INTERVIEW

SALWA DALLALAH ON THE INDABA DURING CLIMATE NEGOTIATIONS

Salwa Dallalah Led the organization of 21 International Climate Change Conferences and Summits, including Kyoto (1997), Copenhagen (2009) and Paris (2015). Salwa is in the business of organizing meaningful meetings.

In this interview Salwa Dallalah tells us everything about the Indaba during climate conferences. About why it works, how to design it, and how to create the breakthroughs.

"The Indaba is one of the most powerful negotiation methods I know. It requires people to get into a room, meet eye to eye, exchange perspectives and then have the willingness to find a sincere compromise. To reach a decision that's not maximized for one but optimal for the collective."

- Salwa Dallalah

You were chief organizer during a series of 10 UN climate conferences (COP) and you witnessed the introduction of the Indaba as a decision-making tool. Can you tell us everything about the Indaba in the context of climate negotiations?

Climate negotiations are a melting pot of economic, political and social conflicts. The Indaba entered the climate negotiations when South-Africa hosted the COP17 in Durban in 2011. Climate negotiations are always quite complicated because of conflicting interests. Climate change might be the most perilous phenomenon that humanity faces, so there's all sorts of tensions between states and a lot of potential conflicts in terms of land rights, human rights and the transfer of technology. And then there's several rising economic powerhouses that assert their place in the pecking order.

Why was the Indaba used in Durban?

The interests at stake combined with feeling the eye of the world upon you, makes a COP a highly political arena with lots of potential conflict. Politicians can seize the opportunity to put on a show frontstage. And of course, the political gets personal, and the personal can get political. About 196 countries, 250 NGO's and a number of UN delegates were part of the negotiating delegations, and then of course the press was present in great numbers. At COP21 in Paris there were 40 thousand persons.

About Salwa Dallalah
Lawyer and career diplomat from Sudan. Director of the Division of Conference and Document Service at the IAEA. Former Coordinator of Conference Affairs Services at UNFCCC. In the business of organizing meaningful meetings.

Successfully led the organization of 21 international climate change conferences and summits. Managed teams of up to 500 staff and annual budget of up to $180 million.

Hosting the conference, at some point the South-African delegation realized the negotiations didn't go well and there was a severe risk of leaving the conference without any consensus or agreement. At the same time the urgency of global action was felt deeply.

The South-African Minister of Foreign Affairs as the president of the COP and the Minister of Environment asked me to find a confined room within the conference area. The aim of this gathering was to create something of a boiling room for a sincere dialogue aimed at consensus, without the opportunity to put on a public show.

How did you set up an Indaba in this context?

The problem with these negotiations is the little amount of trust between delegations and the fear to be outmanoeuvred by your opponents' hidden agenda. Some delegations put their formal or informal power to clever use, others use the public opinion to their ends.

In order to make sure delegations where showing their cards instead of putting on a show, the negotiations should be outside the eyes and ears of the press. We were to find a room with a size big enough for a large group so that all countries are represented, but definitely not large enough to include everyone.

Every delegation was allowed to participate with two delegates, the secretary and a subject expert. Otherwise access was strictly confined. We sat at an oval table and the room was set up accordingly. In South Africa there were about 300 people in the room, and in later conferences this increased to somewhere around 500 people. Even though that is a lot of people, these were the meaningful conversations that delivered breakthroughs.

How does an Indaba work?

The South-African secretary presided and facilitated the dialogue and made sure conflicts were turned into a constructive dialogue.

The dialogue in this space could be brutally transparent, since we excluded the outside world. The Indaba-gatherings felt endless and lasted for hours and even days, and thus indeed functioned as a pressure cooker. Of course the one with stamina has a slight advantage to tire out the others, but in spite of these downsides I believe as humanity we haven't found any better way to come to take wise decisions.

In order to reach a decision or consensus you need to get to the deep underlying issues and power conflicts where the knifes come out (metaphorically of course), and this setting creates an environment to have exactly that conversation.

The role of the president seems quite important?

Of course the chair of the Indaba has no decisive power, but his authority gives him both the power and the responsibility to guide the group wisely towards a decision. And when he does so with respect and compassion, the chances for successful negotiations increase strongly.

This doesn't mean everyone gets his way, that would be impossible. Some member-states still loose. However, when there's no more hidden arguments, when all cards are on the table and yet the dialogue has been with respect, it's my experience that people - reluctantly - accept the outcome.

To reach a decision in a conflict situation, an Indaba-president once accomplished a breakthrough by promising on a personal title to keep the issue on the agenda. That was enough for the opposing parties to move forward.

The president has the responsibility to reach out to everyone, to use his rank in order to keep the dialogue constructive, and to remain neutral so people sincerely feel heard. Everything (s)he does is geared towards guiding the group to reach the collective wisest decision.

And most important, why does the Indaba work?

The Indaba is one of the most powerful negotiation methods I know. It requires people to get into a room, meet eye to eye, exchange perspectives and then have the willingness to find a sincere compromise. To reach a decision that's not maximized for one but optimal for the collective.

Heads of States, ministers and officials pulling up their sleeves, talking, listening, and cooperating to get to make it work and get to a consensus really has an amazing effect. And an Indaba is very inclusive, everyone in the room has a voice that should be heard and taken into consideration. In this way you put together a huge number of - sometimes conflicting - perspectives and interests, but everyone feels heard.

The Indaba as a collective decision-making process has a very strong impact and can reopen tough or stuck negotiations in a very powerful yet inclusive way. Ever since Durban the Indaba was part of the negotiating methods, although it was never on any agenda. But I always knew the moment would come when the president of the conference would approach me and ask me to set up an Indaba.

"The Indaba as a collective decision-making process has a very strong impact and can reopen tough or stuck negotiations in a very powerful yet inclusive way."
- Salwa Dallalah