

# Planning a Community Dialogue

## Community Dialogue

A community dialogue can be a strategic conversation with a few key people or a big gathering that involves many different people from a community. Simply put, they involve a series of conversations and learning opportunities on a specific topic, like community food security, and provide a space to hear different perspectives, critically discuss the topic, and plan ways to take further action in order to effect change. The format and atmosphere of dialogues can vary, and can take place anywhere from a kitchen table to a meeting hall. However, to have a successful community dialogue, the key is to have a clear purpose, a strong facilitation plan, a strategy to capture the discussion and share the learning, and debrief to support next steps.



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Planning an effective community dialogue takes time and preparation in advance. This resource provides a brief description of community dialogues and outlines an approach to planning dialogues that supports participatory processes using the Chaordic Stepping Stones.

Lasting solutions to complex issues like Community Food Security (CFS) start with PEOPLE. We need to talk with one another, and listen to understand all perspectives. We need to value and draw upon different ways of knowing, and raise questions and work together to find solutions.

Community dialogues are not an end in themselves. They are an important step in larger policy change processes and action plans to build CFS. Community dialogues can contribute to building CFS in many ways. They can:



- ✱ Help us to reflect upon, and interpret research findings and experience.
- ✱ Create opportunities to build relationships, understand different points of view, dispel stereotypes, honestly relay ideas, connect personal and public concerns to find solutions and build shared priorities, and ultimately plan for action and social change that build CFS.
- ✱ Help us understand the ideas, organizations and economic factors that influence policy and create opportunities for policy change. Different policy tools can be used to:
  - Inform the planning of the community dialogues (e.g., who to invite and how to invite them, stakeholder analysis ), so we are strategic in our conversations.
  - Gain diverse perspectives (e.g., through policy mapping ).
  - Share information, build understanding and develop action plans (e.g., using the tool Thought about Food? A Workbook on Food Security and Influencing Policy).
  - Identify next steps and opportunities for change from the learning gained from the conversations.

A single community dialogue will not always be enough to identify solutions. Offering an opportunity that allows people to respond to research findings and build interest about an issue is an important step toward action. A separate call for action is often required to harness the energy from those who identified areas of interest during the dialogue. A dialogue may be about generating ideas, where a separate call for action will help assess the feasibility and energy to pursue particular action projects.

The process below outlines a way to plan community dialogues that supports the participatory nature of this work.

1. What is the need for this dialogue? What opportunities exist? Answering these questions can involve looking at research findings; thinking about what can influence policy, examining community priorities, and considering new opportunities and allies.
2. What is the purpose of this dialogue? Starting from the need identified, outline a clear purpose for the conversation(s). Is your purpose to: Tell someone about research findings and get their input on how to move forward? Bring citizens and government decision-makers together to explore the issue and inform stakeholder analysis and policy mapping? Develop a strategy or policy? Equip citizens with knowledge and skills for taking action? Something else? Any one dialogue can serve one or more purposes.

