

# *Trim-Tab Dialogues: Transformative Vision and Action in South Asia*

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From 2011 to 2016, the South Asia Champions Dialogue Process (SACDP) engaged dozens of officials, leaders and development organizations to create a series of innovative conversations that would catalyze several billion dollars of investment. Sponsored by the World Bank and the Department of International Development (DFID), this activity brought about honest exchanges among senior leaders and officials across South Asia in the management of Energy, Water, Climate, Ecosystem and Trade.

This group achieved unprecedented results. Among other achievements, they:

- stimulated the design and commissioning of the first-ever India-Pakistan energy transmission line;
- catalyzed trade through river dredging of inland waterways between India and Bangladesh;
- supported the expansion of a first-ever regional energy grid between Bangladesh and India;
- helped defuse a border conflict between India and Nepal;
- set up unprecedented, sustained cross-national dialogues among officials from different sectors; and

- produced an actionable strategic vision for developing South Asia, now being pursued, that had not previously emerged in 30 years of sustained effort.

However, none of these outcomes were envisioned or would have been considered possible at the outset. Shyam Saran, a participant in the process and former Foreign Secretary of India, writes that the SACDP was born out of the realization that “despite the compelling and often self-evident rationale for regional economic integration, South Asia had remained at the margins of the global trend towards such integration.” Even with considerable efforts by The Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and by South Asian leaders themselves through Summit-level declarations and the creation of the South Asia Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), “there has been only limited and halting progress in advancing regional economic integration in South Asia.”

### **Shared Challenges Demanded Regional Cooperation**

South Asia is one of the least-integrated trading regions in the world, with only 5% intraregional trade, as compared to 22% in sub-Saharan Africa and 50% in East Asia. It is also one of the poorest regions, and its populations are among the most vulnerable to climate change. As it became evident to the participants through this process, South Asia’s most critical challenges could not be solved except through regional cooperation. The shared ecological crisis required a joint response that transcends political differences.

For example, the region’s energy limitations could be easily met by taking advantage of the complementarities of energy supply across the region and stimulating cross-border electricity trade. The ability to eliminate poverty would be greatly enhanced by trading together instead of sustaining the fragmentation of the region. The World Bank estimates that intraregional trade was \$23 billion in 2015, only about one third of the potential of \$67 billion.

The project set out to close two gaps. Together these created a pressured context in which inaction would become ever more problematic: (1) The wide discrepancy between the evident promise of regional cooperation and the notable absence of action (“aim low, shoot even lower,” noted one participant), and (2) The realization that while this was the “Asian Century,” South Asia ran the risk of being left out by failing to participate in the global economy.

### **Breaking Through Constraints: The South Asia Champions**

From its inception the SACDP was envisioned as a cross-regional conversation among a group of preeminent leaders to address the fragmentation in the region by exploring directly the causes of difficulties and their potential solutions.

At the core of this process was a sustained, multi-year candid dialogue where a core group of participants that the core team called “Champions”—a term that describes the leadership required to deliver an innovation breakthrough within a constrained context—engaged together to surface the true causes of difficulty, create a new narrative for South Asia, and



stimulate a new level of action. They came from all eight South Asian countries: India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan. The Champions met in 10 primary sessions over a period of about five years, with a series of design and development conversations and activities that supported and enhanced the impact of the effort.

The invitation was extended to leaders who had been intimately involved in these issues, held positions of prominence and authority in their countries, and who could engage the highest levels of their respective political systems to address and begin to remove the obstacles to new understanding and insight. These people understood the complexities involved in promoting regional engagement. In many cases the leaders we engaged had known each other for many years and had interacted formally through their official positions. Our process deliberately “formalized informality” by removing some of the barriers and trappings of engagement and enabling people to speak honestly and off the record, out of the direct sight of both their home institutions and the media. This off-the-record, protected quality of engagement was one of the more critical features of the process.

### **Five Core Components**

At its core this process brought a small group of people together with the aim of having an impact on a much larger system, an effect visionary thinker Buckminster Fuller once referred to as a “trim tab.” A trim tab is a small surface attached to the edge of the rudder of a ship that makes it possible for the rudder to turn more easily. We sought to create a dialogic trim tab, intending to address the fragmentation in the macrocosm by transforming it in a microcosm that contained the diverse factors with which we were concerned. The intention was to impact not only the steering mechanism, but the direction of the larger ship of regional economic cooperation. Five deliberate interventions during the Champions Dialogue characterized this innovative approach:

- 1) **Shifting the Identity Narrative** – To have an impact on the system, we needed to shift the underlying identity narratives carried by people. That included, but was not limited to, the mindsets of the most senior leaders in the respective countries with which we were concerned. To the degree that people held rigidly to national or political identities, an expansive spirit of cooperation stalled. Ultimately the process became an inquiry into identity itself, made possible by the fact of the relatively secure and established democracies in the region. As one participant put it, “We’re moving into a genuinely postcolonial moment. We are now confident about our individual identities; nations are confident about their nationhood...” [Now] “we’re wrestling with questions about identity in the context of globalization – if our identities are becoming more expansive in terms of how we engage globally, we cannot get away from the need to take the neighborhood with us on that journey.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Champions Meeting Notes, Delhi November 2014.



