Intercultural dialogue

A tool for young people to address exclusion in southern Africa

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Abstract

This article aims to develop understanding about how intercultural dialogue can pave the way for more inclusive societies. Four intercultural dialogues were held, one in each of the following countries: Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe. They addressed important topics such as cultural identity, gender inequality, and power imbalances in access to education or employment, with young people from diverse ethnic origins (e.g. Tonga, Shona and Ndebele). The dialogues provided participants with an opportunity to discuss the social dynamics of exclusion. In addition, they allowed for the study of the usefulness of intercultural dialogue to motivate personal transformation as a cornerstone for social justice.

Keywords: *Intercultural dialogue, southern African youth, exclusion, interculturality*

Introduction

Intercultural dialogues are constructed spaces for shared beliefs and goals (Oluwagbemi-Jacob 2011). Studies have found that, although it is possible for exposure to diverse contexts to reduce the degree of ethnocentricity of 'trust' (Lea Robison 2016:2), the experience of engaging with and trusting other groups is more linked to an interactive intercultural dialogue (Dallmayr 2009). According to Bekemans (2014), dialogue can help people to move from multi- to interculturality by providing the foundations for a true coexistence. This means going beyond the idea of living side by side to really achieve a mutual influencing through interaction and understanding.

In an economically globalized world, there is still the challenge of mutual understanding and a culture of peace. Intercultural dialogue can support the achievement of these goals, as it is a process committed to respecting the dignity and human rights of all, especially of those who are discriminated against and excluded. A series of dialogues with young people from different ethnic origins and group identities were held to address the complex notions of exclusion, cultural identity, and gender relations in their respective countries and communities. This article analyzes the experience of the four dialogues that took place, in an attempt to better understand and support the complexity of dialogues in a region, that, while still struggling with its colonial past, is a melting pot of cultures and thriving opportunities.

Study context

Southern Africa remains the most developed and relatively peaceful region in Africa. Nevertheless, there are still traces of past colonial practices that to this day cause socio-political and economic conflicts. Modern southern African states were created by colonial rulers tracing artificial borders that partitioned ethnic groups among various countries, while at the same time gathering diverse groups within national

territories. This became conflicting because colonial rule made sure to sustain power imbalances and unequal distributions of wealth and opportunities (Achankeng 2013; Cohen 1995; Duala-M'Bedy 1984). Therefore, while nourishing a supposedly inevitable "ethnic split", colonial rulers designed a stratified society comprised of first-class (white settlers), second-class and third-class citizens (blacks, Indians and mixed ethnicities). As a consequence, southern African societies still experience identity-related conflicts connected to the distribution of the economic, social and political resources within the state; conflicts related to perceived and factual socio-economic injustice (Jinadu 2007).

In this socio-political landscape, young people – the largest proportion of the population – face a number of challenges. For example, their access to the school system is hampered by financial barriers. This unequal access is related to important variables such as ethnicity, the rural-urban gap, and gender (Morrow et al. 2005). This perpetuates conditions such as poverty and underemployment (Van Breda and Dickens 2015), which is especially true for young people with disabilities, whose education remains severely constrained across the region, particularly in rural areas (OSISA 2012).

Young people without education who are excluded from formal jobs, tend to migrate to find work, and this leads young immigrants to face cultural-ethnic barriers that non-immigrants do not face. These are caused by prejudices of employers, and by certain inadequacies such as the lack of language fluency (Fangen 2010). For example, in South Africa and Botswana, young black African immigrants are disliked and "imagined and re-imagined to suit the negative images conjured up by their reluctant […] hosts" (Nyamnjoh 2006:14). These constitute the group most likely to be considered "illegal", in contrast with fairer-skinned migrants.

Lastly, many southern African young women find themselves at the mercy of strong patriarchal societies. According to UNFPA (2012), more than 15% of young women have experienced sexual violence in Zimbabwe, Malawi and Zambia. In addition, young girls in the region present a higher prevalence of HIV/AIDS than young boys, and teenage pregnancy is a major health concern given its connection to morbidity and mortality; these factors coupled with early marriage affect female educational attainment (Nyimbili 2012).

