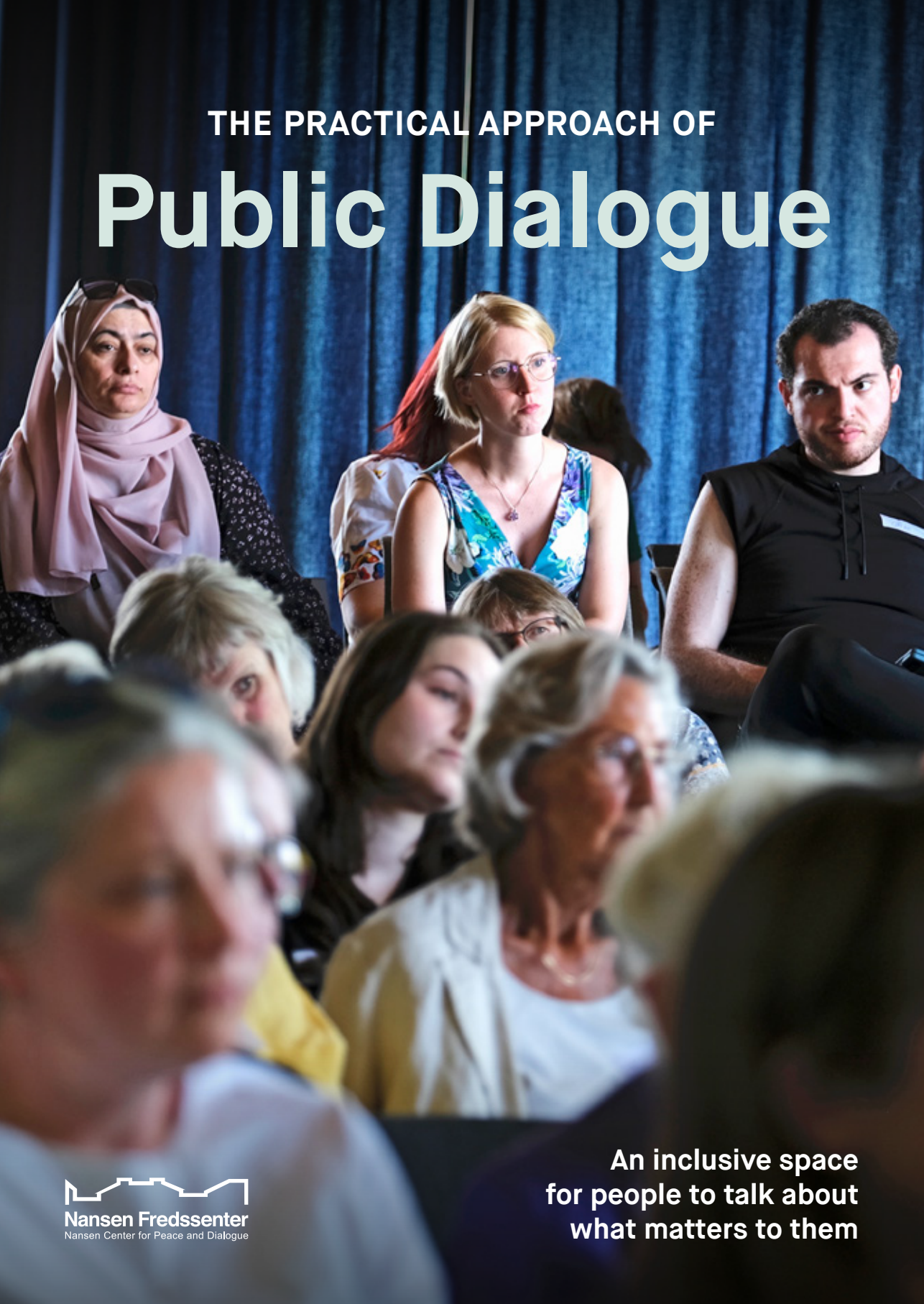
THE PRACTICAL APPROACH OF

Public Dialogue



An inclusive space for people to talk about what matters to them

Nansen Fredssenter
Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue

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About this handbook

In this handbook, you will find information about the practical approach of public dialogue. The information is based on insights from how the Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue (NCPD) use and understand the approach. Our hope is to provide useful and accessible knowledge, rooted in real experiences and practical examples, that will better enable you to use public dialogue in your context. First, we would like to share a few clarifying pointers that will enhance the rest of your reading experience.

As practitioners, we apply experience-based knowledge and continuously develop our methodology. Our insights have been developed through a combined 20 years of working in the field of peace, conflict transformation, and community development. While training and facilitating dialogue as a tool for conflict transformation, participants wanted to know if there was a way for dialogue to serve the general public, in addition to people navigating conflict situations. This request was the starting point for the development of our approach to public dialogue.

The content of this handbook is a result of that development process. However, the public dialogue approach is always evolving. One of our wishes for this resource is for you to take what we have assembled and make it your own. We hope it can serve as a fundament for further development of the approach.

Our years of practicing public dialogue has been a humbling endeavour of trying and failing. No matter how much experience we've gained, we do not believe in the notion of a perfect dialogue worker. Even though we write this handbook, we do not think we figured it all out and now sit with all the answers. Working with public dialogue is a constant learning process that no one ever fully graduates from. We invite you to approach this work with the same student mentality.

This handbook is a result of our experience with facilitating public dialogue in Norway and in developing training courses in Norway and internationally. Even though we have worked with public dialogue across many continents, you will come to find that many of the examples we share are from Norway. This is because of our choice to prioritize public dialogue trainings overseas rather than facilitations. We believe that the outreach of this

approach is far more sustainable and effective through capacity building. When people who live in the area facilitate themselves, it is also more likely to be culturally adapted and relevant.

Our wish for this resource to be as practical as possible connects to our strong belief that public dialogue is something that has to be experienced and practiced rather than theoretically studied. Therefore, while we hope you find this content engaging, we want to emphasize that it is only a doorway into a life-long learning process. We strongly recommend participating in at least one of our interactive trainings in this approach.

This points to the question of who this handbook is for. Our goal has been to assemble information that first and foremost serve those who have attended NCPD's trainings in public dialogue and want further guidance afterwards. It might also be useful for those working with similar approaches or whose engagements concern that of public discourse, moderation, conflict work, communication, and community building and organizing. With that said, we hope these chapters can prove interesting also for curious readers more unfamiliar with the approach, perhaps inspiring further learning and exploration.

Throughout the handbook you will find anonymized quotes highlighting different aspects of this approach. These are all from participants of the public dialogues we have facilitated over the years. In addition, you will come across information boxes that should supplement key points and give necessary context. We believe that the most fruitful learning experience is a personal one. Therefore, every chapter ends with a few reflective questions for you to reflect on. We encourage you to take a moment and think through them before moving on – they are certainly questions we continuously ask ourselves.

The following chapters are structured in a way that mirrors our trainings in public dialogue. They are meant to be accessible and useful. In the preface, we set the tone and step into the mindset of the rest of the handbook. Initially, we find it necessary to first introduce the broader concept of dialogue as we see it, as it forms the foundation for understanding public dialogue. Chapter two focuses on the specifics of public dialogue,

elaborating on its basic components, methods, application, and potential benefits. The organization of public dialogues is the focus of chapter three, which provides information essential for moving on to chapter four about facilitation and the facilitators roles and tasks. While the rest of the handbook mostly consider physical public dialogues, chapter five specifies the tools and methods of digital public dialogues as we have used it. Lastly, chapter six brings forth important limitations, pitfalls, and challenges of the approach – summarizing and elaborating on essential issues for its application. At the back of the book, we share some resources for furthering and enhancing your learning process, including recommended literature we rely on in our work and methodology development.

Thank you for taking an interest in this approach and this handbook. We hope it will serve as a resource on your journey of understanding and practicing public dialogue. Good luck!

Christiane Seehausen & Siri Syverud Thorsen
Oslo, February 2024

"I am noticing how good it is to be exposed to other people's thoughts. In the dialogue, I get to challenge my own perspectives, but it also makes me more confident in what I think - talking together like this gives me hope for the future."

PREFACE

The power of dialogue

This handbook is about the power of dialogue. What it looks like, how to create space for it, and what it can do to, and for us. It is about how conversations different than the ones we usually have can make an impact – change something in ourselves, our relationships, and subsequently the societies we live in. Through dialogue, we can practice our way into a world where we meet our "other" with the intention of understanding them better. This happens by listening deeply and staying curious, rather than competing in a loop of arguments, interruptions, offensives, and defence. Experiencing this "world" during a dialogue is for many a profound experience. An experience that sometimes can plant a seed that keeps on growing.

In a facilitated public dialogue, you will experience that real democratic participation is possible. People are invited to come together and share what really matters to them, and every voice is equally meaningful and important. In the dialogue space, people who seldom have the chance to be heard, can use their voice and become more visible to their peers. Every participant in a dialogue matter equally, and together they have ownership of the direction and content of the conversation. In this way, dialogue is empowering. The experience of participating can empower people to take an active role in the public conversations needed to make their communities active and inclusive. It can empower people to step out of their dichotomies and to commit to the greater "we".

The term dialogue has many definitions. We see dialogue as a structured and mindful form of conversation where deep listening and curious questions are the main ingredients. One of the main goals for a dialogue is for people to understand each other better. What does it mean then, to better understand another person? To us, understanding is a continuous process of grasping a clearer picture of the others' complexity – to manage to look behind our own stereotypes and prejudices and give the other a chance to show up for us in the way they want. Even a slight improvement in our understanding of others can open the door to a process of building and rebuilding relationships, which in turn can make it easier to live in togetherness.

Dialogue is a holistic approach that embraces the whole human experience – holding space for our intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions. This entails that our feelings, needs, personal experiences, and bodily knowledge regarding a topic are given the attention, even more than facts and theories. This expansion in focus can have a humanizing effect, as well as foster collective responsibility and commitment within the group.

In dialogue, disagreements and conflict are not seen as threats needed to be resolved, but rather opportunities for change, growth, and learning. Through this facilitated process, communities can strengthen their capacity for peaceful co-existence by practicing how to live with disagreements in a constructive and non-violent manner.

This is the power of dialogue – the potential to create a space where disagreement and tolerance go hand in hand, allowing for the chance of deepened relationships and understanding.



CHAPTER ONE

1 Dialogue – an introduction

In this chapter we will provide you with a general introduction to the dialogue methodology as we use it. This methodology forms the basis of the public dialogue approach. The chapter contains:

What dialogue is and what it isn't

- Debate vs. dialogue
- Dialogue as a craft

The basics of dialogue

Dialogical qualities

- The qualities of dialogue
- Personal concepts

Practicing dialogue

- Communicating clearly
- Going below the surface
- The main ingredients of dialogue
- Listening deeply
- Asking questions
- Dialogical behaviour

Responsible dialogue

- Dialogue is a two-way street
- Boundary awareness
- The importance of challenging questions
- Dialogue is not therapy
- Dialogue is not meant to be easy

What dialogue is and what it isn't

Dialogue is an inclusive form of sustained and civil conservation. By this we mean an inter-group and interpersonal conversation where participants can speak without interruption or hurry, to people who try to listen to understand them. Participants' voices are viewed as equally important, regardless of identities and status within the society at large.

Dialogue engages the heart as well as the mind. The sharing of experiences, feelings, reflections, and needs is at the centre of a dialogue – theory, arguments and facts are not the most essential. We give focus to participants' personal understandings and the reasons behind their viewpoints, more than their general statements and positions.

Dialogue is different from ordinary, everyday conversations. It has a focus and purpose and in our understanding of dialogue, it is facilitated by a dialogue facilitator. Through deep listening and follow-up questions, the facilitator makes space for different voices to be heard, and helps participants go deeper into what they are saying.

Defining dialogue is no easy task, but Harold Saunders manages to include most of its aspects in the following summation:

> *Dialogue is a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Each makes a serious effort to take others' concerns into her or his own picture, even when disagreement persists. No participants gives up her or his identity, but each recognizes enough of the other's valid human claims that he or she will act differently toward the other.*[1]

Debate vs. dialogue

As this definition emphasises, dialogue has the potential to hold space for the contrasting elements of understanding vs. disagreement and perseverance vs. change. This quality differs from many other forms of communication, like debate or discussion, where one's positions often stay locked in place and where nuance and complexity have a tendency to be avoided or ignored.

Dialogue and debate do not only differ in how we communicate, but also in what is given value and importance. An essential difference in this regard is that dialogue is as interested in the relationship between the partici-

pants is as important as the topic being explored. By comparing[2] the two communication forms, we can better illustrate what makes the dialogue approach unique:

Debate *Goal: To win*	**Dialogue** *Goal: To understand*
Convince	Explain
Argue	Listen
Look for the weak argument	Look for the strength in the other
Attack and defend	Reflect and be aware
Moral judgement	Tolerance
Make the other insecure	Make the other feel safe
Movement in viewpoint is a sign of weakness	Movement in viewpoint is a sign of maturity
Create a competitive atmosphere	Create a safe space
Confronting language	Supportive language

This overview presents the differences in tools, techniques, and mindsets commonly used in the two forms – which is not to say that one is better than the other. Debate is an important aspect of any healthy and democratic society or relationship. However, from our years of practicing dialogue we have seen that most of us live in, and are accustomed to, a debate culture. Our small encounters and everyday conversations are often following the patterns of debate, being characterized by assumptions, locked positions, and using arguments to convince or win. Public dialogue is an approach that can help balance out this culture – fostering increased awareness in participants on debate and when we choose to talk in a different manner.

These differences are summed up well by Louise Diamond, who explains:

> *In dialogue, the intention is not to advocate but to inquire; not to argue but to explore; not to convince but to discover.*[3]

Dialogue as a craft

Dialogue is in many ways a craft – it takes time to familiarize oneself with it, but after getting known with it, it can feel as the most natural and fulfilling thing in the world. As anyone who has ever tried to master a craft will say, it doesn't come easy and there are no shortcuts. It requires a lot of concentration, willingness, practice, and determination. Dialogue is no exception, as it can feel like it goes against how our usual communication patterns and habits.

As any craft, dialogue can be taught, and feel easier the more we practice it. That being said, there is no such thing as a perfect dialogue communicator. Dialogue is both the means and the goal – a set of lenses we utilize to try to talk differently to each other. By striving to embody its methods and principles, the approach can gradually make us more dialogical.

"In the dialogue I am a person, shoulder to shoulder with other people. We are different and the same, and that's okay. I got a warm feeling of belonging. Listening and being listened to is calming and challenging at the same time."

The basics of dialogue

Before exploring deeper what characterizes dialogue and how it's done, we need to cover some basics of what it constitutes of and what it looks like. Hopefully, this will help you picture a dialogue setting in your mind while you continue reading. Some of these basics will be described in much greater detail later in this handbook.

The purpose of dialogue	To address complex social topics, problems, and challenges by creating a space for mutual learning and understanding.
Parties involved in dialogue	Participants: Those who have come to talk – they are responsible for the content. Facilitator(s): Those who continuously create the space for dialogue – they are responsible for the process. Organizers/hosts: Those in charge of logistics and recruitment. (Sometimes also done by the facilitators)

Different types of dialogue

Dialogue can be divided into conflict-based dialogue and public dialogue.

Conflict-based dialogue concerns a certain group of people who are in different ways involved or effected by a specific conflict.	Public dialogues are about topics of common concern, even though conflict often exists within the topic.
Conflict-based dialogues are closed off and for invitees only.	Public dialogues are generally open to anyone who choose to attend but can also be organized for specific invitees and in closed off settings.

Scope of dialogue

Dialogues can either be a one-time session or a longer process of series of dialogues.

Conflict-based dialogues are often longer processes with several dialogues at different times for the same group.

Public dialogues can be both a one-time session, or a series of public dialogues, either for/in a specific community or about a specific topic in many different places.

Longer dialogue series and processes sometimes include tools and methods such as workshops and group work. They also often involve a combination of conflict-based and public dialogues.

Dialogue set-up

In a dialogue, both participants and facilitators sit together in a circle, or in several circles within each other, without any tables. The facilitator(s) sits a spot inside the circle where they have a good overview of the room and the participants.

A dialogue normally lasts between 1–3 hours and have anything from 2–100 participants.

The dialogue often starts with an opening from the facilitators, sometimes after welcoming words from the host. Depending on the group size and context, the facilitator may choose to start with a short presentation round. They begin the dialogue by asking an already prepared opening question to the group. The dialogue normally ends with the facilitators closing the dialogue in different ways depending on the type of dialogue and the situation.

All dialogues contain a set of ground rules, sometimes called guiding principles. The facilitator can invoke the ground rules to maintain a safe space. Ground rules are directions for the conversation that is meant to help participants talk in a dialogical and respectful way. "Try to speak on behalf of yourself", "Listen to try to understand" and, "No phones in the circle" are examples of such rules.

The choice of ground rules depends on the context and type of dialogue. In continuous dialogue processes with the same participant group, they are often defined by the participants themselves. In a one-time public dialogue the facilitator presents them to the circle.

Objectives of dialogue

Better understanding and trust building are among the overarching and recurring goals for dialogue.

However, certain more specific objectives related to the usage of the public dialogue approach are useful to work with:

- Engage all participants
- Foster learning and deeper understanding
- Create the sense of safety required for open and honest conversation
- Inspire people to be involved in their communities
- Foster commitment to achieve sustainable personal and societal change

Safe space or brave space?

The term safe space has become a common expression in the last few years. The concept originated in the LGBTQ and women's movement in the 1970s and described a physical space where people dealing with similar identity related realities could meet and share experiences in a safe setting.[4.]

While practicing dialogue over the last decade, we have experienced that the term is often used when discussing how to create meeting places free from harassment, threats, and hate speech. Consequently, these discussions involve different perspectives on what limitations should be in place to secure such meeting places, and if that in turn leads to restricting freedom of speech and furthering polarization.

In dialogue, a safe space is not a space free from discomfort, tension, or even pain and anger. Sometimes, it can contain accusations, rudeness, shouting, and dislike. It can be necessary for such expressions to surface – as the opposite can feel dishonest and disingenuous, potentially lead to mistrust and unsustainable changes.

To us, a safe space is a brave space. A space where we accept challenging conversations, even when they become tough. It requires courage to step out of the comfort zone and share and receive in a different manner, one that is open, curious, and willing, even when things get hard.

Managing challenging expressions while at the same time feeling safe requires some level of reciprocity, physical safety, and respect within the participant group. If the group cannot follow the ground rules put in place to help with this, the public dialogue has to end.

