



TIPS FOR STIMULATING A CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL AND NATIONAL/LOCAL CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS TO ENHANCE COOPERATION AND ENSURE MORE EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIPS.

This is a **brief list of some tips for conducting meetings** or other interactions, to support you to develop productive dialogues between international and national/local civil society organisations. Remember it's a "dialogue": There are many types of verbal interactions such as monologues, panel discussions, speeches, and debates. These can support dialogues. However, dialogues are an exchange of ideas on a particular subject – a conversation.

There are usually **three stages of dialogue**.

1. If it is the first time people meet, it is good to start with the goal is of deepening understanding about diverse viewpoints on a topic: what are they? how did people develop them? What is people's current sense of "reality"?
2. After a group has meaningfully investigated these questions might be about how things could be different – this is a "visioning" dialogue, aiming to open up new possibilities and creativity.
3. A subsequent dialogue can be about what to do to create a new possibility that inspires people.

While these three steps can be completed within a couple of hours, often people spend many days over several months going through them.

The Setting

Generally experience suggests that **the best dialogue groups are six to eight people together**. This size allows a diverse group, everyone can participate and people can get to know each other – to begin forming relationships. It is good to **ensure that groups are of people from mixed background and views**. If you have a larger group, you might want to divide it into groups of six to eight and convene again as a whole group to share experiences.

If you're planning a panel or some larger form of exchange, **try to create small groups** to discuss what was presented so people can feel like active participants, rather than passive receivers.

Groundrules

Identifying some **guidelines for behavior in a dialogue** group is helpful. At the beginning of a meeting you might want to propose ground rules, such as the ones below. Going over them and inviting people to ask questions or change them is good. You might want to keep a list (such as the bold face words) on a wall to help people keep them in mind. You can introduce these by saying something like "I'd like to propose some guidelines for our dialogue to support exchanges that we all value. Let's:

1. Really **listen** to what others say. Often people are so intent on saying something, they don't pay attention to what others say. Good dialogue moves from speaker to speaker in a flow.

2. **Support participation** of everyone. Keep in mind the dynamics of the whole group, and give everyone time to participate – avoid monopolizing the time.
3. **Generate learning.** Encourage questions to each other, and not just statements. Take advantage of the opportunity to explore and discover how people arrive at their perceptions and opinions.
4. **Be open.** Forget about titles and status, and share experiences across these divides. Abandon preconceptions.
5. **Talk about what's important.** The time together is valuable and the chance for multi-stakeholder dialogue is unusual. Let's get beyond superficial chit-chat.
6. **Respect** what others have to say. You might disagree, even strongly. However, the goal is to explore each other's way of thinking about things and how they arrive at what they say. This contrasts with a goal to make someone "wrong" – that is debate, not dialogue.

During a dialogue, keep in mind the need for **balance between *advocating* (stating what needs to be done, aiming to "convince" people you are right) and *inquiry* (asking questions to deepen understanding and learning)**. Most people do much more advocating than inquiry, and this can cause problems because until you understand others' views and why they hold them, it is very easy to advocate something that another person will find insulting or receive negatively.

Developing the Dialogue

To **identify "who" to invite** to a dialogue, identify the stakeholders in the issue you are addressing. These stakeholders are *groups* – informal groups, or formal organizations – who have distinct views and interests in the issue. A rich dialogue between ICSSOs and national/local CSOs aims to bring together people who both hold and express the views of all these groups. If there is a group that is important but not represented by a formal organization, try to identify someone who can do this in any case.

Although it is natural to focus effort on the actual meeting of stakeholders, it is good to remember that **the success of the meeting depends on preparation**. Of course there are the mechanics of getting a space and time and such. Equally important is to do some research in advance about *who* to invite. Probably you already have people in mind, and of course it makes sense to start by contacting them.