Theoretical framework

Intercultural dialogue is a process by which people from different cultural backgrounds seek to listen and understand multiple perspectives, including those with which they have no apparent agreement. It is a tool for deconstruction that promotes the analysis of cultural certainties and values through the use of reason, emotion and creativity (UNESCO 2013). In the dialogue, participants "recognize each other as equals and abhor the imposition of the truth of one person on the other" (Oluwagbemi-Jacob 2011:104); here, no party owns the truth or has the monopoly of wisdom, and no party is totally ignorant either. It is a point of encounter where individuals attempt to learn together that they are not self-sufficient.

Intercultural dialogues are considered a tool to develop more inclusive societies and prevent exclusion, stereotyping and discrimination (García Agustín 2012) through the personal transformation of the participants (Schoem and Hurtado 2001). Scholars have found that these dialogues are a useful tool to encourage intercultural understanding and help build alliances, promote social change (DeTurk 2006) and improve intergroup relations (Stephan and Stephan 2013).

Studies within the field of education have made it possible to identify relevant elements to incorporate in the intercultural dialogue to strengthen its potential to promote the social alliances for social change and to help tackle exclusion (Gonçalves 2011; Lambertsson Björk and Eschenbach 2014; Nagai-Rothe 2015; Ortega Viseñor and Guzmán Macías 2012). Among these elements are the need to carefully choose techniques and exercises to activate the proposed communication and psychological processes for specific contexts (Stephan and Stephan 2013); create a pleasant learning environment for the sharing of knowledge and ideas (Gonçalves 2011) and to decrease prejudice (Groenewald and Kotze 2014). Furthermore, Allport (1954) found that there are some necessary elements that may help, such as

gathering participants with equal status, establishing common goals, promoting cooperation, and having persons with positive influence supporting the space may further the positive effect of dialogue.

Intercultural dialogue is a proposal for relocating positions in dichotomies such as men and women, rich and poor, developed and underdeveloped, urban and rural, or black and white, so cultural relations can be reconstructed (Danisile Ntuli 2012), and the grass roots empowerment of the powerless can be promoted. Through dialogue, people should be capable of problematizing dominant practices and knowledge to critically address exclusion.

According to Pérez-Sáinz and Mora-Salas (2007:31), exclusion is a concept that has at its core the notion of power imbalances. Exclusion is a condition and a process caused by the exercise of power of one social group against other(s), where a group with power monopolizes certain resources, depriving others of them. Hence, exclusion is not only the condition where persons or groups are barred from access to resources and opportunities, it is a situation caused by unequal power balances in the society.

Exclusion of youths "is defined as the detachment or alienation of young people from mainstream institutions in society that facilitate the acquisition of skills and other resources" (Chigunta 2001:15). Cultural stereotypes and socialization processes lead to the perpetuation of social biases, prejudices and discriminatory practices against young people in southern Africa. Intercultural dialogues are proposed as a tool to address this situation.

Method

Participants: A series of intercultural dialogues were organized with groups of young women (n = 40) and men (n = 55) (N=95) between the ages of 15 and 24 years old (M = 20, SD = 2,7). In total, four dialogues took place between September and November 2016, one in each of the following four countries (Figure 1): Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Participants in the four countries had diverse ethnic origins (Figure 2); some of them belonged to dominant groups and some of them to minorities. Moreover, they had diverse backgrounds: attending school (formal and non-formal), unemployed early school leavers, young people living with disabilities, having a migratory background, from rural areas, living with parents, living with aunt/uncle/grandparents, and living with HIV/AIDS.

Recruitment: Participants attending school were recruited with the aid of their schools and the Ministries of Education of each country; the respective Ministries of Youth aided the recruitment of out-of-school youth.