Dialogical qualities

The qualities of dialogue

Naturally, dialogue is about what we say – we come together to share what we think, feel, believe, and have experienced. But dialogue is not just about the words that we speak, it is equally concerned with the manners in which we say them – our actions and our intensions during the conversation.

In this sense, dialogical conversations hold certain qualities. They serve as a compass for our attention, attitude, and behaviour in the dialogue – both when speaking and while listening to others. The point of these qualities is

that they are goals to strive for, rather than virtues we already master to perfection. In a dialogue, the most important thing is that we try our best to meet others with these qualities. The most fundamental ones are the qualities of:

- Curiosity
- Acknowledgement
- Patience
- Openness
- Respect
- Humility
- "Follow the flow"

Curiosity By embodying a genuinely curious position, we accept the reality that we do not know what we think we know about others and their experiences. This helps us ask the right questions and challenge our taken for granted notions.

Acknowledgement Acknowledgement means to recognize our shared humanity and the real experiences and personal truths others carry. This can look like refraining from commenting and picking apart what others are sharing or practicing empathy while listening.

Patience Dialogue takes a great deal of patience, because going deep requires time. It can mean giving others time to share their long trails of thoughts, while at the same time giving yourself time and space to reflect, process, and learn. This involves a certain degree of letting go of control of the process. It can sometimes feel strange and uncomfortable, as many of us have become accustomed to a fast pace and outcome focused culture in our daily life.

Openness In a dialogue, one needs to meet the worlds of others, as well as your own inner world, with an open mind and heart. This is hard work, as most people will find themselves constantly wrestling preconceived judgements, past experiences, and unconscious established responses. A truly open attitude requires a lot of self-reflection and discipline, persisting in the effort of recognizing when we are not able to stay open.

Respect

At its most basic level, respect is the regard for the dignity of others – to see them as human beings and treat them as such. Respect does not necessarily have to entail acceptance of someone's viewpoints or beliefs, but perhaps rather the accepting understanding that these viewpoints and beliefs do in fact exist and are part of a shared bigger picture.

Humility

A very important part of dialogical communication concerns humility. In the circle, participants are confronted with the reality that they are only experts of their own lives and experiences, and no one else's. Staying humble requires one to be open to the idea that the world views, lived realities, and convictions we know to be our truths are not the same for everyone. Being humble in the dialogue circle can look like refraining from giving unsolicited advice and interrupting or trying to see the validity in other perspectives. Practicing humility can be challenging, but it also provides a sense of relief from "having all the answers", creating an opportunity for learning that can feel liberating.

"Follow the flow"

Because dialogue is a process-based approach, the aim is that both participants and facilitators "follow the flow" of the conversation. To follow the flow means to give room for free reflection and new things to come up in relation to what is being said. This free reflection can take the conversation in different directions, even to topics and issues that had nothing to do with the original topic e of the dialogue. Following the flow can help the process and conversation be more reflective and unpredictable, rather than goal oriented. This can also prompt the participants' ownership and responsibility for the content of the dialogue.

Personal concepts

These qualities are, as you may have noticed from our short descriptions of them, intersected and intertwined. In the dialogical circle they play on each other – humility comes through acknowledging other ways of seeing and living in the world, and without openness it is difficult to practice curiosity.

Furthermore, these words mean vastly different things to different people. Perhaps you even raised an eyebrow while reading about them above, as we described them according to our specific understanding of them. Sometimes, the different understandings can lead to challenges in the dialogue if the concepts are taken for granted and not reflected on. What dialogue gives us is a space for these qualities to be tried and explored collectively, which is sometimes just what we need. It can very well be that exploring the meaning of respect within a community faced with intergenerational conflict can help the situation itself.

"We really need to talk together and it's very liberating not to argue with each other"

Practicing dialogue

With this understanding of dialogue in mind, a natural question that follows is how to actually practice dialogue. As we have mentioned earlier, the main ingredients in dialogue for both facilitators and participants are deep listening and dialogical questions. For this, a certain mindset and focus is needed. Much of this mindset is connected to the qualities explained above. However, many of them concern how you show up for others in the dialogue circle – and it is crucial to first give attention to how you show up for yourselves. Dialogue is in many ways an endeavour that begins with yourself. The main ingredients of listening and questioning also applies to your internal world and behaviour. Therefore, the act of practicing dialogue can be described like this:

> *Dialogue is a process where I humbly try to better understand the root causes of my own and others' beliefs and behaviours. I do this by listening deeply and asking follow-up questions.*[5]

Regardless of if you are a participant or facilitator, dialogue requires continuous self-awareness and self-discipline. We begin to communicate in clear, mindful, and honest ways by being in touch with that which moves us, what makes us react physically, which taken for granted notions we live by, or which parts of our identity are closest to our values and norms. Through internal exploration of our previous experiences and how these influence our communication patterns and style, we can communicate in a way that is easier for others to understand. For example, it would be beneficial to me and the rest of the dialogue circle if I was aware of why I react with paralyzing fear towards older men who raise their voice. Perhaps I had a father figure that constantly shouted and hit me as a child, leading me to experience heightened stress and fear in situations that feels similar later in life. By being aware of this, I can avoid becoming defensive or closing down, which will have an effect on the communication process.

Communicating clearly

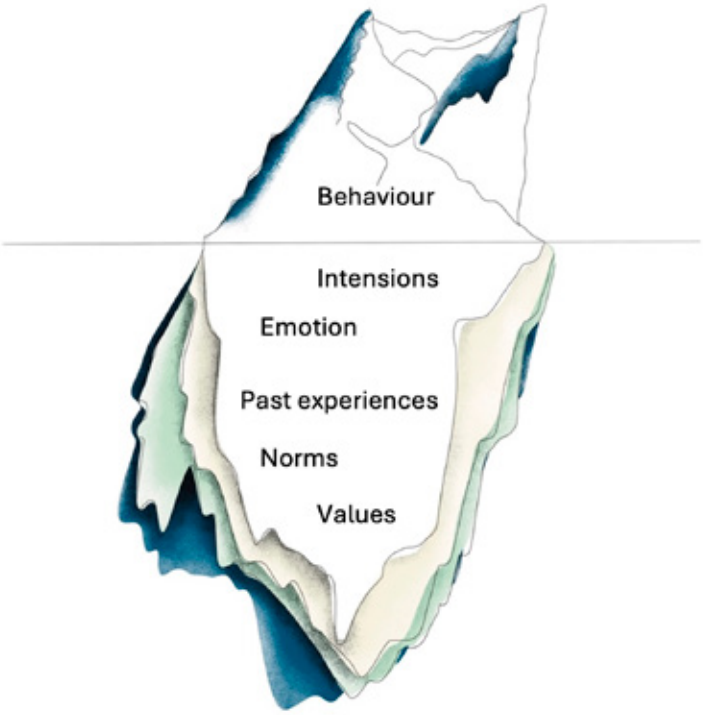
Continuous self-awareness and self-discipline begins with self-exploration. By exploring our patterns and reactions we can communicate in a clear way that is grounded in our own integrity. This means that we are so connected to our own feelings, needs, and thoughts that we are free to choose to either communicate them clearly or keep them to ourselves. Ensuring that our inner world correlates with our actions and words is often harder than we think. It is easy to say that everything is fine when it is not, or to laugh away an uncomfortable situation. But such ambiguous ways of communicating can quickly create distrust, confusion, or overstepping of boundaries, potentially leading to a less safe space.

This dialogical way of communicating can sometimes be challenging, but it has the potential to leave us feeling energized, relieved, and honest. We have seen time and time again, that this can also help to clear space for listening. When we feel safe and not in need to protect ourselves, we have space and energy to better understand what others are sharing with us.

Going below the surface

The iceberg model below is a useful illustration of the complexity that often hides in our communication. The elements depicted under the waterline, like past experiences, intensions, or values, influence our positions and communication styles, but are not necessarily evident to the people we are speaking to. In this way you can become a better communicator by knowing yourself better. For example, if I am aware that equality is a core value

of mine, I can also understand and process why I get so angry when listening to someone who in my view expresses opposite values. In the dialogue I don't have to change my values, but being conscious about why I react can enable me to convey my feelings clearly. It can also help me to listen with an open mind without feeling defensive or assertive. As a dialogue participant, you choose what from below the waterline you share or keep to yourself. Absolute transparency is not necessary for clear and honest communication.



1 "The Iceberg" illustrates the visible (above the waterline) and non-visible (below the waterline) premises of our communication. To send accurate (congruent) messages, our verbal and non-verbal messages should not conflict with one another.[6]

The main ingredients of dialogue

To listen deeply and to ask dialogical questions are conscious actions that involves a lot of discipline and self-control, where you give another person your attentiveness and a desire to understand. As skills, they can be developed and improved through training and practice.

Listening deeply

Active, or deep listening, is an act where we decide to fully concentrate on what is being said. This process includes hearing, empathy, self-awareness, humility, and the nurturing of deep interest for all speakers regardless of the particular topic or person. Deep listening can mean not letting your mind wander, or refraining from inserting your own judgements or solutions onto what someone is saying. It can also mean not interrupting, or trying not to focus on a reply or instant response. This form of genuine listening can open us up for movement and learning. Besides the fact that listening provides information, it also has the potential to build and rebuild relationships based on respect and an expanded world view.

When deep listening is practiced in the dialogue circle, our experience is that participants tend to become less argumentative, slower in tempo, and more ready to incorporate other viewpoints in their reflections. Furthermore, people who are listened to with sensitivity and attentiveness, often become more aware and clearer about what they are thinking. Because dialogical listening reduces the threat of having one's ideas criticized, those talking can express themselves fully and are more likely to feel that their contributions are worthwhile.





Asking questions

As the main goal of any dialogue in to increase understanding, questions are essential to making this happen. The right question can bring out what someone is unconsciously thinking but not explicitly saying, help to go deep into complex topics, highlight details, clarify disagreements, or shed light to diverse perspectives.

A good dialogical question is a question where you don't know the answer. You ask because you are curious and with the acknowledgement that you need others to learn something you do not already know. A good dialogical question has certain characteristics:

- They are open ended – they open up a space that can be filled with different answers
- They are brave enough to be actual questions, rather than hidden criticism, accusations, statements, or persuasions
- They are asked because of genuine interest and curiosity
- They are free from hidden and clear judgements
- They give the focus to the person(s) asked rather than the one asking
- Unless it is an opening question, they follow up what has been said

A sincere question can unlock a willingness to share openly and honestly, as genuine interest can feel acknowledging.

In a public dialogue, there are no formal requirements on how participants ask each other questions as long as they follow the ground rules. The characteristics listed above are what we want the questions to contain. But, following them is a challenging task, and participants often ask each other un-dialogical questions. The facilitator, however, has a responsibility to formulate questions in a dialogical manner. Later in this handbook we will delve further into how they can formulate such questions.

Dialogical behaviour

To summarize we can say that dialogical behaviour is a practice of trying your best to:

- Inquire to learn
- Share your experiences, thoughts, and feelings
- Listen with an open mind
- Reflect on what is being said
- Stay curious – ask questions to understand better
- Explore underlying assumptions – both your own and those of others
- Acknowledge emotions as well as ideas and opinions
- Be open to new knowledge, perspectives, or world views

It is impossible to remain dialogical in your communication and behaviour at all times, but through continuous practice in the circle, moments of dialogue and understanding can occur.

"My participation reminds me that silent participation doesn't mean to be absent. I really appreciated to be here and listen to people. "

Responsible dialogue

As a participant in a dialogue, you are not just doing your part in building a safe and inclusive environment for the other participants, you also need to maintain a safe experience for yourself. Even if one of the objectives in dialogue is to talk openly and honestly with others, this should not

be misconstrued to imply blind and unconditional sharing to the point of putting yourself in physical or phycological jeopardy. The line between challenging discomfort and breaking of important boundaries can be thin. Therefore, dialogue is an exercise in responsibility.

Dialogue is a two-way street

Importantly, dialogue requires more than one willing participant. Engaging in dialogue with the above qualities in mind requires reciprocity and mutual exchange. If one feels like the only one making an effort, it is difficult to maintain the motivation and openness necessary for dialogue. This way of communicating relies on the willingness of the participants to try their best to respect each person's right to express their truths. If someone in the circle misuse or exploit the trust that is being built, the dialogue will not be possible. This especially applies when topics are sensitive, private, and potentially threatening, and it is important for all participants to take care of themselves and their own well-being throughout their participation.

Boundary awareness

Dialogues should never cause harm to anyone participating, and therefore, everyone's boundaries and limits should be respected and taken into consideration. With that in mind, nobody in the dialogue circle, including the dialogue facilitator, will know where someone else's boundaries are. It is therefore the responsibility of the individual participant to be conscious of their own boundaries and voice them if necessary.

We once facilitated a closed dialogue with a group of civil society actors about the role of emotions in society and in their work. One man shared that his relationship to his father played an important role in how he had dealt with emotional aspects of life. When asked if he could tell more about this, he replied that he would rather not go into it. In this moment it was important that we as facilitators respected his wish by not following up further, but also that we exemplified to the group that this was totally ok by not pushing him. We thanked him for sharing and moved on, which made the asserting of his boundary a natural thing rather than something to be afraid of or uncomfortable with.

The importance of challenging questions

This boundary awareness is especially important because of the nature of the questions that will be asked in a dialogue. As explained above, dialogical questions seek to dig deeper into our positions and statements, to highlight personal stories and examples from our lives. Answering certain questions can be challenging or intimidating, but it should not feel like you are being pushed over the edge of your own limits. That being said, we believe in the importance of asking the challenging questions. Our experience is that people are often too afraid to ask questions because they do not want to intrude or create emotional reactions. Implicit in this fear is the notion that we somehow can know what is intrusive or too private for someone else, which we in fact can't. Therefore, we often think it is better to ask then not to – from the premise that it is totally ok to choose not to answer. This requires that we stay culturally sensitive by remaining aware of communication patterns and what is considered to be appropriate in the specific context.

Dialogue is not therapy

Participating in public dialogues can give acknowledgement, empowerment, processing, and clarity, while experiencing personal and sensitive moments. Dialogue is not therapy, and there is no therapist in the room. A facilitator's role is to acknowledge, show interest, and hold space, but they do not intervene or assist the speaker in their personal mental health journey. Knowing when to refrain from sharing is an important part of the self-awareness we strive for in dialogues. If you do not feel like sharing certain aspects of your experience, feelings, or thoughts, it is very ok to not do so.

Dialogue is not meant to be easy

Making sure that you as participant share on your own terms in the dialogue is important for making it feel safe, but it is not necessarily easy. The balance of sharing and oversharing, privacy and personal, healthy challenge and overly pushing is a difficult endeavor, and depends on the persons involved. Even though dialogues should not harm, there is no requirement that they must be comfortable, easy, or even painless. The dialogue circle has room for all emotions and dispositions, including the difficult ones. In this balancing act, the facilitator is responsible for making it clear to everyone participating that it is totally up to them what and how much they share. With that clarified, it is only the participant themselves that can know where the line is drawn in the landscape between a brave and a safe space.

Reflect further:

* *How do you communicate? Reflect on what type of communicator you are and how this influences the interactions you are in.*

* *What do you think you need from others to feel safe and brave enough to share your opinions, experiences, and reflections on difficult subjects?*

* *Think about your own limits of communication – is there anything that is too hard to talk about? Investigate why it is hard, and what would happen if you talked about it*

"We should really have dialogues like this every day. We need to talk more about what we don't talk about so much [...] – about the big and the small."



2

CHAPTER TWO

Public dialogue – An arena for inclusive conversations

This chapter provides an overview of the specifics of the public dialogue approach, and contains:

What is public dialogue?

- Topic of a public dialogue
- Where to hold a public dialogue
- Duration of a public dialogue

Different forms of public dialogue

- Standard public dialogue
- Public dialogue with introduction
- Public dialogue with groups
- Dialogue on stage
- Public dialogue with objects

What can public dialogue achieve?

- Building relationships
- Inclusive conversations
- Empowerment
- Humanizing "the other"
- Controversial topics

When to use public dialogue

- Mobilization or strengthening of communities
- Navigating sensitive topics
- Collective decision-making processes
- Research projects
- Processing collective experiences

Hidden conflicts

What is public dialogue?

A public dialogue, as the name indicates, is a facilitated dialogue open to the public about something that matters to them.

It is an inclusive conversation amongst people with different backgrounds, roles, identities, and formal and informal affiliations. In this space, everyone can be seen and heard, and there is room for sharing needs, interests, and experiences. Simply put, it is a different way to organize a community conversation than what most are used to.

Topic of a public dialogue

The topic of a public dialogue is always something that matters to or concerns the people. It can be connected to something that has recently happened in a community, general topics that are of public interest, a special event or occasion, or a decision-making process. More often than not, a public dialogue takes place because someone has requested it – and a desired topic is normally included in such a request. Such topics of public interest are often important or relevant to many, which can sometimes make them challenging, sensitive, or conflictual to talk about. A public dialogue topic could for example be "Discrimination of migrants in our community". Through practicing dialogue, the participants would have the chance to take part in a mutual learning process about such a potentially dividing issue, rather than to fall into a spiral of accusations and competing arguments.

Where to hold a public dialogue

The space of a public dialogue sets an important tone for the general feeling of inclusivity and community. Therefore, we recommend that it is held in a space of collective ownership or belonging, like a library, museum, townhall, community centre etc. The choice of space may also be dependent on the format of the public dialogue, like if it is an open or closed session, or how many participants is expected to show up.

The number of participants vary greatly in public dialogues. One can arrange a public dialogue with 10 or 100 participants, and there's no such thing as a perfect amount. The number does however influence how the dialogue is organized. A smaller public dialogue is not dependent on much more than a facilitator and a circle of chairs, whilst a large number of participants require several skilled facilitators, a big space, and the possibility to use microphones and speakers. Beginners of the method should start with smaller groups because it is easier to organize and facilitate. With more

experience one can expand the number of participants, but the participant number does not determine the quality of the dialogue.

Duration of a public dialogue

Usually, a public dialogue lasts between 1,5 and 3 hours, sometimes with a break in between. Our experience is that less time can jeopardize the quality of the conversation, as it takes time for the group to get comfortable in the dialogue. It is not unusual that over an hour can pass before the conversation feels dialogical. Most of us are used to a completely different way of communicating, and we need time to observe and adjust.

"The public dialogue made me aware of how I have been feeling."

