

Doing Action Research on Dialogues in Ukraine

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Abstract

This article analyses the experiences of Ukrainian and German researchers in using an action research approach to explore dialogue activities at the civil society level in post-2014 Ukraine. It explains why and how the classical model of action research has been modified to fit the specific conflict and research context in this case. By connecting academic researchers with practitioners as well as local Ukrainian actors with international experts from the initial stage of research design to the dissemination of findings, the action research approach has allowed the stimulation of tangible change in dialogue practice in Ukraine within the life span of the research project.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser Artikel wertet die Erfahrungen einer ukrainisch-deutschen Forschergruppe aus, die mit dem Ansatz der Aktionsforschung zivilgesellschaftliche Dialog-Aktivitäten in der Ukraine nach 2014 untersucht hat. Der Artikel zeigt auf, warum und wie das klassische Model der Aktionsforschung für diesen spezifischen Konflikt- und Forschungskontext modifiziert wurde. Von den ersten Schritten in der Entwicklung des Forschungsdesigns bis zur Veröffentlichung der Ergebnisse wurden Wissenschaftler mit Praktikern und lokale ukrainische Akteure mit internationalen Experten zusammengebracht. Der Aktionsforschungsansatz ermöglichte es auf diese Weise, noch während der Projektlaufzeit greifbare Veränderungen in der Dialogpraxis vor Ort zu anzustoßen.

Keywords: action research, dialogue, mediation, facilitation, peacebuilding, war, Ukraine, Russia

1. Introduction

After the 2014 change of government, the annexation of the Crimean peninsula by the Russian Federation, and the armed conflict with Russia-backed separatists in Eastern parts of the country, Ukraine has found itself involved in a number of serious socio-political conflicts at multiple levels – from geopolitical struggles between world super-powers to a secessionist conflict and political battles on corruption and reforms inside Ukraine (Averre, 2016; Kuzio, 2015; Wilson, 2016). These conflicts prompted a multiplicity of local and international organizations to set up peace-building, reconciliation and dialogue initiatives on the civil society level – track III in the Multitrack model (Diamond & McDonald, 1996). A lot of these initiatives were supported with funds of international donors.

Yet by 2015 it was already clear that many dialogue and peace-building initiatives led by

Ukrainian NGOs and international organizations faced considerable difficulties, with many of these endeavours simply failing. Concerned about this development, researchers from National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Ukraine, and the Center for Peace Mediation at European University Viadrina, Frankfurt (Oder), Germany, initiated a collaborative research project on Track III Dialogues in Ukraine (hereinafter “Ukraine Dialogue Project”).⁴ The aim of the project was to identify the most obstructive challenges to dialogue and peace mediation processes in Ukraine on the level of civil society and to stimulate reflection and action towards possible meaningful responses among the very actors involved in these processes. These actors were local and international dialogue and mediation practitioners, Ukrainian civil society and government actors as well as international donor institutions.

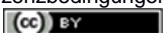
Given the express motivation of the research team to go beyond classic academic research in order to improve dialogue practices in Ukraine and thereby to make a concrete contribution to building peace in this country, it was decided to use an action research approach as the methodological

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Lizenzbedingungen:



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basis for the research project. A key criterion for this choice was that such an approach would produce research findings firmly rooted not only in empirical evidence but also in the concrete needs and potentials for improvement in the field. Additionally, in the best case it should prompt relevant actors to improve the practice in their field on their own.

The research process was arranged around a series of empirical research and participatory enquiry formats allowing for structured exchange with practitioners, policy actors and scholars. Their feedback was systematically collected and integrated into the research process, from conceptual design over analysis of findings to dissemination of results. In many regards, the approach was decisively exploratory; for instance, the research findings were used as direct stimuli for autonomous reflection and action instead of being directly translated into practical recommendations, as is done often in the peace-building field.

This article analyses the development of and the experiences gained with the action research approach in the Ukraine Dialogue research project. Following the introduction, the second part of the article outlines the concept of action research, its definition, main principles and processes. The third part outlines the action research model implemented in the Ukraine Dialogue Project and explains the modifications of the classical action research approach. The fourth part describes how this model was spelled out into seven iterative cycles of feedback collection that together formed a feedback spiral. The conclusion summarizes the key features of the developed action research approach that stimulated tangible change in dialogue practice in Ukraine within the life span of the research project.