- 2) **Reframing Meaning** – We allowed traditional and familiar conflicts to surface and get reframed in ways that surprised and energized the participants. These conversations went beyond merely being candid.

For example, at the first gathering in 2011, a conversation between a Nepalese senior official and an Indian leader explored the question of why India at the time threatened to charge an extra tax on electricity sold to Nepal. The mistrust between India and Nepal on this score had scuttled many potential deals to develop and sell Nepal’s hydropower to India, its obvious and primary market. This mistrust had led to the failure in Nepal to develop its vast hydropower potential (estimated at between 80 and 100GW – enough to power much of South Asia) for decades. Nepalis believed that India had harmed them in the past and would do so again; the Indians tended not to notice that their scale and economic size was seen as a threat and barrier to increased trade negotiations.

“We would never have enforced those provisions,” said the Indian official. “Then why did you put them in there in the first place?!” asked the exasperated Nepali.

In a brief instant during the conversation, the historical momentum that had generated a pattern of mistrust, and a sustained blindspot, began to show itself and to shift and so this could be openly discussed. An offshoot of this dialogue carried on in a series of conversations in Nepal, with the assistance of several of the Champions in this group. This opened the way for a Power Trading agreement for the sale of electricity from India to Nepal that would end decades of power shortages in Nepal. Together with the efforts of many others, the leaders signed an agreement within a few years, leading to several major hydropower projects that will in time greatly transform the energy infrastructure of Nepal and the region.

By surfacing these factors, we began to get beyond mutual suspicions. As one participant noted:

*At the initial stages, it was not easy to construct a shared narrative among participants which would avoid arousing nationalist sentiments but identify at least some common perspectives which could be built upon. Through the process of honestly and forthrightly confronting and talking through some of the political and psychological barriers that divide South Asian countries, it became possible to reduce the level of suspicion and distrust and explore commonalities on which one could build a more forward-looking approach to regional cooperation.<sup>2</sup>*

- 3) **Moving Beyond Problem-Solving** – The focus of our dialogues went beyond a “problem-solving” orientation; that is, we engaged the underlying emotional and intellectual

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<sup>2</sup> Saran, Ibid p. 13

complexities that have guided the region’s political and economic policymaking for decades. We sought to make these discussable, and to discern what new actions could begin to transform them. This immediately differentiated our shared dialogue from traditional policy conversations.

The aim here was not initially to “solve problems” or create action plans, but to understand and transform the conditions out of which the problems had arisen and been sustained. It was also to find a way to address these problems which, as will be outlined below, began to emerge in powerful and organic ways. But we began with the premise that seeking to change conditions with the same frame of mind that created these mindsets in the first place would not work.

Summarizing the first session, one observer wrote:

*Participants were invited to speak from experience, to take a step back, to see and speak from a wider perspective than our familiar roles, acknowledging that these will be part of the equation. The challenge for the gathering would be to surface contradictions and to hold them, to invite fresh and original thinking together such that those present could be capable of determining the right next steps, beyond currently held views and approaches.<sup>3</sup>*

- 4) **Evoking a Dream** – A formative factor in any dialogue is the dream people carry about its potential. We found that there was a profound, latent dream and sense of potential held by many people in the region—that of a unified South Asia. The success (however dubiously regarded) of regional integration in the EU was a model many South Asians looked to. But what lay below the surface was something much larger. While divided for more than 75 years through wars and interventions, many still held the memory and experience of a whole South Asian identity. There are many markers of this, ranging from a common obsession with the same kinds of films, music and cultural icons, to shared memories of families who now live divided and in different countries, to a sense of history where, for many thousands of years, South Asia shares a common context and sense of belonging.

