

Designing & Facilitating Effective Dialogue Processes

“Good social change happens from good conversations. Almost all change takes place through conversations of one kind or another.”
(Reeler, 2015)

Introduction

In many ways, today’s challenges and opportunities are increasingly complex and interconnected. Take climate change: it is affecting people and places across the boundaries of states and regions, sectors, businesses and levels of government. Addressing climate change effectively calls for building bridges across these boundaries. In addition, it calls for doing things differently: away from “business as usual”, from established worldviews and paradigms, to transformative change.

It takes partnerships and collective action to address complex issues. However, bringing the different groups affected – the stakeholders – together to work in partnership, is not an easy task. They might worry about similar issues but are driven by different interests that might constrain the actions of others. To avoid this, we need to constructively engage with each other, develop shared understandings and a collective commitment for action.

The V-LED project was designed on a simple premise: collective action starts with dialogue. If you convene people and provide a space for listening to and interacting with each other in a meaningful way, a shared sense of understanding and trust – possibly even excitement! – will emerge. These are basic requirements to coordinate efforts, initiate learning, inspire innovation and generate a sense of ownership of the solutions. Like this dialogue can help facilitate coordination and produce more comprehensive strategies, capable of addressing even a challenge as complex as climate change.

How can we engage stakeholders in constructive dialogues? How can we facilitate conversations that inspire change? In this short working paper, we are looking at the rationale behind facilitating multi-stakeholder dialogues, at the principles that seem to us most important to consider and at practical guidelines for organising and facilitating successful dialogue processes.

Rationale

To bring about transformative change, we need collective action. This does not only follow from experiential evidence but theories of (1) political science (2) sociology and (3) psychology:

- (1) The ways our societies are governed are changing. Increasingly, socio-economic or environmental issues are dealt with in global or multilateral governance regimes (i.e. the sustainable development agenda; climate change negotiations). At the same time, there is an emerging groundswell of non-state actors pushing for greater participation in political processes. This shift from **“government to governance”** recognises a need for more participatory, multi-stakeholder approaches to decision making.
- (2) Our societies are **complex social systems**. No individual has the power to change the entire system. Rather change happens as a result of interaction. Within this system, communication is the main catalyst for change. A way of strengthening the resilience and adaptability of our societies is to increase the effectiveness of our communication. Insights from system theory therewith provide a strong justification for involving a diversity of (relevant) stakeholders in dialogical processes.
- (3) Scaling down towards the individual level, research has long confirmed that **humans are social, cooperative beings** that need to feel valued and respected. Researchers in public and development policy also affirm that agreements produced through participatory, deliberative process are characterized by high rates of **ownership and better implementation**.

Principles

Complex challenges mostly require a coming-together of a diversity of stakeholders (remember, humans). In the attempt to facilitate a most constructive dialogue among them, we try to build our work on the following (ethical) principles. Mostly, they speak about inclusiveness and the attempt to meet on “equal footing”:

- **Respect** is paramount: for the individuals and partners who come to your workshops, learning events etc., but also for their contributions. Respect as a principle may imply that you make a conscious effort to get to know your participants, to hear each voice (also if coming from someone who is supposedly no expert) and to make sure that everyone leaves your event with the impression of their time well spent.
- **Devotion** to solving the challenges at hand: e.g. tackling climate change (respectively a more varied picture on the local level). If you feel “lost” in discussions during an event, it is helpful to remind and ask yourself: how to best contribute, in this moment?
- **Insight** into the power of diversity. Basically, everyone is needed to tackle the problem of climate change (maybe not all at the same time). This is the idea of integrated, cross-

sectoral, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches: To get out of our bubbles and silos! The trick, however, lies in facilitating the interaction properly and most fruitfully.

- **Knowledge** of how to best make use of the precious occasions when people come together; it involves a good deal of preparation beforehand, organisation on the side, and some ideas about how to best facilitate a constructive dialogue.

Practical Guidelines I

Formal Procedures – ease communication and produce instant results.

- **Rules and orientation:** Following a systematic procedure or other form of guided process provides the space to set roles and rules of communication. It is for example helpful to have the agenda visible during an event so that everybody knows “where we are at” in the overall design of the day.
- **Voices:** Consider certain tools to enable all participants to contribute to the discussion. Even small things, such as introducing your neighbour, followed by a general round of introduction in the beginning of an event, already provide helpful opportunities for everyone to speak out and break the first ice.
- **Relationships, cohesiveness and consensus:** Becoming aware of differences and commonalities within discussions is key and can eventually lead to orchestrated approaches and the fostering of relationships. Sometimes it helps to have a neutral person (e.g. a key listener) drawing the common picture or literally use visualisation techniques.
- **Recording/Visualisation:** Several tools can record discussions visually. Stakeholder maps for example display not only who is doing what but they can also draw connections and enable discussions about e.g. the relations between institutions. Visual recordings (e.g. drawings on whiteboards, cards on the wall or on the table) give further orientation and are checkpoints for participants to follow the discussion. These can easily be used for further documentation and presentation.
- **Silent Space:** Reflection-time, having time to think about and record ones’ own position, maybe with the help of some guiding questions and a notepad. This can easily be the basis for participants to contribute to the event, e.g. presenting their answers in a round.