2. Action Research: Theoretical Background

Although the literature on action research is rich in useful definitions, and while the approach is gaining popularity both with practitioners and theorists, there is currently no unambiguous definition (Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002). One definition comes from Peter Reason and Hilary Bradbury, who suggested that action research approach is *“a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes, grounded in a participatory worldview which we believe is emerging at this historical moment. It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues*

of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1).

Kurt Lewin explicitly coined the term “action research” in 1946. He understood it as “comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action,” using “a spiral of steps, each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action, and fact-finding about the result of the action” (Lewin, 1946).

The action research approach that originated from this point does not belong to one discipline but rather is “an approach to research that has emerged over time from a broad range of fields” (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2003, p. 11). It starts from the epistemological premise that “the notion of an objective, value-free approach to knowledge generation (is rejected) in favour of an explicitly political, socially engaged, and democratic practice” (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 13).

Integration of theory and practice is a major aspect of this approach, which is not only concerned about practice in order to generate knowledge from the “real world” and then to inform back the practice, but in some of its schools also aims to trigger “positive” social change as desired by the very people involved. (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003, p. 15; Gustavsen, 2008, p. 433) The basic action research working principle is to connect and partner with various actors who, directly or indirectly, shape the social or professional practice of a specific field; and to do research “with” and not “on” or “for” this community. The usually asymmetrical and distant relationship between researching subjects and researched objects is thereby turned into a collaborative inquiry of researchers and practitioners who are all in various ways involved and interested in changing the status quo in their environment (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 10). Knowledge-making and change is thus grounded on a negotiated co-construction of problem, needs and strategies, which confronts and ideally synthesizes practical and theoretical views (Chevalier & Buckles, 2013, p. 10). From a cognitive perspective, the joint reflection process enables researchers and practitioners to step back from familiar routines, forms of interaction, and power relationships in order to fundamentally question and rethink established interpretations of situations and strategies. As always where two spheres of action – here science and practice – meet, interact and seek to develop an understanding, this could be a very demanding process (Bergold & Thomas, 2012).

Most scholars structure the research process in cycles, based on Lewin’s idea of “a cycle of action

research” (Adelman, 1993, p. 14). Altrichter, Kemmis, MacTaggart and Zuber-Skerritt have developed a simple model of the cyclical nature of the typical action research process with each cycle consisting of four steps: plan, act, observe, reflect (Altrichter et al., 2002; Gordon, 2006). Other scholars used somewhat more elaborate models of repeated cycles of “action and reflection” (Susman & Evered, 1978). Cycles in these models had to be repeated until the problem was solved or goals were achieved.

Areas of application of action research approach vary. Initially, it was applied in organizational studies and employment relations, later in educational research, information technology research, community development and peacebuilding. The war and post-war context of reconciliation and peacebuilding is considered one of the most promising areas for the application of action research (Christie, 2006; Lundy & McGovern, 2006; Lykes, 2006). Indeed, some scholars even claim that “the construction of peace *requires* action research aimed at constructing culturally appropriate intervention and prevention efforts... that contribute to broader programs of post-conflict reconstruction and development” (Wessells, 1998, p. 635).

These promising features of the action research approach and its potential applicability to research on dialogues at the civil society level as a part of broader peace-building efforts provided solid ground for the Ukraine Dialogue research project.

3. Action Research in the Ukraine Dialogue Project: An Iterative Process of Collaborative Knowledge Making

The project research team was determined to apply an action research approach from the outset. *First* of all, the project design firmly relied on major conceptual aspects of classical action research as described above. In particular, the theory of change inspiring the project’s action research approach was that joint reflection on one’s own professional practices and experiences in a safe and stimulating environment that transcends roles and hierarchies to a certain degree can initiate changes in patterns of thinking and acting of those involved. If researchers and practitioners of a professional community engage in this kind of joint (self)investigation, the ensuing synergies (insights plus critical mass and the strategic weight to implement them) can make them even capable of changing the status quo in their field on a systemic level (Burns, 2014). One example of the impact of

joint self-reflective inquiry: In evaluating the counter-perspectives expressed at the first expert-round table, the researchers learned that their hypotheses on “impediments to dialogue in Ukraine” were too heavily focused on cultural reasons. As a result, the project design took a key conceptual shift, in which the cultural factors, which initially comprised one third of the hypotheses, were reframed and broken down into a combination of practical, institutional, political and procedural difficulties in implementing dialogue in Ukraine.⁵

Secondly, an explorative process strategy proved to be best suited for the context of the evolving armed conflict in Eastern Ukraine since 2014. Profound uncertainties in political and societal spheres of the researched environment conditioned a very flexible approach to research design. The series of units and formats for exchange, feedback and discussion, which in hindsight might resemble a well-composed, predefined master plan,⁶ developed organically by following windows of opportunity emerging in the process: The two expert round tables and the interview series – as the main building blocks – were complemented step by step by additional formats for feedback or dissemination, such as other expert round-tables, face-to-face and e-mail consultations and supplementary sources such as outputs of public events and conferences on dialogue and peacebuilding in Ukraine and in other countries, as well as insights from NGO strategic planning sessions. In the end, each format was well planned and carefully implemented building on the previous one, but the format’s concrete shape remained open until the feedback from the last unit was evaluated.

