First and foremost, I think it is very important to recognise that dialogue is an on-going process. It is not a goal-setting idea. And as the tides of human migration ebb and flow, one can readily see the form and substance of dialogue transforming.

In a similar manner to conflict, the emphasis placed upon dialogue has now shifted from the international to the domestic arena. Since the end of the Cold War, societies and nations have become more self-conscious and image-conscious, and this period of introspection has sparked both conflict and dialogue. This process of introspection has taken place both within ‘stable’ states and newly formed states. However, the ratio of conflict to dialogue tends to accord with the durability of the state in question.

This transition from the international to domestic arena has meant that dialogue itself can become more substance than form. Through a process of exchange, education, sensitisation and shared decision-making, the communities engaged in dialogue can contribute to seeking instrumental co-operation with the aim of facilitating social harmony.

Thus, dialogue can take place at multiple levels, and is probably most effective when it takes place between individuals or communities who are actively engaged in one another’s lives. In other words, dialogue is most relevant to those parties who live and work in close proximity. Dialogue, therefore, need not be the preserve of senior politicians and diplomats, but the lubricant that allows communities sharing public space to live together without friction.

Dialogue has already been taking place for at least the past 50 years, where patterns of migration have changed the constituent parts of many of the world’s major cities. As part of this process, communities have begun to live together, and the dialogue has been initiated at the various levels of interaction. The process of dialogue might not be an easy one, and we can easily recognise contemporary flashpoints, but as communities from different traditions seek to accommodate each other’s public space, the likelihood of co-existence increases. It is easier when approaching dialogue at this level of interaction to make sure that local parties have similar access to resources, in other words, there is a balance of power between or among the parties concerned.

Community leaders might assume the responsibility for initiating a dialogue among competing groups. And where a dialogue emerges organically, the process would militate against one group promoting an agenda at the expense of another. As Picco mentioned, one outcome of this conference could be the sowing of the dialogue seeds; however, the nurturing process should be undertaken by local agents. In a similar vein to the dialogue, seedlings require constant care during the four seasons, and when the climate worsens it needs more sustained shelter and protection.

One should not underestimate the role that leaders might play in initiating and developing the dialogue. Accountable community leaders are well placed to guide their followers through the gateway of dialogue. They hold the key to unlocking the gates of prejudice, and are often invested with the authority to take decisions on behalf of their followers. However, one can see the growing disjuncture between generations within communities, and it is critical that community leadership includes members from different social classes, generations and genders.
It is often the youth who express the pain of exclusion, and it is vital, therefore, to ensure that youth leaders are in touch with both their ‘elders’ and their constituents. However, the PC generation has benefited from the growth of the internet as a means of global communication. Subsequently, they have been invested with an opportunity to reach out to other communities, cultures or civilisations without leaving their homes.

The internationalisation of tertiary education, as a two-way exchange rather than an educational migration to Oxbridge et al, has also ensured that a dialogue is taking place in the classroom, as well as in social settings. Coupled with the internet, these changes can help alleviate the paucity of information and knowledge that each individual holds about the ‘other’. Hence, we can see that education and effective communication – both enhanced by the internet provide another avenue for initiating and sustaining dialogue among civilisations.

Dialogue is already taking place at multiple levels. As we all search for tangible outcomes from this conference, I think we can make a commitment to nurturing the seeds of dialogue within our own communities. And from this point, we can initiate our own series of low-key dialogues.

Neil Quilliam