

COMMUNITY ALPHABET

INCLUSIVE DIALOGUE



WHAT DO WE MEAN BY DIALOGUE?

In this thematic bloc we are concerned with **inclusive dialogue**. But before we can tackle that topic, we need to establish a shared understanding of the **basic concept of dialogue**.

The word dialogue comes from the Greek word DIA meaning “through” and LOGOS meaning “word”.

In one definition: “*Dialogue is the 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.*”¹

DIALOGUE:

- is an **exchange** of **messages** between two or more people
- can be both **verbal** and **non-verbal**
- aims at forming a **relationship** and building **trust** and **understanding**
- includes both **cognitive** and **emotional** content²

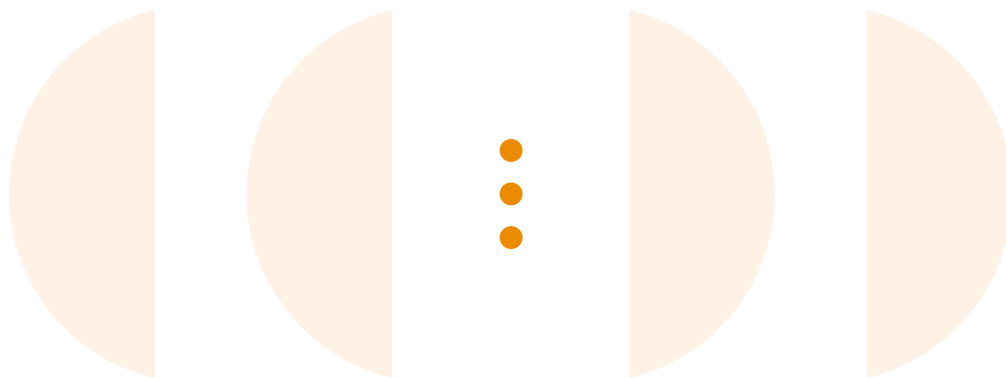
¹ Bettye Pruitt and Philip Thomas, "[Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners](#)" (General Secretariat of Organization of American States; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance; UN Development Programme. 2007); pgs 21-22. Retrieved 1 November, 2024

² Source: Presentation, Tanja Popovic, CA Workshop Prague, September 2023

DIALOGUE VERSUS DISCUSSION, DEBATE AND NEGOTIATION

Dialogue is not the same thing as discussion, debate or negotiation. Here is how they differ from dialogue:

- **Discussion:** communication focused on **information**, and finding the truth
- **Debate:** communication focused on **arguments** and winning
- **Negotiation:** communication processes focused on identifying positions and interests and finding a **solution**



Take a look at page 19 of the [Tension and conflict thematic bloc](#) for more on the differences.

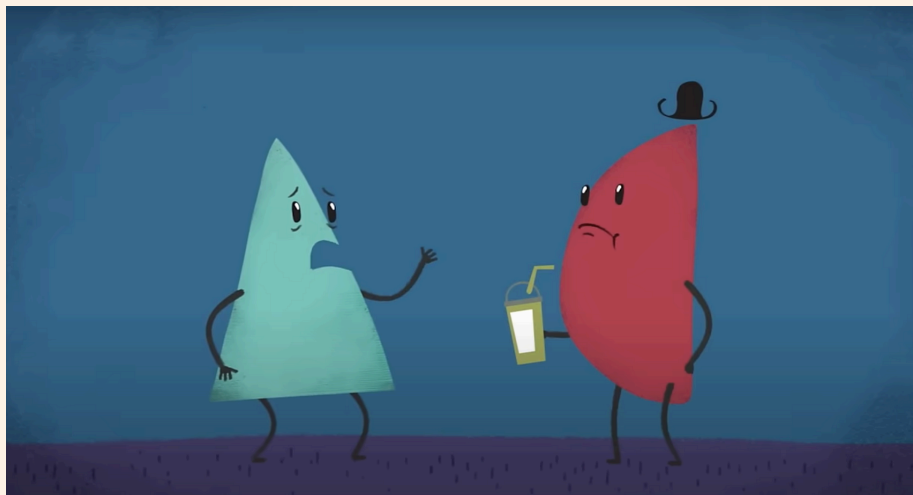
Dialogue sometimes refers to formal, structured processes with a specific purpose (e.g. political dialogue or community dialogue processes like participatory budgeting, etc.). But in fact we can engage in dialogue **every day**, in **many different types of interactions**.

THE CHALLENGES OF DIALOGUE

3

Engaging in real dialogue - listening deeply enough to actually be changed by what we learn, is difficult, for many reasons:

- Our self-image, our image of the other person, our definition of the situation, our motives and attitudes, our expectations and other **communication filters** influence how we transmit and receive messages.
- The many challenges explored in the [Active Listening thematic bloc](#) also apply to dialogue situations.
- Hearing things that don't align with our world view can awaken **emotions** that make it harder for us to listen intently.
- Our **biases** influence how we hear and understand others. For more on bias, see the [Power dynamics & bias thematic bloc](#).