When you contact them, think about approaching them as though you are doing an interview – in fact, you are undertaking a one-on-one "dialogue" and so the groundrules apply here, too. It is good to **have a specific set of questions** to pose to each person who you speak with, although of course you should add questions according to your relationship with the person and their group.

Particularly important in defining the questions is to remember the groundrule of "respect what others have to say". You want to *learn* from them; although you may know the individual already, this is a good chance to explain that you are doing background research for a dialogue process that you are developing. Framing it as "research" and an "interview" will allow you to ask questions that perhaps you have never asked before, even if you do know them. It's good to **make some notes** during, or at least after, the interview.

Some Suggested Questions

You can think of the above interview as a chance to actually **test questions that can be posed during the group dialogue**. Remember the three stages of dialogue that were described above at the beginning. And remember that you want to provide an opportunity for people to deepen and broaden their own understanding of the situation.

IMPORTANT: After you ask an initial question, very often it is important to do a follow-up to get people to explain further. A follow-up question builds on the first response, and is

something like “Could you explain more? I feel I still don’t understand.” Or “You said ‘X’. I am not sure how you arrive at that conclusion. Could you elaborate?” Or: “you said ‘X’. Can you give an illustration of when you experienced that or an example of what you mean so I can understand better?” Below are some potential questions that can guide both your interviews and the group dialogue. They are just an example, you may want to use others better suited to your context of intervention.

Stage 1: Exploring the current situation - getting people to describe their concerns and goals.

- 1) When you think of this issue, what comes to mind for you? How does this issue affect you and people you know? Your organization (members)?
- 2) How important do you think this issue is for you and your organization/members?
- 3) How important do you sense the issue is for the community as a whole?
- 4) What do you see as the major barriers to improving the situation?
- 5) Who else do you talk to about this issue, and who do you think is particularly influential in it? (this provides a list for further interviews, invitations, and understanding who talks to whom)

Stage 2: Thinking about how it could be different – getting people to imagine paths to improvement

- 1) I am interested in understanding what we should aim for, what objective we should set to improve this issue. What are your thoughts about that objective? what would it look like?
- 2) How would that affect (you/your organization/members)? How would they benefit?

Stage 3: Identifying possible steps to that future – getting people to begin planning to take action

- 1) What do you think can be done to help improve the situation?
- 2) We talked about barriers earlier. What ideas do you have about how to address them?
- 3) What role might (you/your organization/members) have in implementing some of these suggestions?
- 4) Who else should we engage in making this happen?

When these questions are used as initial research, you will come out with a deeper understanding of the person’s ideas, their willingness and ability to share them, and names of others who you should speak with. This helps you build your understanding of your issue as a “system” of people, organizations, resources, and views. It will also help you understand whether the person would be good to invite to the group dialogue. As mentioned before, you may want to **use same or similar questions to drive the group dialogue.**

A big challenge in group dialogue is to move beyond “official” positions and statements. People often experience this as becoming “vulnerable”, and many times people who have “formal” authority or positions are reluctant to move beyond official statements because they will see it as challenging their base of support or committing themselves to something they don’t want to commit to – at least for the moment. Therefore, it is sometimes better to get someone other than the head of an organization to an initial dialogue who feels freer to share and explore. However, that can come with its own issues – that person might feel inhibited to speak without a formal leader’s permission. These are the types of challenges you will face in developing the invitation list.

The notes you’ve taken from the interviews can be reviewed before the meeting. Hopefully you have a facilitator or someone you are working with, to discuss them with. Talk about them again in terms of the three stages. You may want to keep the general approach of the questions proposed for the group dialogue – after all, people have not had a chance to share as a group and it is critical that everyone learns each other’s views. However, reviewing

your notes may point to particular issues or sub-questions that need to be addressed, and you can refine the structure of the group dialogue to incorporate these.

Remember: no dialogue is “perfect”. Encourage people to enjoy themselves, learning, exploring and creating. This is the basis for building strong community and a base for action.

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