



Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada

Community Dialogue Toolkit - Supporting Local Solutions to Local Challenges

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Introduction

Many rural communities have expressed an interest in holding dialogue sessions, but are unsure of where to start or the steps involved in organizing one. As part of the Government of Canada's ongoing commitment to rural Canada, we have developed the Community Dialogue Toolkit to help initiate the dialogue process. A community dialogue is the first step in identifying issues and opportunities within a community that can ultimately lead to a higher quality of life.

Listening to Canadians living in rural and remote areas was one cornerstone of the Canadian Rural Partnership. Responding to their needs by building networks and providing support at the grassroots level is another. The Partnership conducted an ongoing dialogue with rural Canadians from all parts of the country, and they have indicated a strong interest in continuing the dialogue.

The Community Dialogue Toolkit is a "how to" guide to holding community-based dialogue sessions. It has been written for use by community leaders of all types. Anyone who can start a conversation can use this toolkit. It offers a flexible approach that can be easily adapted to your community and its objectives.

We encourage you to use this toolkit to identify goals, build partnerships and seek out solutions that fit your community. You are also encouraged to share the results of your dialogues with the Government of Canada and other levels of government in order to maintain an awareness of rural Canada and the challenges it faces.

1. What Is a Community Dialogue?

A community dialogue is a forum that draws participants from as many parts of the community as possible to exchange information face-to-face, share personal stories and experiences, honestly express perspectives, clarify viewpoints, and develop solutions to community concerns and opportunities.

Unlike debate, dialogue emphasizes listening to deepen understanding. It develops common perspectives and goals, and allows participants to express their own interests.

As you will discover in this toolkit, a dialogue is a community conversation that can take many forms. It can involve five people around a kitchen table, five-hundred people in a large community hall, or anything in between.

Why Should Our Community Host a Dialogue?

A dialogue has many uses. It can:

- **Expand** the base of constituencies and voices (youth, business, grassroots leaders, etc..) who bring their expertise and interest to

existing and new community partnerships.

- **Reach** common ground-integrate the workings of more formal institutions and partnerships with the leadership from neighbourhoods and grassroots groups.
- **Surface** common issues and the resources to address them-help identify barriers to positive change and uncover innovative ideas.
- **Sustain** an ongoing community discourse and exchange between the many groups and partnerships in a community.
- **Build** the capacity of your group to act on its ideas.
- **Launch** new initiatives and strengthen the impact of existing community improvement partnerships.
- **Focus** corporate and organizational investment towards greater community benefit.
- **Break through** community "turf wars" and connect fragmented resources-build the public consensus and commitment necessary to generate action for better outcomes.
- **Stimulate** action and track progress for accountability.
- **Generate** local media attention.
- **Help** leaders of all sectors see their role in building healthy, sustainable communities.

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What Makes for Successful Dialogue?

The nature of the dialogue process can motivate people to work towards change. Effective dialogues do the following:

Move Towards Solutions Rather than Continue to Express or Analyse the Problem

An emphasis on personal responsibility moves the discussion away from the problems and towards constructive common action.

Reach Beyond the Usual Boundaries

When fully developed, dialogues can involve the entire community, offering opportunities for new, unexpected partnerships. New partnerships can develop when participants listen carefully and respectfully to each other, and understand each other's perspectives.

Aim for a Change of Heart, Not Just a Change of Mind

Dialogues go beyond sharing and understanding to transforming participants. While the process begins with the individual, it eventually involves groups and institutions. Ultimately, dialogues can affect how policies, programs and decisions are made.

What Resources Are Available to Communities?

The following is a list federal departments and agencies that may be able to assist you with either your dialogue session or any projects resulting from it.

The main contact for all types of business information is the Canada Business Service Centre: 1-888-576-4444.

Or, call your regional development contact, the route to Community Futures and Community Business Development Corporations in many communities:

- Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency (ACOA) 1-800-561-7862
- Canada Economic Development for Quebec Regions (CED) 514-283-6412
- Western Economic Diversification (WD) 1-888-338-9378
- Federal Economic Development Initiative for Northern Ontario (FedNor) 1-877-333-6673

We have also included a copy of the Pocket Directory of Rural Programs and Services that can be referred to for information on programs and services that may be of assistance.