The explorative research design used the preliminary and final research findings as a main stimulus of change: Instead of translating the findings immediately into recommendations and guidance for practitioners, the researchers asked the professional community members how these findings corresponded with their respective experiences and how responses to the identified obstructive patterns could look. As a result, the unfiltered findings indeed provoked further discussions among practitioners that were later continued in settings beyond this research project.

⁵ See the Hypotheses Paper in the annex to the Discussion Paper “Challenges to Mediation and Dialogue in Ukraine: Distrust in Procedures and A Dysfunctional Market” (Kraus, Kyselova & Von Dobeneck, 2017).

⁶ For a detailed description of the project design, see Kyselova, T., Kraus A.I., Kirchhoff, L., von Dobeneck, J. (2017). Track III Dialogue in Ukraine: Full Research Report, available at http://www.peacemediation.de/uploads/7/3/9/1/73911539/track_iii_dialogues_ukraine_full_research_report.pdf.

Thirdly, and in a similar vein, a principled yet flexible approach in terms of research methodology was applied. For example, a crucial part of practitioner feedback was so sensitive that it was only implicitly or confidentially conveyed in side conversations; there were no documenting notes or transcripts. However, ignoring this kind of feedback would have weakened the results and derailed the whole research process. Therefore the researchers integrated these implicit or confidential messages while leaving out any link to sources, and tested the adaptations in a next feedback round, seeking greater collective affirmation or correction. Another example of the applied flexibility is that the researchers did not implement those suggested changes in content and process that seemed to instrumentalize findings for individual or institutional interests or to avoid legitimate critique.

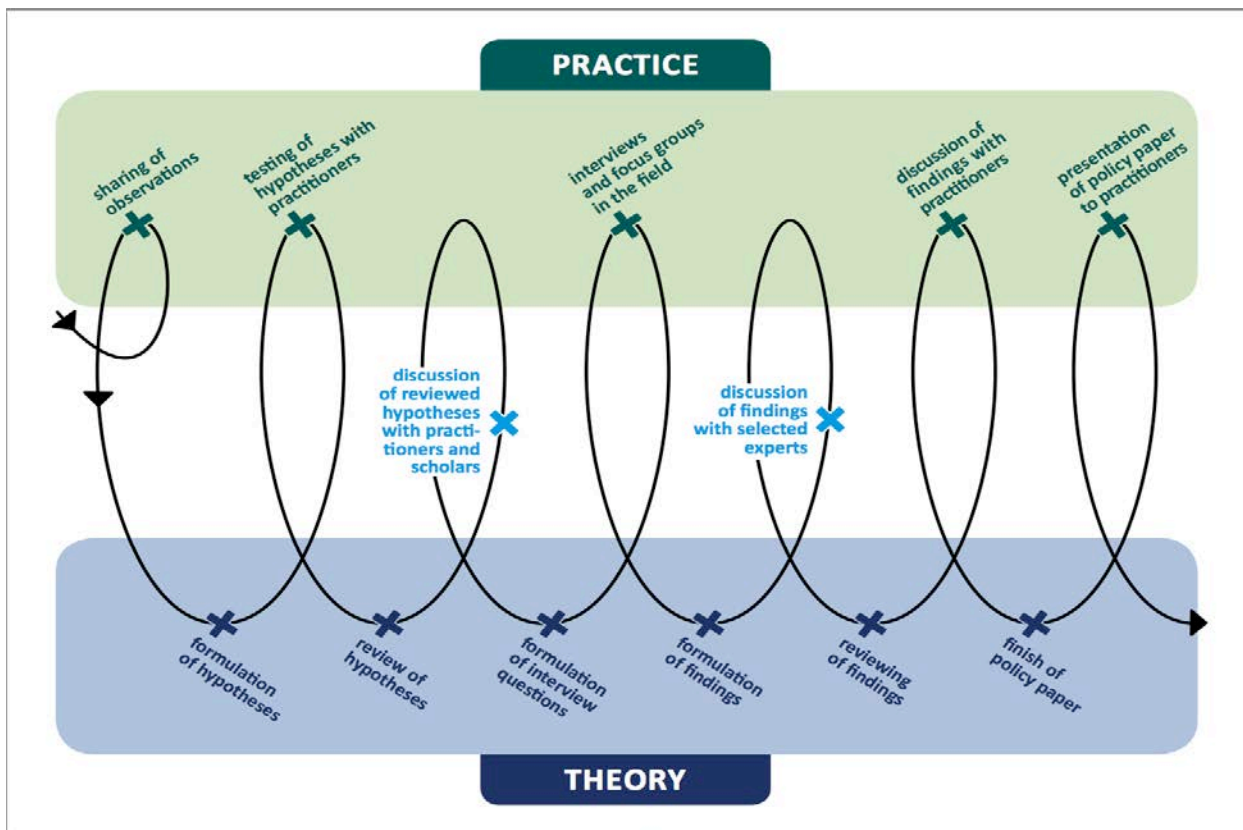
Fourthly, in terms of research ethics, the researchers relied on the *Do No Harm* principle, both in terms of content and process: all participating individuals and institutions needed to choose the degree of confidentiality required for their participation and to explicitly signal informed consent in view of the research goals and the use of their input/feedback before being actively involved. Sensitive issues, such as the mixture of