When following **formal procedures** (e.g. reflective thinking or other methods) it is key to appropriately chair and facilitate the needs to ensure equal and universal participation. Please see references for further ideas. Formal procedures can provide, but do not guarantee, the means to organise effective discussions and result in relevant outputs, e.g. creation of ownership. Keeping an eye on the overall setting (e.g. balance with informal procedures) and the expectations of the participants is just as important.

Informal procedures:

Next to formal methods and procedures, **informal procedures** are equally important, such as coffee breaks, dinners, walks etc. Many experienced facilitators even argue (and in our opinion rightly so) what happens “informally” might actually be most important. Some methods, such as world café and open space, are designed according to this insight. These formats provide the opportunities to freely choose the person(s) you want to talk to, to network and to inspire each other. So allow for some informality and never cut the breaks. Rather make “use” of a break by providing a final funny or provoking thought or question that you consciously “give to the participants” right before leaving for a break.

The role of the facilitator [adapted from Acland (2012), Brouwer et al. (2016), Hemmati (2002)]

Throughout our work, we step into the role of the facilitator. This means a wide range of tasks and skills. These begin long before the actual workshop or meeting. Whether creating the right atmosphere for a dialogue or simply running an effective meeting, a facilitator always plays the role of a convenor, a moderator and a catalyst (MSP Guide, chapter 5).

Convenor: brings the relevant actors together, clarifies roles, encourages interaction, secures support, gives direction and aligns goals and expectations...

Moderator: makes collaboration easy by ensuring smooth communication, helps to build and maintain trust, creates clear common ground rules and assists in developing a common understanding, resolves/ mediates conflict, removes practical obstacles...

Catalyst: stimulates participants to think outside the box, enhances creativity...

Additionally, facilitators need to pay attention to:

- **Meta-communication:** Make group members aware of the communication process and the role of communication in-group performance: participants act differently when aware of underlying processes and possible implications.
- Prevent **groupthink** (drive to reach consensus at any cost) without losing the **benefit of cohesiveness**:
 - ensure adequate consideration of alternatives (e.g. appoint “devils advocates” to point out weaknesses in favoured decisions)
 - outsiders brought in to validate the groups decision and look out for shared biases or let groups with different perspectives work simultaneously on the same problem
 - reduce conformity pressure (public votes should be exception)
 - encourage the expression of doubt and objections

Practical Guidance II: References – commented links

The list of guides, toolboxes, scientific articles and online resources dealing with event facilitation is growing. Here you may find a list of resources we recommend for further reading and inspiration:

- **Brouwer, Herman and Woodhill, Jim, with Hemmati, Minu, Verhoosel, Karèn and van Vugt, Simone** (2016): [The MSP Guide, How to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships](#), Wageningen: Wageningen University and Research, CDI, and Rugby, UK: Practical Action Publishing, This is a comprehensive reference on the why, what and how of facilitating multi stakeholder partnerships (MSP). Chapter 5 explains the role of the facilitator as a convenor, moderator and catalyst; 6 provides a selection of tools. Complementary to the book, on the [MSP website](#) you can find everything about designing MSPs. Including a great overview of existing workshop [Tools and Methods](#), [Case Studies](#) and [Resources](#). They also have an extensive list of [great online resource](#).
- **Hemmati, Minu (with contributions from Felix Dodds, Jasmin Enyati, and Jan McHarry)** (2002): [Multi-stakeholder processes for governance and sustainability: beyond deadlock and conflict](#). London.
Chapter 5 (by Jasmin Enyati) is of particular interest regarding scientific evidences. It elaborates on the issue of diversity and its impact on group composition, consensus-building and integrating mechanisms of communication.
- **Reeler, Doug** (2015): [Facilitating Social Change. Seven questions that keep us awake](#). Community Development Resource Association.
This writing shares seven evolving questions and many other lines of inquiry that guide our work. Reeler's questions are: "1. What is social change and how do we approach it? 2. What is our primary role as development practitioners? 3. How do we see and work with power? 4. How do we work with uncertainty? 5. What social change strategies work best? 6. What kinds of organizations and leadership do we need to face the future? 7. How can we have conversations that matter?"
- **Acland, Andrew** (2012): [Dialogue by Design. A Handbook of Public & Stakeholder Engagement](#).
One guidebook (of many) which does offer hands-on guidance regarding the design of meetings/workshops: choosing techniques, giving inspiration and instructions on all features of facilitation.