



Knowledge document

Meaningful stakeholder dialogue What makes a good facilitator?

SEER





Introduction

This tool is part of a collection of resources, including tools, knowledge documents, and training, designed to help companies prepare and conduct [meaningful dialogues](#) with their stakeholders. Meaningful stakeholder engagement is fundamental for (International) Responsible Business Conduct (IRBC) and is reflected in [all steps of the due diligence process](#) as included in the OECD guidelines.

When conducting a stakeholder dialogue, you can either lead the conversations yourself or hire one or more external facilitators to lead the dialogue. This document highlights the advantages of engaging a professional facilitator and provides key factors to consider when selecting the right one.

Why choose an external facilitator?

Engaging an external facilitator provides several advantages:

- Active participation by the organiser: An external facilitator allows the organiser to participate more actively in the dialogue instead of focusing solely on managing the conversation. This enables the company to engage fully in its role and fosters a sense of equality between the company and its stakeholders.
- Lack of facilitation experience: If the organiser lacks sufficient experience in facilitating conversations, a professional facilitator can ensure the dialogue runs smoothly and is more productive.
- Impartiality and conflict management: An impartial facilitator is valuable, especially when conflicts arise, as they can guide the discussion toward constructive outcomes. Conflicts should not be avoided; they can expose crucial information necessary for making informed decisions. The risk of conflict increases when the dialogue topic is sensitive, stakeholder interests diverge, there are disagreements over facts, or stakeholders perceive the company as having excessive influence.

- Overcoming distrust and hostility: An external facilitator can help manage situations where there is a lack of mutual trust or a history of prejudice or hostility among stakeholders. Their neutrality can mitigate these tensions, fostering a more open and productive dialogue.
- Creating a safe and inclusive environment: Facilitators play a critical role in establishing a safe and inclusive environment where stakeholders feel comfortable sharing their views without fear of repercussions. This is especially important when engaging with vulnerable stakeholders.

How to find a facilitator?

- Search online for a facilitator whose experience matches the purpose of your dialogue.
- Leverage your network. Check within your professional network for recommendations or consider facilitators you have previously encountered during other meetings.
- Ask partner organisations: Reach out to partner companies, NGOs, or civil society organisations to see if they can recommend a qualified facilitator. Some organisations specialise in facilitating dialogues at specific levels, such as [WE program](#), which operates at the production location level.



What makes a good facilitator?

Below are some key tips to help you assess whether a facilitator is a good fit. If you, as the organiser of a dialogue, are taking on the role of facilitator, you can also use these criteria to prepare and conduct the dialogue effectively. Please note that this document is only a starting point; becoming a skilled facilitator requires extensive training and in-depth knowledge.

1. A good facilitator is someone the stakeholders can trust

Trust is established when the facilitator demonstrates a respectful and appreciative attitude and effectively guides the conversation. For example, a facilitator who is approachable – perhaps by making a light-hearted joke when appropriate – can help participants feel more at ease. The facilitator's background also plays a role in building trust. Their perceived impartiality and the extent to which their identity or position makes stakeholders comfortable, rather than apprehensive, are crucial factors. Consider a scenario where a local woman leads a discussion on women's rights in Southeast Asia; her background may encourage more active participation from female stakeholders, as they might feel a greater sense of understanding and empathy.

A facilitator also earns trust by being skilled in cross-cultural communication, which is essential for engaging diverse stakeholder groups. This skill set includes understanding cultural contexts and being sensitive to cultural differences, which can help facilitate smoother interactions and more productive discussions. For further guidance on this topic, refer to the [knowledge document](#) 'Considering country-specific and cultural factors.' Additional information about building trust can be found in the [tool](#) 'Building trust'.

2. A good facilitator understands the importance of ground rules for dialogue and can apply them effectively

For a dialogue to be meaningful and productive, it is essential that both participants and the facilitator adhere to some basic ground rules. Key principles of meaningful dialogue include listening with genuine interest, appreciating each participant's input, suspending judgment, speaking from personal experience, and ensuring everyone has the opportunity to contribute. As a facilitator, you may choose to establish these rules yourself or collaborate with the group to create similar guidelines, which can increase the likelihood of adherence.

A good facilitator is particularly skilled at ensuring everyone has the opportunity to speak. Whether a participant feels comfortable contributing to the discussion can depend on their personality, prior experience with dialogue, and existing knowledge on the topic. A competent facilitator creates a safe and confidential environment where all voices can be heard, relevant information is shared, and important issues are addressed, even if the topics are sensitive, uncomfortable, or complex. They are adept at managing differing interests and navigating negative or non-constructive attitudes from participants.