heterogeneous participants in small group workshops or judgments about participating actors' perceptions and actions in the feedback, were reflected in view of potential detrimental effects for the people involved.

Fifthly, a specific aspect of the projects' action research approach was the transparency on the work in progress and emerging findings. The project published its research design and most of its interim results (including the initial hypotheses paper and a discussion paper with the results of a first expert round table) in open internet access on the website of the Center for Peace Mediation.

Finally, the model of the action research that eventually emerged in the Ukraine Dialogue Project, was designed as a cyclical process of interaction between theory and practice where various stimuli (hypotheses, questions, preliminary and final findings) were used to collect a broad set of data and analyze the findings and practical implications deriving from them (see Table 1). Explicit and implicit feedback was sought and integrated on both the research content and the process (e.g. Have all potential reasons for difficulties been identified? Have the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders been integrated into the research?).

Table 1. Action research spiral in the Ukraine Dialogue project.



4. The Feedback Spiral in the Ukraine Dialogue Project

Following the cyclical logic, the research process in the Ukraine Dialogue Project entailed seven cycles of sharing, collecting, consolidating and implementing knowledge. These circles comprised:

- (1) formulation of hypotheses by the research team, listing assumed impediments to mediation and dialogue in Ukraine;
- (2) testing of hypotheses with practitioners at a first expert round table in Frankfurt (Oder) that resulted in a discussion paper (Kraus et al., 2017);
- (3) a qualitative empirical study in Ukraine (formulation of interview questions, interviews and focus groups, analysis and formulation of findings);⁷
- (4) drafting of a policy paper based on the findings of the empirical study and an analysis of policy documents of international organizations and Ukrainian government;⁸
- (5) discussion of the findings with selected Ukrainian and international experts at a second expert round table in Kyiv;

⁷ The empirical study consisted of three focus group discussions with 21 participants and 40 in-depth interviews, most of them carried out in Ukraine – in Kyiv, Lviv, Odessa and Kramatorsk – and one focus-group in Berlin. The target groups for interviews and focus-groups comprised mediators, dialogue facilitators, lawyers, judges, local and central government officials, business people, Ukrainian civil society activists, representatives of international organizations and donor agencies working in Ukraine. For a detailed description of methodology for the empirical study, see Kyselova, T., Kraus A. I., Kirchhoff, L., von Dobeneck, J. (2017). Track III Dialogue in Ukraine: Research Report, available at http://www.peacemediation.de/uploads/7/3/9/1/73911539/track_iii_dialogues_ukraine_full_research_report.pdf (Retrieved: September 2, 2018).

⁸ UN/EU/World Bank “Ukraine Recovery and Peacebuilding Assessment”; available at: <http://www.un.org.ua/en/publications-and-reports/un-in-ukraine-publications/3738-ukraine-recovery-and-peacebuilding-plan-volume-2> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018).