Getting Started-Steps in Organizing a Dialogue

As someone who is considering organizing a dialogue, you have several choices ranging from the very simple to the somewhat complex. There is no one "best way." It depends on what you want to accomplish. Tailor an approach that works best for your objectives, setting, participants, time and capacities. Whatever your approach, for a lasting impact on the larger community, it is a good idea to think about how you will sustain the project before you begin. Dialogue may start at many levels and in many ways. While the guidance provided below can be adapted for the small "ad-hoc" gathering, it is generally intended for a larger effort.

Brainstorming is the first step in organising a community dialogue event or activity. Organising teams need to take the time required to answer the five Ws (Who, What, Where, When and Why) before designing the community dialogue. Brainstorming these questions will assist in determining the goals of the dialogue and thinking about the hoped-for outcomes. It will also help the team in finding potential partners, dividing up responsibilities, preparing a budget and deciding on a date and location.

We have included a worksheet with some basic questions to help you think about organising a community dialogue. They are meant to be a starting point. Answering these questions will help you better understand the purpose and potential of your effort. You may wish to use the worksheet to sketch a profile of your own community.

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To Get The Most From Your Dialogue . . .

Step 1: Prepare For Your Dialogue

Build a Dialogue Team to "Host" the Event

A team approach to convening a dialogue will help to build ownership and spread the tasks involved. The team can help you to define goals for the project. Identify a few people with whom you have worked before and/or have credibility with those you want to invite to the dialogue.

Determine Your Own Goals for the Dialogue

Your community may have some specific goals for the dialogue itself and the information received from it. (Refer to page 2 "Why Should Our Community Host a Dialogue?" for some possible goals.) The design of the dialogue session should reflect this.

Determine the Group of Participants

Who would you like to bring together to share ideas and opinions? Whose opinions are critical to include? Consider seeking a diversity of voices. To minimize the effort required for recruitment, you may find it easiest to partner with an existing group. This will allow you to use their network. You may also wish to engage new voices. Dialogue groups may be as small as five people or as large as 500-it's just a matter of how your dialogue is designed, what you want to accomplish and how much time you have. Most groups will include from 12 to 30 participants.

Select and Prepare Your Facilitator

Good facilitation is critical to a successful dialogue. You should enlist an experienced facilitator or someone who is a good listener and can inspire conversation while remaining neutral. It is important for the facilitator to get comfortable with the dialogue objectives, purpose and questions, and determine how to best design the conversation. It is also important that the facilitator be familiar with the community in question. We have included helpful guidelines for the dialogue facilitator. Your facilitator may even want to practice her/his skills with the Dialogue Team to make any changes that may need to occur.

Set a Place, Date and Time for Your Dialogue

Choose a spot that is comfortable and accessible. Dialogues can be conveniently held in someone's home, a community centre, library or private dining room of a local restaurant. Hospitals, schools and businesses often have conference rooms or cafeterias where groups can meet. Keeping sites convenient to the participants is key. Determine the time period (from one to three hours). Be sure to give a minimum of two weeks' notice of your dialogue meeting. A reminder call two days before the event will help to increase attendance.

Create an Inviting Environment

Dialogues should be held at a neutral location so that all participants feel at ease with the process. Accessibility and special needs must also be considered (i.e. wheelchair access, language, transportation). Seating arrangements are important in a smaller group. To assure strong interaction, place seats in a circle or in a "U" formation. Refreshments (or food for a breakfast or lunch meeting) are a welcome and appropriate sign of appreciation, but are not absolutely necessary. Many times, local businesses are willing to donate refreshments for community meetings.

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Step 2: Invite Participants

People are naturally attracted to those who speak from commitment and possibility. People want to talk about what's possible in their community. Determine how to access your desired participants. Contact friends, co-workers or specific community groups. Personal contact makes the difference! A telephone call with a follow-up letter or flier with the details is usually very effective. Don't worry if someone says no.

Remember, if you wish to have a specific number of people in your group, you may need to recruit one and a half to two times as many. If you want a large group that involves many community constituencies, it may be wise to advertise the dialogue in newsletters or fliers placed where people gather: in coffee shops, grocery stores, gyms, daycare centres or libraries.