The same methodology was applied for each dialogue in all four countries. Allport (1954) points to four conditions that generate positive dialogue: (1) equal group status within the encounter (they were all young people), (2) the establishment of common goals (clear objectives were shared at the beginning of the process), (3) cooperative interactions (clear, common rules of interaction were established by participants and interventions were always constructive), and (4) authorities, i.e., persons with positive social influence, supporting and promoting the dynamics. As to this latter point, the facilitator was a "neutral" person who did not belong to any of the participating groups and who clearly stated the constructive objectives in the beginning of each dialogue. Three main themes were introduced: discrimination and exclusion, cultural diversity, and gender equality, as well as to share ideas about the problems participants may have encountered with regards to exclusion at school, in public spaces, in the work place, and in politics. These three themes were first presented through triggering questions posed mainly to motivate participation. These questions were answered in subgroups of six to eight people randomly selected to work together, who later presented their conclusions to the main group. Following the discussion of the questions, there was a short break. Here, participants were asked to answer simple questions (Who is the most discriminated group in your country/community? Where are they most discriminated against?) on pieces of paper which were placed on cardboards on the walls. This was done to allow participants to anonymously answer questions related to the previous exercise. After this, the

entire group formed a circle to have a dialogue amongst all participants. Again, people were randomly assigned a seat in the circle, thus promoting the mixing of all ethnic and social backgrounds.

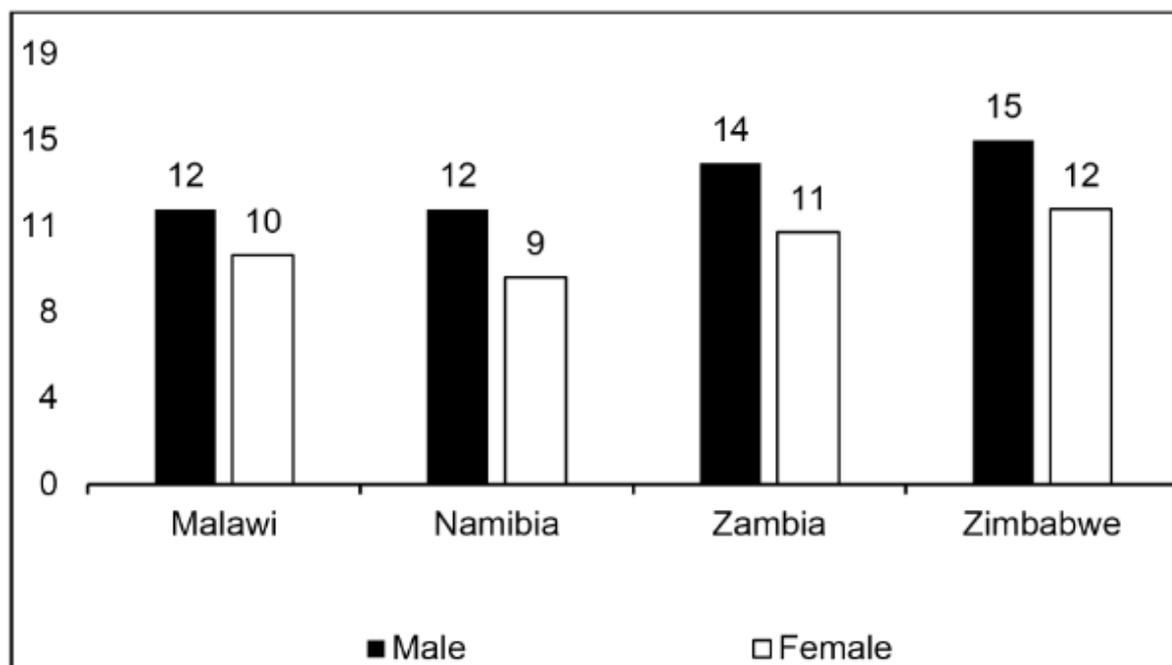**Figure 1:** *Number of participants of the dialogues per country, per gender*