The Ministry of Temporary Occupied Territories Action Plan aimed at the implementation of certain fundamentals of domestic policy regarding certain areas of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, where state authorities temporarily do not exercise their power,” 11 January, 2017, available at: <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/8-2017-%D1%80> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018.) Ministry of Temporary Occupied Territories, Draft State Program on Recovery and Peacebuilding in Eastern Regions of Ukraine; available at: <http://mtot.gov.ua/uvaga-ogolosheno-provedennya-gromadskiy-publichnyh-obgovoren-proektu-derzhavnoyi-tsilovoyi-programy-vidnovlennya-ta-rozbudovy-myru-v-shidnyh-regionah-ukraviny/> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018).

Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine, National Action Plan on Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 “Women, Peace and Security,” <http://zakon2.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/113-2016-%D1%80/print1493904687523518#n11> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018).

(6) drafting of a final research-based policy paper (Kyselova & von Dobeneck, 2017) that summarizes the main findings of the whole research process and illustrates implications;

(7) dissemination of research findings through publication of the policy paper and eleven dissemination events for major dialogue actors in Ukraine and Germany,⁹ publications in international academic journals (Kyselova, 2017, 2018), on Facebook, Internet blogs and popular Ukrainian mass media.¹⁰

All together, these circles formed a spiral where the ending of one cycle comprised the beginning of the next one and where cycles were not separated from each other. Following iterative feedback loop methodology (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009; Stringer, 2007), the relatively high number of closely interrelated feedback loops in the project aimed at counterbalancing biases and blind spots in perception, interpretation and evaluation. This contrasts the classical action research model that comprises a series of completed closed “action and reflection” cycles that are only loosely connected with each other (Altrichter et al., 2002, p. 130; Susman & Evered, 1978, p. 588).

From an epistemological point of view, each feedback cycle produces a shift in the understanding of problem and solution, leading to ever more empirically grounded and theoretically reflected insights; as this kind of incremental knowledge-making is of course an endless process, it needs to be limited by criteria relating to the aim of research. In this case, the researchers’ and practitioners’ understandings of problems and potential solutions were exchanged and discussed

⁹ Including the Ministry of Temporary Occupied Territories, Ukraine; OSCE Project Coordinator Office in Ukraine; OSCE Special Monitoring Mission in Ukraine; German Federal Foreign Office; UNDP Ukraine office; National Association of Mediators of Ukraine; USAID, Ukraine; World Bank office, Ukraine; Council of Europe office, Ukraine; UK, Canadian, German and Swiss embassies in Ukraine. For the full list of organizations that took part in dissemination events see Kyselova, T., Kraus A. I., Kirchhoff, L., von Dobeneck, J. (2017). Track III Dialogue in Ukraine: Research Report, available at http://www.peacemediation.de/uploads/7/3/9/1/73911539/track_iii_dialogues_ukraine_full_research_report.pdf (Retrieved: September 2, 2018).

¹⁰ Tatiana Kyselova, Mediators and Dialogue Facilitators – One Profession or Competitors? Kluwer Mediation Blog post, 30 January 2018, available at <http://mediationblog.kluwerarbitration.com/2018/01/30/mediators-dialogue-facilitators-one-profession-competitors/> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018.)

Тетяна Кисельова, Професійні миротворці в Україні до та після 2014 [Professional Peacemakers in Ukraine Before and After 2014], Українська правда, 17 листопада 2017, електронний ресурс <http://life.pravda.com.ua/projects/5a0b01b1bee64/2017/11/17/227484/> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018.).

until the perspectives of all stakeholders seemed to be sufficiently represented and integrated.

Finally, in contrast to conventional action research models, the spiral of the action research approach in this project was expressly lacking a finite beginning and end insofar as the project built upon the researchers previous experiences and existing networks. Tatiana Kyselova has been doing qualitative empirical research on mediation in Ukraine, working with Ukrainian mediators and consulting international organizations, since the late 1990s. The researchers of the Center for Peace Mediation had carried out practical support for dialogue actors in Odessa, Ukraine, in 2014-2015,¹¹ including an action-oriented study on local dialogues in Odessa (Kraus & Kerber, 2017).

Similarly, although the project was officially completed in January 2018, its informal research impact continues beyond the project's formal borders. Most importantly, the research project triggered certain changes within the professional community of local mediators and dialogue facilitators in Ukraine. After a public discussion on the dialogue patterns identified by the research, in particular the first pattern – conceptual unclarity of dialogue practice in Ukraine (Kyselova & von Dobeneck, 2017) – a group of Ukrainian dialogue facilitators led by the Ukrainian NGO “Institute for Peace and Common Ground” and supported by the Project Coordinator Office of the OSCE in Ukraine started drafting Standards of Dialogue. The working group consisting of representatives of eight Ukrainian NGOs and involving one author of the Policy Paper (Dr. Kyselova) as an independent consultant, developed a Ukrainian context-specific definition of dialogue and its main principles. The document is expected to provide methodological guidance for dialogue facilitators and local government as well as to serve as an ethical guidance for practitioners. This is the first time in the history of the armed conflict in Ukraine that a local community of professionals, and not foreign experts, has defined dialogue practice.