This brief video shows [what happens when we communicate](#).³

When we work with communities, we engage in lots of dialogue. But the way in which we do so can make all the difference!

³ Katherine Hampsten, "[How miscommunication happens \(and how to avoid it\)](#)". [Katherine Hampsten | Ted-Ed](#). 2016. Retrieved 26 November, 2024

INCLUSIVE DIALOGUE

4

Now that we've covered dialogue, let's explore what we mean by **inclusive dialogue**.

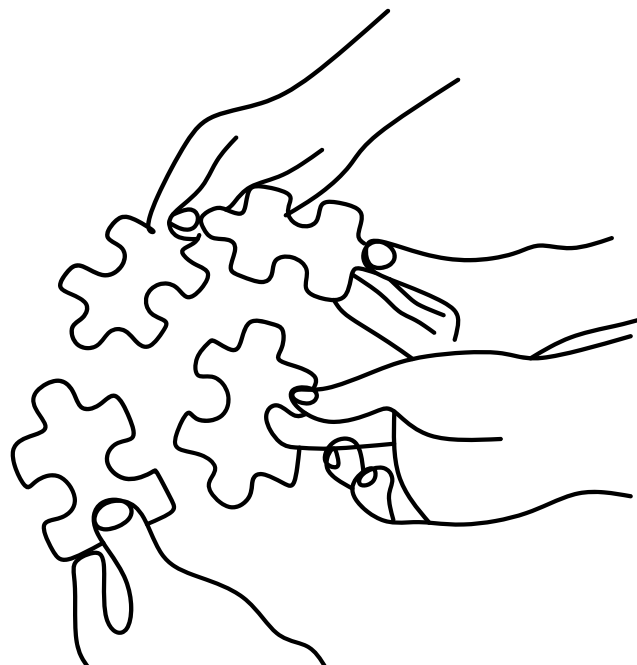
Inclusive dialogue is a conversation which aims to better **understand** the experiences and perspectives of people with whom you have **limited interaction** or who are **not often asked to share their views**. It seeks (over the longer term) to open lines of **communication**, improve **understanding** and build **relationships**. It offers space for **all voices to be heard**.

Inclusive dialogues **respect the diversity** among people and values **equal participation** and **inclusion**. These are the values that underlie modern notions of democracy.

Inclusive dialogue, as you may already be thinking, is not simple...

Biases and differences in power among people result in inequalities in our communities and societies that are difficult to overcome. A commitment to inclusive dialogue in community activities thus means paying close attention to **diversity**, differences in **power** as well as to how we **interact** with and are seen by other people!

For more on these important topics, see the [Identity & diversity thematic bloc](#) and [Power dynamics & bias thematic bloc](#).



PRACTICAL EXAMPLE: PREPARING FOR INCLUSIVE DIALOGUE

After Michal, a Czech CA participant, learned about the concept of **listening conversations** (see [Active Listening thematic bloc](#)), he was inspired to try it in his own village, where there are divisions between long-term, older residents and younger, recently settled residents.

He thought the approach - **interviewing neighbours** to learn about what **skills, knowledge and interests they want to share** - could be a good way to map the community's strengths and get to know fellow residents better, especially those he rarely interacted with.



Several of his friends were excited to join the effort. The group worked intensively for two months on **preparations**: developing a shared understanding of their aims, carefully designing an interview question template, testing out the questions on themselves and giving each other feedback on interview style.

Through the test interviews, they saw which topics might be **sensitive** with some people and how listening attentively could **strengthen relationships**. They also began to see others in a much more **complex** way and recognise their own perspectives and capacities.

They gradually began interviewing other villagers. The biggest gain, said Michal, was not in the emerging map of skills and knowledge, but in the process of **getting to know people in different social groups** which normally have little or only superficial contact with one another.

To find out more about the process and challenges of listening conversations in Michal's village, see the [CA case study](#).

WHY IS INCLUSIVE DIALOGUE IMPORTANT IN COMMUNITY BUILDING?

All types of dialogue are fundamental to community-building because they help:

- people in the community feel **heard** and better **understood**
- reveal the **similar** and **divergent values**, interests and capacities of residents or regular visitors of a community
- people understand one another better and look for **common ground** even though experiences and perspectives may differ
- develop a culture of **respectful interaction**/practices
- increase **communication** and interaction between people in the community, and build **trust**.

Dialogue can also help us:

- understand better the **roots of the problems** and tensions that inevitably arise between people and groups
- build a **vision** for the future that takes multiple perspectives and possible contributions from community members and other actors into consideration.

