

Intercultural Dialogue: Moving Beyond Words

**A lecture by Martin Davidson, Chief Executive of the British Council,
presented at Al Ahram Regional Press Institute, Cairo, on 27 May 2008**

First of all I would like to thank our hosts this evening, Al Ahram Media and, in particular, the Al Ahram Regional Press Institute. I am grateful for your invitation to speak tonight and for the opportunity to share views in the following discussion.

This is my first visit to Egypt since becoming Chief Executive of the British Council last year. But the British Council has been here for 70 years. Egypt is, and has been, one of our most important offices - recognising this country's strong political and cultural influence in this region and in the world.

We decided to establish our first office outside Europe in Cairo in 1938. We wanted to build on the strong ties between our two countries, bring our two great cultures closer together and continue our then mission to fight fascism.

We even maintained a presence in Cairo when British people, including our British staff, had to leave Egypt. At that time, the Egyptian Government appointed Egyptian staff to keep our office open. Proof, if any were needed, that cultural and educational ties can survive even the most tense political situations.

Today our long-term commitment to Egypt remains as strong as ever, even though much in the world has changed. 70 years ago the work of a Cultural Relations organisation largely consisted of handing out grants and scholarships to sustain education links.

Now we recognise that is not enough. People want a voice, skills and connections to the wider world. We all want a platform in our own country,

and, more widely, to capitalise on any personal, social and vocational opportunities which arise.

As an organisation we increase trust and engagement between the UK and other countries. We do this by working with millions of people on issues of importance to them, developing skills and helping people and civil society tackle difficult problems.

We connect people: increasing understanding and appreciation between cultures - helping people in the UK and around the globe develop a better understanding of how their culture fits into the world.

In doing so, we create global connections and build trust - the background for a fairer and safer world.

We cannot do this alone. We broker partnerships and networks around the world, working with the people who will influence the way their societies develop and how the world develops. People like you.

Our world has been transformed by globalisation. Governments are playing catch up as people, ideas and resources move faster than ever before. But globalisation itself will not lead to a universal increase in living standards or free and open societies for all. It is a paradox that, all too often, greater global movement, rather than create unity, has led to a disconnect between peoples as misunderstanding has grown.

This interconnected world presents many such challenges. Economic, geopolitical and environmental issues have an impact on individuals and communities around the world. But those issues need a global answer. Some individuals have responded by becoming part of the pool of global actors. Many however have not. They have not been given the trans-national mobility or the opportunity to develop the skills needed to thrive in this new context.

Those skills are not just learning a global language like English or Arabic. They include international awareness and a critical understanding of how we communicate, work and live with one another.

Just this month, we took young people from across this region and the world to the centre of the World Economic Forum on the Middle East at Sharm El Sheik. In the closing session Amira Hossam, a Political Science and Economic Graduate from Egypt took the stage with His Excellency, Prime Minister Dr Ahmed Nazif.

Together they expressed their commitment to Egypt's priority agenda – increasing the employability and skills development of young people in this region, harnessing the rich human capital that lies here for the benefit of all.

Building on projects like WEF, our joint challenge is to develop the many people in our countries who are connected to local communities and international issues and want an opportunity to make their voice heard.

Because it's not just about untapped potential. We believe that extremism and violence can flourish where individuals feel their voice, views and skills aren't important. And where they feel their identities are under threat or values compromised.

In this region, like the UK, we have seen young people gripped by an extremist narrative which exploits their desire for recognition and need to be treated as equal to their national and international peers. This exploitation is insidious and can be fatal. And, of course, it leads to mistrust and hate.

But as we know, this danger is not confined to any particular country or region. The recent riots in the townships of South Africa and in the banlieues of Paris are graphic and honest examples of how people can react when they feel they have no voice or, in a world of scarce resources, their livelihoods are threatened.

In the UK, we have seen an increasing intolerance in some sections of the press, exploiting people's concerns over migration, economic opportunities and prosperity, and diverting the attention of those who feel underrepresented by the political mainstream.

The British Council's Inter-Cultural Dialogue programmes are our response to some of these challenges.

Through intercultural dialogue we strengthen engagement and trust between people in the UK and other societies and widen opportunities. We work with local, national and international partners to challenge the narratives that have gripped some of our young people. Narratives that turn lack of information into misunderstanding and link political events across this region and the world to create and direct violence.

We do this by targeting young people and those who influence them. We develop partnerships to tackle difficult issues, building engagement based on shared understanding, and trust.

For a long time the British Council was fearful of engaging in this debate. In many parts of this region we got used to talking to a small circle of well-known faces. We were fearful of being seen to be political or religious. But people are political and religious and as our approach to inter-cultural dialogue is about people, we work with them on their issues.

Creating a partnership of equals

Creating a genuine dialogue of equals is at the heart of how we do inter-cultural dialogue. Real engagement is based on a partnership of equals, one in which each side values the other.

But to “do” inter-cultural dialogue effectively, to have real and meaningful engagement between people, you have to be prepared to accept that you can’t control the outcome. A few years ago we invited a group of young photographers to record aspects of real Muslim life in the UK, without any guidance or censorship on our part. Some chose asylum centres, some makeshift mosques, others schoolchildren in the north of England. This was an exercise in honesty and openness, not in propaganda.

The resulting exhibition, Common Ground, toured across this region, the Arabian Peninsula and Malaysia and Indonesia. It opened many eyes. Many people in the Middle East had no idea that Britain had a Muslim population – let alone hundreds of mosques and dozens of Muslim schools – or that Islam is the second most popular religion in the UK.

