a more systematic understanding of transdisciplinary process knowledge. They also informed the development of new communication formats such as the FONA Forum of the German Federal Ministry of Research and Education and cooperation with key stakeholders in the transdisciplinary science landscape (the Volkswagen Foundation, for example). The findings of this practice and research also contributed to the development of training courses for other stakeholders who wish to use similar practices in their work, particularly in politically contested environments.

Link:

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