

A facilitators' guide



How to conduct a dialogue circle in your community



AKNOWLEDGEMENT

SWEDISH PROJECT TEAM

We Wish to thank

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The dialogue circle is a democratic tool that can help ordinary people reshape their communities and their lives. It can be used by organizations, networks and community-based groups to vitalize their work and deepen their impact. It can also be used by unorganized people as a way to address issues affecting them.

The facilitator plays a key part in the dialogue process. This guide will help facilitators to conduct successful dialogue circles in their communities. It contains information about the dialogue circle concept, the role of the facilitator, a step-by-step guide, a facilitators' toolbox and many tips for facilitators.

The dialogue circle

A dialogue circle is a simple and powerful tool for democratic discussion and community problem solving. The face-to-face facilitated dialogue can help ordinary people understand social and political issues and work together to find solutions.

The dialogue circle is a small-group democracy in action—all viewpoints are taken seriously, and each participant has equal opportunity to share their ideas. It is enriched by the member's knowledge and experience. One can look at it as cooking a meal together – all participants add an ingredient to the final result.

The dialogue circle is independent from established power structures like political parties and authorities. The participants decide for themselves what issues to address. If it is being used within an organization it is important that the participants in the circle, and not the organization, decide what issues to address.

Dialogue circles are not the same as traditional education (where a teacher instructs students), focus groups (organized to gather or test information on participants), or large group meetings with a predetermined agenda. The dialogue circle is a unique tool.

A dialogue circle...

- Is a tool for community change – it helps people to address various issues affecting their community.
- Is a participatory method where people learn from each other, share experiences and reach conclusions together.
- Is a small and diverse group of 8 to 15 people.
- Is led by a facilitator – not a teacher, but a person that manages the discussions
- Meets regularly for a limited period, normally in two-hour sessions.
- Is truly democratic – all participants take part in decision-making and all are equals.
- Is independent from established power structures, like political parties and authorities

The ideal dialogue circle...

- Gives all participants about the same scope
- Makes use of all participants' experiences
- Combines the search for knowledge with dialogue and problem solving
- Allows different points of view in the discussion
- Comes up with important and workable solutions

The role of the facilitator

The dialogue circle is led by a facilitator. A facilitator helps participants in the dialogue circle to explore different issues.

A facilitator is not the same as a teacher or a trainer. He or she is not there to lecture. A facilitator doesn't need to be a content expert. Rather look at the role of the facilitator as being a democratic guide.

The task is to create a democratic and participative atmosphere in the group, to ask vital questions, to uncover variables and to find solutions to conflicts and problems within the group.

The goal is to encourage participants to think productively, to help them articulate key ideas, and to identify productive actions.

A facilitator...

- Is not there to teach or lecture
- Facilitates the discussion and guides the group through the process
- Structures the session and keeps track of time
- Involves all the participants in dialogue
- Tries to stay neutral during dialogue
- Doesn't give answers, but asks questions
- Lets the group make their own decisions – shows the alternatives
- Manages problems and conflicts within the group

As a skilled facilitator you should...

- Be well prepared
- Encourage participation with different tools and techniques
- Encourage constructive differences of opinion
- Enforce positive and respectful interaction
- Ask open-ended questions and listen carefully
- Trust your participants to have good ideas
- Try to bring in different perspectives
- Summarize and clarify difficult content or discussions
- Include a variety of activities
- Be positive, enthusiastic, and focused
- Offer encouragement, praise, and recognition
- Be aware of time; keep an eye on the clock; keep it moving
- Be sure that the agenda has a beginning, middle, and end
- Have a sense of closure or a call to action
- Pay attention to participant reactions, moods, and attentiveness
- Be able to solve problems and conflicts that may arise

In the circle – a field guide

Once you have taken part in a training of facilitators, and now you are ready to facilitate a dialogue circle in your community. In the following paragraph you will find advice and tips on how to conduct a successful dialogue circle.

Tips for facilitators

Here are some advices that will make you a better facilitator:

- Gain as much understanding as possible about the group you are facilitating in advance (numbers, occupation, issues and concerns).
- Plan your process in advance, but always be ready to change or adapt to meet the needs of the group.