To ensure the right balance for your group(s), you may need to consider the following. First, "Which voices need to be included?" Answering that question will ensure the diversity necessary for successful dialogues. Then, "Who is missing?" That answer will steer you towards others

who need to be involved.

Generate interest by doing the following:

- Ask community leaders and other influential members of the community to help rally the public;
- Identify the appropriate media for the audience you are trying to reach-consider placing an announcement in a small local weekly or monthly newspaper, on a community bulletin board, or even on an electronic community bulletin board;
- Post an announcement in grocery stores in the community;
- Invite yourself to various group meetings in the community to get the word out; and
- Approach local chapters of national organizations.

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Step 3: Plan to Record Your Dialogue

Designate a Person on the Dialogue Team to Take Notes and Summarize Important Points

The recorder need not keep a word-by-word account of the conversation, but should summarize the group's views during their interaction. It's just as important to note areas of disagreement as consensus. Obtaining quotations and stories from participants is essential. The facilitator should plan to sit down with the recorder immediately after the dialogue to review the notes and prepare a summary.

Step 4: Conducting the Dialogue

Greet Participants

It is important for the facilitator to greet participants as they arrive. This will help put guests at ease and encourage them to speak up.

Introduction

The facilitator should introduce her/himself and thank the participants for attending. A brief introduction, stating the purpose of the dialogue and the importance of asking the community for their opinions should follow. If the group is small, the facilitator may ask each participant to introduce himself or herself.

Initiate the Dialogue

The questions included in this toolkit are for your use during the dialogue. There are seven primary questions with a series of sub-questions for your consideration. These sub-questions are ideas to stimulate and guide the group's conversation. Not all sub-questions need to be asked. Please tailor the dialogue to your community's needs; adjustments will be needed. You may also wish to create your own set of questions. If the group is large, the facilitator may wish to project the questions on overhead transparencies for all to see.

Engage the Media and Document the Event

Some groups will want to have local media present to report on the dialogue and its findings. You may also want to take a few photos or video clips of the event. There may be the opportunity to place photos on a participating group's Web site, along with a summary of the event.

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Step 5: Concluding the Dialogue and Next Steps

At the end of the dialogue session, the facilitator can thank the group for taking the time to share ideas and personal values. The group should consider some possible next steps, but should not feel obliged to do something together. The group recorder may give a summary of the dialogue.

A dialogue report should be prepared and distributed to participants. The dialogue team also needs to consider who else would benefit from the results of the dialogue. Other people or groups that should receive a copy of the report include community leaders, municipal governments, Rural Teams (contact information included), local organizations and media.

Possible Next Steps

- The group may be excited about a particular idea it would like to take action on, and agree to meet again to develop some action plans.
- The group may decide to have a more in-depth conversation and involve some missing voices and perspectives from their neighbourhood (or to involve their elected representatives and the local newspaper).

- The group may decide to have additional dialogues on other subjects of importance to them.
- The group may share information about existing community efforts that could benefit from volunteers and additional leadership.

The next steps will vary for all groups, but it is important to ensure that participants are clearly aware of what is planned, and also to keep them updated on what happens in the longer term as a result of the dialogue and their participation.

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How Well Did We Do?

Document and Evaluate the Project

Keep a record of the individuals and groups who take part in the dialogues and of how well the discussions go. Include such things as number of participants, group composition, main topics discussed, how productive the discussions were, how they might have been improved, and other thoughts on what worked well and what did not. This will allow you to see how attitudes and perceptions have changed and whether changes need to be made in the dialogue format.

Have Participants Evaluate the Dialogue

Depending on their goals, each group will evaluate the dialogue, whether a single session or a series, after it is over. Evaluations can be written and/or expressed verbally. You may wish to distribute a short evaluation form to elicit participant feedback and to measure the impact of the dialogue. We have included a sample evaluation form for your use. Questions can be modified to meet the needs of the team.