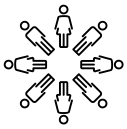
Different forms of public dialogue

All public dialogues have in common that the conversation takes place in a circle, with one or more facilitators to guide the session. They contain certain parts, where some vary depending on the context, group, and topic. These parts will be explained in more detail in chapter 4 which focuses on Dialogue facilitation:

Welcome	Often done by the host or organizer but can also be done by the facilitators. Explains the event. Any logistical information is shared here.
Introductory opening	The facilitators explain what public dialogue is, what is expected from the participants, what their roles are, before presenting and explaining the ground rules of the dialogue.
(Presentation round)	Depending on the group size and context, it is possible to begin with a short presentation round.

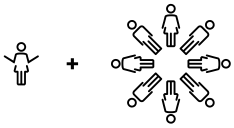
Dialogue session	Depending on the form of dialogue, the session may begin with an introduction, dialogue on stage, or group dialogues, before beginning the collective dialogue. Regardless of form, the dialogue sessions begins when the facilitators pose the opening question. Participants signal to speak and is invited to speak by the facilitators. The facilitators ask follow-up questions. Potential breaks are taken when needed.
Summary	The co-facilitator takes the word and starts to close the dialogue by presenting the summary. If there is only one facilitator, this part of the dialogue is skipped.
Final closing	The facilitator that posed the opening question closes the session and thanks the participants for their contributions.

With these fundamental parts as a baseline, public dialogues can take different forms. They have different benefits, purposes, and concerns and can be combined depending on the need:



Standard public dialogue

The most basic way of having a public dialogue is to invite into a dialogue circle, start the dialogue and continue until time is up. This can be a particularly beneficial format if the group is relatively small, or if you expect a lot of engagement from the participants, as you have more time for the collective dialogue.

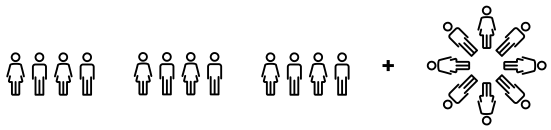


Public dialogue with introduction

Another form of public dialogue is to have an introduction before the dialogue starts. After welcoming the participants, the organizer gives the word

to someone who will introduce the topic or the questions at hand for not more than five minutes. The style of the introduction can vary – it could be artistic, historical, or theoretical. This way of doing public dialogue can be helpful if the topic is sensitive, particularly complicated, or needs some type of contextualizing. An introducer can also be a good way to attract people to the event.

Importantly, any introducer should always join the dialogue that follows their introduction. A dialogue is a mutual conversation, and if you share your thoughts you should also listen to others – if the introducer leaves it can send the wrong message to the rest of the participant group. It is also essential that the introduction opens up the topic, rather than closing it off in a way that makes participants feel like there are right and wrong perspectives and experiences. A good introduction should open up the topic for the participants, illuminating its complexity and nuance and the multitude of potential pathways one can go about talk around it. Our experience is that artistic introductions such as music, poetry etc. are particularly suitable for achieving this. Moreover, this format requires further expectation management of the introducer about the tone of the introduction, as we don't want to create a dynamic of expert vs. the rest.

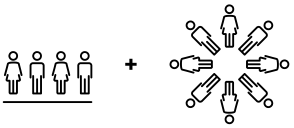


Public dialogue with groups

This form of dialogue consists of smaller group conversations before the collective dialogue takes place. After welcoming the participants and explaining the dialogue's approach, topic, and ground rules, the facilitator can assign people into groups. The groups will then get some time to reflect on one or more questions together, for typically between 10–30 minutes, before moving back into the big circle. Notably, these questions should be easy opening questions that serve as warmup of the participants. Since the facilitators are unable to take part in all parallel group conversations, they should try to limit the possibility of tensions to occur through the type of questions they give the group to work with. After the group sessions the plenary dialogue session can begin.

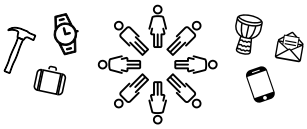
This format can prove especially useful when there are many participants, from around 50 people and up, as it ensures that everyone will have a chance

to speak during the session. It can also be used with participant groups that you, through background research and preparation, might suspect will be overly shy and uncomfortable with speaking to a large group of people.



Dialogue on stage

Another form of dialogue that we increasingly used over the last few years is a public dialogue with a dialogue on stage. This form of dialogue starts with a facilitated dialogue amongst 3–5 chosen participants for around 15–40 minutes, before changing to a standard dialogue format where everyone participates. The first dialogue can take place on a platform or stage in the case of a high number of participants, or just as an extension of the dialogue circle with some space in between the two half circles for better visibility. The panellists are first introduced by the facilitator, who is sitting together with them. The facilitator then starts a smaller dialogue amongst the group, following up what is being said, but making sure all panellists are included. This format can be used if the organizer wishes to highlight certain perspectives regarding the topic and is a good strategy to recruit participants to the dialogue.



Public dialogue with objects

This is a form of public dialogue where participants are asked to bring an object as the basis for sharing their thoughts and experiences on the topic. Rather than through an opening question, the dialogue starts with participants explaining their object and why they chose it. This form of public dialogue can be beneficial for topics which are hard to talk about, or where there is a wish from the organizers or host to highlight the tangible and concrete side of an elusive topic. This format can also be done in collaboration with an associated art installation or exhibition, where the objects are collected afterwards and borrowed out to be showcased for a period. In such a way, the dialogue process can continue with new participants and internal and interpersonal conversations.

"The way we discuss in society today works against our democracy, and democracy is under pressure."

What can public dialogue achieve?

Public dialogues contain the possibility to create processes of change, learning, and exchange. As all forms of dialogue, public dialogue centres around the building and maintaining of human relationships. It concerns how we live in togetherness and is rooted in the principle that societies need physical meeting places for democratic participation, interaction, and mutual exchange. In democratic and inclusive communities, respect for different opinions, values, and ways of life is the basis for constructive co-existence. Hence, public dialogues have the power to foster democratic attitudes and motivations that can help counteract hate speech, polarization, and xenophobia. We believe such attitudes cannot be dictated from above, but needs to develop authentically for each member of society. Public dialogue can serve as one of the means to this end.

In our experience, we have seen most often that public dialogue can be a useful approach for:

- Building relationships
- Inclusive conversation
- Empowerment
- Humanizing "the other"
- Controversial topics

Building relationships

Public dialogue is about the building of relationships between people. Being in relation to people we share community with, but perhaps don't feel any resemblance to in background, societal status, or worldview, is an important part of healthy co-existence. We often live in bubbles, only interacting deeply with people who are similar to us, who we care about, or who we feel attached to in some way. This segregation can potentially lead to indifference, arrogance, ignorance, or even hate. Meeting face to face while getting known with each other does not mean we have to like of befriend everyone. It takes practice to be able to live in diverse communities where we can exchange views and experiences while still preserving the right to respectfully disagree. Through public dialogues, relationships can be built and rebuilt, which can help with co-existence or collective problem solving.

In Kibera, Kenya we once facilitated a dialogue project with participants that were all involved in peaceful community work after a surge of post-election violence. The participant group consisted of local bishops and priests and members of the Rastafari community in the area. Although living in the same community and working on the same issue, the groups had never met. Throughout the dialogue process, they built relationships by gaining trust in each other and getting curious on each other's life.

Inclusive conversations

A public dialogue has the potential to foster inclusive conversations. The non-competitive format gives space for more people to talk, also those who need time to express themselves or gather their thoughts. None of the participants need specific knowledge before they enter the dialogue – the only thing needed is an interest for the topic and the willingness to share one's thoughts, ideas, and emotions. Our experience is that educational background, societal status, gender, age etc. can play a less significant role inside the dialogue circle than in society. We have often witnessed power shifts between participants where new social dynamics play out.

At a Women's Centre in Iraq we facilitated a public dialogue with women from very diverse social and educational backgrounds. One of the participants had suffered an attack earlier in her life and lived with severe physical disability because of it. She was one of the participants with the least amount of education and normally lived a quite isolated life in her family's house. A while into the session she shared her story with the room. While she spoke, it was clear that her body language and gaze shifted, growing taller and sturdier as she spoke, while the rest of the group listened attentively.

Empowerment

The example from Iraq also illustrates how public dialogue can be a tool for empowerment. In societies today, there are many who don't feel heard or seen. This is also the case for many public conversations like public meetings and discussions. They might feel like they speak "the right" language or have "the right" background, education, or position. In public dialogues, we see that many experience a strengthening of confidence and freedom

to share their perspectives. Because participants are encouraged to talk on behalf of themselves rather than any groups or entities they may be affiliated with, their autonomy can be better preserved. Wth the dialogue approach participants are active agents of their situation with influence over the conversation. Participants understand that their participation matters, and this can stimulate a sense of responsibility and ownership over the topic or situation at hand, which can potentially lead to action or learning.

In 2021 we held public dialogues all over Norway about the Covid-19 pandemic and what it did to us. These dialogues had many empowering moments – one of them was in an intergenerational dialogue where many of the participants were between 18–20 years old. In a room with local politicians who were in charge of implementing restrictions given by the state, they spoke of how unfair they felt some of the policies had been towards their age group, expressing their frustration towards the political prioritizations, and the effect the lockdown had on their lives.

Humanizing "the other"

In a public dialogue we sit together with no tables or notebooks to hide behind, while attempting to keep our ears, minds, and hearts open. This creates room for movement in our perceptions of "the other" – they are suddenly an irreplicable human being instead of a statistic or distant category. It is possible to see ourselves in them and we can begin to care for or about them. In turn, this can create an awareness in us of how our own actions and words can affect them.

After a public dialogue in Colombia, we were approached by a participant in tears. She explained they were happy tears, because she for the first time in her life had felt that strangers cared about what she had gone through during the civil war. As someone living with trauma, she often felt her individual story had no place in the general discussion about trauma victims as a group. This dialogue had given her that space, where she could tell her personal experience while being recognized as an individual.

Controversial topics

Because words have power they should be chosen with care – with freedom of speech comes responsibility of speech. Public dialogue is a method well suited for controversial topics because it can provide communities with another way of living with disagreement and diversity of opinion. In dialogue, disagreement and conflict is seen as a natural part of life and as opportunities for shared learning, progress, and development. The public dialogue circle is meant to be a space where controversial opinions, differences in values, and expressions of emotions are welcome and safeguarded. Participants practice holding space for plurality without giving up any part of their own identities or standpoints.

In Oslo we facilitated public dialogues about sexuality and gender for specifically invited leaders in religious and secular life stance communities. In a country with quite liberal general norms around these topics, several in the group experienced they were part of a more conservative minority through their convictions. The dialogues provided a space for the group to share across congregations and religions, to better understand each other's positions, and to express related dilemmas they experienced as leaders. In the circle, they were challenged to speak on a personal level about gender and sexuality, sharing things they later said they would never normally reflect on. Some found connection and similarity with others they thought they fundamentally disagreed with.



A process-based approach

In this handbook, you will often see the word process. In our way of understanding dialogue, we give great importance to this word. It emphasizes and encompasses the flexibility, humility, and openness that is central to the approach.

In our work, it is not uncommon that a dialogue session results in the community asking for a series of public dialogues. The trust built in these conversations can also lead to a hidden conflict surfacing, perhaps making us change our strategy towards more conflict-based dialogues. Maybe it becomes clear after a while that there are other actors that need to be invited to the sessions. If we feel stuck, we may change one meeting to a workshop where participants analyze their positions and what lies behind them.

This is what we mean with a process-based approach. To be process-based means to take the direction that naturally comes up with every conversation. The direction is based on what participants are expressing. Through their earned trust, professional knowledge, and humble mindset, the facilitator can suggest what format the process can take next, but it is up to participants to decide if they are ok with the suggestion.

When to use public dialogue

As a method, public dialogue can be used in a variety of ways and for different purposes. It is a good tool when someone in a community is expressing a need for collective conversations. Throughout the years, the NCPD have applied it for community building and mobilization, conflict prevention, formal and informal data collection, for commemorations, decision making processes, collective processing of shared experiences, reconciliation, and in connection to specific events or happenings in communities. Generally, it can be a beneficial approach for capacity building – meaning it can help to foster trust, understanding, co-existence, and communication. It can be used to support and strengthen relationships and individual competencies without guaranteeing to fix or resolve anything by its mere existence.



In our experience, public dialogue can be used in situations when there is a need for:

- Mobilization or strengthening of communities
- Navigating sensitive topics
- Collective decision-making processes
- Research projects
- Processing collective experiences

Mobilization or strengthening of communities

Public dialogue can be a beneficial tool for mobilization and strengthening communities. It can entail capacity building and community coordination, creating room for the members of a community to gain an overview of what resources, needs, and issues exist.

In a small town in Norway, we once facilitated a public dialogue about climate change and the role religious communities can play in this crisis. The local church wanted to gather ideas and coordinate actions amongst religious leaders and members in their communities. They also wanted the topic to be explored in a non-argumentative manner. In the public dialogue, they could share their worries and frustration, as well as different strategies and examples of how they saw themselves contributing within the uncertainty of the future. The initiators felt that many discussions around climate change were characterized by the authorities deciding what should be done in the end. Part of their reason for requesting a public dialogue was to motivate their religious network to take ownership of the challenges ahead and to use their influence in society in a coordinated manner.

Navigating sensitive topics

The public dialogue approach is useful when topics are highly sensitive or where there is a need to hold space for emotions and personal experiences.

In our local town Lillehammer, we once organized a public dialogue in connection with the instalment of stumbling stones for the Jewish Holocaust victims that had been living in the town when deported. Stumbling stones are memorial project that seek to commemorate Holocaust victims, where golden cobblestones with the their names, birth- and death date is installed in the ground, often in front of the houses they lived in and were taken from. For this occasion, it was clear that very few members of the local population knew at all that Jewish people had been taken from the town and sent to concentration camps. The organizers of the instalment felt it was important to create public conversations about this lack of memory. In addition to opinion pieces and movie screenings, where organizers shared their reflections and informed of the historic context, a public dialogue was held to make space for more personal and emotional conversations.

Collective decision-making processes

Public dialogues can also be used in preparing for decisions-making processes or negotiations. For such processes to be fruitful, they require a certain level of trust. Dialogue can help to build trust through a non-judgemental, open process where participants feel acknowledged and accepted.

In a municipality in Norway, we were approached by a mayor that wanted to get concrete input from the public about the development of the area. In several public dialogues, we gathered 30 different actors from the fields of education, volunteerism, business, law enforcement, as well as religious leaders and various community interest organizations. These sat together with the local politicians and explored topics that concerned the municipality and its future, which then became the basis for new political agendas.

Research projects

Public dialogue can also prove useful in formal and informal research of social and societal issues by serving as a tool of data collection.



In the Norwegian town of Bergen, we facilitated several public dialogues for a research project that aimed to map the experiences of racism in the area. Our experience was that the dialogue approach enabled a safe enough space for honest and complex conversations about the topic, where participant experiences were leading the conversation and its direction. The framework of research presented new and unique ethical concerns and considerations, but once adjusted, the public dialogue approach proved beneficial in gathering valuable data in a responsible way.

Processing collective experiences

Additionally, public dialogues can be a way to let the public process collective experiences. By coming together without any other agenda than to share stories and better understand others' experience, participants can feel less alone and gain new perspectives.



After a community outside Oslo experienced a racially and religiously motivated domestic terror attack in 2019 there was a need to come together and process it collectively. In a series of public dialogues members of the community could meet each other and talk about what they had gone through and listen to the different realities' participants experienced after such an event. The dialogues also became a space for reflecting together about how they as a community wanted to commemorate the attack and move forward.

"I have longed to sit like this. We have a need to talk together and meet face to face."



Hidden conflicts

Although public dialogues concern a topic, it might create room for a hidden conflict to surface. Sometimes this is more predictable, if the topic has a conflictual undertone or potential, but the method can also in and of itself be the catalyst for conflict to arise. As dialogue opens the door for deeper collective reflection and encourages people to be introspective and conscious of their own views and perceptions, it can sometimes create a reflection process that expose underlying disagreements, prejudices, and emotions. For some, this can be experienced as conflict, which in dialogue is considered a natural part of social life. Sometimes, the root causes of a problem or situation is sustained because essential topics or questions are buried away and concealed. Dialogue often concerns such topics and questions, which can stir up emotions, differences, and unresolved issues. If this occurs, the process could change form or approach, depending on the wishes from the community in question.

In northern Norway, we have become involved in a challenging community situation concerning contradictory opinions and tension around the management and usage of an important fishing river. What started as a public dialogue project eventually evolved into a conflict-based dialogue process due to the deeply rooted conflicts that emerged. Public dialogues can also be useful in conflict prevention work. In Poland, one of our partners are using the approach to gather left-wing and right-wing radical groups and individuals, in the hopes of preventing violence and further escalation amongst the groups.

Reflect further

* *How do you feel when you observe a public debate or panel? What makes you speak up or keep quiet?*

* *What does democratic participation mean to you? How do you practice it?*

* *Can you think of any situations you have been a part of where you think public dialogues could have been used as a tool?*

"[You] get the opportunity to talk without being attacked. Normally you're attacked, it's like a debate. It's always a debate. But here you are actually allowed to say what you think, and I think it's what everyone needs, what society needs."

3

CHAPTER THREE

Organizing public dialogues

This chapter explains what it means to organize a public dialogue. It contains the following topics:

More than just a circle

- Who organizes a public dialogue?

Important steps in the organizing of a public dialogue

- Knowing why
- Choosing the right format
- Choosing the right space
- Who needs to talk together?
- Budgeting
- Promoting the public dialogue
- Preparing the space for the public dialogue

Following up the public dialogue

More than just a circle

The fact that public dialogue is unknown to most people is one reason why its organization is so crucial. When asking people to step into the unfamiliar territory of a dialogue circle, great efforts should be made to ensure that their participation is a welcoming, inclusive, and trustful experience. This does not happen just by placing chairs in a circle. The creation of a dialogical space involves a variety of formal and informal tasks and approaches. More than merely gathering people, the organizing of public dialogues concerns how we gather them. Dialogue can be encouraged or hindered by the choice of location, the words used to describe the event, or the set-up of the venue. This chapter will show you how organizing dialogues is a process that starts long before the doors open.

Who organizes a public dialogue?