- Don't make the process too complex. You do not want the process to get in the way of the discussion.
- Think through the issues or problems that may arise in the workshop and know how you will respond to them.
- Before your session begins, strike up personal conversations with individuals. This forms a connection that will help support discussion later.
- An introductory exercise that makes people talk to each other is always advisable as it breaks the ice.
- Use a flip chart, a white board or a chalk board to “record” the issues that the participants are addressing.
- Remember that (your role is not that of expert). You do not have all the answers; the group you are facilitating does.
- Try to involve everyone and don't let anyone take over the conversation. Use the facilitators' tools to enforce these ideals.
- Ask questions. As a neutral party you can help a group think through issues by simply asking questions. Ask open-ended questions that can't be answered with a quick “yes” or “no”.
- Listen carefully to the speakers—visibly show them that you are thinking deeply about what they are saying.
- There is a balance to strike between giving people time to express themselves and keeping the process on track.
- Keep the discussion on course. If the discussion strays, pull it back by referring to something someone said earlier.
- Help the group look at the pros and cons of each viewpoint. Or, ask participants to consider a point of view that hasn't come up in the discussion.
- Encourage the participants to speak to one another, not through you the facilitator. When the conversation is going well, the facilitator isn't saying much.

- You must trust that the group you are facilitating will take responsibility for their own problem solving. Your role is to provide a structure or support for doing this.
- Sometimes you may want to restate or summarize what someone has said to encourage more discussion on that point or to highlight a fruitful line of thinking.
- At various points in the discussion, tie together statements made by different participants. You may do this by rephrasing, summarizing, synthesizing, referencing, etc.
- Use energizers and play regularly to make the circle more joyful and to strengthen the solidarity within the group.
- If conflict emerges, identify the issue that is at the centre of the conflict. Acknowledge that there is conflict and emotion.
- Avoid creating a repressive tone by making negative comments if the participants don't respond right away.



Typical Dialogue Setting.

The facilitators' toolbox

These tools will help you shape the best dialogue circle possible:



- Asks questions to the group (don't give the answers yourself)
- Do follow up questions (to keep the dialogue going and to deepen the discussion)
- Use direct questions to shift speaker (if someone is talking too much or too little)
- Have people discuss the question with the person next to them before you call for group discussion (to warm up peoples voices and thinking)
- Go around the circle (to include everyone and to emphasize that everyone's input is equally important)
- Use a speaking stick (to put focus on the person speaking, the stick give people the right to speak)
- Use silence (to give people the time to think and prepare their input)
- Let the participants interview each other (to make people comfortable with one another)
- Split the participants into smaller group (to make it easier for everyone to participate on equal terms)
- Use small group workshops with follow up in the big group (to put the power of initiative into the hands of the participants. One person takes notes)
- Brainstorming with listing on a flip chart (to collect ideas swiftly, display them for the group and elaborate on them)
- Let the participants prioritize their ideas (to structure the problems and the solutions and decide what to put focus on)

General questions to ask

Try to ask questions like these:

- What seems to be the key point here?
- Do you agree with that? Why?
- What do other people think of this idea?
- What would be a strong case against what you just said?
- What experiences have you had with this?
- Could you help us understand the reasons behind your opinion?
- What do you think is really going on here? Why is that important?
- How might others see this issue?
- Do you think others in the group see this the way you do? Why?
- How does this make you feel?

Useful discussion “bridges.”

Use variations of the following encouragement phrases to help stimulate or encourage ongoing discussion:

- Can you elaborate on that....
- Tell me more....
- What do you mean by...?
- Does anyone disagree with that...?
- Can anyone give an example...?
- How did you come to this conclusion...?
- Can you see evidence of this in your daily life...?
- Have you had an experience that brought you to this conclusion...?
- Is there another way to see things...?
- I'm not sure what you mean, are you saying....
- How do you (the group) define ...?
- Have you thought about “x”....
- Have the rest of you thought about this in the same way....
- Who has had the same experience or situation...?

The dialogue circle agenda at a glance

Dialogue circles may differ in content, but they share a common structure:

- 1) A dialogue circle begins with people getting to know one another and setting ground rules for the dialogue.
- 2) After that the facilitator helps the group identify problems, discuss and prioritize them.
- 3) In the following sessions problems are addressed one at the time, and possible solutions are explored and prioritized.
- 4) At the last session of the dialogue circle, people are preparing for action and change, and an evaluation is done.