The document's wording was tested at two public events for mediators and dialogue facilitators in October-December 2017, and an open online consultation for all members of the Ukrainian professional community was launched in January 2018. The final standards were published in March 2018 on the website of the Institute for Peace and

Common Ground,¹² which also intends to develop more detailed recommendations for the use of dialogue by Ukrainian state agencies and local government based on the new Dialogue Standards. Thus, the Ukraine Dialogue research project helped Ukrainian mediators to articulate one specific problem in the practice of dialogue and to mobilize their resources to jointly initiate the process of professionalization and standard-setting within their professional community.

Overall, the major international actors working in reconciliation and peacebuilding in Ukraine – such as OSCE and UN agencies – took the research findings into account when developing or reviewing their strategic approaches to Ukraine. Important positive feedback was received from the Minister of Temporary Occupied Territories of Ukraine, who initiated a meeting so the research team could present its findings to international donor agencies working in Ukraine.

5. Conclusion

This article analysed how the action research approach has been applied to research into dialogues at the civil society level in Ukraine in 2016-2017. The approach that the research team developed modified the classical action research model from isolated circles to a spiral, where the ending of one cycle comprises the beginning of the next and where theory and practice are expressly connected. The developed model consisted of seven cycles ranging from the formulation of hypotheses to the dissemination of the final outcome. Another distinctive feature of the approach was that it involved experienced conflict resolution practitioners from the very beginning – starting with the design of the research itself. At the two expert round tables and other feedback forums, practitioners and researchers worked closely together in reviewing the hypotheses and preliminary findings. The collaboration at the round tables and during the whole project was designed to create an equal footing between local and international experts who tend to work separately. Furthermore, the empirical study expressly focused on local experiences, with more than three quarters of interviewed experts being Ukrainians.

Looking at the results of using this approach, the productive exchange between highly interested actors combined with the sound qualitative methodology of the empirical study helped produce

¹¹ <http://www.peacemediation.de/the-common-house.html> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018).

¹² Institute for Peace and Common Ground, <http://ipcog.org.ua/en/> (Retrieved: September 2, 2018).

research findings that were directly relevant to policy and strategy development in the area of dialogue and peacebuilding in conflict-affected Ukraine. Indeed, the findings were enthusiastically received by Ukrainian mediators and dialogue facilitators, who confirmed all of the patterns identified in the research. Moreover, in direct response to the policy paper findings, the professional community of facilitators in Ukraine involved the research team as consultants in drafting the Standards of Dialogue, defining facilitated dialogue and its major principles from a local Ukrainian perspective for the first time. In developing and reviewing their strategies, the major national and international reconciliation and peacebuilding actors in Ukraine took the findings into account. The action research approach, therefore, allowed the project to develop various positive practical effects in the field.

At the time of publication, these effects still continue to spread and inform conflict resolution practitioners working on Ukrainian conflict. The research team plans to continue monitoring the dialogue patterns identified by the research through a regular quantitative survey of dialogue participants and facilitators in Ukraine. The action research approach used in the Ukraine Dialogue Project will be further developed in a subsequent research project on dilemmas of peace mediators, initiated by the Center for Peace Mediation in collaboration with the Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich, swisspeace and the National University of Kyiv-Mohyla Academy.

With regard to the factors that made it possible for the action research approach to be applied fruitfully and to produce tangible results in the Ukraine Dialogue Project, several aspects were important. Firstly, the approach has been integrated into the project from its very first stage of discussion with practitioners about the basic conceptual ideas and the research design. Secondly, the results of the ongoing feedback loops were consistently shared and reflected within the research team and co-researching practitioners, making the process of formulating and reviewing findings a truly collective endeavor. Last but not least, given that the implementation of the action research approach requires substantial resources and investments compared to traditional research methodologies, it was absolutely crucial that the project receive funding specifically aimed at enabling the involvement of practitioners through various feedback formats.

Thus, thanks to these factors, action research proved to be a very productive approach in the

Ukraine Dialogue Project, as it triggered concrete positive changes in the way local practitioners treat dialogue practice.

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