Organizing a public dialogue is often a collaborative job. The main responsibility of organizational and logistical tasks can be divided amongst or designated to:

- the facilitator(s) of the dialogue
- a local partner (those requesting the dialogue)
- a local partner that is also the host of the dialogue
- a host that only lends out the physical space

As facilitators, we usually work with local partners when we hold public dialogues in communities and areas we are not familiar with. They can assist as a connection to the participant group, providing contextual knowledge and insight when planning for a dialogue. These local partners can be passionate members of their community that see a problem or a need. This can be teachers, health workers, civil society groups, or institutions such as universities, museums, municipality administrations, or NGO's that want a public dialogue to take place. Sometimes, the local partner is also the host of the public dialogue, meaning they provide a physical space. Other times, the host is less involved in the organization, other than lending out their space and doing some of the recruitment. With enough resources, it is also possible for someone in the facilitator team to have the organizer role, as long as they know enough about the community where the dialogue will take place.

The organizational responsibilities presented in this chapter can be divided amongst the facilitator and organizer in collaboration, but the workload and responsibility may differ. If the organizer is not already a part of the

dialogue team, they should communicate continuously with the facilitators while planning the steps below. This is because the organization can greatly affect the quality and fruitfulness of a public dialogue and should therefore be planned and implemented with dialogical principles in mind. If the organizer is not a local person connected to the community, someone who is should be consulted during the planning process. This way, choices can be made based on context-specific information about the potential participants and their situation.

Important steps in the organizing of a public dialogue

In our experience, organizing a dialogue looks different every time – there is no perfect recipe to follow, as each process should be adjusted to its specific context. With that in mind, it is useful to consider certain steps and stages when preparing for a public dialogue:

1. Knowing why
2. Choosing the right format
3. Choosing the right space
4. Who needs to talk together?

Knowing why

First and foremost, it is important to know why this public dialogue should take place. Not working from a defined need or focus can create confusion and misunderstandings, potentially inviting to a dialogue no one is interested in or needs. Often, representatives from a community wants to have a public dialogue and will this way provide a "why" that can be explored. These representatives can be potential host organizations or institutions, contact persons in the communities, or other community members that requests the public dialogue. However, it is wise to be mindful that the local partner's understanding of the topic or situation can sometimes be incorrect or one-sided. This navigation is an important part of the preparation process to better limit the chance of choosing a topic that does not fit the needs or interests of the community or group.

Check-points for this step:

- What are the purposes of having a public dialogue? Which reasons are being expressed for why this public dialogue should take place?
- What does the contact person/host/enquirer want out of this?
- Do they understand what dialogue is and why is it the right approach for their purposes?

"The public dialogue worked very well and created just the type of space we were hoping for, where participants could speak openly, share, and listen to each other."

Choosing the right format

Furthermore, it is important to take time to choose the right format for the public dialogue. The choice will affect what type of meeting place you invite people to. As organizer, you assess the different formats of public dialogue and choose the most fitting for the situation and objectives of the request. Both open and closed public dialogues can use all formats described in the previous chapter, the choice depends on group size, the organizers intension, context-specific opportunities, and recruitment issues. Such choices could for example be:

- During a conference with different events about one overarching topic, choosing to begin with a dialogue on stage with invited panellists could make the dialogue more attractive to conference goers deciding between parallel events.
- In a very polarised community situation, choosing a closed public dialogue for a motivated and diverse group of community members could make the dialogues safer, more controlled, and less likely to escalate the situation than perhaps an open public dialogue could.
- For a public dialogue for teachers, school administrations, and parents at a school, choosing to begin with an introduction from the headmaster or initiator can help establish a common ground or starting point for further conversation in the session.
- If a large number of participants are expected to attend the public dialogue, choosing a standard public dialogue format will give the most time for broad participation, and choosing group talks before the collective session can help to let most participants to contribute and share.

Check-points for this step:

- Which format can better assist the context-specific objective of the public dialogue?
- Are there reasons for this to be a closed dialogue, or should it be open to anyone?
- Is there a specific situational/physical context of the public dialogue? (Like a conference, a festival, an exhibition opening?) Which format is best suitable for such a context?

Choosing the right space

The choice of space influences the public dialogue in several ways. For example, it may affect the choice of format and the number of participants. It is therefore wise to check in beforehand how many circles of chairs you can fit around each other and set a participant cap to this number.

We recommend a space that has some form of public ownership attached to it, like a library, school, museum, town hall, or cultural centre. Usually, it is beneficial that the space is somewhat neutral to the topic or situation. However, in the case of a public dialogue process with multiple meetings, the space can be decided by the participants themselves.

Check-points for this step:

- How many participants are expected or wanted to come?
- What can be considered a neutral space for the expected participants?
- Is there room for one or more circle of chairs in the space?
- Can the space accommodate for any practical needs? (microphones, more facilitators, translation)

Who needs to talk together?

Identifying potential stakeholders and target groups is another important part of the organization of public dialogue.

In public dialogues that are closed off for a group of selected invitees, the organizers try their best to include all people affected by the situation or topic. This is sometimes not possible, but at the very least representatives of different groups affected should be invited and actively encouraged to come. Often,

local partners are needed in this selection process to give input on potential participants. This process can sometimes stretch out in time, where the core participant group expands as new information is revealed in the dialogues.

In open public dialogues, it is not certain who will show up to the event. Some may choose to invite participants through registration form, but they rarely give any guarantees. As the aim is to create a space for community conversation, organizers should put special effort into attempting to gather a representative and diverse selection of the community. It can be useful to inquire with local partners who they suspect will show up and who probably won't. With this contextual insight, it is then possible to actively reach out to and invite specific people, groups, and organizations, especially those that perhaps do perceive such spaces to be welcoming of them.

Check-points for this step:

- Who is part of this situation and wants to talk together?
- Which groups and/or representatives are expected to attend or be motivated to attend? Which groups and/or representatives are not expected to attend or be motivated to attend?
- How can the number of participants affect the public dialogue?
- Are there any groups that are in formal or informal ways repressed in the community, potentially needing special attention in the coming invitation process?

Budgeting

In our experience, a public dialogue is normally quite a low-cost approach. Often, the location is a public institution like a library, religious building, school, or museum, many of which lend out their venues free of charge. With that said, this is not always the case. Other potential costs for public dialogues can be connected to:

- Fees for facilitators
- Coffee, tea, and snacks for the session
- Renting of sound equipment like microphones and speakers in bigger public dialogues
- Musicians, poets, or other artists that introduce the dialogue through a performance
- Venue hire
- Dinner or lunch in the case of full days of dialogue sessions
- Sponsorship of participants' travel

If the public dialogue is organized with funders, it is essential that these know that they are not in charge of the content or direction of the dialogue. Once the dialogue session has started, they will not have any more influence over the conversation than anyone else, and this can sometimes be necessary to clarify in advance. It can be very useful to invite funders to participate in the dialogue. Our experience is that this can help them gain a better understanding of the approach and it's worth.

Check-points for this step:

- What are the potential costs of the public dialogue?
- Who will pay for these costs? If they are split, how will they be divided?
- Are there any dilemmas related to the funding?

Promoting the public dialogue

How the dialogue is presented beforehand can influence if the event is perceived as welcoming, inclusive, and safe for all. Therefore, it is important to give focus to the promotional content, recruitment, and the general publicity of the public dialogue. It is wise to stay away from overly academic, complicated, vague, or polarizing language, as this can create certain associations or confusion. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that most people have no previous experience or knowledge about the public dialogue approach. Sometimes this cultivates curiosity – other times it makes people feel intimidated or indifferent. Therefore, we always try to include a short paragraph or sentence about the approach in event descriptions and social media posts, while making sure the language is simple, honest, and intriguing.

If journalists come to an open public dialogue, our general practice has been to let them be there because it is a public meeting. However, to safeguard the atmosphere in the room we have required of them to sit in the dialogue circle as everyone else. Furthermore, we also ask them to not take notes, as this can make participants apprehensive and negatively affect the trust and openness of the conversation.

In our experience, the most challenging organizational task has been to get people to come to the dialogue. Personally reaching out to groups and community members have been one of the most effective approaches of recruitment, as well as social media presence. Promoting the attendance of known people who will introduce or be a part of a dialogue on stage is also another effective method.

Recruitment is an important part of a dialogue, especially due to the principle of diversity and inclusivity. However, numbers don't make dialogues worthwhile. We have facilitated public dialogues with three and four participants, and they were meaningful and engaging conversations lasting well over two hours. The most important part of dialogue promotion and recruitment is to make sure that everyone is invited and feel welcome, even if they don't choose to attend.

Check-points for this step:

- What concrete measures can be taken to best ensure a diverse participation group that represents the whole community?
- How do we reach the different target groups and general public?
- Is the event description clear, accessible, and concise? Are there ways to enhance the appeal of the public dialogue?



Should anyone be allowed to participate in a public dialogue?

Hate speech and extremism is a problem in many places in the world. Using this approach raises the question of who should be allowed to participate. It is a fair question, as public dialogues are meant to be safe spaces for sharing, trust building, and practicing understanding. Extreme, hateful, or undemocratic opinions can potentially damage such a space. At the same time, polarization comes in part from a lack of face-to-face encounters, echo chambers, and a debate culture that dominates most conversations we take part in.

There is no easy answer to this dilemma, as it can depend on the context and topic. The NCPD has taken the approach that, in principle, public dialogues are for everyone. This principle necessitates that all participants abide by the grounds rules and do not spoil the process. If we are unable to provide a safe space, we will end the session.

Furthermore, the question can depend on what type of event the organizers/hosts want to create. If there are contextual concerns around providing a platform for people with extreme views, a closed public dialogue can be a good option. In the case of an open public dialogue, where we cannot control who shows up, clearly stated ground rules should be communicated in beforehand. But in general, as believers in dialogue, we do not feel we can forbid people from participating before the public dialogue has begun.

In our dialogue trainings we go into depth about these types of dilemmas. Read more about them here:

Preparing the space for the public dialogue

Before the public dialogue, the organizers need to prepare the space. This is an essential part of laying the grounds for an honest, open, and safe conversation. When deciding on the set-up of the space, organizers should consider both the whole participant experience, from the point of arrival to departure.

When participants arrive, it should be clear to them where they can go to sit down, mingle, or have a drink before the session begins. Such zones are an important part of making participants feel comfortable and taken care of. Snacks and drinks can provide a familiar and informal activity which can

help loosen up the atmosphere in the room. Organizers should be present, welcoming, and attentive to participants from the beginning, as the facilitators sometimes need to prepare for the dialogue during this time. Part of this attentiveness is the important task of guiding participants to the circle before the dialogue starts. As a general principle, anyone present in the room should be part of the circle and not standing or walking around. Sometimes this is not doable for logistical staff, which can work discreetly in the background. This principle is important both for the building of an attentive focus within the group, and for the experience of safety for participants. Someone outside the circle might easily feel like a spectator and make it less comfortable to talk.

In open public dialogues the exact number of participants are unknown until people show up. Therefore, organizers have to plan for flexibility when arranging the circle. It can be wise that a couple of staffers are designated to swiftly adapt the number of chairs in the minutes before the dialogue begins. In our experience, it is often easier to add chairs than to remove them.

Check-points for this step:

- How do you plan to build a comfortable atmosphere for participants arriving? (e.g. a person greeting them at the entrance, an area for coffee, tea, and snacks)
- What is the planned set-up of chairs and the room? How many participants is there space for? Have you ensured open corridors within the circle(s) for participants to walk in and out?
- Is someone designated the tasks of assisting latecomers and adapting the number of chairs before the dialogue?
- Is there a natural area for participants to mingle during a potential break?
- Is there space and accessibility for people using wheelchairs or other assistance tools?

"I think this is a method suitable for many areas of society. It is perhaps especially interesting in conversations about conflict-filled topics."

Following up the public dialogue

The follow-up process of a public dialogue depends on the type of dialogue and is adapted organically from wishes and needs stated in or after the session. We have rarely followed up a one-time public dialogue unless participants or local partners clearly request it.

Following up participants is more necessary in public dialogue series, where there is a need to keep in touch with the participant group for potential adjustments to the process. It can be beneficial that a local partner takes up this role, as they are more connected to the community and can serve as a link between the participants and the dialogue team.



Reflect further

* *What types of rooms feel welcoming to you?*
  What types of rooms feel excluding?

* *How do you explain what public dialogue is in three sentences?*
  What is important to include, and for what reason?

* *In your opinion, are there certain people that should*
  be not allowed to join a public dialogue?

"This was a nice and different experience. Simply a good "debrief" after a strange time. As a politician, dialogue is not what you practice most. It´s rather sharp phrasing and often popularized black-and-white arguments. Dialogue, on the other hand, creates the opportunity to reflect on what onehas heard, experienced, and felt without being contradicted. "

CHAPTER FOUR

4 The role of the facilitator in public dialogues

This chapter gives insight into the different aspects of the role of the public dialogue facilitators. It contains:

The basics of facilitation

- Defining facilitation
- The facilitator role
- Objectives of the dialogue facilitators
- Tools of the dialogue facilitator

Key qualities of a facilitator

- Integrity – the core of facilitation
- Humility – through self-awareness and belief in people
- Openness – through curiosity, non-judgement, honesty, and flexibility
- Multi-partiality – through inclusiveness and non-leading
- Self-discipline – through concentration, observation, patience, and attentiveness

Facilitating in teams

- Team composition
- Modelling interaction
- Division of overall responsibilities within the team

The preparational tasks of public dialogue facilitation

- Expectation management
- Setting the ground rules
- Formulating the opening question
- Preparing for potential challenges

Facilitation tasks during the public dialogue

- Division of tasks amongst the facilitator team
- Deep listening and dialogical follow-up questions
- Summarizing the public dialogue

The basics of facilitation

All public dialogues are facilitated dialogues. The presence and efforts of the dialogue facilitators play a crucial role in assisting participants to talk in a dialogical way. A public dialogue has one or more facilitators which are trained in the dialogue approach. Facilitators can either be external actors, or sometimes members of the community – as long as the participants accept them as multi-partial.

Defining facilitation

Dialogue facilitation is a unique approach to accompanying a conversation. As facilitator, you are responsible for the process, but not the content of the dialogue. It is a complex role that fundamentally can be described this way:

> *A facilitator guides people through a dialogue process. Facilitators are process experts rather than experts on a subject area. […] They model active listening and respectful speaking.*[7]

To us, 'guiding' means to lay the grounds for a specific type of conversation. The facilitator does not guide in the sense of giving suggestions or steering the direction, but by holding space and following up what is being said.

Furthermore, the facilitator 'models' by being an example of respectful, humble, and listening behaviour, while at the same time showing that this behaviour does not require one to be perfect and devoid of personal characteristics. We have experienced that the participants mirror the facilitator as long as they feel the facilitator's behavior is genuine. If they are calm, confident, respectful, and patient – participants often follow. Modelling is also an important part of your integrity as a facilitator – you do not ask of the participants something you wouldn't do yourself.

In addition to the mentioned 'active listening' and 'respectful speaking' in the above definition, modelling humility and asking dialogical questions are to us essential when defining the role of the facilitator.

The facilitator role

As dialogue facilitator, you are not a teacher, moderator, supervisor, or mediator. You refrain from steering and influencing the direction and outcome of the conversation, and you don't give feedback, suggestions, or opinions about what is being said. Instead, your role can be characterised by the following:

- *Facilitators help the group explore similarities and differences of opinion. Facilitators do not promote or share their own opinions.*
- *Facilitators make sure that all participants get a chance to contribute to the dialogue.*
- *Facilitators bear primary responsibility for enforcing the ground rules, although the group also shares this responsibility collectively.*[8]

A main reason why the role of the facilitator exist in dialogue, is to help participants go deeper in what they are saying. Going deeper means giving focus not just the superficial positions in people's statements, but to the roots and layers of what they are saying and feeling. These could be interests and needs, emotions, and the experiences that led to our sentiments. In other words, the facilitator should not
"[…] ignore or talk away someone's perception. Instead, try to understand where it is rooted"[9]

By understanding where their own and others' positions, sentiments, and perceptions are rooted, participants can gain perspective and see complexity. One way for you as facilitator to create room for this depth, is by noticing and give attention to what we call 'turning points' in the conversation. Turning points are moments where a participant moves beyond polite and superficial talk, and share honest, vulnerable, emotional, or personal reflections. In these moments, participants feel safe enough to lay down their guards – which can create movement in the conversation and the relationships. Your job as facilitator is to recognize such moments and empower participants to explore them deeper through attentive focus and follow-up questions.

In a public dialogue, the goal is that the facilitator becomes less and less noticeable throughout the session. Normally, in the beginning of a dialogue, most participants primarily look at and speak to the facilitator. Gradually, with increased trust and comfortability, the aim is that the participants turn towards each other, ask each other questions, and in this way increasingly owns the space, the topic, and situation.

"I must admit that the public dialogue was the most educational element in the conference for me. Not because what emerged was directly new information, but because it deepened and gave further understanding."

Objectives of the dialogue facilitators

While you as facilitator won't have any personal goals for the content and direction of the dialogue, it can be useful to work from certain objectives in the making of the process. These objectives can guide you to better create a safe, honest, and respectful atmosphere for participants to share personal experiences and thoughts.

In the public dialogue, the facilitator should aim to:

- Provide a setting and an atmosphere in which different views can be shared in an honest, open, and respectful manner.
- Ask follow-up questions to help participants express more of what they have chosen to share and, in the process, gain increased awareness of their views, how it is being perceived, and how this influence the conversation
- Encourage participants to listen to each other
- Apply the set ground rules to help create and maintain a dialogical safe space and reduce the risk of harm.

The rest of this chapter will give further insight into how to specifically go about attaining these objectives.

Tools of the dialogue facilitators

As facilitator, there are certain tools available to you that will help with reaching the objectives mentioned above. Some of these tools are frequent essentials of your facilitation, others are higher up on what we can call the 'ladder of interventions' – only necessary in rare situations. The following is an overview of these tools – how to use them will be explained further along in this chapter.

Opening question	This is the question that opens the floor in the public dialogue. It is not necessarily the same as the title or topic of the session.
Follow-up questions	These are questions that the facilitators ask to go deeper into something a participant has just said, all the while using the participants' own words.
Ground rules	Ground rules are guiding principles for the dialogue that concern how the group talks to each other, including any potential restrictions for the conversation.
Attentiveness	The facilitator gives attention to the participants with their body language, active listening, gaze, and communicative signalling. In this way, facilitators can influence the group to focus to the speaker. Attentiveness can also make participants feel safe, acknowledged, and important. To ensure that no participants feel neglected while others talk, the facilitator team will focus their attention differently depending on their role division.
Silence	The facilitator can use silence as a tool to show authority, patience, encouragement, and calmness. It can be useful to use breaks of silence in the introduction of the dialogue to make sure participants receive the information, and silence can be used to motivate participants to elaborate further after speaking. Silence can also be a way to hold space after a participant has shared something personal or powerful. Silence can also often be a natural part of the beginning of the public dialogue, sometimes occurring after the opening question has been asked. The facilitator can sit comfortably in this silence as a tool to illustrate that there is no rush and that the participants are responsible for the content.