Acknowledgements

Some sections reprinted from "Healthy People in Healthy Communities - A dialogue guide" and "One America Dialogue Guide - Conducting a Discussion on Race" with the permission of :

- The Health Research and Educational Trust/Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities, copyright 2000.
- The President's Initiative on Race (PIR) and the Community Relations Service (CRS), [U.S. Department of Justice](#).

2. Regional Advisors / Rural Teams

The Rural Secretariat is interested in learning about the information needs of rural residents, your ideas and suggestions for the future of rural Canada and how we can best serve you. We encourage you to contact us. The Rural Secretariat is headquartered in Ottawa with regional offices in Burnaby, Calgary, Guelph, Quebec City, and Moncton.

Telephone: 1-855-773-0241

E-mail: info@agr.gc.ca

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3. For the Dialogue Facilitator

The Role of the Dialogue Facilitator

The facilitator's role is an important one that requires especially good listening skills, knowledge and ability of when not to talk. The facilitator must also help set and follow ground rules for participation in the dialogue. Establishing rules helps to create a safe environment for openness and sharing. The facilitator's basic responsibility is to the group as a whole, while also considering each person's individuality and level of comfort.

Facilitators are Critical to Making the Dialogue Work

As the facilitator of a dialogue you do not need to be an "expert" or even the most knowledgeable person in the group on the topic being discussed. However, you should be the best prepared for the discussion. It is up to the facilitator to keep the group moving forward, using phrases that enhance conversations and encourage discussion. This means understanding the goals of the dialogue, thinking ahead of time about the directions in which the discussion might go, and preparing questions to help the group tackle their subject. The facilitator guides the process to ensure that it stays on track and avoids obstacles that could derail it. He or she is also impartial in it. This means that the facilitator should not favour one person or point of view, or add personal opinions. The facilitator lets the participants dictate the flow of the discussion. Solid preparation will enable you to give your full attention to how the participants are relating to each other and to what they are saying.

The Facilitator Plays Several Roles

At the start of the session, remind everyone that the purpose is to have an open, honest, cooperative dialogue, and that your role as leader is to remain neutral, keep the discussion focussed, and follow the ground rules. Before the discussion begins, help the participants establish ground rules and ensure that all participants are willing to follow them. Ground rules must emphasize respect, listening, honesty and the importance of sharing time equitably. Stress the importance of respecting different opinions and perspectives. You might post the following sample ground rules on a flip chart, or give one sample ground rule and ask the group to come up with more. You could then ask, "Are there any questions about these ground rules? Can we all agree to them before we continue?"

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The Following Tips Describe What a Good Facilitator Should Strive to Do:

Establish Ground Rules for the Group

Your conversation will proceed more smoothly if you and the participants agree on clear ground rules.

Set a Relaxed and Open Tone

Stay Neutral

This may be the most important point to remember as the leader of a dialogue. You should not share your personal views or try to advance your agenda on the issue. You are there to serve the discussion, not to join it

Keep Track of Who is Contributing and Who is Not

You are not only helping to keep the group focussed on the content of the discussion, but you are monitoring how well the participants are communicating with each other—who has spoken, who has not, and whose points have not yet received a fair hearing.

Follow and Focus the Conversation Flow

To help keep the group on the topic, it is helpful to occasionally restate the key question or insight under discussion. It is important to guide gently, yet persistently. You might ask, "How does your point relate to the topic?" or state, "That's an interesting point, but let's return to the central issue." Keep careful track of time.

Do Not Fear Silence

It is alright if people are quiet for a while. When deciding when to intervene, err on the side of non-intervention. Sometimes group members only need more time to think through alternatives or to consider what has just been said.

Accept and Summarize Expressed Opinions

Accepting shows respect for each participant in the group. It is important for the facilitator to make it clear that dialogue discussions involve no right or wrong responses.

Anticipate Conflict and Tend to the Ground Rules

When conflict arises, explain that disagreement over ideas is to be expected. Remind participants that conflict must stay on the issue. Do not allow it to become personal. Appeal to the group to help resolve the conflict and abide by the ground rules. You may have to stop and refer to the ground rules several times throughout the discussion.

Close the Dialogue

Give participants a chance to talk about the most important thing they gained from the discussion. You may ask them to share any new ideas or thoughts they've had as a result of the discussion. Ask them to think about what worked and what didn't. Remember to thank everyone for their participation.