Figure 2: *Ethnic origins of dialogue participants, per country*

Malawi	Namibia	Zambia	Zimbabwe
Chewa*	Owambo*	Bemba*	Shona*
Tonga**	San**	Tonga*	Ndebele**
Yao	Shona** (Zimbabwean migrants)	Ngoni**	Tonga
Ngnoni	Herero	Lozi	Nambya
	Kavango	Chewa	Kalanga
	Damara		
	Coloured (mixed)		
	Caprivi		

* Dominant group   ** Ethnic minority

Data analysis

The lead author had access to three different sets of data, including the following:

a. Participants' written and verbal accounts of discussions in focus groups. One member of the focus group took notes on a flipchart and another participant reported to the plenary. The author observed the group discussions and took notes. The focus group discussions allowed exploring how the group thinks about the main issues, the range of opinions and ideas, and the inconsistencies and

variations that exist in a particular community in terms of beliefs and their experiences and practices. This approach also contributed to identifying key themes emerging from the participants.

b. Participants' written responses to the questions that were asked during the break (see above: Method). The responses were anonymous. They gave an indication of priority issues, and numbers on participants' views on the most discriminated groups and spaces of discrimination. The responses were presented to the group and contributed to the plenary discussions.

c. Finally, the author had access to video recordings of the plenary discussions. He reviewed the recordings for further analysis. The author used the main three themes of discrimination and exclusion, cultural diversity, and gender equality as units of analysis. The utterances were systematically sorted by the respondents' ethnicity, and gender. The author viewed and reviewed the material in its entirety, and took notes of a large number of quotations relevant to the three main themes. This approach is close to a "framework analysis". It allows us to focus on particular answers and abandon the rest. "Framework analysis is better adapted to research that has specific questions, a limited time frame, a pre-designed sample and a priori issues" (Srivastava and Thomson 2009: 72).

Ethical considerations

The objective and focus of the research was well explained to the participants. The latter were given sufficient information about the research project in writing prior to focus groups. The researcher requested permission to audio record the discussions and to take written notes during the focus group discussions. The participants signed an informed consent form. The confidentiality and anonymity of respondents is assured through the use of fictitious names.

Participation in the study was voluntarily. The participants had the right to stop participating in the focus groups at any time if they felt uncomfortable. All respondents were treated with respect and courtesy.

The author followed strictly the ethical guidelines developed by the Faculty of Social Sciences of the University of Cape Town. The discussions were audio recorded but not transcribed. The audio recordings will not be shared with anyone and will be deleted after the publication of the article.

Critical comments

English was used as the lingua franca because all participants were fluent English speakers. Nevertheless, a local polyglot interpreter accompanied each dialogue. This was useful because on occasion some participants expressed their need to communicate an idea in their native tongue, especially in Malawi and Zimbabwe. The interpreter was an important aid in these cases. This supported the participants' need to express themselves and promoted their participation by not letting language become an obstacle.

Results

The intercultural encounters created spaces for dialogue that participants claimed do not exist in their communities or in public institutions, such as schools. All the participants recognized the existence of discrimination against certain persons because of their ethnicity, discrimination that causes the exclusion of these persons from important parts of social life such as education and work.

There was general agreement on which groups were the most discriminated against and most excluded. In general, the groups facing the most discrimination in the four countries were considered to be: youth with disabilities, youth living with HIV/AIDS, and youth living in poor economic conditions. Agreement as to which were the most excluded groups also existed in each country, both regarding discriminated ethnic groups and people with disabilities or living with HIV/AIDS. These groups were represented by at least one participant who agreed and shared personal experiences of exclusion with the group, for example from education or job opportunities.

Even though participants expressed their awareness of discrimination based on ethnic origins, this caused no problem during the study's intercultural dialogues. This does not mean that there was always agreement, but rather that the dialogue mostly followed the rules of interaction participants themselves had established. The dialogues were generally fluid, equitable and attentive.