Authority

A facilitator needs to have authority. The openness of the dialogue approach can be misused by participants who ignore ground rules and attack others' viewpoints. Having authority is not the same as being authoritarian. A facilitator's authority relies on their integrity and necessitates that they clearly explain their role and objectives. They must show that they are the person in charge with clear communication and body language, always in a respectful and multi-partial manner. Navigating authority is a difficult part of the facilitator role. It requires confidence without arrogance and sturdiness without rigidity.

In the beginning of the public dialogue, facilitators show and gain authority by being in charge of the process, the time management, and the introduction. During the session, authority is shown in the asking of questions, choices for the process, and by selectively giving attention. In the end of the dialogue, facilitators have authority because they can end the session, sum it up, and have the last word.

Breaks

Breaks can be taken by the facilitator depending on the needs. It is useful to use if the participant group seem tired and unfocused, if they ask for it, or if an unexpected situation occurs. Such situations can for example be that a participant abruptly leaves the dialogue, strong emotions are persisting, or the facilitators feel they are not able to maintain a safe space or that they themselves are in need of a break.

Summary

The summary of a public dialogue is a tool for creating a collective learning experience and maintaining a safe space that gives room for a diversity of experiences.

Ending the dialogue

Ending the dialogue earlier than planned can be an option if the ground rules are continuously broken, the participants have nothing more to share, or if the situation feels out of control and there is fear of violence or an unsafe atmosphere.

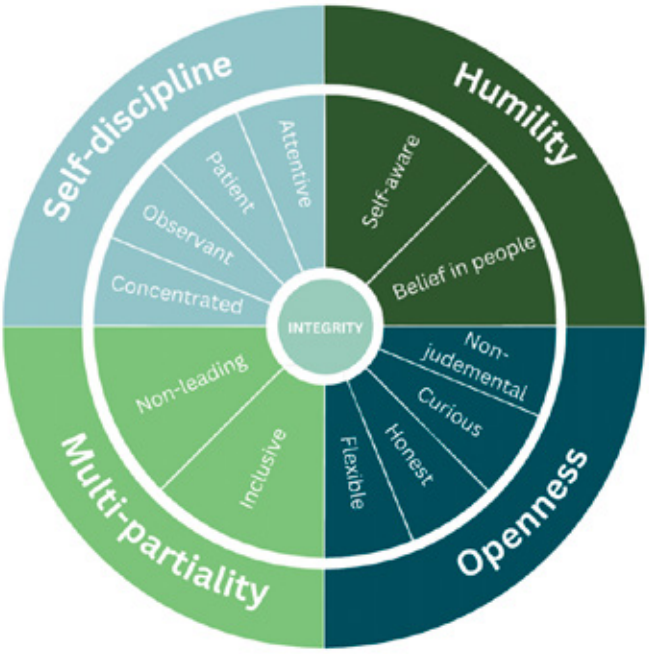
"In a public dialogue, where the facilitator manages to create a safe setting, opportunity emerges for those who normally do not take the floor to dare to share their thoughts. In this way, dialogue can perhaps be a contribution to equalizing the disparity within the space for (of) expression between different groups."

Key qualities of a facilitator

To best be able to create a safe and inclusive dialogue, the facilitator should aim to act through certain dialogical qualities. These qualities characterize the desired mindset and approach that the dialogue facilitator should attempt to internalize and embody. This mindset and approach can be learned and developed, and the facilitator can demonstrate them through a combination of their skills, personal characteristics, competencies, and experience.

These qualities should be expressed with a combination of energy and calmness. Public dialogue facilitation is sometimes challenging, and requires energy through drive, motivation, passion, and belief in the approach. However, this energy should not seem overly intense or stressed. Therefore, facilitators at the same time have to remain calm, collected, and relaxed, without appearing slow or too laid back. They are alert, observant, flexible, and ready for what's next. That is the energy of a dialogue facilitator.

Together, the different, but equally important, qualities explained in this chapter make up the integral elements of dialogue facilitation. They connect and intersect, but for a clearer understanding we have chosen to present them in the model below. There, they are categorised underneath four main pillars: Humility, Openness, Multi-partiality, and Self-discipline. These are all dependent on the centre of it all – integrity. Importantly, these qualities and their connection to each other are not absolutes – they evolve and reform through different contexts and situations.



2 The key qualities of a dialogue facilitator can be summed up in the graphic above.[10]

Integrity – the core of facilitation

The facilitators' ability to embody the qualities below rely on their ability to maintain and uphold their integrity. To us, integrity means to live with a role rather than play it. It means to not "preform" curiosity or patience, but to stay as yourself within the professional role while striving for curiosity or patience. Without integrity, facilitators can struggle gaining and maintaining the trust of the participants. Participants often notice if the facilitators are pretending to believe in them and the principles of the approach. Integrity means to practice what you preach. Without integrity, we fell it will be impossible to embody the qualities considered below.

To have integrity as a dialogue facilitator means to constantly be in a humble process of learning how to be more open, more inclusive, more observant, more non-judgemental. This student mentality is something you as facilitator can be open about with the participants. With integrity, you become a relatable example that shows them that you don't have to be perfect to practice dialogue. In this learning process, integrity is the means to the goals of humility, curiosity, flexibility etc. The dialogue facilitator has to go through integrity to reach them.

Integrity is also a way to gain authority. The participants see that you do not ask something of them that you wouldn't do yourself. Through this authority you are more able to create the trust and safety necessary for dialogical conversation.

Humility – through self-awareness and belief in people

Humility is one of the core qualities of a good dialogue facilitator. Maintaining humility in your approach, choices, and attitude requires a great deal of **self-awareness** and **belief in other people**. It means to truly and genuinely not believe you know better than the participants in the circle. To not fall into the role of an expert, even when the participants expect it from you.

Self-awareness is an integral part of the role, as you rely on your capacity to be conscious of your own emotions, prejudices, and the way your internal and external responses may affect the room. It also means understanding your own personal characteristics and how they may affect your facilitation style and potential shortcomings. Humility requires knowing that it is the participants themselves that know what is best for them, that they are the experts on their own lives, and that they have the capacity to create the change, movement, or development they want and need.

Openness – through curiosity, non-judgement, honesty, and flexibility

Dialogue facilitation also requires genuine **openness**. Openness both to the participants and their stories, and to the process and where the group will take the conversation. The facilitator should be sincerely **curious** about peoples' lives and perspectives, and **refrain from judging** their answers and behaviours. Facilitators should be curious about why the dynamics in the room are changing, constantly asking themselves "How are people seeing things differently regarding this issue? Why are they seeing things in the way that they are?". In our experience, non-judgement doesn't come from being a perfect human being, but from being so aware of your own patterns and tendencies for judgement, that it is possible to choose not to let them direct you.

Additionally, a good facilitator is **honest** with the participants without having a hidden agenda. It means explaining why the dialogue is taking place, and being clear about what the participants can expect from the facilitator and from the approach. This also entails being honest about when you can't maintain a safe space.

To be open to the process requires **flexibility**, as participants may steer the conversation in any direction and the job of the facilitator is to follow. Flexibility is also a useful quality in sudden or unplanned situations that can occur in the dialogue, where the facilitator should be able to adapt according to the needs of the room.

Multi-partiality – through inclusiveness and non-leading

The role of the dialogue facilitator is a **multi-partial** one. Over the years we have come to believe that neutrality and impartiality are unattainable and inauthentic standards. The way the facilitators dress, their gender, language, and where they are from can all have an influence over the dialogue and its participants. Rather than pretending to not be yourself, you should as facilitator be authentic to your own personhood while remaining professional. Importantly, the facilitator should be impartial towards the specific situation, in the sense that they do not play a part in it.

Multi-partiality means to stand with all participants and give them the same attention and care regardless of their positions. This means to have an **inclusive** mindset, acknowledging everyone's right to say their opinion, treating everyone with respect, and accept the diversity of opinions and thoughts.

With that said, a facilitator is not perfect. They will perhaps like some participants more than others, and they will personally agree and disagree with different sentiments. However, they should stay self-aware and refrain from acting upon this. Being truly multi-partial also means to **not lead** the conversation in any specific direction you'd like, which can easily happen when phrasing follow-up questions.

Self-discipline – through concentration, observation, patience, and attentiveness

A dialogue facilitator should also practice **self-discipline**. Your regular and individual communication style is influenced by childhood experiences, culture, mood, ego, and more. Therefore, they do not always lead to the most dialogical communication. As a facilitator, you need to be fully **concentrated** and disciplined in your choice of words, body language, follow-up questions, and internal reactions to maintain a safe and trusting space. A good facilitator is also **observant** of which dynamics, moods, reactions, and energy is playing out in the circle – always analysing how this can affect the conversation. It is important to note that this observant mindset is an interpretive one, where the facilitator explores more than asserts.

Furthermore, self-disciplined facilitation entails a great deal of **patience**. It can be easy to want to "make things happen", see progress, and reach solutions. This is not the job of the dialogue facilitator. In a public dialogue, there is space for lengthy reflections and slow realizations and digestion. Participants are welcome to feel impatient or to drive conversations forward if they so please, but this should not come from the facilitator, as that would be to lead the conversation in a certain direction.

Lastly, **attentiveness** is a crucial quality of facilitation. Rather than merely observing, a facilitator should make sure all participants feel they are seen and heard, and that they find support in the facilitator's presence to the degree where they feel comfortable sharing and listening to others. Attentiveness also means to continuously try to analyze and understand the underlying reasons, tensions, dynamics, and changing connections within the participant group.

The importance of integrity in facilitation was evident during a public dialogue we facilitated a few years ago. The dialogue concerned immigration and was open to the public. Amongst those who showed up were members of a right wing anti-Islamic organization. In the room, there were many people of Muslim faith and others who felt attacked by the general messaging of members of this organization. Ensuring a safe space was a main objective, and because everyone had to follow the ground rules and could not present arguments, this small group of people was challenged and balanced out by the majority in the circle.

As facilitators, it was a challenge to remain multi-partial, open, and curious towards the people with quite extremist and hateful viewpoints. We tried our best to stay true to the qualities of facilitation, interrogating our inner reactions and feelings instead of passively pretending to understand. Mentally this gave access to feelings of empathy towards the people from this group, as they were asked to share their personal experiences and feelings rather than general arguments. In this situation, although challenging, it was possible to open ourselves up to their experience without losing or compromising ourselves and the dignity of the rest of the group.

Facilitating in teams

Public dialogue facilitation is very often done in teams. A facilitation team consists of a main facilitator and one or more co-facilitators. Choosing the number of facilitators can depend on resources, complexity of the dialogue, and the size of the participant group. We recommend two facilitators in groups with more than 10 participants, and a third co-facilitator can be beneficial in sessions where there are multiple circles within each other and many participants to give attention to.

The advantages of being a team of facilitators are many. It provides beneficial support amongst the facilitators, as tasks can be done with more intent and focus if they are divided between the team. You will also have a better change of handling unexpected instances, and you can ensure that there always is a facilitator present in the room during breaks. Working in teams of two or more also allows for the public dialogue to end with a summary. If there is only one facilitator, their full concentration and attentiveness is needed for deep listening and follow-up questions, therefore a summary has to be skipped.

Team composition

The natural dynamic of a team of facilitators has the possibility to help the process of trust building and the quality of the facilitation as a whole. With two or more facilitators, who each brings their own individuality to the role, you are more likely to ensure that participants feel comfortable or seen. Perhaps some will prefer the style or demeanour of one of the facilitators more than the other, or for different reasons feel more inclined to trust or respect one of them. Therefore, it can be useful to assess if the team should have certain constellations in terms of gender, age, personality types, ethnicities etc. This of course depends heavily on the context, and the resources available. Although it can have a beneficial effect, it is rarely an indispensable element for creating a dialogical atmosphere.

Furthermore, a diverse facilitator team provides the chance of demonstrating the dialogical qualities in front of the participants. As a facilitation team with a clear gap in age, we have several times been told by participants that the way our senior facilitator showcased humility, respect, and equality towards the younger one had an influence over their own participation.

Modelling interaction

Facilitating in teams provide the opportunity to model dialogical interaction, in addition to individual behavior. By demonstrating dialogical communication and interaction amongst the team, participants can witness examples of the mutual respect and reciprocity essential to dialogue. Therefore, it is crucial that the facilitator team talk to each other in a dialogical manner. This entails being attentive and interested when another facilitator speaks. If for example the main facilitator seems distracted while the co-facilitator speaks, the participants can easily follow their behavior.

In this way, the team is one entity – what one does affects the whole team's ability to facilitate well. If one of them interrupts or undermines the other, both facilitators can lose their authority or the trust of the group. Therefore, any disagreements or mistakes should not be visible to the group and should be talked about after the dialogue session. There should never be competition amongst the team, and jealousy can be easy to spot.

Being a team presents a unique challenge in and of itself. The facilitators should be mindful to not separate themselves from the group in ways that can create distrust and suspicion. Whispering, regardless of what is being said, can make participants feel uncertain, and the same can be said with some forms of eye contact or smiles amongst the team. Participants should not have a reason to feel like the facilitators are having their own conversation within the collective dialogue conversation.

Division of overall responsibilities within the team

The role of the main facilitator and co-facilitator(s) are equally important for the dialogue process. A team can take turns having the different roles, but it is beneficial to consider personal strengths and skill sets. Both roles are equal, but different, and will in combination best create and maintain a safe space. To make the execution of tasks as smooth as possible, and to better prevent the risk of misunderstandings, it is useful to work with clearly divided key responsibilities. The following are the ones we recommend based on our experience – division of specific tasks will be explained later in this chapter.

Level of authority

As we follow the flow in public dialogues, unexpected situations can occur that demands quick decisions and management. This can be the case if the conversation feels unsafe, a participant's nose starts to bleed, or there is a need for a break. In these moments, the facilitation team should not feel or seem unorganized or uncertain. Therefore, the main facilitator, who is following the participants the closest, should have the highest authority to call the shots when there is no time or space for deliberation. If any co-facilitator(s) disagree with the decision, they should express this after the session to not undermine the position of the facilitator team as a whole. The main facilitator's level of authority can also be made visible to the group by making the main facilitator have the first and last word of the session.

Primary focus

To better be able to preserve a safe space for the whole participant group throughout the session, the facilitators primarily give focus in different ways. When someone is speaking, the main facilitator will give their complete attention to the speaker, showing them that they are listened to and that it is safe to share. Meanwhile, the rest of the group should not feel neglected, as this can jeopardize their feeling of trust and safe space. The co-facilitator is therefore particularly aware of the rest of the circle, continuously shifting their gaze amongst the whole group. This will also help them read the atmosphere and non-verbal communication in the circle, remain observant to other needs, and be available for participants who want to signal that they would like to speak. Importantly, this division of focus concerns primary focus – facilitators should not be so comfortable in this division that they forget their responsibility of general attentiveness.



The preparational tasks of public dialogue facilitation

Before a public dialogue, the facilitator(s) should decide on how they will conduct the dialogue and divide tasks amongst the team. These tasks and choices depend on the specific context, but in our experience, the following responsibilities are fundamental to the preparations.

Expectation management

The facilitators should be clear from the start, both with the organizers and the participants, about what they can expect from a facilitator. This expectation management entails explaining how you can assist the process of communication, but not be involved in the content or direction of the conversation. If the role is not clarified, people can assume that the dialogue facilitator will act similarly to mediators and panel moderators, leading to confusion or distrust when this is not the case. Expectation management can also include explaining the method of dialogue, both prior to and at the beginning of the session, so that the participants are better equipped to take part in the conversation ahead. This expectation management can be especially important in situations where a community has a problem or issue and is seeking someone to come with answers or suggestions.

Check-points for this task:

- Is the organizer, funder, and/or host informed about the dialogue approach and its restrictions and limitations? Do they adequately understand your role as facilitator?
- Does the recruitment text/event description explain the dialogue approach in a way that creates the right expectations?

Setting the ground rules

Additionally, the dialogue facilitator will prepare ground rules that will be mentioned in the beginning of the public dialogue. We have come to depend on three indispensable rules:

- Try to talk on behalf of yourself
- Do not argue against each other or comment on each other's statements
- Try to ask questions

Sometimes, if we have reason to believe other rules need to be added, we develop these based on our information of the coming dialogue. As mentioned earlier, we recommend that the participants create their ground rules in cases where there are several public dialogues with the same group. This will help participants have ownership towards the process and a sense of responsibility to follow the rules. Ground rules can always be altered during the dialogue if the participants agree to it.

In a one-time public dialogue, most participants are often completely new to the approach. Therefore, the facilitator should be very aware of how the ground rules are presented. In our experience, participants who already feel unsure about what the conversation will be like, can be easily intimidated to participate if the rules are perceived to be very strict. Mentioning them is absolutely essential, as it is one of the few tools the facilitator can use if things get out of hand. However, they should be explained in such a manner that participants understand that the rules are there to help rather than restrict. Rushing past the explanation of the rules or stating them in a rigid manner can sometimes lead to participants refraining from asking for the word in fear of breaking the rules. This especially concerns the second rule mentioned above, as we often see that people are perplexed about not being able to comment on someone's statements. Therefore, a facilitator should always explain what this means by clarifying that while anyone can share their thoughts and reflections, also in connection to what

has been said before, they are not able to try to make a remark on or give feedback to another participant's statement. In dialogue, we want people's contributions to be allowed to stand on their own as the speaker intended it, without being subject to either positive or negative judgement, pointers, or apparent corrections.

Check-points For this task:

- Does the specific context call for certain ground rules other than the usual ones?
- Are the ground rules formulated in a clear, concise, and simple manner?
- Does the specific situation, topic, or expected participant group require the ground rules to be presented in a specific way or with a specific tone and focus?

"The rules of the dialogue provide a fundamental sense of calm because we agree to listen to each other. Listening to other people's thoughts gave life to my own, enriched them with perspectives I wasn't aware of. [...] I learned about myself and my reactions through what the others were saying."