- a. Establish a shared definition of success. You may want to identify what success means to you/your group in a clear and compelling way. This does not mean predetermining the outcomes.
  3. What are the basic principles that will guide the conversation? Basic principles allow organizers to understand how they will work together. The principles should be simple and make sense to everyone. Example: "We will respect the skills and experience that everyone brings."
  4. Who are the people that should be involved in the process? Who are the key allies? Who are the decision makers? Who can sabotage the work if they are not involved? Who will help plan and who will participate? Some key points to remember are:
    - a. Build meaningful relationships. Good relationships are a key to meaningful action. Be inclusive. Invite partners to participate early in the process; clearly identify roles, provide partners with a clear purpose and an honest explanation of why their participation is important and ask partners for their expectations and how they hope to benefit.
    - b. Share ownership of the dialogue process and build on what is already in place. Connect and involve leaders who are already mobilizing people and developing relationships.
    - c. Give careful consideration to who will be invited to the dialogue. While the purpose of the dialogue will influence who is invited and how, engaging diverse opinions and experiences are important to build CFS.
  5. What is limiting your view? What might get in the way of success? The results of an activity are often a reflection of our assumptions; if we assume it to be X, then it will be X. It's important to be open-minded and critical in our thinking, and identify things that may stop our ability to see new solutions or viewpoints – break mental habits!
  6. What is the format of the dialogue? What activities and questions will best serve the purpose and people? After the need, purpose, principles and people are identified; decide how you will hold the conversation (the content of the meeting). What questions will you ask? How will you ask them? What processes suit the situation (e.g., small group discussions, one-on-one conversations, large group conversations)?
- ✱ Consider how the results of your dialogue will be used. This helps both in planning your next steps, but also engages dialogue participants in seeing how their contributions can be used to affect the issue. How will you capture what happens? How will you share it?
- ✱ One common way to set up a dialogue is to frame it around answering the questions:
- What? (story are the results telling us)?
  - Why? (should we care or why is this "story" happening)?
  - So, what? (does this mean in our community/provincial context)? and
  - Now, what? (are the areas we need to focus on/ are we going to do about it?)

This is just one approach to planning community dialogues, but draws on the experiences of other similar processes. The intention is to identify some important elements to consider, while offering a lot of flexibility for unique community approaches, engaging diverse viewpoints, building relationships, and generating ideas required for effective public action and policy change.

- <sup>i</sup> National Council for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD). (2010). Quick Reference Guide. Retrieved March 28th 2010 from [www.thataway.org/?page\\_id=499](http://www.thataway.org/?page_id=499).
- <sup>ii</sup> ACT for CFS Policy Working Group. Draft: The Political Economy of Food Policy Change. November 2012
- <sup>iii</sup> The community learning and development checklist can be used to help in planning and delivery community events within the ACT for CFS project. Community learning and development describes a way of working with and supporting communities to increase the skills, confidence, networks and resources needed to tackle real issues in the community through community action and community based learning.
- <sup>iv</sup> Stakeholder analysis essentially means understanding the interests and perspectives of different stakeholders in an issue area such as community food security, as well as understanding the power and resources that those actors have to shape the policy environment. A stakeholder analysis can be completed prior to a community dialogue or as part of the community dialogue.
- <sup>v</sup> Policy mapping seeks to create a visual diagram of the policy environment, including the main institutional processes and key stakeholders involved in or seeking to influence those processes, as well as their resources, so that the mappers can then develop strategies for moving their policy proposal forward. This process can be done as the second part of the stakeholder analysis and again can happen during a community dialogue with some of the stakeholders in the room. Policy Working Group, Act for CFS, 2011 and 2013
- <sup>vi</sup> Thought About Food? is intended to provide tools and information to inspire communities to come together and act to make food security a reality for everyone. The workbook contains sections that support the user in talking about food security, what it means and why we should care about it. It also contains tools and resources that explain policy and actions to achieve policy change ([www.foodthoughtful.ca](http://www.foodthoughtful.ca) )
- <sup>vii</sup> Hodge, S. (Ed.) n.d. Discovering Common Ground: Deliberation in your community.

## Related Materials

### **Real-life Dialogue Examples** (544.5Kb, PDF)

Examples of how two community dialogues were planned.  
(FoodARC, 2014)

### **Facilitation Plan Template** (512.9Kb, PDF)

A template to help identify the flow of the day, including who will facilitate specific parts of the day and what materials are needed.  
(FoodARC, 2014)

### **Chaordic Stepping Stones** (386.0Kb, PDF )

Outlines seven factors to consider when planning for a successful event. Helps find order in sometimes what seems to be an overwhelming task (Informs our 'Planning a Community Dialogue' resource).  
Video: <http://youtu.be/xIlaMa2K3Yw> (FoodARC, Sep. 29, 2011)

### **Inclusion Worksheet** (83.6Kb, PDF )

Helps dialogue facilitators and planners to consider how to make events as inclusive as possible. (FoodARC , 2014)



Find out more at: [www.foodarc.ca](http://www.foodarc.ca)