In spite of awareness of what ethnic groups were excluded in the respective countries, the participants did not have deeper knowledge of their living conditions or culture. This was especially the case for participants from dominant ethnic groups. For example, in Zambia and Zimbabwe, the Bemba and the Shona reported having little knowledge about the conditions and aspirations of the Ngoni and the Ndebele, respectively. For instance, in Namibia, some Owambo participants met peers from the San group for the first time in their lives. In all the dialogue groups, the youths representing minorities were shocked about this lack of knowledge. This moved them to share with the group as much as they could about their living conditions and those of their parents, who were suffering exclusion as well, mainly related to work.

A key finding was that when addressing the reasons for exclusion, participants reduced them to the individual. There was a generalized opinion that exclusion is associated with a lack of confidence: "Usually, marginalized youth lack confidence in themselves and they have low self-esteem, especially youth immigrants", said one female participant in Zambia. The notion of exclusion as a consequence of low self-esteem was pervasive in all the dialogues, and were also held by participants from minority ethnic groups, i.e. the excluded. Participants with disabilities who come from poor backgrounds stated that their lack of self-esteem was instilled in them from a very early age by their parents and relatives. Also, young migrants and those from minority ethnicities admitted that, in contrast to what they consider should be the pride of one's origins, they refrain from using their native tongue in public to avoid feeling unwelcome. They expressed a sense of self-censorship regarding communication in public.

Addressing the lack of knowledge about ethnic minorities' culture and way of life led to participants from all countries providing a critical description of their societies which they consider to be the perpetuator of exclusionary practices against others, practices that are persistent and, therefore, normalized. Communal life was considered the foremost vehicle for discriminatory behaviour and perceptions against others. This was also the case in members of minority groups. Although not in control of access to relevant resources such as jobs, they can certainly create narratives about members of cultures and ethnicities who discriminate against them. The community was also considered a space where certain social norms learned by parents were publicly reinforced by community leaders, teachers, and others, stigmatizing youth with disabilities and those living with HIV/AIDS. Negative values, beliefs systems and customs in relation to "outsiders" lead to discrimination and, hence, to detrimental social and economic living conditions for minorities. However, the community was also seen as a source of protection, shared values and group identity.

Based on this, the participants in all four countries acknowledged the importance of facilitating direct contact between different groups, away from the community. Participants found that in settings such as these dialogues, they were more willing to reach out to the others and to understand their situation. They expressed that they are ready to play an important role in bridging the divide between the various groups in their communities. They lived in more culturally diverse environments than what their parents grew up in, especially in the city: "Our parents grew up in the villages where they did not have the opportunity to meet people from different tribes", said a male participant in Zambia, but "we have access to Facebook and other social media where we interact with different people around the world, so it is easier for us to break stereotypes."

Discussions between young participants about teaching in dominant languages at school and the position of minority languages at the national level were heated, and created moments of tension and animated debate. This topic seemed to divide the participants more than any other. Those who were not taught in their native tongue felt discriminated against; they felt barred from equal opportunities in society such as access to education, jobs and political activities. They found that language gave the dominant ethnic group an advantage.

This domination of societies' majority groups were also found within politics at the national level. Several of the participants complained about people voting along ethnic lines. According to them, politicians opt to run for elections in their tribal areas thereby reinforcing segregation and access to political power based on tribal identity.

Also the patriarchal organisation of family and society created a challenge for the participation of girls in the intercultural encounters. In all the countries under study, we noticed tension between girls and boys. Young male immigrants pointed to economic independence as the key to the success of migrants, but when discussing gender roles, they supported the idea of immigrant women belonging to the private sphere of unpaid domestic work. The female participants expressed their disapproval and provided the groups with examples of their own personal experiences, where they had been forced to stay at home and take care of the household. One of the girls from Malawi told the group that: "At school I can't talk about these things because boys make fun of me." She continued to explain how young women remain silent to avoid being denigrated by male peers. Young women expressed that the dialogue setting provided them with a feeling of safety to face young men. Here, they felt more at ease and were able to speak up without feeling intimidated by their male peers. The male participants showed quiet discomfort and disapproval of women being so empowered. Moreover, youths with HIV/AIDS were empowered to share their experiences because they felt this was a safe space. The other participants received their comments with interest and respect.