Formulating the opening question

An important part of preparing for a public dialogue is the formulation of the opening question. The opening question is not the same as the topic of the dialogue, and a lot of time and effort is needed to find one that suits the dialogue.

An opening question is an open and non-leading question that invites a multitude of answers where participants are inspired to speak on behalf of themselves rather than in generalised terms. The goal of such a question is to open up the minds and thoughts of the participants, rather than close them off. What closes people off are angles that can make one feel defensive, confused, or uninterested. A leading opening question can make participants feel that the public dialogue is not an open space for all types of perspectives, and that the facilitators are expecting or prefer certain answers.

With these considerations in mind, an opening question should have the following qualities:

- Be short and concise
- Not include difficult terms – be as simple as possible
- Be connected to the topic of the dialogue
- Inspire the participants to speak on behalf of themselves, and share their thoughts and ideas
- Be open and not leading

Opening questions in public dialogues are often very different than those we hear in public debates or panel discussions. In example, for a public dialogue with the topic "Twenty years after 9/11", an opening question like "How has 9/11 affected you?" has a better chance of promoting dialogical conversation than "What role has 9/11 played in Norwegian society the last 20 years?". Both questions are interesting and thought-provoking, but they create very different types of conversations, tones, and atmospheres. An opening question in a public dialogue should assist the facilitator in their task of motivating for honest, open, and personal sharing, not make it more difficult.

Check-points For this task:

- Does your opening question create space for a multitude of answers and perspectives, or is it leading? Is it relevant to the whole community?
- Is it formulated in an accessible and simple manner?
- Is it more likely to invite sharing of personal stories or generalized opinions?
- How does the opening question feel when said out loud? Does it make sense off the page?

Preparing for potential challenges

As facilitator, you should prepare to navigate certain challenging aspects of your role. Firstly, it can be useful to reflect around the **possibility of strong emotional expressions** in the public dialogue. Emotions are a common part of dialogue sessions, but if participants feel that their emotions makes the facilitator uncomfortable or stressed, they are less likely to express themselves freely. The first step in dealing with strong emotions is therefore to not be afraid of them. Hence, you should be familiar with your relationship to different emotions – perhaps you have a pattern of reaction to some of them. This can often be the case for expressions of anger, sadness, or

aggressivity – many of us tense up, become nervous, or go silent when witnessing them. We recommend that you do an honest check-in with yourself before facilitating a dialogue, as your ability to hold space for emotions can depend on the day and your current personal circumstances. If you as facilitator are unprepared and unable to receive emotions coming up, you can easily loose the trust of the participants.

The **presence of extreme opinions** is also something that a facilitator should be prepared for. In the open public dialogues, you do not know who will show up to participate. If the organizers or hosts do not wish to have a conversation where extreme opinions can potentially surface, you should choose to hold a closed dialogue for specific invitees. Other times, there can be a wish to invite people with more radical or extreme opinions to a closed dialogue about a certain topic. In either case, as facilitator you need to be mentally prepared to hold space for such opinions, especially if you personally disagree with or fear such opinions. This preparation can entail asking yourself what you regard as extreme and investigate the likely reactions you can have to such expressions. In a facilitation team, it is useful to share this information amongst the facilitators, so that you can better assist one another if those viewpoints or topics come up. When you are able to hold space, ask questions, and stay multi-partial, our experience is that the acknowledgement and respect that comes with being listened to has the potential to defuse hateful, bombastic, or generalized rhetoric. In public dialogues with extreme opinions, the ground rules should be well thought out and maintained. If you feel as facilitator that you are unable to maintain a safe environment where everyone is free to share dialogically, you should take a break or end the dialogue.

Furthermore, you should, as facilitator, **prepare for the presence of power dynamics**. In every public dialogue there will be power imbalances, as participants have different levels of formal or informal power. In addition, there are often some participants who feel powerless or understand themselves as victims in their society. As facilitator, you should attempt to balance these power dimensions. This involves gaining awareness of them and their contextual make-up, instead of pretending they do not exist. By creating space for dialogue, you can make room for new relationships to develop that doesn't necessarily follow to the normally ascribed status positions. In the dialogue circle, participants have the chance to let go of their usually accustomed roles and talk on behalf of themselves, creating moments where power can fuse, fade, and shift. As facilitator, you should be

particularly careful to tend to all participants in the same manner and not give special treatment. If you choose to begin with a presentation round, we recommend to not include things like occupation or academic background, as they will give focus to positions and societal status.

When navigating power dynamics before and during a dialogue session, try to stay aware of and open to the following reminders:

- There are existing and specific power dimensions in society that can have an effect on the dialogue
- These dimensions can shift and fluctuate during the dialogue session
- Open and honest sharing can cost or drain some participants more than others, and this can often be related to their societal positions and previous experience with power differences
- In the dialogue circle, informal power can sometimes be as influential as formal power
- By trying to empower you can also end up victimizing
- You might personally sympathize more with some participants due to power dynamics, be mindful of this

Check-points For this task:

- Which emotional expressions create unwanted or unconscious reactions in you? How will you handle such emotions surfacing in a dialogue?
- What do you consider to be extreme opinions? Are there some topics you cannot facilitate with multi-partiality?
- How can power dynamics show themselves in this specific public dialogue? What can you do to try to balance them out?
- Together in the facilitation team, reflect on potential challenges and divide clear responsibilities for unexpected scenarios

Facilitation tasks during the public dialogue

Division of tasks amongst the facilitator team

When the facilitator team has talked through their preparations and divided their roles, they should divide specific tasks amongst themselves. This will enable each facilitator to execute their tasks with the necessary level of concentration and care.

The division of tasks should depend on the individual strengths and experience of the facilitators. After the opening of the dialogue, it can be beneficial that the main facilitator directs their sole focus to listening to what is being said and asking follow-up questions. This means that the co-facilitator then focuses on time keeping, giving the word, and summarizing the dialogue, in addition to listening and asking potential questions. From this base line, we have created a simplified guide for dividing tasks in a standard open public dialogue. This overview is just a suggestion – facilitators should alter it to fit their dynamic and the specific format of the session.



Main facilitator	Co-facilitator
Prepare the space for the dialogue. Put the chairs in a circle, choose where you should sit (together).	Prepare the space for the dialogue. Put the chairs in a circle, choose where you should sit (together), and what side of the facilitator you should be on.
When the participants are seated, welcome them to the dialogue, mention the topic and present yourself and your role as facilitator. Explain that your role is to maintain a safe space for talking about the topic, and that you will listen and ask follow-up questions. Say that you are responsible for the process, but not the content of the dialogue. After that, give the word to the co-facilitator. Remember that trust building starts from the moment participants enter the room.	Sit beside the main facilitator in the circle. When you are given the word, present yourself and your role as a co-facilitator. Say that you will assist the facilitator in this dialogue, that you listen and follow-up, and that you will keep track of those who want to talk. Let them know they can signal you if they wish to speak, and that you will give them the word when it is time. Say that your task is to summarize the dialogue in the end, and that you will therefore be taking some notes that will not be shared elsewhere (unless planned otherwise). Explain that you will be the timekeeper and share with them the time frame of the public dialogue.
After the co-facilitator has presented themselves and their tasks, say some words about the dialogue method and present the ground rules of the session.	If the main facilitator forgets some parts in the introduction, assist them by taking the word.
If the group is small you can choose to begin with a presentation round. Refrain from asking about positions/roles etc. If the group is larger, you can start directly by presenting the opening question.	Move your attention amongst the participants regularly so that all participants feel seen even when the main facilitator is focusing on the one talking. Follow the process and note down those who want the word.

Main facilitator	Co-facilitator
During the dialogue give attention to everyone and stay multi-partial. Be an example of genuine empathy and curiosity. Help participants to express their feelings and needs by asking follow-up questions. Give those who speak extra focus and don' be afraid to ask several follow-up questions. Acknowledge their thoughts and experiences. To maintain multi-partiality, refrain from nodding while they're talking, instead nod after and before they talk. Do not guide them or lead them. Remember you are responsible for the process, but not the content. Asses if breaks are needed depending on the energy and situation in the circle.	Give the word to those who want to talk. Be attentive to the facilitator and jump in if they lose their concentration or miss important follow-up opportunities. Note down key topical words from the conversation for the summary, try not to spend time and focus writing long sentences. If some of the participants leaves the room – follow them, talk with them and motivate them to come back. The main facilitator stays in the circle and initiates a break. If some of the participants become emotional, follow it up together with the facilitator. Stay multi-partial the whole time. When time is coming to a close, let participants know how many are left to speak, and signal to the facilitator when there is 5–10 minutes left.
When the co-facilitator has given you a sign that time soon is soon over, make sure to save enough time for the summary – thank the participants for their participation and give the word to the co-facilitator.	Give a summary based on your notes. Make sure to not put your own reflections, judgement, or thoughts about what has been shared into the summary. Thank the participants for their participation.
Because you are the main responsible for the safe space, have the last word by saying goodbye – if the dialogue is part of a longer series or process, mention the time for the next dialogue and welcome them to participate.	

"We understand better that we are not alone in our experiences. This applies both to that which is difficult, but also to the beautiful moments that colour everyday life. [...] That is why we need more dialogue; we could learn more of this"

Deep listening and dialogical follow-up questions

Many of the important qualities of facilitation mentioned above – like curiosity, attentiveness, openness, humility, and concentration, show up in part in how the facilitators listen and follow up. They demonstrate their attentive listening by asking questions that shows they have absorbed what the participant is saying. This way, facilitators build trust and show integrity by practicing what they preach.

Deep listening is a key to dialogical conversation, and the facilitators have the main responsibility for creating an atmosphere where deep listening has centre stage. The facilitators' ability to listen will set a standard for the participants. In our view, listening is something very different to hearing. To hear can be described as our ears sensing that something has been said, but we don't necessarily consciously take it in. Often, we are more focused on what we have to say then what the others have said. Listening, on the other hand, is a conscious process. We open our mind and hearts to really understand what the other is trying to explain, without giving in to any internal resistance and defence, even when we do not like or agree with the speaker.

Facilitators of public dialogue should follow the flow and process of the participants, listening to each word and sentence with deep curiosity and interest. This way, they can follow up with questions that assist the speaker to go deeper into what they have chosen to share, rather than what the listener is interested in. In our experience, because such questions are so connected to the speaker and so disconnected from the facilitator's own needs, judgements, and interests, many participants feel that these follow-up questions are empowering, rather than intrusive or confronting.

By deeply listening, the facilitator can notice key topics or words that has room for deeper reflection. Such key words are often connected to something deeper within us and can tell us something about our interests and needs. Examples of such key words are large or foreign concepts,

generalizations, feelings, experiences from the past, and descriptions or moments of change.

If a participant says, "I hate all this focus on pride celebrations" or "Young people don't have respect anymore", the facilitator can follow up by asking "What do you mean when you say hate?" and "What is respect to you?". These questions give the participant a space to explain more about their initial positions, but from a more personal point of view – giving the rest of the circle a better chance to understand. In comparison, if the facilitator would have asked "What are the pride celebrations you think of?" or "What has changed with young people?" the conversation would more likely stay on a fact-based surface level where participants could end up talking more about others than themselves. This level of conversation can potentially lead to a discussion where participants feel like defending their positions instead of going deeper into what their positions mean and why they have them.

Dialogical follow-up questions are often simpler than we think, and we often end up asking "Can you say more about that?", "How do you feel about that?", "Could you please explain some more?", and "What does that mean to you?".

"I remember the first time I participated in a public dialogue. It gave me a strange sense of calm and safety in knowing that this conversation will go well, despite the fact that I had many [previous] experiences of conversations that came to a standstill or where I took over the conversations."

Summarizing the public dialogue

As mentioned above, one of the designated tasks of the co-facilitator in a public dialogue is to present a summary at the end of the session. The summary is there to outline the content of the conversation and is an important element of the learning aspect of the public dialogue approach. By summarizing the content of the whole dialogue, participants can leave the session with a more complete recollection of what they have experienced, as we often tend to best remember the last point that was said.

Importantly, a dialogue summary is unique to a public dialogue, and should not be used in a conflict-based dialogue where the tension and distrust can be much higher. As mentioned earlier, if the dialogue only has one facilitator, this part should be skipped, as it will distract too much from the responsibility of listening and asking questions.

Done carefully, the summary can round up the session in an open and reflective manner, while at the same time making everyone feel heard and seen. It can highlight the complexity and depth of the dialogue topic by showcasing the variety of contributions, and help participants remember more from the conversation. It can also foster feelings of collectiveness and community, by rounding up what the group has been a part of together.

Writing and presenting the summary is a responsibility that requires careful attentiveness and concentration. Therefore, we feel that it is better to keep it simple and general, as too much focus on the writing can damage the dialogical atmosphere. The following are some guidelines for how it *can* be done:

- Listen to each statement in full, then note down a key word or short sentence/quote that represent the content of the statement. Only use words that was used by the participant.

- Try to write without drawing too much attention to yourself. Try to not look down unless it is really necessary – this will also help you keep your notes concise. Don't write during particularly emotional or vulnerable moments.

- Write in upper case letters as it can help you recite more effortlessly later on.

- Try and limit the summary to one page to avoid flipping through pages when presenting, as this can break up the atmosphere of the room.

- Write notes in the same manner as you will present it – it is hard to present the summary in line with the dialogical qualities of facilitation if the notes are biased, leading, judgmental etc.

- When the main facilitator gives you the floor to present the summary, thank the group for sharing their experiences, thoughts, and reflections. Make sure you don't use adjectives when referring to the content, like "brave", "great", "interesting", "sad", "difficult" etc.

- Follow the topics that were mentioned somewhat chronologically and use short binding words and phrases to go from topic to topic. Try to vary your language so the binding phrases don't feel unnecessarily repetitive. You can also create variation by reciting both whole sentences and key words in your summary.

- Make sure to look around in the room while presenting. It is not important to look at the person who talked about a topic when you are mentioning that topic – as a group, they now own the content of the dialogue together.

- Don't rush though the page – taking a breath or looking down at the page gives participants time to take in what you are saying.

- End by thanking them again for sharing and giving others space to share. Give the word back to the main facilitator for the last part of closing the dialogue.



Interested to learn more about facilitation?

Facilitation is a craft that has to be physically experienced and practiced over time. It is a complex endeavor and unique role, which should be done with care and a great sense of responsibility.

In this chapter, we have given an overview of the role and its responsibilities, but we do recommend undergoing training before facilitating dialogues. At the back of this handbook you can find more resources concerning the role.

Here you can find information about our trainings for public dialogue facilitation and conflict-based dialogue facilitation:

Reflect further

* *How do you think questions open up or close a reflective process? What qualities make them foster or hinder reflection?*

* *Think of a time you felt defensive in a conversation. What was it that made you feel attacked?*

* *What do you need to stay open-minded in a conversation with someone you disagree with?*

"The public dialogue gave me insight into myself and the others I participated with. I saw myself from the outside in a way. It's good to take a step out of your own head every now and then."

CHAPTER FIVE

5 Digital public dialogues

This chapter gives an overview of our experience with digital public dialogues. It contains the following:

Making the digital dialogical

Essentials in the digital space

- Camera on
- Knowing names
- Making time for introductions
- The use of emoji signs

Dealing with confidentiality

Digital organizing

- Group size
- Digital competencies and internet access
- Detailed preparation
- Reducing screen fatigue

Digital tools in public dialogue

- The raise hand button
- Managing the chat
- Presentation tools
- Digital timer
- Break out rooms
- Whiteboard

Facilitating digital public dialogue

- Technical facilitation

Benefits of the digital format

- Increased inclusivity
- An inexpensive conversation
- A slower pace
- The comfort of your own couch

Shortcomings of the digital format

- Loss of spontaneity and flow
- Building trust in a digital dialogue

A digital dialogue is better than no dialogue

Making the digital dialogical

Public dialogue can also take place online. This format was completely new to us when we started experimenting with it in the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with the needs of our network to still speak together, we wondered if it was possible to make a digital space feel dialogical. To our surprise, with the right conditions in place, the meetings that we facilitated felt dialogical and true to the approach. The reflections and points made in the following chapter are the result of our steep learning curve. We are by no means finished with learning how to use this digital format, but we do however have some valuable experience to share.

A fundamental concern when transferring the dialogue methods onto the screen is how to make a digital space feel safe and dialogical. In addition to following the general qualities of dialogue and dialogue facilitation, we have seen a heightened importance of the setting an example. Because of the more artificial and static nature of the digital set up, it is essential that the facilitators and organizers have a relaxed, down to earth, and not too formal approach. This entails a certain level of flexibility and tolerance for technical hiccups and blunders while facilitating the session.

Essentials in the digital space

Furthermore, the making of a safe digital space is in many ways a practical responsibility. Some elements of this task are so basic they are easily taken for granted, but if they are forgotten, the session can be compromised or feel confusing. Therefore, it can be beneficial to include information about some of the following basics in correspondence or material shared with the participants before the dialogue.

Camera on

Amongst the digital dialogues we have facilitated, there was a great difference between those where most participants had their cameras on and those where the majority didn't. In addition to the discomforting nature of not seeing anyone you are talking to, we found that it is harder to keep participants engaged if their screen is filled with mostly black squares. We have found it best to always ask the participants to be on camera if they are able, and to prepare them for this beforehand.

Having cameras on additionally gives the added personal touch of seeing and showing a part of our homes, pets, and lives to each other. This feature

sometimes becomes an informal conversation starter that sparks a form of connection less available in a physical public dialogue. Camera presence is also a way for the facilitators to set an example. The facilitators' body language and how it conveys on the screen can help shape the atmosphere. For example, seeing both a face and a torso can be more welcoming than a face with no neck, and in our experience it also matters that the facilitator's gaze is directed towards the camera lens rather than their screen.

"Zoom makes people more attentive to listening and waiting for your turn. Seeing people in their private spaces actually felt closer in a way. I appreciate the clear rules; time management, who speaks when, and that we sign up [to the dialogue] before, that no one is going in and out."

Knowing names

In addition to encouraging video, facilitators should also take a minute in the beginning of the dialogue to let everyone write their name in the name field. There is a big humanizing difference between talking to Omar or o.t.88@mail.com. Furthermore, taking the time to acknowledge the names of the others can remind participants of their unique personhoods. In addition, it gives people the space to potentially include something that is important for them in their presentation, like pronouns or titles etc.