To ensure everyone has a chance to speak, a facilitator might divide the group into smaller, more manageable groups or start with an introductory round or check-in, giving everyone an initial opportunity to share and listen to others. In a hybrid meeting format, it is crucial for the facilitator to monitor online responses and questions – either personally or with support – so that virtual participants are equally included in the conversation. Additionally, even when under time constraints, it is important to periodically ask if anyone has any final thoughts or points that must be mentioned before concluding the discussion.

For more guidance on facilitating effective dialogue, refer to the [tools](#) 'Good practices in conducting dialogue' and 'Asking the right questions'.

3. A good facilitator is responsible for the process, not for the content

A facilitator does not need to be an expert on the topics being discussed because their primary responsibility is to manage the process, not the content. The facilitator's role is to guide the conversation, while the participants are responsible for contributing the substantive content. However, it is important for the facilitator to have a general understanding of the subject matter to effectively steer the conversation. As the organiser, you can support the facilitator by providing relevant information in advance, enabling them to prepare adequately and anticipate key discussion points – see also point 7.

4. A good facilitator creates a constructive atmosphere and sustains energy over time

The facilitator's role is to ensure the dialogue flows smoothly. This does not mean that the discussion must always be harmonious; exploring conflicting interests can be a valuable part of the process and may sometimes lead to tension. This is not necessarily a problem, as long as the facilitator keeps the conversation constructive and intervenes if the agreed-upon ground rules are breached. A skilled facilitator acknowledges the complexities of the dialogue but reassures participants that they can work through the issues together, providing support and guidance throughout the process.

To maintain energy levels, the facilitator can employ various strategies, such as varying the dialogue format or changing the physical setting to refresh the group's dynamics. If the energy starts to wane during the discussion, an experienced facilitator knows when to take action, such as suggesting a short break.

5. A good facilitator is clear about the format of the dialogue

A facilitator must ensure that all participants clearly understand the format of the dialogue – whether it will be conducted plenary, in small groups, in rounds, or with a specific assignment. This clarity helps prevent any confusion during the session. The facilitator should also be well-prepared to answer any additional

questions that might arise about the format. Even when dividing participants into smaller groups, it is crucial for the facilitator to remain accessible and provide support as needed to ensure a smooth process.

6. A good facilitator is flexible

Flexibility is a key quality of a good facilitator. The content, format, location, or duration of a dialogue may change at the last minute – or even during the session – due to unexpected circumstances, such as the sudden arrival or absence of an important stakeholder or technical difficulties. A facilitator must be able to respond quickly to these changes, adapting to the new situation or initiating changes themselves if needed.

7. A good facilitator prepares well for the dialogue

Thorough preparation is essential for conducting a meaningful dialogue. It is important to meet with the facilitator(s) well in advance and plan the session together. As the organising company, you should ask the facilitator what they need from you and the other stakeholders to prepare effectively. Preparation methods can vary significantly between facilitators: some may rely on their own experience and expertise, while others may prefer to be fully briefed on all the details.

To support a facilitator in preparing well, you can consider the following:

- Discuss and align expectations regarding each other's roles.
- Provide detailed information about the stakeholders and their interests.
- Share insights about the preliminary process, including what has worked well and what has not.
- Encourage the facilitator to contribute ideas for the program structure, particularly regarding the format.
- Take time to review all aspects thoroughly before the session begins.
- Ensure the facilitator is informed of any last-minute changes.



Examples of good facilitation

Example | Stakeholder meeting on double materiality: promoting interactivity and involvement of all participants

A company conducted a double materiality assessment by engaging in dialogue with various stakeholders. To ensure that each stakeholder could provide their input without being influenced by others, the company initially held conversations with stakeholders individually. Following these one-on-one sessions, the company organised a joint stakeholder meeting at their office in Amsterdam. To actively participate in the discussion without being tied up in managing the meeting, the company hired an independent external facilitator. In this instance, they chose a senior policy officer from the Social and Economic Council (SER) due to the ongoing collaboration between the two organisations on the meaningful stakeholder dialogue project. The selected facilitator had extensive knowledge and experience in facilitating dialogues and expertise in sustainability, which was the central topic of the meeting.

To ensure a well-prepared and smooth session, the company and the facilitator held several preparatory meetings to familiarise themselves with each other and align on expectations. The facilitator reviewed the summaries of the individual stakeholder dialogues and their outcomes to gain insights into the backgrounds, interests, and dynamics of those who would attend the multi-stakeholder meeting. Together, they discussed potential formats for the dialogue and assigned specific roles for the meeting.