Families and communities were identified as the source of the idea that girls are "less useful" than boys. Hence, the groups concluded it is especially important to promote gender equality among the same groups that are living in disadvantaged conditions.

Discussion

The result section highlights the importance of dialogue between young people in Malawi, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe, due to the lack of opportunities to engage in dialogue with members of other ethnic or social groups than their own within a structured framework and in a safe setting.

For these dialogues, the construction of a safe setting which guaranteed that an inclusive educational experience beyond physical safety (Gayle, Cortez and Preiss 2013) was achieved. This is shown in that participants in all countries shared a similar amount of time, and managed to speak on many topics, even those usually deemed too embarrassing or taboo. It is also shown in that the young women spoke freely and were heard, something uncommon in their daily lives.

Throughout the dialogues it became evident that young people in the four countries identify discrimination and exclusion not only as a reality, but as directed against specific groups, whether based on ethnic origins or on conditions such as having a disability. Even though participants did not show discriminatory behaviour during the dialogues – except when gender relations were discussed – they recognized having grown up in environments that promote segregation and exclusion, which may have contributed to the development of negative stereotypes and lacunae of knowledge. The open discussion of these negative stereotypes was perceived as an important step to reduce them. This is in keeping with other studies where intergroup dialogues resulted in positive changes in behaviours, attitudes and feelings toward minorities (Dessel 2010; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006), and intercultural interventions that use a peer-to-peer approach (Souweidane 2012).

Peers from different groups sharing their personal experiences proved through discussion to be able to bridge the knowledge gap created mainly by ignorance of who the others are and how they live. This led to empathy and the identification of common challenges, such as the need to work with parents, community leaders, teachers and themselves to stop the exclusion of others. Nevertheless, it is important to address the issue of what Nagai-Rothe (2015) has identified as differentiated types of engagement in dialogues, in terms of the participants' emotional vulnerability.

In research in the United States with white people and people of colour, Nagai-Rothe (2015:59) found that people of colour– those with less power – seem to be burdened with the "projected and assumed responsibility [to educate] white people about race and racism". This exhausts and frustrates participants of colour who play the role of "race experts" who often educate through sharing personal experiences related to race and racism, while white participants can exercise the privilege of intellectualizing those experiences without emotional engagement.

Even if our dialogues were not structured around the issue of race, they implied imbalances of power among groups. We therefore found it necessary to pay attention to the interplay of emotion and rationality. According to Nagai-Rothe (2015), dialogues are a Western construction centered around the idea of cognitive work that may lead to a process where rational/intellectual interventions prevail over emotions. This may result not only in leaving aside important matters related to emotions, but also in the dismissal of forms of addressing issues characteristic of certain groups, like women, who – regardless of whether they are right or wrong – may have been raised to comply with the stereotypical notions that associate femininity with being "overly-emotional" and irrational, not with intellectuality.

Nevertheless, the dialogues showed the importance of maintaining an ethical stance toward the emotions expressed as something important in itself, and not only as a tool for the intellectualization of the privileged.

Members of minority groups were vocal about how the dialogues were an opportunity to express for the first time, face to face, things they had never had the chance to do, a finding also found in other studies (Nagda, McCoy and Barrett 2006). It is believed, however, that longer-term interventions may be more beneficial, since it is mainly through time that trust can be built and that elements such as empathy and the potential for friendships – predictors of positive effects of intergroup contact – can develop (Dessel and Rogge 2008) and positive group behaviour can continue outside the dialogical context.