Preparations for the dialogue circle session

As a facilitator you must be well prepared:

- Survey the location before the session to ensure it suits the purpose of the meeting. Check to make sure that the both the space and lighting are adequate.
- Be certain that you have all the supplies you'll need – flip charts, marking pens, pencils, notebooks, hand outs etc.
- Arrange the room, or the outside venue, with a circle of comfortable chairs
- Prepare refreshments (and tea if it is possible)
- It's good if you know your participants before the training begins –their backgrounds, age spread, work experience, titles and roles etc.

A typical dialogue circle session

A dialogue circle session often has this agenda:

- 1) Welcome and introductions.
- 2) Go through the ground rules (or set them if it's the first session)
- 3) Dialogue and deliberation on a certain issue. Focus on one issue at a time.
- 4) Come up with solutions. Deliberate and prioritize (see how below)
- 5) Summary, wrap up and instructions for the next session.

Agenda for the first session

As a facilitator you'll need to prepare the first session in more detail.

This is how the agenda could look like:

- 1) If requested, start with a prayer
- 2) Welcome and introductions. If the participants don't know everyone, provide time for introductions. Note however that a common facilitator mistake is to let introductions go on too long. Don't forget to introduce yourself (keep it warm, brief, personal, and humble).
- 3) Use an energizer.
- 4) Establish ground rules so that all participants know the group norms and expectations (see how below).
- 5) Ask the participants to articulate their expectations for the session. Write it down.
- 6) Start the dialogue by asking the participants what issues and problems they face in the community. Consider splitting up into smaller groups and recapture in the larger group.
- 7) Prioritize the issues/problems (see how below)
- 8) Make a summary of the first session and prepare the group for the next session.

Setting ground rules

Ground rules (also known as guidelines, agreements or norms) help the group members conduct civil, productive discussions. It will help the group share responsibility for the quality of the dialogue. Each dialogue circle sets its own ground rules at the beginning and uses them in all sessions. These guidelines “belong” to the group – they can modify them at any time, and group members are expected to help enforce them. Invite the group to come up with the ground rules by letting them talk in pairs and then collecting the suggestions. Write the suggestions on a flip chart. Take a moment to look over the suggestions. Is there something that needs to be added? Is any suggestion unnecessary or even unsuitable? If something seems to be missing on the list, consider adding some of the following:

- Punctuality – don't be late to the sessions
- Everyone should have the chance to speak - share “air time”
- One person speaks at a time. Try not to interrupt
- Seek first to understand, then to be understood
- Show respect to all participants and all ideas
- Turn your cell phones off or at least on “silence mode”.
- Personal stories stay in the group, unless we all agree that we can share them
- We share responsibility for making the conversation productive

Leading a brainstorm

Brainstorming is a way for a group to come up with lots of ideas in a short period of time. The purpose of a brainstorm is to help the group be creative and to come up with many different ideas in a short time.

- **Guidelines:** All ideas are Ok. Don't stop to talk about each idea. Don't judge ideas
- **How to do it:** Anyone can offer an idea. People don't need to wait for their "turn". Write down every idea. Write ideas in the speaker's words
- **Variation:** Invite people to reflect quietly for a moment. Or ask people to jot down their ideas on a piece of paper. Or go around the circle and invite each person to share one of their ideas.

Prioritizing issues/problems

- 1) Sort issues/problems by category. Group similar issues/problems together and remove duplicates.
- 2) Allow time for people to discuss the importance of every issue/ problem. Do this in the larger group.
- 3) After this discussion invite people to narrow the list. Check with the group to see if there is general agreement.
- 4) Or, give participants colored dots or markers and ask them to vote for the issues/problems they consider most important to address. Everyone has three dots to their disposal. People can apply their votes to one issue/problem, or spread them around.
- 5) Identify the top choices. Start deliberating on the top choice and move down the list. Come up with solutions. Don't go to fast.

Help the group to produce solutions and action ideas

Ideally, solutions and action ideas should grow out of a discussion about approaches to change. However, sometimes people suggest large, abstract ideas for change, rather than specific "do able" actions. To help people come up with effective solutions and action ideas, you can ask the group if the idea meets the following criteria.