Making time for introductions

In our experience, taking time for an introduction round can prove beneficial in a digital public dialogue. Participating through a screen can be passivating, so ensuring that everyone speaks within the first few minutes can make an important difference. It is also a tool to establish the groups' dynamic and ownership of the space. The presentation round can also provide some necessary informal socialization, as the usual space for coffee, tea, and biscuits is lacking from this format. It is important to note that the presentation round should be quick and simple, as it can drag on for a long time with a large group of participants. Depending on the group size, we usually ask participants to share their name and where they currently are. If the group is small enough (less than 15), we sometimes add a question about their motivation to participate in the dialogue.

The use of emoji signs

When it comes to the question of the use of signalling emojis like thumbs up, hearts, etc., we have mixed experiences. One could think that they can promote supportive and positive relations. However, we have seen that they can end up serving as a form of commenting on people's statements, in the sense of "giving scores" or feedback to each other's contributions, by giving thumbs up and smiles to selected participants. Such commenting is something we want to refrain from in dialogue. It can create a difficult dynamic for open and honest conversation, as well as potentially creating ambiguity around which statements emojis refer to and what points in a statement they are reacting to. The applause function for example, can become a rewarding practice towards the group's majority opinions. This can potentially jeopardize the likelihood of participants with more outsider perspectives or opinions to share without fear of being treated differently.

Managing such signalling can be challenging, as the facilitator needs to assess how to navigate it without stifling the conversation. Sometimes, letting it pass can be better for the flow of the dialogue, as telling participants not to use emojis after the fact can make them feel self-conscious or insecure. If an emoji is being used when there are no new participants waiting to talk, it can be useful to follow up on it by asking questions to those who signalled something or to the group as a whole. Generally, we would refrain from coming with correcting comments on the use of emojis unless the dialogue has a highly sensitive or conflictual topic, or if we are prepared for a session with very diverging opinions. In such a scenario, we would ask participants to refrain from using signs in our introduction of the dialogue.

In our experience, emoji signalling rarely becomes a big issue. When we as facilitators have actively refrained from using them, participants often follow our example.

Dealing with confidentiality

The question of confidentiality is another aspect of the creation of a safe online space. Recording the meeting should always be agreed upon or decided in beforehand, and we do not generally recommend doing so in a dialogue session. It is not possible to guarantee confidentiality in such a dialogue, as there is less of a way to notice and follow up participants use of devices that can record or document. Often, participants sit somewhere where other people are present or pass through. This is one of the reasons



why we have refrained from facilitating conflict-based dialogues online, but it does not necessarily hinder a public dialogue in the same way. In our experience, the most important thing is to have an open conversation about the matter with the participants in the beginning of the dialogue, encouraging a trust-based relationship with no hidden agendas. It could also be useful to include a point on privacy or confidentiality in the information shared with participant prior to the dialogue, letting participants know that it could be beneficial to sit in a private room during the dialogue. Lastly, we always give participants the chance to turn off the camera if the organizers would like to take a screen shot of the session for PR purposes.

Digital organizing

Many of the concerns around organizing dialogues mentioned previously in this handbook equally applies to digital public dialogues. With that said, there are certain tasks and considerations unique to the digital format. Primarily, some significant factors may affect the decision-making processes while planning for a digital session.

Group size

The size of the group is an important factor when deciding the practicalities and possibilities for a digital public dialogue. A useful rule of thumb is that the larger the group is, the less time there is. With a group of ten, you can expect to be able to go even more in depth in the time you have, and that everyone who wishes to, has a chance to speak. With a group of 30 or more, it could be beneficial to split up the group for part of the time or skip a presentation round.

Digital competencies and internet access

Furthermore, the group's digital competencies and internet access will be determining how much time things will take, the representativeness and reach of the participant group, and if they are generally inclined to feel at ease and confident in this format. Depending on these factors, it is important to accommodate the set up correspondingly.

Detailed preparation

Careful preparations are crucial for making the atmosphere of a digital public dialogue as relaxed as possible. This entails creating an estimated plan for time management of the beginning and end of the dialogue, clearly dividing responsibilities amongst the facilitators and any external organizers, as well as working on expectation management in beforehand. Specifically, we have found it beneficial to include information about internet connection, video usage, confidentiality and so forth in invitations, event descriptions, or emails to participants.

Reducing screen fatigue

Another key responsibility when organizing the session is how to minimize screen fatigue. In our experience, it doesn't matter how interested or passionate participants are, everyone will get tired from looking at the screen for too long. Therefore, online public dialogues are often shorter than physical ones, normally lasting between 1–2,5 hours. There are ways to limit this affect – incorporating designated breaks being the most apparent one. In addition, it is beneficial to consciously create variety in what the participants look at or do – especially in the case of the dialogue lasting over 2 hours. It can for example be beneficial to utilize certain tools, like break-out rooms or a single power point slide informing the group of the topic and time frame of the dialogue. The use of tools depends on the type of public dialogue and its context.

"It was empowering to share and connect with you. [...] The lack of possibility to react spontaneously and directly was one negative effect. But even if we were online, I felt some intimacy and that we are really truly involved in each other. It is weak and strong at the same time, this internet tool."

Digital tools in public dialogue

Below is a compilation of some of the tools we have come to depend on in digital dialogue facilitation. We have also facilitated some online dialogues that contained workshop elements, which naturally contained more tool usage. Importantly, tools like these are supposed to be helpful, and make the digital sessions easier and more participatory. If using them creates complications, confusion, or stress, it is better to skip them. Digital public dialogues should feel as easy going and open as possible – and tools shouldn't hinder this. If used well, the tools below can foster interactive participation and new forms of engagement.

The raise hand button

Some tools are so fundamental they are perhaps not even perceived as tools by some. The "raise hand" feature in most digital video conferencing programs is one of these. This feature is essential in groups with more than 5 participants and is an important part of a digital public dialogue. Using it helps the facilitators maintain an overview of those who want to speak, and the clear visibility of the sign can provide reassurance to participants who are waiting for their turn.

Managing the chat

The chat is another tool that can be used in a digital dialogue. Our recommendation is to ask participants to reserve the use of the chat to practical messages or questions for technical assistance, like asking for a break or inquiring how they can unmute themselves. We have seen that if participants use the chat to share their thoughts and experiences, it can have a negative effect on the dialogue. Such a chat can become its own parallel dialogue, which creates confusion, and can be experienced as interrupting the speaker or jumping the line. If this occurs, the co-facilitator in charge




"Because of Zoom I had more time to think about what I had to say, but then when people came with new perspectives when I was waiting for my turn made me reflect on how I try to be open to actually listen and change my view from listening. Closing reflections were really appreciated, it helped to ground the conversation and gave me some closure and inspiring thoughts."

of the speaking list should acknowledge the comments by letting the group know that the participants active in the chat are put on the list to further elaborate when their time comes.

Presentation tools

Furthermore, we have seen the benefits of using presentation tools in our digital facilitation. It is not always necessary but can be a way to break up the different parts of the session to ensure that participants receive important information like time frame, an intro to the dialogue approach, the opening question, and the ground rules. A general principle when using this tool is that slides should contain little text and clear messaging. One should be mindful when using this tool as such presentations can evoke unwanted associations of a classroom or a lecture for the participants.

Digital timer

Anyone who has led a digital meeting knows how challenging it can be to get participants back from break on time. A participant recommended to us once to use a digital timer and share our screen during breaks so that everyone could see and hear when the break was over. This has saved us a lot of waiting, as we do not want to begin the dialogue again without everyone present.

Break out rooms

In addition to these fundamental tools, there are other, perhaps more advanced tools, that can serve a purpose in digital public dialogue. One of them are break out rooms – a feature where the meeting host can divide participants into private rooms and control how long they should be there. This tool can be useful in large groups, as long as the topic or question the participants are assigned to talk together about is not too sensitive or conflictual.

Whiteboard

Furthermore, some public dialogues can benefit from the use of a whiteboard – a digital version of a traditional blackboard. We have used it in sessions where participants themselves choose and define their ground rules and topics, and in dialogue series for brainstorming about the topics of coming sessions.

Facilitating digital public dialogues

Facilitating a digital public dialogue is in many ways similar to facilitating a physical one. The objectives and role of the facilitator(s) are the same, but some tasks and their division within the facilitator team can be different.

From our experience, digital dialogue facilitation requires an even more rigid division of tasks, as the potential for distraction and loss of concentration is very high. Such distractions can be unexpected low computer battery, someone walking into the room, notifications popping up on the screen, and power outages. As always, the division should take into consideration the individual strengths and competencies of the different facilitators. We have come to believe that the most effective approach is a clean cut division, where one facilitator solely focuses on the conversation while another has the main technical tasks and responsibilities. It can also be useful to have a third assistant for most of the technical support in addition to the two facilitators.

Technical facilitation

Makin sure the session runs smoothly from a technical standpoint is crucial for the atmosphere of the dialogue. We have often designated the co-facilitator all aspects of the technical implementation, like the managing of tools, the chat, admitting of participants, un-muting, and so forth. Throughout our exploration of digital facilitation, we have found that there are many benefits to sitting together in the same room as a facilitation team, as it is easier to communicate through body language, cues, or written notes. With this set up one should use two separate computers – one serving as the main screen for seeing the participants and one for managing technical functions and participant support. If the facilitators cannot sit together, it is even more important to keep the tasks separated. For example, it can create confusion in the group if the main facilitator gives the word according to the raised hands present in the moment, not taking into consideration that the co-facilitator perhaps has a more complete list compiled throughout the dialogue session. If sitting apart, the facilitator team should still communicate continuously through a private chat or additional communication channel.

"This was really empowering. I needed these inspiring talks, and it gave me some sort of hope and feeling of community. Maybe a little bit like we were in the same bubble, but at the same time some moments were so moving, deep and intimate, possibly bringing us closer than we would have been physically."

Benefits of the digital format

Initially having low expectations to how the digital format could work for public dialogue, we were pleasantly surprised by the many benefits it in fact brought with it.

Increased inclusivity

From an organizational point of view, the digital format can give more people the ability or willingness to join a dialogue. This broadened reach could be because of the low threshold of participation, as it does not require you to leave the comfort of your couch. Or because the format provides a chance for participation regardless of geography and travel possibilities, which otherwise could restrict someone's ability to join. That being said, the format is limited in the sense that it is only available to those who have internet access and a suitable electronic device.

An inexpensive conversation

Furthermore, it is an even more inexpensive format than physical public dialogues. With the digital format, there are no costs related to transportation, snacks and drinks, rig etc. As long as you have a computer and internet connection it is possible to make it happen.

A slower pace

In terms of the dialogical benefits, we have seen that the tempo coinciding with the digital format can help with dialogical communication. Specifically, the "raise hand" function makes it less easy for participants to interrupt each other and gives them visual confirmation that they will have a chance to speak. Natural pauses between participants speaking can occur, and the speakers gain more conscious control over when they want to finish talking.

The comfort of your own couch

Furthermore, in addition to catching a glimpse into someone's home and reality, being at home can have other positive side effects. Firstly, the sometimes difficult task of getting up from the couch to go to a physical event is removed. Additionally, the safety of your own home can have a comforting effect on participants, potentially leading them to be able to share more and feel at ease in the conversation.

Shortcomings of the digital format

With the positive elements of the digital format in mind, we still feel that physical public dialogues are the better option in most situations. This is because there are also several shortcomings with the format, which can threaten the potential for dialogical moments to occur.

Loss of spontaneity and flow

Firstly, the digital format lacks a sense of spontaneity and organic flow that can be essential in the trust building and general process of a dialogue. The fact that digital dialogues sometimes are shorter than physical ones, and include more breaks, can also have a negative effect on the process. Because it takes time before moments of deep listening and dialogue occur, we often push breaks to not interrupt the flow. This option is not as available in digital dialogues because of screen fatigue, potentially leading to dialogue sessions that may feel interrupted and stagnated.

Building trust in a digital dialogue

We have also found it to be more challenging to build trust in online dialogues. On our screens, our humanness becomes more compromised – we lose informal socializing, non-verbal communication and cues, and direct eye contact. These are all key factors in creating a trusting atmosphere. The matter of confidentiality also affects the potential for trust building. In our experience, public dialogues often cause underlying conflicts and sensitive issues to surface, and a digital format can make it more difficult for the facilitator to maintain a safe enough environment.

"I am grateful that I could also see you and that people used the videos. But I am dramatically missing the physical touch in the whole sense. This tool also showed me how being physically close is so important, that we can touch, that we can almost feel each other's heartbeat. I feel exhausted after these meetings, it is very difficult to focus on the screen for so long. It is something artificial, but on the other hand very practical. But I miss you all in reality."

A digital dialogue is better than no dialogue

All in all, digital public dialogues come with a set of unique considerations and challenges, but also possibilities that sometimes surpass the physical format. Choosing whether a public dialogue should be physical or digital should depend on contextual knowledge, the aim of the gathering, and the resources available. We have seen that in longer dialogue processes, it can be very useful to combine the two formats, using digital dialogues in between physical gatherings, and as part of preparations. Even with the digital format's shortcomings in mind, it can sometimes be the preferred choice. And if the choice is between a digital public dialogue or no dialogue at all, we certainly believe that it is worth the effort.

Reflect further

* *What is your experience with digital dialogues? How did they feel?*
* *Which topics do you think are suitable for digital public dialogues?*
* *What do you need in order to avoid becoming too tired as a participant on screen?*

CHAPTER SIX

6 Lessons learned – Limitation, pitfalls, and challenges to public dialogue

This chapter summarizes some common issues and dilemmas of the public dialogue approach and how to potentially navigate them. It contains the following topics:

Limitations of public dialogue

- Willingness and motivation
- A slow process

Pitfalls of public dialogue

- Lack of preparation and expectation management
- Not following the flow
- A weak opening question
- Facilitators' lack of self-awareness
- Lack of cultural sensitivity
- An activist facilitator
- Failing to navigate emotional displays

Challenges of public dialogue

- Power differences within the participant group
- Symbolic participation
- Recruiting participants
- Spoiling behaviour in a public dialogue
- Unexpected aftermath
- Evaluation public dialogue
- Doing no harm

A great responsibility

Throughout the years of facilitating and organizing public dialogues, we have experienced the impact and power of the approach, but also many doubts, challenges, and failures. In this chapter, we want to summarize and elaborate on some of our reflections stemming from these experiences. This way, we hope that those who want to implement public dialogues can do so from a more complete understanding of its potential limitations, pitfalls, and challenges.

Limitations of public dialogue

Over the years while developing our approach to public dialogue, we have experienced that it also has its limitations. Being aware of these limitations can be useful to better set clear expectations with participants and collaborators, and when deciding if public dialogue is the right approach in a certain situation.

Willingness and motivation

Unlocking the potential of this approach depends greatly on the willingness and motivation of the community and the participants the public dialogue is meant for. If the community does not want the dialogue to take place, it will rarely have the wanted effect.

Sometimes, lack of motivation concerns attending the public dialogue. In such instances, it can be useful to assess if the topic, organizer/host, location, or promotion strategies are not meeting the needs of the public in that community, and then make the necessary changes.

Dialogue also depends on participants' willingness during the session. To listen with the intent of understanding your "other" can be a challenging and demanding endeavour. For different reasons, participants may not be motivated to try to be open, curious, and self-aware, especially if the situation or topic is tense or a source of frustration. The facilitators can try to spark motivation and interest through their questions and their attentiveness. Encouragement can also be nurtured by making sure the participants know enough about the dialogue approach and its potential benefits. Sometimes, the best tool is time – some participants become increasingly motivated and willing after having warmed up to the approach. That being said, the facilitators can only encourage and inspire – dialogical communication can never be forced if there is no wish for it.

A slow process

Public dialogue is also limited in the sense that it is a patient approach, where participants can talk and listen for longer stretches of time than what most are used to. Therefore, it is not suitable for promising quick results or changes in situations where this is the motivation.

Sometimes, a community comes together in public dialogue because they have a problem, a coming decision to make, or a difficult situation at hand. Meeting in a dialogue circle can lead to inclusive and democratic decision making, but that solely depends on where the participants take the conversation. The facilitators will never push forward solution-oriented thinking or action points on their own.

In such instances where a community wishes to change their situation or make decisions, it is important to set aside enough time, for example through a series of dialogue sessions. This is because following the flow will often naturally lead the group to spend a lot of time devoted to understanding the situation and the different experiences related to it. When the depth and complexity of a situation is understood better, it can potentially lead to more sustainable choices and collective movement. This patient attitude in dialogue is something participants should be well informed about, so they don't lose motivation if things take time. Nevertheless, dialogue does not give guarantees, and patience and flexibility are necessary for it to run its course.

Pitfalls of public dialogue

There are many potential pitfalls to look out for when working with the public dialogue approach. They can be "hidden threats" for the dialogue that unexpectedly come up, or possible risks that, if not tended to, can jeopardize the quality of the dialogue.

Lack of preparation and expectation management

Insufficient preparations and expectation management are potential pitfalls of public dialogue. If participants are not well informed about the approach, they can easily become overwhelmed by the methods and what is expected of their participation. Therefore, event descriptions, invitation emails, and posters should include information about dialogue. When this is not prioritized, it can take a long time before the participants start speaking in a dialogical way.

Another potential pitfall is the failure of communicating clearly about expectations with any external host, funder, or organizer. Often, organizers have their own goals for why they want to have a dialogue. If the facilitator has not been clear about the fact that once the dialogue has started, they will not steer the content, this can surprise and sometimes frustrate organizers. We have experienced many times that a partner comes up to us in a break, unhappy with the direction the conversation is going, and asking us to guide it towards something else. To maintain one's integrity as a facilitator, one should not do this, but rather invite the organizer to join the speaking list, share their thoughts, and in this way influence the conversation.

This difference in agenda can also surface if there are high-level participants or partners in the public dialogue, like politicians and leaders of a community. It can occur that they ask that certain topics should be avoided or not addressed, to which the facilitator has to remain honest in their approach by declining to guarantee this.

Not following the flow

Another potential pitfall for organizers and facilitators is inability to adapt and stay flexible throughout the process. If the set-up, planning, and facilitation becomes too rigid, it can hinder the flow, potentially leading to a dialogue that does not reflect the different needs of the participant group. Flexibility is needed at the preparatory stages of a public dialogue and during the dialogue itself. It can look like changing the topic in beforehand after listening to members of the community, or accepting the direction the conversation is taking in the circle. This inability to follow the flow can compromise the integrity of the approach and its unique qualities.