Regarding the important debates about teaching-learning in the native tongue, studies show that young people who are not taught in their native tongue feel discriminated against (Fangen 2010). However, the participants' discussions lead to serious reflections on the language of the dialogue itself. Important questions to be asked and studied are: How is the language chosen for the dialogue affecting the results? Is the selection of a lingua franca a practice that perpetuates power imbalances?

In reference to gender, and despite findings that posit that intergroup contact is effective as a means to reduce prejudice but not when this relates to gender (Jackman 1994), we consider that the dialogues allowed a momentary power switch, where usually voiceless young women could safely express their ideas to their male peers. In addition, the dialogue context may have allowed other participants realize the prevalence of sexism, thus creating interest in changing power imbalances and rejecting sexist beliefs (Becker and Swim 2011).

Even so, the palpable discomfort when women were vocal about their concerns shows that inequalities and exclusion may be intellectualized and that there are other mechanisms that need to be triggered in order for people – in this case, young men – to understand their privileged role. Therefore, even though the dialogues promoted the awareness of power imbalances, mainly in this case where gender inequalities exist across different groups, it remains a crucial task to promote practices to develop empathy in male participants through dialogues and related contexts. According to Becker and Swim (2011) empathy and taking other people's perspective are necessary to changing men's attitudes toward unequal gender relations.

Finally, contradictions in discourses show the complexity of lay notions of power and exclusion. On the one hand, intellectualization allowed for participants in the four countries to understand exclusion and even to identify who it benefits. On the other hand, the causal explanations of why people are excluded (the individual lack of self-esteem as responsible for a person's exclusion) show the depth of individualisation, and how narratives place the blame on the victims, not on those who exert social closure. This individualisation is also shown in the response to why the participants thought that improved economic conditions is the solution to exclusion. This notion, according to which you will be socially included if you earn a lot of money, is at odds with various studies in the Global North that show

that immigrants are excluded by the dominant groups on the basis of "not sharing the same values", even when the excluded are economically successful (Fangen 2010). This indicates a notion that their countries' and communities' value systems are exclusionary, and that exclusion and inclusion depend on the individual's capacity to generate income or wealth.

The notion of exclusion as something a person brings upon himself or herself caused by lack of self-confidence or self-esteem, contradicts the notion expressed in the four countries of exclusion as an external action exercised against certain persons or groups. It also contrasts the notion agreed among the majority of participants that exclusion benefits those in society who already have privileges, an idea that became stronger when addressing the political class and political participation.

It is important to highlight that participants felt capable of bringing about change. This has also been found in studies that, interestingly, also support the relevance of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and social media for friendly interaction, protest, gatherings and community building (Cassell and Tversky 2005; Howard and Hussain 2013; Neumayer and Raffl 2008), and in other studies that analyze ICTs as potential tools for developing intercultural competences (Chiper 2013; Larrea Espinar, Raigón Rodríguez, and Gómez Parra 2012), which can be supporting elements to use along with dialogues. The intersections of different methods and tools must be further analyzed, so that effective actions may be implemented to promote positive social transformations.

Conclusions

Although youths interact at school and sometimes in public spaces, the intercultural encounters provided a context for meaningful exchanges. They provided the time and structure for interactions and conversations about life, realities and shared concerns, and facilitated a better understanding of each other. The intercultural encounters – even when they created some moments of tension – gave the youths, within predetermined rules of engagement, contexts in which to learn about the life conditions of their peers, but also a sense of duty to listen and feel part of the issues and solutions. The young participants felt that their voices could be heard; they felt they could contribute to the matters most important to them and society. This is precisely what lies at the core of intercultural approaches, which are developed to strengthen self-awareness and to empower the internal voices of the participants so they may vocalize their concerns about power imbalances and develop respect for diversity and human rights.

As stated by a young male student from Zimbabwe, building consensus begins at home and in the community. Therefore, besides dialogues with young people, it is evident that work with adults (teachers, community leaders, and parents) needs to be done. It is through this joint work, according to the youth, that the acceptance and integration of excluded people can improve the lives not only of those who are excluded, but of the community as a whole.

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