IDEAS

- I Issue –** Will the action address the key concerns the group has been discussing?
- D Do able –** Is the action practical?
- E Effectiveness –** Will the action create a desirable change?
- A Assets –** Are the resources available to help implement the action?
- S Situation –** Does the action make sense in our community?

You can prioritize the solutions and action ideas on a flip chart in the same way as you prioritize issues/problems.

Handle challenges and conflict

Most dialogue circles go smoothly because participants are there voluntarily and care about the conversation. But there are challenges in any group process.

If problems and constructive conflict arises – try to solve them in this order:

- 1) Prevent problems by always setting ground rules
- 2) Use facilitator tools and techniques (from the tool box)
- 3) Refer to the ground rules in a positive way
- 4) Refer to the ground rules in a negative way
- 5) Talk to the person causing problems in private
- 6) Discuss and redefine the ground rules
- 7) Ask the group what to do, how the problem can be solved
- 8) Ask the person causing problems to leave

Here are some challenging situations, and some possible ways to deal with them:

- Certain participants don't say anything and seem shy: Make eye contact with quiet participants – it reminds them that you'd like to hear from them. Look for non verbal cues that indicate participants are ready to speak. Consider using more ice breakers and warm-up exercises to help people feel more at ease. Consider also to go around the circle to give everyone the chance to speak, and to split a large group in to smaller groups for a few minutes. Make a point of talking informally with group members before and after sessions, to help everyone feel more at ease. When someone speaks up after staying in the background, encourage them by showing interest.
- A talkative person dominates the discussion: As the facilitator, it is your responsibility to handle domineering participants. Start by limiting your eye contact with the speaker. Try going around the circle or using a speaking stick to give the rest of the group the right to speak. You could also split into smaller groups to "limit the arena" for the domineering participants. If the problem continues, remind the

group that everyone is invited to participate. You might say, "Let's hear from some people who haven't had a chance to speak yet". You can also use the ground rules to reinforce the message. Say: "I notice that some people are doing most of the talking. Do we need to modify our ground rules, to make sure everyone has a chance to speak?" If necessary, speak to the person privately and ask them to make room for others to join the conversation.

- Lack of interest, no excitement, no one wants to talk, only a few people participating: This rarely happens, but it may occur. It may help to pose a question and go around the circle asking everyone to respond. Or, pair people up for a few minutes, and ask them to talk about a particular point. Then bring everyone together again. Occasionally, you might have a lack of excitement in the discussion because the group seems to be in agreement and doesn't appreciate the complexity of the issue. In this case, your job is to try to bring other views into the discussion, especially if no one in the group holds them. Try something like, "Do you know people who hold other views? What would they say about your conversation?"
- Lack of focus, not moving forward, participants wander off the topic: It is the facilitator's role to help move the discussion along. Keep an eye on the participants to see how engaged they are, and if you are in doubt, check it out with the group. "We're a little off the topic right now. Would you like to stay with this, or move on the next question?" If a participant goes into a lengthy digression, you may have to say: "We are wandering off the subject, and I'd like to invite others to speak."

- Someone puts forth information that you know is false: Ask “has anyone heard other information about this?” If no one offers a correction, you might raise one. Be careful not to present the information in a way that makes it sound like your opinion. If the point is not essential put it aside and move on. If the point is central to the discussion, encourage members to look up the information and bring it to the next meeting. Remind the group that experts often disagree.
- There is tension or open conflict in the group: If there is tension, address it directly. Remind participants that airing different ideas is what a dialogue circle is all about. Explain that, for conflict to be productive, it must be focused on the issue. It is OK to challenge someone’s ideas but attacking the person is not acceptable. You must interrupt personal attacks, name-calling, or put-downs as soon as they occur. You will be better able to do so if you have established ground rules that discourage such behaviors and encourage tolerance for all views. Don’t hesitate to appeal to the group for help, if group members have bought into the ground rules, they will support you. You might ask the group, “What seems to be root of cause this dispute?” This question shifts the focus from the people to their ideas. As a last resort, consider taking a break to change the energy in the room. You can take the opportunity to talk one-on-one with the participants in question.

*As Energizer**The pioneer group for dialogue in kenya*



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