As one participant put it, our challenge was “to translate our shared history into a shared destiny.” One of the characteristics of the process was that it became safe to articulate this dream, despite many pressures and political realities that spoke against this. “One South Asia” became the label that participants recalled and brought to mind—to the point of creating a Twitter account with that name. It took some years to build momentum, and the drafting of a vision document, to bring participants to a common sense of the future. By 2015, In Colombo, Sri Lanka one of the participants put

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<sup>3</sup> Meeting notes, Pattaya Champions Session World Bank Meeting Notes, 2011



it this way: “I spell SouthAsia as one word—I dream of South Asia as un-fractured.” Another added, “What we’re trying to do right now is dream a dream, one that should excite and appeal to everyone. What does a South Asian community dream of? That’s the dream we will appeal to.”<sup>4</sup>

A collective output of the process was the development of a vision paper intended to articulate this dream, shift the narrative and outline a strategic approach to change. Developed through a series of dialogue sessions, the paper spoke directly to the Champions’ collective assessment that one of the causes of the lack of progress was the absence of an articulated vision. As one participant noted:

*The premise of this project is that one of the reasons there is relatively little excitement around the idea of regional cooperation is this: there is no vision behind the current articulations of the idea, They remain largely bureaucratic exercises, often entailing a series of projects, but with no real passion behind them. On the other hand, those outside government who are passionate advocates of regional cooperation have often not developed a coherent framework that generates excitement. South Asian Cooperation seems once again to drift between a present that cannot long endure and a future that is hard to envision. There has been no framework developed by South Asians collectively, where the creation of a framework is itself an example of working together. This project is an attempt to provide such a framework.*<sup>5</sup>

This participant’s words stemmed from the commitment described here, and the actions of these leaders followed suit and continue today.

- 5) **Creating a Shared Path to Action** – Another vital element that characterized this project was the development of actionable projects and a wide series of investments and results that could not have been envisioned at the outset. This is particularly interesting given the fact that the focus initially was precisely on *not* generating new projects, but on surfacing, understanding, and transforming social, economic and political “fault lines.”

One of the challenges of conversations like these, sometimes labelled “Track II diplomacy”—talks among national leaders acting outside of official channels—is integrating the insights generated in these settings back into the mainstream policy contexts. This is often more generally the case in dialogue, where insight does not seem to lead to any obvious action, and people can begin to lose interest in continuing.

We bridged this gap in two ways: each of the Champions stayed in touch with the senior political leaders of their respective countries—some through informal channels, some as

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<sup>4</sup> Meeting notes, Colombo Champions Session World Bank Meeting Notes, 2015

<sup>5</sup> Meta, P. *South Asia Vision Project*, 2016.



direct advisors to their prime ministers. We would also frequently meet informally with government leaders before and after these sessions. This quickly allowed ideas that had been generated to find fertile ground in action. In addition, the World Bank brought to bear its convening power and its project finance and project generation expertise in support of this effort, producing a delivery mechanism that was closely integrated into the dialogue from the beginning.

The World Bank leaders themselves had been trained in dialogue techniques and understood the value of engaging in a reflective manner. They participated in the conversations, but the Champions themselves were the primary participants. At the same time, these leaders were able to quickly translate the ideas of the Champions into action. This happened many times over the years of the project, to the point that the dialogues generated an ongoing stream of work that the Bank and other agencies worked on, while the Champions acted as advisors and at times intervenors to help senior officials understand the value of and support these activities. They acted, in other words, as Champions in two senses: generating new insights and supporting their delivery in partnership with the World Bank.

To take an example, at the first meeting of the Champions group the participants noted that the Punjab part of Pakistan often experienced “load shedding”—managed shortages of electricity for many hours at a time—and that the Punjab part of India had excess power that it could sell to Pakistan, something that had never before occurred. As the group spoke, the idea emerged for India to sell power to Pakistan. Several of the participating Champions were at the time involved in the conception and development of the first-ever Bangladesh India power line, progressing at the time, and one for which the Champions process would eventually provide a major boost. The unlikely nature of a project like the one between Pakistan and India loomed. “Do we really need to rehearse the reasons against it in this room?” one person asked. “Why not explore it?” someone else offered. Within three months, there were conversations in the prime minister’s offices of both Pakistan and India, agreeing to commission a joint technical team to explore the feasibility of building a 500-megawatt transmission line between the two countries. By 2013 the line was commissioned. During this period were many instances where the Champions intervened to help facilitate the progress of this effort, which was first envisioned in this gathering.

## **How the Process Unfolded**

### ***Inception***

All creative processes begin with particular people in immediate, concrete situations. The narrative of how this process began is instrumental to its unfoldment, something which is always the case. As it turns out, the participants in the dialogue process itself also were listening for a story from the very start.



In March of 2011 I was sitting with a small group of World Bank Directors from South Asia at a resort called Chewton Glen in England. They were attending a leadership program run by my firm and were interested in exploring how we could collaborate to apply the concepts and experience they were having in this program to the challenges they saw in the world and in their client base. One of this group, Salman Zaheer, had grown up in India and was the son of one of the country's most senior military officials. He had married a woman from a Brahmin family in Bangladesh and felt a strong sense of responsibility to the region, and to its development. He had spent his career working on energy challenges in the region and was now the Director responsible for regional integration for the World Bank.