Part of the success of the exhibition was that the images were plainly authentic. The photographers had taken full advantage of their creative freedom. Middle East audiences appreciated the fact that the work was a truthful reflection of contemporary life in the UK. They felt that they were not being patronised. In any form of cultural exchange, this honesty and plurality of views is crucial to creating understanding.

Honest reflection is how you start to build understanding and engagement, which we use as the basis for developing partnership of equals.

Today people expect engagement to be two-way: that you will be as interested in what I have got to say, as you expect me to be in what you have to say. People are no longer prepared – if indeed they ever were – to sit passively, meekly absorbing the influences of others, politely receiving today’s message. They don’t want a message; they want to have the value of their contribution recognised.

We are a values-based organisation and all that we do is based on our values – we make no apology for that. But we recognise that people come with their own values, experiences and narratives. The power of what we do comes

from bringing people together and allowing them to explore what they have in common as well as their differences.

This engagement of equals then is not value neutral. It is not about compromising values but about challenging misperception and misunderstanding. We know that this engagement leads to shared awareness and increased trust.

As we speak, 18 young people from Egypt and the UK are coming to the end of a three-month stay in Assuit in Upper Egypt. They have been working on community projects ranging from increasing women's literacy to supporting street children, living in real Egyptian homes, with real families.

They have told us how much they've learned from one another and from the community in which they've been working. They said their preconceived ideas of one another's countries, values and societies have been challenged on a daily basis. Next month they will travel together to another town - Luton in the UK - and continue this real life experience of intercultural dialogue.

The concept of reciprocal volunteering exchanges such as this one challenges the idea that volunteering is a one-way process from the developed countries, the global North, to the developing South. Volunteers on Global Xchange live and work in both countries. In doing so the volunteers learn new skills, become more confident and develop international understanding and growing cultural awareness. They create links with people and communities that last. They learn about a different outlook on life. In short they become global citizens.

Programmes like Global Xchange or Common Ground offer people truly global engagement. A mutual exchange of experiences, understanding and ideas that form the basis of a partnership of equals.

Widen opportunities, providing people with skills and platforms to use them

As I said above, our partnerships are about developing international awareness and a critical understanding of how we communicate, work and live with one another. They're about giving people a voice, skills and the platform to use them to tackle issues that matter. In this region, our focus is on addressing some of the needs of the near 70 % of the population who are under 30 and asking for greater skills development.

So each year in the Sinai desert we organise field trips for undergraduate Egyptian scientists to work side-by-side with their British counterparts.

This is one of the British Council's most important science programmes. Young British and Egyptian scientists are working together to map the biodiversity of the Sinai and understand the impacts of climate change there. But, and perhaps more importantly, they are learning about one another and learning how to communicate and share ideas across cultures. At the same time, we are reminding people of Islam and the Arab world's contribution to science - and that, for a time, Arabic was the language of science.

Language learning is, and has been, one of the central roles of the British Council. Last year we trained 23,000 learners of English in Egypt. As many of you know, we are building on this reputation and working with Al Azhar University, at their request, to provide English language lessons within their main campus.

In partnering with us on this project, Al Azhar recognised that it is no longer enough for their students to be leading scholars. Today's graduates need to communicate and share their ideas with the wider world.

Arabic, of course, is a world language, as has been since the time of the Prophet, when, in the name of Islam, the language linked people across many borders.

But to communicate its ideas even more widely and to share its thinking with the world, the University has had the foresight to equip its trainee Imams with that other world language, English.

Sport is another tool for international communication and for bringing people together. Recognising this, we have developed an innovative English-language and soccer coaching programme with the English Premier League.

Premier Skills brings young people from across Egypt together with the aim of developing football coaching skills, English language and life skills. It is a vehicle for personal and community development. The project has an important equality and social inclusion element and works with both young men and women.

Over the past year, 100 young soccer aspirants have been trained and at the last count 18 of them have been employed in youth and community leadership and sports coaching. This is a fabulous success but we want to develop even more young people over the life of the programme.

We are also working with three Egyptian Ministries to address the technical and vocational skills needs of young Egyptians. We are launching two new initiatives this year and next to support those working to improve the employability of young people.

These programmes are our response to the World Bank's assessment that, over the next 15 years, an additional 100 million jobs will be needed to realise the potential of young people in this region.

The first programme focuses on skills for employability. Over the next five years we will help develop links between industry and education; increase

collaboration between policy makers and practitioners; encourage and support entrepreneurship, and provide an environment which recognises and nurtures talent and innovation.

But in addition to developing young people's skills, we need to shift their, and society's, perceptions of technical and vocational education and training. This is true as much in the UK as here.

Our second programme will specifically address the barriers faced by the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Through our Global Xchange programme we will support young people to become advocates for equal opportunity and access to employment.

We believe that by providing greater employment opportunities for young people in this region we will foster more cohesive and inclusive communities. Helping young people contribute positively to their own societies, and enhancing the feeling of fairness and equity amongst the next generation, supports the process of social integration and increased security.

Increase understanding and build trust

In developing partnerships, developing our young people and helping tackle global issues we increase understanding and build trust. We create life changing opportunities and connections that last a life-time. Working across 110 countries, we turn these connections into a global network.

Bringing people together, sharing ideas and creating educational and cultural links has been our core purpose for 70 years. The issues of the day have changed through times of tension and of partnership – from the War in Europe, Suez to our globally connected world – where news from Cairo can hit the streets in London in minutes – but a world in which mistrust and extremism have grown.

In all this time, the need to build understanding and trust to ensure that the relationship between our two great countries prospers has remained constant.

Inter-cultural dialogue, as we do it, is about much more than words. It is about bringing people together to tackle issues of common concern. In doing so they learn how to live, learn and communicate with one another. We believe that the learning and connections we foster are the background for a safer and fairer world.