During the stakeholder meeting, the facilitator was responsible for managing the agenda and keeping track of time. At the beginning of the session, she clarified her role and outlined how the meeting would be conducted. The meeting began with a brief introduction round where stakeholders were asked to share their name, organisation, and their expectations for the meeting in one word. Before diving

into the discussions, the facilitator briefly reviewed the principles of constructive dialogue to set the tone. To encourage participation, the facilitator divided the stakeholders into smaller groups, making it easier for everyone to contribute. After the group discussions, the facilitator led a plenary session to consolidate the insights gathered. Participants were then invited to add any additional thoughts. This structured approach fostered a high level of interactivity and engagement among the participants.

Example | Multi-stakeholder dialogue in a production country: Promoting equality through co-facilitation

As part of the TruStone Initiative, a multi-stakeholder dialogue was organised in Rajasthan, India, to identify and address risks in the natural stone sector. This in-person dialogue was a continuation of previous online meetings involving importers, exporters, NGOs, and government representatives. Up to that point, the online dialogues had been moderated by the (Dutch) chairman of the TruStone Initiative, who was chosen for his neutral stance. However, his role as the sole facilitator unintentionally led to an imbalance in participation, with European stakeholders having a disproportionate influence on the discussions. This imbalance risked overshadowing the perspectives of Indian participants.

To address this issue and promote more balanced participation, it was decided to appoint an Indian co-facilitator. The co-facilitator was chosen specifically to better engage Indian exporters in the discussions, leveraging his understanding of the local language, culture, and the sensitivity of certain topics.

In collaboration with the involved NGOs, an Indian co-facilitator was selected based on several criteria: legitimacy among local stakeholders, independence, a congenial attitude, the ability to effectively lead a multi-stakeholder dialogue, a broad understanding of the sector and its risks, and strong language skills. Ultimately, a co-facilitator was chosen from within the Indian NGO network.

Significant effort went into preparing the Indian co-facilitator, including briefing him on the initiative's background, past successes, risks, stakeholder interests, and the agenda items. One challenge during preparation was the information gap between the two facilitators: the Dutch co-facilitator had been involved in the process for a longer period and thus had more detailed knowledge. This disparity in preparation was not fully addressed and should be considered in future collaborations involving multiple facilitators.

During the implementation phase, both co-facilitators participated fully in the entire visit, including preliminary sessions designed to familiarise themselves with the participants. This engagement allowed them to better understand the stakeholders, identify potential sensitivities, and gauge areas of strong collective interest. This groundwork helped set a solid foundation for the multi-stakeholder dialogue.

During the dialogue, the Indian co-facilitator successfully engaged Indian exporters more actively than had been achieved in previous online discussions. He facilitated their involvement by asking direct questions, offering to translate their input into English, and ensuring clarity and understanding. His efforts significantly enhanced the dialogue's balance and promoted greater equality among participants.

By carefully planning how to facilitate the dialogue, particularly with a focus on fostering equal participation, and by investing time and resources into this approach, the dialogue became more meaningful for many participants. The willingness of the Dutch facilitator and other participants to adapt the process created the conditions necessary for successful co-facilitation.

Example | Dialogue with workers in the supply chain: the importance of trust

Importers of natural stone engaged in a dialogue with workers in the supply chain to discuss risks in the natural stone sector. This conversation was part of a broader multi-stakeholder dialogue taking place in a production country. The workers involved were all part of the informal segment of the supply chain, characterised by the absence of formal employment contracts and typically low-paid, ad-hoc work. Given the significant power imbalance between these workers and the importers, it was crucial to select a facilitator who could create conditions conducive to an equitable dialogue.

To ensure a balanced discussion, two local Indian organisations were chosen to facilitate the dialogue. These organisations had extensive experience working with the group of workers over many years and were therefore well-positioned to bring the workers together for the discussion. Their longstanding relationship with the workers helped foster a safe and constructive atmosphere during the meeting.

The dialogue revealed a strong foundation of mutual trust between the Indian facilitators and the workers, which was essential for enabling an open and honest discussion with balanced participation from both workers and importers. The facilitators helped increase mutual openness by conducting the dialogue in both English and Hindi, ensuring that all participants had equal speaking time, addressing sensitive topics head-on, and cultivating an inclusive and approachable environment.

This approach not only facilitated meaningful exchanges but also ensured that the voices of the workers were heard and valued equally alongside those of the importers.

Information and support

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Click on a topic below for more information and support preparing and conducting a meaningful stakeholder dialogue.



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Colophon

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