In this conversation we initially explored the question of how dialogue could be applied to the challenges of rivers and water stewardship in the region. And then we asked, why be limited to that? Why not find a way to engage the leadership of South Asia as a whole in a strategic dialogue about the future and potential of the region? We imagined we might start with a layer or two away from the prime ministers, but then create a mechanism by which all the prime ministers could engage fruitfully together. We envisioned assembling a group of eminent leaders from each of the South Asia countries to explore what might be possible.

Salman took initial responsibility with several others to identify leaders in the region who could participate in an off-the-record dialogue on these matters. We agreed to maintain a spirit of informality, to invite people carefully and to maintain as much diversity of thought and perspective as possible. We invited several currently serving and recently retired senior political officials, as well as several prominent leaders of think tanks in India and Bangladesh. Included in this number were a former foreign minister, foreign secretaries, a finance secretary, a power secretary, and foreign affairs advisors to a prime minister. We also invited a group of World Bank Directors and staff from the region.

### ***Setting the Field***

The nature and quality of the invitation for any dialogue deeply determines the subsequent experience people have. The way the context is set enormously influences what people expect, the attitudes they bring, the quality of imagination and openness with which they enter the conversation, and ultimately the experience they have. We think of this quality of experience as the “field” of creative possibility and experience in which people participate.

Kurt Lewin defined a *field* as a set of factors in the life space or psychological arena.<sup>6</sup> David Bohm spoke about a pool of common meaning.<sup>7</sup> Building on these ideas, I define a field as the living environments created by the quality of relationship, thought, and energy actually experienced by the people concerned. A field is an energetic context in which a pool of common meaning may emerge. This experience can be transmitted from one person to the

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<sup>6</sup> See Lewin, K. (1951). *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*. Harper & Row: New York.

<sup>7</sup> D. Bohm and L Nichol. (2003) *On Dialogue*. Routledge: New York.



next, is held in the symbols and artifacts of the shared experience and is subsequently conveyed in the stories and narratives told by those who participate in it.

Research on fields, and the expansion of understanding of this term, is an important component in the development of dialogue as defined here. This idea has immediate practical implications. Because fields are “upstream” of the experience of thinking and action, they provide a high-leverage avenue with which to influence social and action outcomes. These fields can be directly and precisely influenced through the quality of tone and interaction expressed and exchanged by human beings.

In the case of the South Asian Champions Dialogue, we worked very carefully to set a field for the dialogue in which the participants would bring a quality of exchange that was markedly different from the one that they had known in their professional roles—often with each other—in diplomatic and governmental contexts. We sought participants who we felt could both bring stature and authority to the challenges of regional cooperation, but who also had the openness and humility to engage in a manner that would expand and intensify the quality of the field of exchange. This would make it possible to form a new pool of common meaning together and, from that, to allow fundamentally different social and economic actions and arrangements to emerge.

The setting of the field has many concrete implications. We sought for our first meeting a place that all participants would see as neutral. We had to consider the asymmetrical power of India relative to all the other smaller South Asia countries. Holding the first meeting in India would have immediately been seen as a biased step by many participants. Geography and place played a critical part in the strategy we pursued. We held the first session in Pattaya, Thailand, completely outside of the region. Air travel across the region, as with all trade, is quite restricted. Thailand was one of the few places most people could get to fairly easily, and it did not have excessive emotional baggage attached to it.

We also held careful interviews with each potential participant, during which we expressed the intention of the dialogue. We made it clear that we wanted simply to create an initial inquiry together about the potential of South Asian economic regional cooperation. We asked in the invitation that each participant to come prepared to make a brief (five-minute) introductory talk on the possibilities of regional cooperation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We asked each candidate to be brief and to “evoke the future without censorship...to offer your true ambitions for the region... and to be challenging and innovative.” We asked them to state their dream, and not to hold back.

Informal conversations circulated among the participants on the content of the dialogue as well, including the agreement that regional economic cooperation needed to be conducted within the context of cross-national exchange. Shyam Saran noted of the time that “there was a need to acknowledge and deal with the often-unspoken but nevertheless powerful mindsets which retard and prevent the realization of opportunities for collaborative action, incrementally



chip away at these roadblocks, and eventually construct an alternate but shared narrative conducive to change in the right direction.”<sup>8</sup>

### ***Initial Session***

The first Champions gathering in Pattaya was characterized by, as one participant put it “a remarkable candor.” A positive mood and exchange formed very quickly, as well as a direct and open acknowledgement of the history of conflict and difficulties in the region. Within a few hours the participants began naming others that they felt ought to attend gatherings of this sort—prominent leaders from across the region, people they felt could bring vision and add to the fresh perspective emerging in the room. We reflected on the range of new activities already emerging, such as building a transmission line (CASA 1000) that traversed four Central Asian countries, including Afghanistan and Pakistan and a cross-border power exchange between India and Bangladesh. The existence of breakthrough activities such as these encouraged the group to imagine other possibilities. The pattern that emerged in this meeting set out a path of action for subsequent ones. These included mapping the stakeholders who needed to be included, identifying “owners” who had a strong stake in making regional cooperation succeed, including and transforming opponents into allies, identifying ways to help achieve breakthroughs and progress through new potential activities and projects, and building strategies for progressively expanding popular and political consensus.

