

Saunders, Harold H.A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflict. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

David E. Schmitt

Volume 20, numéro 1, spring 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs20_01br01

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Schmitt, D. E. (2000). Compte rendu de [Saunders, Harold H.A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflict. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 20(1), 187–188.

Saunders, Harold H. *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflict*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.

Harold Saunders is Director of International Affairs at the Kettering Foundation. With extensive service on the US National Security Council and as assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern and South Asian affairs (1978-81), he was intimately involved in such endeavors as US mediation efforts in the Egyptian-Israeli peace processes. His book "... presents a framework for action by people mired in deep-rooted human conflict who want to change their conflictual relationships." (p. xv) Saunders maintains that as deep-seated conflicts cannot be resolved until citizens interact in new, more constructive ways, an effective peace process requires that citizens outside of government participate in the process. The central vehicle for this endeavor is "sustained dialogue," which he sees as a major additional tool in the arsenal of more traditional techniques, such as diplomacy, and related methods, such as mediation and negotiation. Saunders explicitly acknowledges the importance of traditional academic and governmental approaches.

Sustained dialogue can be initiated externally or by members of the communities. Five carefully worked out stages of sustained dialogue are presented: deciding to engage in dialogue; mapping and naming problems and relationships; probing problems and relationships to choose a direction; scenario building - experiencing a changing relationship; and acting together to make change happen. These stages are discussed in the body of the book as well as in a lengthy appendix entitled "The Process in Outline: A Brochure Organizers' and Moderators' Manual." Numerous suggestions to participants and moderators are provided.

Saunders criticizes traditional academic and governmental approaches as focusing too much on interests and official channels. As international politics is changing to include an international civil society of groups and individuals, one must have a broader understanding of policy processes and democratic participation. "More and more, people believe that they must harness their own political power in new ways to tackle chronic social and political problems. To accomplish this, they are thinking about politics in creative, noninstitutional ways. Interaction among citizens is proliferating." (p. 73) However, little supporting evidence is provided, and Saunders understates the degree to which traditional scholarship recognizes the complexity of the policy processes in international relations.

The book is generally well written, although somewhat repetitive. Case studies include the Inter-Tajik dialogue, race relations dialogue in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and dialogue processes between Palestinians and Israelis. To some scholars and practitioners the core arguments may appear a bit idealistic. Specific limitations to the approach include the possibility that sustained dialogue might increase tensions, be co-opted by partisan leaders or manipulated by external states, groups or individuals to advance a national or ideological agenda. Fear may prevent participation. Also, citizen dialogue may be unable to alter hardened attitudes on the ground, and those advocating moderation might run considerable personal risk. Some conflicts and hatreds may be so intense that maintaining separation might constitute the least objectionable alternative if equitable and acceptable to the communities concerned. Other conflicts result primarily from the powerful

exploiting the weak, where compromise might not be defensible and where dialogue processes are unlikely to produce change. Saunders explicitly recognizes some of the above problems and acknowledges additional ones. Despite his awareness of difficulties, he argues that many obstacles can be overcome and provides specific examples and techniques.

Government policy makers will find the book useful not only for its alternative perspective but also as a potential source of ideas. Practitioners in nonprofit organizations will find many practical tips that may be helpful in a variety of peace process activities. As a teaching tool, the book will be of special interest to academics attracted to the peace studies viewpoint. Other faculty will find the volume, in whole or in part, useful for introducing students to an alternative perspective. Researchers may gain insights helpful for their research projects.

Harold Saunders has done an effective job advocating and presenting the sustained dialogue technique. It is probably too early to tell if this and similar approaches can have a major, positive real-world impact, whether for particular conflicts or a broader contribution to evolving national and international democratic political cultures. Practitioners and academics who remain unconvinced (including this reviewer) are probably well advised to reserve judgement and to encourage further research and carefully-implemented initiatives. In sum, *A Public Peace Process* is an important and interesting contribution to the literature.

David E. Schmitt

Northeastern University