

Roundtable meeting on Culture and Dialogue

November 2022



Swedish Dialogue Institute
for the Middle East and North Africa

Executive summary

In early November, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted a roundtable discussion exploring interlinkages between culture and dialogue, peace building and resilience. The event was centred around questions on how dialogue can benefit from a better integration of culture as a tool to foster empathy and understanding, and on the sharing best practices in this field. The meeting was attended by a group of eminent personalities, working within both the cultural sector (music, theatre, film, and arts) and on dialogue and peace building (international institutions, as well as think tanks and civil society).

While participants stressed that art must be allowed to be art in its own right, free from moral, political, or utilitarian function – art is also a crucial human expression, reflecting on society as it is, and presenting alternative interpretations and ideas.

A key message from the meeting was that culture has the power to foster empathy and understanding, and to help overcoming prejudices, divides and polarisation and that culture can play an essential role in breaking taboos and dealing with shortcomings in society, as well as be an effective tool in addressing trauma.

It was stressed that freedom of expression - including cultural expressions - is essential for a society's wellbeing, development, stability, and peace; and as an essential instrument to elaborate society's tensions and aspirations. Therefore, further work is needed to integrate culture and dialogue, and to connect it with diplomacy, development, and peace building, through bringing together different actors and diverse perspectives. Collaborative approaches and working through networks and systems of "training of trainers", were some emerging ideas on how to achieve progress.

Report

In early November the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa hosted a roundtable discussion exploring interlinkages between culture and dialogue, peace building and resilience. The event was centred around questions on how dialogue can benefit from a better integration of culture as a tool to foster empathy and understanding, and sharing of best practices in this field.

The meeting took place in connection to a visit to Amman, by Laura Hassler, Founder and Executive Director of [Musicians Without Borders](#), a leading international NGO, with a mission to promote music for social change and peace building. The organisation works with local partners in different parts of the world, including in the Middle East, where they currently have programmes in Palestine and Jordan, exploring possibilities for future work in other parts of the region. The meeting was attended by a group of eminent personalities, working within both the cultural sector (music, theatre, film, and arts) and on dialogue and peace building (international institutions, as well as think tanks and civil society).

After welcoming remarks by the Dialogue Institute's director Charlotta Sparre, *Laura Hassler* and *Tareq Jundi*, from Musicians Without Borders (MBV) talked about how support to musicians and their work, through the power of music, create positive change in their communities. They highlighted how music empowers, creates connection, and strengthens empathy. With concrete examples, they illustrated how they work, in collaborations with local musicians and organizations, in bringing music to people and places affected by war, armed conflict, and displacement and how this contributes decreasing tension, building hope, and restoring dignity.

In the following roundtable discussion participants shared their experiences and reflections on the interlinkages between culture and social change and between culture and dialogue, peace building and resilience. They stressed that culture, in its different forms, is a **vital expression of humanity**. Culture reflects on society as it is and presents alternative interpretations and ideas. It also fosters critical thinking, cohesion and ultimately creativity. *"Creativity is essential for a society to grow"*, as one participant put it.

Several participants pointed to culture **fostering empathy and helping to overcome prejudices, divides and polarisation**. One concrete example was presented by [PartnersLebanon](#), an organization that works with a vision of diverse communities coexisting in harmony and dignity with a shared sense of identity and belonging above all ideologies and beliefs; collaborating towards achieving and sustaining peace, prosperity and inclusion. In a school in Beirut, where there had been a lot of tension, bullying and fights between children from different backgrounds, PartnersLebanon had started a choir music project. Through shared appreciation of famous songs by Fairuz and other prominent musicians and by singing together children, who

previously fought each other had found a common ground and could start building a new common relationship and future. *“Seeing these kids singing together and suddenly seeing each other as fellow human beings, not as enemies, was like seeing the Berlin wall falling”*, said PartnersLebanon’s May Nasr.

A key take-away from the meeting was that **cultural expressions have a bridging effect, bringing people to better understand other perspectives and realities** than the ones self-lived. Joy, pain, grief, losses, etc. may take different forms for different individuals and in different circumstances. One participant summarised this, saying: *“Culture has the power of touching the brain, the heart and the soul, so that we, when reading a book, or watching a play or film, are reminded of our shared humanity”*. This means a potential to increase the *“understanding of the other”*, but also a better understanding of ourselves.

Many participants stressed the important role that culture can play in **breaking taboos and dealing with shortcomings in society**. By bringing up injustices, inequalities, discrimination, etc. for example in films, can raise awareness and stimulate debate. Culture can help increasing understanding, tolerance, or acceptance of “the other”, and as one participant put it *“unless we can accept each other, it’s hard to see how we can achieve peace and development”*.

Some participants also highlighted the power of culture as a “tool” to **deal with, or even heal, trauma**. Several examples were shared on how cultural work - literature, theatre, art, etc. - can facilitate dealing with traumatic experiences and can help express emotions. Not least working with children in addressing their experiences of wars, death, losses, etc. culture can be an essential “tool”.

During the discussion participants also reminded that **culture at times is used politically or ideologically with a purpose to divide**, rather than unite and to present “one truth at the expense of others”. It is important to be aware about this risk and to create spaces and possibilities for diverse points of views and perspective to be expressed. Participants emphasised that for a society to develop and to be “healthy and peaceful” **freedom of expression** is essential.

One participant brought up the question of **cultural heritage**, sometimes being a driver for conflict and at other times becoming entry-points for conflict resolution and mediation. She argued for raising awareness about the role of culture, amongst diplomats and peacebuilders.

While recognising the power of culture all participants also underlined the principle of **“art for art’s sake”**, in other words stressing that art must be allowed to be art in its own right, free from moral, political, or utilitarian function. One participant quoted the Egyptian filmmaker Yousri Nasrallah, who once asked about the message in a movie, had responded *“messages are for the postman - art has to stay art”*.

The roundtable ended in a joint **call for further work in connecting culture and dialogue, diplomacy, development, and peace building**. Participants suggested that the Dialogue Institute continue to bring together different actors and diverse perspectives, to connect on a deeper level through the transformative power of culture for social change. **Collaborative approaches** and working through **networks** and system of **training of trainers**, were some emerging ideas on how to achieve progress.

Summary of key reflections and recommendations:

- Culture has the power to **foster empathy and understanding, and to help overcoming prejudices, divides and polarisation**.
- **Art for art's sake, but also for society's**: Art must be allowed to be art in its own right, free from moral, political, or utilitarian function. At the same time art – and culture at large - are **crucial human expressions, reflecting on society** as it is, and presenting alternative interpretations and ideas.
- Culture can play an important role in **breaking taboos and dealing with shortcomings in society**. It can also be an effective tool to **addressing trauma**.
- **Culture is not a luxury!** Freedom of expression - including cultural expressions - is essential for a society's wellbeing, development, stability, and peace; and is an essential instrument to elaborate society's tensions and aspirations.
- **Further work is needed on integrating culture and dialogue, connecting diplomacy, development, and peace building**, through bringing together different actors and diverse perspectives. **Collaborative approaches** and working through **networks** and systems of **"training of trainers"**, were some emerging ideas on how to achieve progress.