Summarizing his experience, one participant said this about the first meeting: “This is the best meeting in over a decade. We are speaking true... I feel invigorated by our conversation. It is emboldening and I sense the potential and opportunity coming through in our dialogue. There is a deeper understanding of the need to come together now... We are at an inflection point.”<sup>9</sup>

### ***Threads of the Conversation***

We held ten sessions over a five-year period from 2011 to 2016, along with a wide number of spinoff projects and events. Two distinct concentration areas began to emerge in our discussions.

#### **1) The exploration and crafting of an alternative narrative for regional economic integration.**

This began with the recognition of the need to shift from the use of the word *integration* to *cooperation*. We explored the underlying fears and assumptions people held, and the unspoken but problematic attitudes and beliefs that had characterized regional engagement over many years.

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<sup>8</sup> Saran, Ibid, p.3

<sup>9</sup> Champions Process Meeting Notes, Pattaya 2011.



### Champions Dialogue Meetings

	Location	Focus	Date
1	Pattaya, Thailand	Champions Meeting	November, 2011
2	Thimphu, Bhutan	Champions Meeting	July, 2012
3	Dubai, UAE	Champions Meeting	June, 2013
4	Delhi, India	Visioning Session	October, 2013
5	Delhi, India	Champions Meeting	January, 2014
6	Kathmandu, Nepal	Visioning Session	June, 2014
7	Kathmandu, Nepal	Champions Meeting	June, 2014
8	Delhi, India	Visioning Session	November 2014
9	Colombo, Sri Lanka	Visioning Meeting	March, 2015
10	Islamabad, Pakistan	Champions Meeting	February, 2016

South Asia is a complex community, one that feels itself to be a singular place and, at the same time, highly fragmented. Said one participant, “We have an enormous capacity in South Asia to be deeply schizophrenic. The common cultural experience and the trust deficit coexist. This is a fault line running through most of us, which could be triggered at different points. It’s not the party of peace versus the party of war, because we all succumb to one or the other. Is there a way of addressing this ambivalence?” Another noted the self-defeating quality that seems to pervade South Asia, saying that “In South Asia we’ve always found a way to trump economic rationalism.” But through these explorations, a positive tone continued to emerge: “Once we dream of freedom, all these fears – of economic and cultural hegemony – vanish.”<sup>10</sup> We named and openly reflected upon this underlying psychological complexity in the region.

Participants recognized that the forces of integration that had led to the EU and other region economic exchanges—and the forces of tribalism and fragmentation that had produced nationalistic battles over many decades—coexisted in the very conversations we were having. We were not merely talking about these forces; we were experiencing and exploring them directly. And we continued to find ways to create breakthroughs and insights.

**“We are a group of irascible South Asians, and we have gotten along. I am not sure how we did it, but if we can, others can too.” A Pakistani Champion**

This thread of the conversation led to the recognition that the absence of a compelling vision for South Asia had directly contributed to the failures to act: “We’re perpetually suspended in the space that the current paradigms don’t work, but there’s no articulation of what the current project is, the new language.” A subset of the Champions group took it upon themselves to craft a document which the larger group

<sup>10</sup> Champions Meeting Notes, March 2015



iteratively reflected upon over a series of gatherings. This resulted in a rich statement that had the full backing of the group, and included not only a frank analysis of some of the causes of the difficulties, but a strategic framework for platforms for collaboration, which generated a wide range of action and continues to be used today. The group spent several sessions developing and reflecting on this vision statement.

2) **The identification and discussion of concrete projects and activities the group could catalyze.**

The seed of the India Pakistan transmission line became a subject of reflection and review at several sessions as technical work between the two countries progressed. The group explored the breakthrough in the supply of power from India to Bangladesh and considered how that could become the basis of a subregional energy grid, much of which has now begun to emerge. The group also considered and backed the development of a Nepal India transmission line.

New possibilities not previously imagined emerged from the group. For instance, at the Dubai meeting there was a debate about the challenges of building road infrastructures to facilitate trade. Trade as a whole is greatly restricted in the region, partly as a result of tariffs and the failure to permit free trade, and partly due to limitations in infrastructure. “It takes too long to build roads,” someone remarked. “Then why don’t we dredge the rivers?” asked another. The realization that inland waterways in the Eastern part of the region could provide a greatly accelerated avenue for trade energized the group. Within six months this became a World Bank project with substantial investment to expand river channels and rebuild ports and jetties. Bangladesh and India formed a new trade agreement, allowing the project to be implemented. The Champions dialogues also stimulated the idea of the co-location of border checkpoints, something that authorities in India have embraced and implemented.