Balancing control can be a difficult task for the facilitator – they should let go of control over the content and direction of the conversation but maintain control over the dialogical process. The latter entails remaining in control of the safe space by being attentive, listening, and observant. Control to us means to be prepared to respond to different inputs from the participants, and to use one's authority when needed.

If the facilitator is too concerned and occupied about their loss of control, they will not be able to be an open and attentive facilitator. Therefore, it is essential that they manage to embrace the unpredictable nature of a dialogue conversation. Not letting go of control can look like always bringing participants back to the main topic or opening question of the dialogue,

or worrying about what they think the participants "should" be talking about or what "should" happen next.

In this balancing act of losing and maintaining control, it is easy to fall into self-doubt and fear about one's ability to handle the unexpected. This can make the facilitator lose focus and attention, and at worst, make them feel paralyzed. In our experience, our ability to be adaptable and flexible as facilitators depend on preparations, self-awareness, and experience. By thinking through different possible scenarios and asking oneself how to navigate them, facilitators can sit more comfortably in the unpredictable nature of dialogue, while making sure the space is safe.

Balancing control and loss of control is in our view one of the most difficult tasks of the role of the facilitator. It is one of the reasons why we recommend working in teams, where the team members can serve as each other's safety net.

A weak opening question

Another potential pitfall for facilitators is choosing an un-dialogical opening question. This can have great consequences for the dialogue, as the opening question is an important tool for "setting the stage" for the conversation and guiding participants towards a dialogical mindset. As mentioned before in this handbook, a well formulated dialogical opening question is clear, open, and non-leading.

A weak opening question can stop the dialogue process before it has started. The first minutes in a dialogue are important, especially when participants have never experienced this form of conversation before. In these first moments, the facilitator must create a safe atmosphere to motivate the participants to talk. If the opening question is too complicated or unclear, the participants might become uncertain, disengaged, or awkward. Therefore, investing time in creating an opening question is crucial to a public dialogue.

Facilitators' lack of self-awareness

Furthermore, if a facilitator is unaware of and steered by their own prejudices and attitudes, it could jeopardize a public dialogue. Certain statements from individuals in the dialogue might provoke an unintentional verbal or non-verbal reaction in the facilitators if it goes against their own values or confirm their prejudices.

To avoid such reactions, which can disturb or even destroy the dialogue, the facilitators need to be conscious about their internalized and often concealed values, experiences, and attitudes. Reactions from the facilitators can be perceived as unprofessional and biased and can hinder the dialogue process.

It might also be that the facilitators consciously or unconsciously grow tired of repeated statements or positions, and that this affects their formulations and choices of follow-up questions, as well as who they choose to follow up. If this occurs, their multi-partiality is jeopardized, and they will end up leading the conversation through these choices.

Lack of cultural sensitivity

Not being aware of cultural sensitivities, linguistic practices, and norms can sometimes make the necessary trust building between facilitators and participants more challenging. Participants might end up feeling offended or confused, thus losing trust with the facilitators. It is therefore important to think through potential cultural differences and how these might play out.

With that said, we have experienced that it is not necessary to be fluent in contextual norms as long as you remain humble, polite, and genuinely interested. It is possible to earn the participants trust by approaching the situation and the task with respect and humility. With this trust, mistakes or misunderstandings are most often manageable and seen as human.

An activist facilitator

Many facilitators are naturally passionate people with a high level of empathy. This can sometimes take the shape of activism. A facilitator of a dialogue cannot be an activist in the traditional sense of the word in regard to the topic or situation of the public dialogue. Many activists are motivated by strong convictions and normally show support to one side of complex situations. Being in the role of a facilitator while actively sympathizing with one side will be harmful to the process.

Failing to navigate emotional displays

That being said, empathy is also a human and emotional connector that sometimes influence facilitation. There is an important distinction between convictions and emotions, and while a facilitator's convictions shouldn't be noticeable in the circle, their emotional responses can.

When participants share deeper thoughts and beliefs they can be linked to emotions. Therefore, public dialogues often entail touching moments affecting both the participants and the facilitator. In our experience, it is possible as a facilitator to show that you are touched by what is being said, without necessarily displaying an expressive emotional reaction. Refraining from showing any emotion in such moments can even have a negative effect on the trust between the facilitator and the group. We have observed that facilitators who doesn't seem affected by participants' expressions of openness and vulnerability, risk being regarded as cold or robotic.

Navigating emotional moments involves walking a difficult and thin line, as the facilitator needs to maintain their multi-partiality and attention towards all participants. Balancing this line is a challenging aspect of the practice of facilitation and should be a part of the internal preparations of a facilitator.

Challenges of public dialogues

Power differences within the participant group

Balancing the power dynamics in a dialogue process is a challenging part of the facilitator role, as the dynamics can be invisible or play out in a myriad of ways. There is no perfect way to navigate them. Importantly, the facilitator should give enough space and time for the participants to themselves challenge power dynamics or empower themselves and each other.

As facilitator, you may also feel more connected to certain participants or viewpoints in response to these dynamics. This is something we have experienced several times – for example with participants that tell stories of the discrimination or oppression they have suffered in their communities. Maintaining active awareness of the reasons behind such affinities, like personal values and beliefs, is crucial. By being self-aware of how you as facilitator risk influencing the dialogue through your understanding of the power differences, you can better navigate their presence.

Symbolic participation

The inclusive and democratic qualities of public dialogue sound agreeable to many – and can therefore be at the risk of being misused by disingenuous participation. Those with formal and informal power positions can sometimes attend a dialogue to tick off a box, have a picture taken, or fulfil an official obligation.

If a facilitator has the impression that this is the case, it can be difficult to ascertain. In a one-time dialogue session, it can be challenging to address such a situation. If it occurs in a series of public dialogue, the facilitator has more time to explore their suspicion. They can challenge such actors to share personally rather speak from their roles, as well as empower other participants to feel safe and supported enough to challenge these actors themselves.

Recruiting participants

Another common challenge of the approach that we have touched upon in this handbook is the task of recruitment. Many hesitate to take the step into the dialogue circle – perhaps they are confused or uncertain about what it entails, or worried or awkward about the potential of sharing personally. Some may not come because of their impression of the approach, and many come without knowing that they will partake in a dialogue. This challenge tells us there is much work to be done to spread understanding and knowledge about the concept of dialogue.

As mentioned in previous chapters, the number of participants is connected to the quality of the dialogue. However, the importance of recruitment lies more in the principles of inclusivity and representation. It is essential for a public dialogue that the organizers and facilitators have done as much as they can to invite members of all areas of the community and that the invitation is sincere and accessible. This can sometimes require a great deal of effort, time, and resources, which can present as a challenge for some.

Spoiling behaviour in a public dialogue

In public dialogue there can also be people with spoiling behaviours, who use their time in the circle to disrupt the session as much as possible. This disruption can look like constant interruption of participants, undermining of ground rules, continuous critical questioning of the point or goal of the public dialogue, or the continual challenging of the facilitator's authority.

While constructive critical reflection is welcome and useful in dialogue, this form of continuous spoiling can disturb the dialogue session so much that other participants lose faith in the process or stop speaking. It is therefore important to address this, as the behaviour can sometimes be a sign of something important. When addressing spoiling behaviour, the facilitator should remember to stay calm and not get provoked or become defensive. They should address the person's questions and critique without defending

themselves or attacking them. It can be beneficial to ask them questions as to understand them better, and to challenge them to clarify their sentiments and the reasons why they feel this way. Other ways to navigate this is to remind the group of the ground rules, as well as explaining again what the purpose of the dialogue and your role is. The speaking list can also help the facilitator when dealing with interruptions, where they should assert their authority and ask the participant to wait for their turn.

Crucially, it is important not to shut down everything the person does or says, as the facilitator also is responsible for their safe space and inclusion. The facilitator should assist the person to express their thoughts and experiences in a constructive way. Knowing how much space and time to give such a participant can be challenging, and one should always try to balance it so that all voices in a dialogue share the space.

An important task is to empower other participants to share their reactions or frustrations towards such spoiling behaviour. Most of the time, participants who have showed up to a dialogue are eager to talk about the topic and might get annoyed by unconstructive disruption and undermining behaviour. It can be very helpful that they get the space to share this, and the facilitators can ask them questions that let them explain further how the disruption affects them.

If nothing works it can be useful to take a break, breathe, and assess amongst the facilitator team what to do next. In our experience, an honest and humble handling of spoiling behaviour might end up as an important learning experience for the participants – showing them how to remain true to dialogical principles and avoid being pulled into a discussion of attack and defence.

Unexpected aftermath

Because public dialogues often concern a topic that matters to people, it has the potential to trigger different types of reactions and outcomes afterwards. This can for example relate to something that was said in the session. When people leave a public dialogue, the facilitators have few chances to follow them up.

But follow-up can sometimes be needed because of what was said or shared in the dialogue. Therefore, our approach has been to always cooperate with

local partners when facilitating outside of our own communities. These local partners have a better chance of staying in touch with participants to assess the situation and potential needs.

To minimize unwanted aftermath facilitators should continuously try to interpret the atmosphere during the session. If they suspect that they should be careful to push further by asking a participant more questions, it can be wise to listen to this gut feeling. However, this is a difficult task, because this perception will always be an interpretation. While it is the responsibility of the participants to only share what they want to share, the facilitator should be conscious of their authority and how this might affect the participants ability to assert their boundaries. Challenges like these are the reason we emphasize the need for experience and practice, which will provide valuable experiences to learn from.

Overall, the chance of harmful, destructive, or violent aftermath is in our experience not very common for public dialogues but should nevertheless be considered.

Evaluating public dialogue

Another potential challenging aspect of working with public dialogues is the question of evaluation. Fundamentally, evaluation in some form is essential to create opportunities for improvement for the facilitators and organizers. By formally or informally opening up for feedback, you can better avoid harmful or ineffective practices, and repetition of mistakes.

Our experience with this mostly concerns gathering or receiving testimonies from participants and local partners. That way, we have gained a good sense of how public dialogue can be experienced on the personal and interpersonal level, both during the dialogue and afterwards.

Because of the specific institutional make-up of the NCPD, we are not too experienced with large scale evaluation and measure of macro outcomes or "effectiveness" of the public dialogue approach, specifically. This can be a crucial aspect of dialogue work when one is reliant on donors, who often require more controllable evaluation practices. Such evaluations can be demanding, as large-scale outcomes of public dialogues can be difficult to evaluate due to the challenge of isolating variables and assessing cause-and-effect relationships.

Systematic evaluation can also present dilemmas due to their focus on effectiveness and results. These can in some ways be seen as directly opposing the process-centred and non-result focused approach of the dialogue method. Navigating these different considerations can be a challenging task and require a lot of resources. In the back of this handbook, you can find further resources on evaluation practices for dialogue.

Doing no harm

A common phrase in the field of peace and dialogue, communication, humanitarian work and international aid is the principle of do no harm. This principle takes different forms, but generally speaks to the challenge for interventions to avoid negative or harmful impacts to the participants or the situation.

In public dialogue, the principle of do no harm is integrated in the approach in its entirety, rather than being used as a separate issue for evaluation or strategy. For us, doing no harm is not an isolated concept, but a conviction seeped into the dialogue process and the role of the facilitator.



Doing no harm connects to the principle of participant cantered conversation, the necessity of ground rules and expectation management, and the emphasis on boundaries and responsibilities. It is represented through the importance of facilitators' preparations and continuous work on self-awareness, the importance of trust building and safe space, and multi-partiality. It is a concern in how facilitators navigate strong emotions, power dimensions, and their own internal attitudes and reactions.

There is no guarantee that public dialogues will always be constructive, but facilitators should do their absolute best to make sure that their involvement does not create any harmful situations or aftermath.

A great responsibility

As a facilitator, your position gives you a great responsibility. The ability to create a safe and brave space for conversations that matter to people is a powerful skill. This skill can be used to instigate change in communities, empower participants, and create space for marginalized people to be listened to.

However, this unique position can easily be subject to misuse and serve as a tool for manipulation, influence, and control. Facilitators should be motivated by a genuine belief in people's capacity to choose what's right for them – an endeavour always cantered on the dialogical principles of deep respect, empathy, and humility. In the dialogue circle, they should not have any other agenda than to serve the community they are sitting with, regardless of its members' beliefs, priorities, or positions.

This great responsibility can sometimes feel like a lonely one, where you depend on your own ability to continuously stay self-aware, humble, and adaptable. Trainings such as the one's NCPD offer serve as important platforms for practice, feedback, critical reflection, and support.

The ability to create a space for inclusive conversations where people matter is a great joy and a meaningful vocation. Although it is a responsibility that should not be taken lightly, facilitating public dialogues is equally a privilege that can be taken on with a great deal of enthusiasm, creativity, and sense of purpose.

Notes

Chapter 1

1 Harold Saunders, *A Public Peace Process: Sustained Dialogue to Transform Racial and Ethnic Conflicts* (New York: Palgrave 1999) pp. 22.

2 Lisa Schirch & David Campt, *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects. A Practical, Hands-On Guide* (PA: Good Books 2007) pp. 9.

3 Bettye Pruitt & Philip Thomas (eds.), *Democratic Dialogue – A Handbook for Practitioners* (CIDA, IDEA, OAS, UNDP 2007) pp. 21.

4 Karin K. Flensner & Marie Von der Lippe, *Being safe from what and safe for whom? A critical discussion of the conceptual metaphor of 'safe space'* (Intercultural Education 2019) pp. 2

5 Christiane Seehausen & Agata Urbanik, Definition formulated during training session in Dialogue Facilitation (2023).

6 Iceberg model credit: R. Selfridge & S. Sokolik, *A comprehensive view of organizational management* (MSU Buisness Topics 1975) pp. 46-61; Illustration by Vanja Steinbru (2023).

Chapter 4

7 Lisa Schirch & David Campt, *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects. A Practical, Hands-On Guide* (PA: Good Books 2007) pp. 42.

8 Lisa Schirch & David Campt, *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects. A Practical, Hands-On Guide* (PA: Good Books 2007) pp. 42.

9 Lisa Schirch & David Campt, *The Little Book of Dialogue for Difficult Subjects. A Practical, Hands-On Guide* (PA: Good Books 2007) pp. 60.

10 Model of key qualities of a dialogue facilitator: Siri Syverud Thorsen (2024).

Recommended books and publications

Many of the methods, tools, and theories the public dialogue approach is based on can be explored further in the following readings:

Bohm, David (L. Nichol, Ed.) (1996): *On dialogue*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203180372

Bryn, Steinar, Inge Eidsvåg & Ingunn Trosholmen (2015): *Understanding the other*. NCPD. https://peace.no/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Understanding-the-Other.pdf

Cuentas, Mirna Ángela & Anaí Linares Méndez (2007): *Practical Guide on Democratic Dialogue*. UNDP. https://www.oas.org/es/sap/dsdme/pubs/guia_e.pdf

Grande, Norunn (2019): *Creating space for making change – A report from dialogue training for civil society in Poland*. NCPD. https://peace.no/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Polen-rapport-2019.pdf

Iversen, Lars Laird (2014): *Uenighetsfellesskap. Blikk på demokratisk samhandling*. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget

Kyselova, Tetiana & Josh Nadeau (2022): *The Evaluation of Facilitated Dialogue: Approaches, Frameworks and Challenges*. OSCE. https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/8/b/525594.pdf

Lederach, John Paul (1996): *Preparing for Peace. Conflict Transformation Across Cultures*. Syracuse University Press.

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All publications from the NCPD can be found here:
https://peace.no/var-tilnaerming/ressurser/publikasjoner/

NCPD's dialogue trainings

The Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue offers three annual open trainings in Lillehammer, Norway. These focus on dialogue and conflict analysis, dialogue facilitation, and public dialogue, respectively. In addition, the center offers tailored trainings and digital options per request for interested organizations, groups, and institutions. Below you will find links that lead you to further information about the different trainings and their upcoming scheduling.

INTRODUCTORY TRAINING:

Dialogue in Conflict

"The training was an unforgettable experience."

– Rebekka, Norway

"I don't think that there are many other institutions out there creating this kind of non-imposing, non-forceful and yet extremely useful course."

– Diego, Canada

Gain a better theoretical and practical understanding of the dialogue approach, as well as conflict analysis and transformation through several tools and methods. This training is for you who is interested in exploring the potential of dialogue to transform conflicts into opportunities, regardless of educational background or profession.

Read more about the training content and find the next one here:



HYBRID TRAINING:

Public Dialogue

"This has been a game changer in my work, and a door opener for new opportunities within the art field. We gained several concrete tools – they were not too many nor too complicated."

– Nina, Norway

"What's missing in the world is the human factor. We are all caught up with all these experts, round tables, panellists. You go to these conferences and you're just exhausted listening to them, and you forget 99 % of what's been said. I think that this [method] is much more impactful for people. Because they're involved and it's about them and no one is lecturing them or telling them how it is and how it should be."

– Sofia, Greece

Learn more about the approach of public dialogue, active listening, dialogical questions, and how to go about organizing and facilitating public dialogues. This training is for you who is interested in gaining insight and practical experience in how you can plan and implement public dialogues in your communities.

Read more about the training content and find the next one here:



ADVANCED TRAINING:

Dialogue Facilitation

"This has been a life-changing experience. I really enjoyed the holistic approach, not just on how to use this professionally, but also how I can use this in my own life and serve humanity as best as I can."

– Sadhu, Nepal

"My favourite part in the training was the role-play. You internalize the role as a facilitator and live out the situation. I will never forget that. This training has changed me and it really brought out the best in me."

– Laura, Argentina

Become a better facilitator by practicing your skills and approaches, exploring your own identity and communication patterns, as well as the dilemmas and challenges that comes with the facilitator role. This training is for you who understands and uses dialogue already, and who wishes to advance your facilitation skills. Participation requires completion of an introductory dialogue training or extensive experience in the field.

Read more about the training content and find the next one here:



Nansen Fredssenter
Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue

About Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue

Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue is a knowledge centre and meeting place for dialogue and peaceful conflict transformation.

To create space for dialogue across lines of division and within communities is the center's core competence. The centre uses methods and approaches developed through extensive practice in Norway and in conflict areas for more than thirty years.

The centre offers pedagogical programs and tools, as well as training courses in dialogue and conflict transformation, public dialogue, and dialogue facilitation. Additionally, they facilitate dialogue processes between parties in conflict and arranges public dialogues in Norway and with partners internationally.

The Nansen Center for Peace and Dialogue is based in Lillehammer, Norway.

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