Here's How to Handle Some Challenging Situations

The best method for handling challenging situations is to anticipate them and be prepared. Each dialogue is a unique experience, providing new opportunities for the discussion leader. Even those who have been facilitators for many years are often faced with new problems requiring on-the-spot creative action. There are no certain answers; sometimes groups just do not go well, and other times all participants seem engaged

and satisfied.

The following scenarios present some possible challenges to the facilitator and offer some guidelines for handling them:

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- **The group is slow to respond to the process**
 - Check to determine whether your directions have been understood. You may need to restate the purpose of the process and how it should be carried out. You may also have people who resist participating because of "power" issues in the group. If so, invite them to participate to the degree they feel comfortable. Assure them that the purpose of the process is to share different insights, experiences and personal reflections on the topic. However the members choose to participate is valuable.
- **One or a few members dominate the dialogue**
 - The instructions you give to participants about respecting time limits are helpful. Invite participants to be conscious of each person having time to share his or her reflections, ideas and insights. It may be helpful to invoke the ground rule "It is important to share time" when a few individuals dominate the discussion. Another solution is to tell the group you want to hear from those who have not said much. Participants will look to you to restrain domineering members. Sometimes this situation happens when those dominating the dialogue feel they have not been heard. Restating the essence of what they've expressed can show that you have understood their point of view.
- **The facilitator feels strongly about an issue and has trouble staying unbiased**
 - The facilitator needs to remain on task, which is to guide the process and to elicit and respect all members' thoughts. A facilitator who really respects the views of others and shows interest in their experiences and viewpoints will not have difficulty in keeping personal ideas from affecting the dialogue. This is not to say that the facilitator never shares with the members in the process. However, you must guard against moving from a discussion leader into a "teacher/lecturer" mode.
- **A participant walks out of a group following a heated conflict**
 - Sometimes the conversation may become heated. Other times, people may seem to be on the verge of fighting, and sometimes they may even walk out. The best way to deal with conflict is to confront it directly. Remind participants that they were told initially to expect conflict but that they agreed to respond to differences respectfully. The facilitator should always stop name-calling, personal attacks and threats. This is one situation where you should readily appeal to the group for support. If they accepted the ground rules, they will support you.

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4. The Dialogue Questions

These seven questions could form the backbone of your dialogue. Several sub-questions are offered as prompts to assist you in deepening the dialogue. You decide which questions to spend more time on. It is not necessary to get consensus, but do seek focus.

You may find that these questions do not meet with the needs of the group. They are suggestions only and the organising team should feel free to develop their own set of questions to better address their situation.

Community

1. What do you believe are the two to three most important characteristics of a healthy community?

- When you picture a healthy community, what stands out?

2. What makes you most proud of your community?

What's Working

3. What are some specific examples of people or groups working together to improve the quality of life in your community? (Listen for and record compelling statements and stories.)

- How did these come about? Who was involved? How did they access needed resources? What was accomplished?
- How do you think some of these efforts could be expanded?
- What are the most important lessons you have learned from both successful and unsuccessful community efforts?

Issues

4. What do you believe are the two to three most important issues that must be addressed to improve the quality of life in your community?

- If you could improve one thing in your community right now, what would it be?
- What are the two to three most important challenges we will face in the next five to ten years?

Causes and Barriers

5. What do you believe is keeping your community from doing what needs to be done to improve quality of life? (Refer to issues identified in question # 4.)

- What do you believe are the underlying causes or reasons for these barriers?
- What is your community currently doing to address these issues?
- What makes leadership difficult on these issues?

Policy and Practice

6. What actions and solutions would you support to build a better community?

- What changes in how your community spends its time and resources would make our community better (at work, school, recreation, in community life, etc.)?
- What responsibility do community members have in building a better community?

Community Action

7. What would excite you enough to become involved (or more involved) in improving your community?

- What is the best way to engage other community members?
- What is the best way to get youth, parents, organizations, businesses, schools, media, etc. involved?
- How can you best build upon the assets and strengths of your community?
- How could learning from this conversation apply to your current activities?
- Are there any obvious next steps?

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