### **Challenges and Breakthroughs**

The dialogue process was not merely an exchange *about* the region but was itself the emergence of a new microcosm of coherence *within* the region. Eventually a core group of seven Champions informally but authoritatively held a concentrated focus such that any and all of them could facilitate and guide the exchanges. Interestingly enough, there was never explicit education about dialogue or the process. All the learning was experiential.

Several thresholds and challenges did emerge, however, the navigation of which enabled the experience of coherence and shared meaning to deepen over time. For instance, we had a deliberate policy of not having anyone join the gathering without first having been interviewed and briefed by one of the participants. The nature of the conversations was sufficiently different from what people had experienced before that we felt the need to induct them into the process consciously and deliberately.



### ***Historic Memory Creates Initial Resistance***

Somehow, despite our careful induction process, a very senior Pakistani official—a former foreign secretary and ambassador to the US among other places—arrived at the second session without preparation or formal invitation. It was not entirely clear to anyone how this had occurred. This gentleman was used to commanding a significant audience wherever he went, and with some justification given his accomplishments. He quickly objected to the format of the conversation, which consisted of a circle of chairs and informal exchange. He had advice to the organizers and wanted to be heard. It took some time to understand his concerns, but eventually they became clear. He told us that we were engaging in a manner that did not require people to speak as experts, or from their formal positions, but from their experience and internal reflections. It came clear that he was concerned he would not be able to contribute in the manner he was used to and would feel left out of the conversation. He gradually discovered that he could relax and support the inquiry, which had already begun to foster some radical innovative ideas, including one from another of his senior Pakistani colleagues who brought out the idea of raising a \$1bn regional cooperation fund to stimulate the activities we were considering. This gentleman realized that he was welcome and began to contribute generously and enthusiastically.

Another challenge emerged when some of the deeper issues between the countries surfaced. For instance, the lingering fear that this was an India-directed dialogue came out through the Pakistani participants. We feared that they might decide not to attend. Eventually through a series of offline conversations it was agreed that we would send one of our number, a former ambassador from Bangladesh to India, to Pakistan to have a series of conversations with participants and potential players, to uncover the real concerns. This trip enabled people to surface their misgivings about their own government's willingness to engage and sustain a commitment, their reluctance to lose the relative comfort of their situations if their actions towards cooperation were misread, and their skepticism about India. This effort to reach out led to some offline frank exchange, honesty from the Pakistanis about their own anxieties, and a stated willingness to engage.

The next meeting, held in Colombo Sri Lanka, found us hosting a new group of five Pakistanis, including Ambassadors, a prominent CEO and a former Finance Secretary. Some of the existing group wanted to alter the focus of the meeting, which was to concentrate on reviewing the newly crafted vision paper, to accommodate these new guests. On the morning of the first day we saw all five of the Pakistanis having breakfast together. Although we were concerned that they might object or issue some kind of challenge statement to the group, we did not alter the plan and process of the dialogue. Within two hours the exchange was free-flowing and rich; there was no sense of divide among the participants. The focus turned to the vision paper which had been fully drafted by this time and was seen as “a true reflection of how far the group has come.” Said one participant, “this exercise is a means to an end and the end itself as

well. The end: there is something called South Asia which is a positive thing. We have a vision for it which is prosperous and poverty free. So it's an end and a means to that end."<sup>11</sup>

### ***Initial Skepticism Leads to Learning***

Most remarkable was that as the conversations progressed the Pakistanis became ever more engaged, to the point that they began openly asking how we could deepen back-channel exchange with India to finally and seriously address some of the underlying difficulties. They made a frank acknowledgement that, while they publicly claim India is the cause of their difficulties, they felt that they themselves are more to blame, and wish to find a way to shift the situation. We discussed and opened a more deliberate mechanism and process of business-to-business discussions across the countries, as a result of this conversation. These exchanges astonished several experienced hands in the room, who noted that they had never heard conversations of this kind so openly before.

Perhaps the strongest indicator of a shift here was what came next. The Pakistanis were keen to host the next meeting. This took place in February of 2016 in Islamabad, and a very wide group of visitors and participants attended some of the sessions. For a variety of reasons holding a meeting of a group of officials from all South Asian countries in Pakistan is itself no small achievement. There had been no impetus to navigate these complexities until the Colombo meeting. Attendance in Islamabad was robust. Many Pakistanis wanted to attend.

At one point a guest from the World Health Organization, invited by the Pakistanis, began to speak. She had not been briefed as to how the dialogue process worked. She did what is somewhat typical in these kinds of forums: she began to make a brief speech, making her three points, one after the other. She carried the assumption that she needed to advocate her view, rather than participating in a live and unscripted conversation. Her comments did not fit the spirit of the conversation and that was quite evident to many. Later, in the lobby of the hotel where we were staying, one of the senior Pakistanis who was present for the first Colombo meeting took me aside and said, "we really need to brief people before they come. That lady really had no idea what we are trying to do." It had become clear that we had generated a process where the spirit of dialogue could be transmitted and shared without any explicit attempt to do so.

At another point in this same dialogue, some tension began to arise between a senior Pakistani leader and an Indian. The Pakistani wanted to argue for a different kind of trade arrangement between India and Pakistan. The conversation became somewhat heated. What was striking was that one of the senior Indian participants facilitated this exchange, noting that the intention of the conversation was to explore the hidden assumptions that had built years of mistrust and difficulty, rather than to bring back to India a new trade proposal. The goal, he noted, was to develop a new shared understanding and to shift the pattern of the constant

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<sup>11</sup> Champions Process meeting notes, Colombo, March 2015.



arising of tensions like these. The group had begun to reflect on and teach to each other the dialogic approach and a new way to engage together.

### **A Generative Process**

*There are huge issues about identity. How does one start? What does one do to take away the old identity and replace it with the regional identity that already exists as well? How does one work towards creating multiple identities and diluting this one national state identity, which is exploited to create differences in people?*

*Why is integration such a sensitive word? The problem is that we read too much in-between the lines. So, there would be people who would start reading between the lines and asking: “What does integration mean?” It is an identity issue. Therefore, you want to get into a different narrative to enable the breaking up of walls and a softening to occur.*

— *Visioning Session Participants Delhi, 2014*

At the core of the Champions process was an inquiry into identity. The quest underlying conversations about a shared narrative was focused on uncovering an experience of identity that transcended the polarizations and divisiveness that has characterized this region for many decades. The process that unfolded allowed the emergence of a level of connection and exchange that the participants stated they had not experienced before, and would not beforehand have believed possible.

What allowed the Champions dialogue process to produce substantial results in different ways from its inception in 2011—not only in terms of a shifting in the experience of identity and meaning, but also in a wide and impactful series of results on the ground?

### ***Deliberate Initial Focus on Not Taking Action***

There is a paradox here that is vital to understanding the answer to this question. The process produced a wide array of outcomes, but was not focused primarily on results. The Champions process was in this sense “generative,” meaning it created a set of outcomes, and followed a set of creative steps that fostered a deep and serious inquiry. The outcomes were not envisioned at the outset and yet what occurred went beyond expected limits. This happened because people maintained a flexibility, resilience and deep inquiry into the underlying meanings they were making. This is in contrast to a sequential or “blueprint” process, where the outcomes and intentions are relatively clearly defined, and where the ambition is to follow a disciplined set of steps, in a particular sequence, to achieve a predicted and desired outcome. In this case neither the steps nor the outcome were known at the outset of the process, yet the components of the process unfolded organically, each setting the stage for the next development.



The process had two impacts: for the Champions, it created a collegial spirit where greater reflection could occur. However, it also emboldened the typically cautious development experts at the World Bank, who tend to see all the limitations and complexities of the political economy in the systems in which they try to work. They are often caught up in, and give voice to, the expert skepticism that says producing change is very difficult. World Bank staff often found themselves surprised and energized by what occurred:

*The most important take-away I want to leave this group with is that for us [the World Bank] together with DFID and the International Finance Corporation, what has really changed in the last 12 months, instead of talking about ‘could we? can we? should we,’ we have really moved on to the realm of: ‘How can we make this happen?’ How do we get power projects to happen, to let the cream come up to the top, so all of us can put really intensive resources to make several projects happen?<sup>12</sup>*

The development organization’s players’ internal doubts began to shift from why things can’t happen to how to make them happen. The dialogue process freed up energy and enabled a creative outcome to emerge.

The group’s initial focus on hosting inquiry that would provide advice to some of the leaders in the World Bank evolved into a conversation among the Champions themselves, which I facilitated, but with the Bank explicitly playing a support-only role. This let the Champions lead the process and create their own momentum. The focus on reflection and a deepening inquiry challenged people to suspend their focus on solving problems and bring their attention to the question of understanding just what the problem really was, what was behind it, and what it would take to shift it. This approach seemed to naturally and quickly lead to action, but of a very different kind than would have emerged if a group of experts had analyzed the problems and recommended a solution. Many of the issues the group took up had in fact been discussed and analyzed through policy papers and statements at SAARC for years. There was not a dearth of expert opinion and formal institutional suggestions about any of these matters; nevertheless there had not been much substantial progress.

### ***First-Person Inquiry***

One of the vital differences here was that the diagnosis of the challenges and the articulation of the vision came from the participants themselves, based on their own long firsthand experience as leaders. They were able to surface some of their assumptions and fears, and come to new understandings of the possibilities for action. Having the goal focused on this led to the realization that there was a different way to address complex challenges—an approach in which the seeds of a new understanding could emerge without being limited by the emotional anxieties and potential reactions of others, but one in which those very anxieties became a legitimate part of the inquiry itself.

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<sup>12</sup> Champions Process Meeting Notes, Dubai, 2013.



### ***The Power of the “Trim Tab”***

The Champions dialogue process engaged a relatively small group of people who nevertheless had a broad impact on the thinking and actions of a region. The impacts here were due to the generative nature of the conversation, one that enabled a microcosm of prominent leaders to shift their underlying identity narrative, and to openly explore long-held assumptions and historically divisive positions. A process of this kind has a “trim tab” effect. The term “trim tab,” as mentioned earlier, was first introduced in 1972 by Buckminster Fuller, a remarkable inventor and visionary. He says:

*Something hit me very hard once, thinking about what one little man could do. Think of the Queen Elizabeth—the whole ship goes by and then comes the rudder. And there’s a tiny thing at the edge of the rudder called a trim tab. It’s a miniature rudder. Just moving the little trim tab builds a low pressure that pulls the rudder around. Takes almost no effort at all...the truth is that you get the low pressure to do things, rather than getting on the other side and trying to push the bow of the ship around. And you build that low pressure by getting rid of a little nonsense, getting rid of things that don’t work and aren’t true until you start to get that trim-tab motion. That’s the grand strategy you’re going for...To be a real trim tab, you’ve got to start with yourself, and soon you’ll feel that low pressure, and suddenly things begin to work in a beautiful way.”<sup>13</sup>*

The Champions process evoked a level of coherence and reflection that cascaded into many different contexts—not only into in each champion’s home country, and the associated international development organizations, but also into networks and associations of business and government leaders with whom we interacted.

### **Design Implications**

The process described here could potentially be beneficial if applied in other contexts. Several important design considerations follow:

**The integration from the outset of a dialogue process and a delivery mechanism is a critical design feature that should be built into the process.** This is a subtle matter, because the logic of delivery tends to be focused on precise execution. It must not, however, interrupt the initial discovery process, which needs to be focused on developing a pool of common understanding and is therefore more oriented in inquiry and in challenging preexisting assumptions. It is very easy for people to get impatient in this process, or for the two logics to compete. It takes a combination of people who have experience with the generative nature of dialogue, but who also have different kinds of expertise, to sit together for a process like this to be effective.

There were many times when some of the more operationally oriented participants from the World Bank and from within the Champions group had to slow down and acknowledge that

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted in *Brain Pickings*, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2015/08/21/buckminster-fuller-trim-tab/>



what was emerging was different from what they expected, and beyond what they alone might have achieved. Achieving a balance in this way opens many possibilities for development organizations and others.

As Secretary Shyam notes, reflecting on the Champions dialogue:

*This process is different from other efforts to promote regional economic cooperation. The Bank's conventional approach to its developmental role is to peg its action on the basis of economic and technical feasibility of a project proposal. If a project is attractive on the basis of such due diligence, then the case for its implementation is assumed to be self-evident. In reality this does not always happen in a single country situation and even less in bilateral and plurilateral situations... What the process has attempted to do quite successfully is to link the traditional project based approach to a larger and more persuasive narrative on regional cooperation generated through structured but open conversations among different constituencies in the countries of the region, led by the Champions which identify the deeper political, psychological, social and cultural factors which influence perceptions regarding such cooperation.<sup>14</sup>*

The integration of these two logics created a trim tab effect in the region that continues today. It has allowed cross-national challenges to be explored and, in many cases, transformed, leading to practical action of a kind that could not have previously been acted upon.

**The pedagogy and learning is embedded in the process itself, making it more likely to spread.**

We did not make an explicit effort to educate people about dialogue. We simply engaged together, and gradually people came to understand the nature of the process and the potential it held. This said, the process was carefully designed and supported by a small core group of the people who had been educated in the spirit and methods of dialogue. Eventually the Champions themselves had internalized the spirit and methods of the dialogue, which they observed and experienced, to the point of being willing to support their introduction into a dominant culture that did not initially understand or comprehend them. This took courage as well as skill. It also took a considerable amount of effort to continue to keep more distant World Bank leaders engaged, since it did not fit neatly into a single country-level focus, which is the dominant organizing structure of the Bank. As it became evident that the Champions themselves were deeply engaged and concerned to protect the process from intrusions and to sustain it, support continued.

**There is wide potential application for this process.** The process as it unfolded here could be a template for engagement around a variety of other issues, both for development organizations like the World Bank, but more generally for any national-level engagement process where the transformation of the core narrative is essential for any real innovation to be made.

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<sup>14</sup> Saran, p.23



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