To sum it up:

being skillful in (inclusive) dialogue helps us **build bridges** to others in the community and gradually establish **trust-based relationships** and networks even when we have different experiences and views.

It can lead to dialogue practices – in yourself and others – that are crucial to **grassroots democracy** and can help communities respond to future situations and crises.

VARIOUS FORMS OF DIALOGUE IN COMMUNITIES

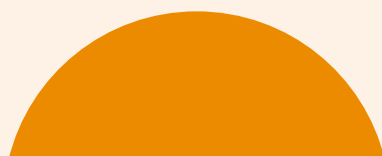
Dialogue in communities can be pursued through formal or informal, large or small processes, such as:

- **formal processes**, often led by the public sector, such as participatory budgeting, formal consultations with citizens around the transformation of public spaces, etc.
- **structured consultations**, often initiated by local associations or NGOs, around public space, the quality of life in the neighbourhood or community, or other issues.
- more **informal and exploratory listening conversations** to better understand residents' perspectives, desires and what they can each bring to the community.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

In what ways are you seeking to use (inclusive) dialogue in your community-building efforts? How have you tried to pursue dialogue with people who are not in your 'in-group', those with whom you don't typically interact?



ALL DIALOGUE RESTS ON GOOD COMMUNICATION

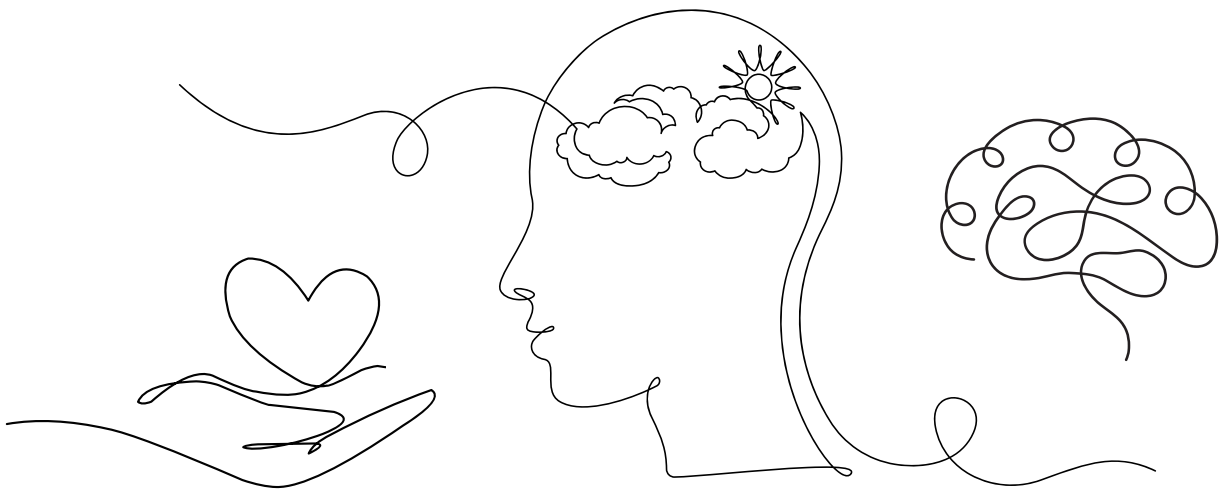
8

Once again we need to turn to the basics...

Understanding the fundamentals of **communication**, our own strengths and weaknesses and developing our **core skills** are the first steps in enhancing dialogue and pursuing inclusive dialogue.

This starts with recognising that all human communication involves the sharing of:

- **affective** elements, such as feelings, beliefs, values, attitudes, and
- **cognitive** elements such as thoughts, knowledge, skills and capacities.



Both the verbal and the non-verbal are important. The affective elements are especially important in dialogue, since the aim is to understand each other better.

This means that when we want to genuinely understand people, we seek to **understand their emotions, beliefs, experiences and attitudes**, not just the information they're trying to convey. And we pay close attention to these elements in our own communication, too.

ALL DIALOGUE RESTS ON GOOD COMMUNICATION

9

Equally important is to recognise that each of us has a different set of experiences, and that these can lead us to **different values, ideas, emotions** and conclusions about the world, without those being more or less right or wrong.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Think about a very recent conversation you had with someone.

Can you identify the moments of the conversation – including non-verbal elements – when you or the other person shared feelings, beliefs, values or attitudes (affective elements) and when you shared thoughts, knowledge, capacities and skills (cognitive elements)?

Can you identify moments in the conversation when different values or perspectives were impacting the dynamic?


How did you feel and react in those moments when you found yourself in disagreement or had a difficult time understanding the other person's verbal or non-verbal communication?

HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND (INCLUSIVE) DIALOGUE?⁴

INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

This exercise can help you understand your own approach to dialogue. You can also try it with the people you work with closely in your community efforts - see the link at the end of this section for the group version of the exercise.

The exercise inspired one CA pax:



*"[It] was very useful and something I want to practice with my coworkers as we prepare to engage our community about our project. It showed that it takes **intentionality** and **effort** to hear other perspectives and then to try and come to an agreement together."*

Review the following qualities characterising dialogue. Which quality or qualities are closest to your own ideas about the keys to good dialogue? Do you feel like anything is missing? Consider what your choices say about your personal priorities.

- **Integrity:** Dialogue is about communicating with integrity. Non-verbal aspects of communication must be consistent with the words used.
- **Challenging:** Dialogue does not mean accepting anything or everything from others. We may need to challenge or oppose others' assertions. When this is the case, this must be done in a way that upholds the humanity of the other person and our own.

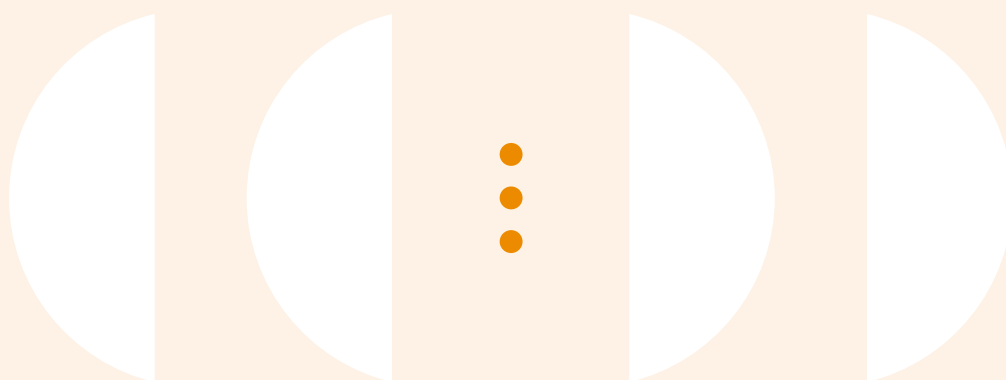
⁴ "Key Qualities of Dialogue". List compiled by Erik Cleven, Nansenskolen, Norway. Exercise shared by Tanja Popovič at CA Workshop in Prague, September 2023.

HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND (INCLUSIVE) DIALOGUE?

- **Vulnerability:** Dialogue involves seeking to know oneself, and showing who one is to the Other, even if this means making oneself vulnerable. This is ultimately the position of greatest strength.
- **Caring for the Other:** Dialogue fosters an attitude of accepting responsibility for the Other, without having an expectation that this will be reciprocated.
- **Relationships:** Dialogue is about understanding and learning from another as we explore positive shifts in relationships.
- **Common language:** Dialogue is about striving to achieve a common language.
- **Understanding first:** In dialogue we seek first to understand and then to be understood.
- **Agreement:** Dialogue is not necessarily about agreeing with or becoming the same as the Other.
- **Listening:** Dialogue is as much about listening as speaking.
- **Courage:** As we enter into dialogue we need courage to let go and to let come.
- **Openness:** Dialogues require us to have an open mind, open heart and open will.

HOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND (INCLUSIVE) DIALOGUE?

- **Judging:** Moral judgments are one of the main tools of domination. Leaving judgements, generalisations, criticism, evaluations, diagnoses and blame behind, moves dialogue to a deeper level.
- **Non-verbal communication:** Dialogue can take place even in silence. Our presence (or lack thereof), our body language, facial expressions, artistic expression etc., are essential for dialogue.
- **Change:** Dialogue is a means for societal change at the individual, relationship, institutional, and cultural levels.



GROUP VERSION OF EXERCISE

Since inclusive dialogue is a key part of community building, it's useful to understand how the people you work with in the community think about dialogue. Doing this [qualities of dialogue exercise](#) as a group can spark a conversation where you can exchange views on your values and approaches.

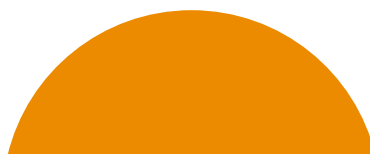
KEY STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE DIALOGUE

13

If we want to lead an inclusive dialogue we must ask ourselves who we are engaging with and who is missing, think about how our communication might keep some people away, and avoid speaking for others. See the [Letting community lead](#), [Identity and diversity](#) and [Power dynamics and bias thematic blocs](#) for more on these points.

But to put inclusive dialogue – or, in fact, any type of dialogue - into practice we also need to look inside ourselves and cultivate these important skills and practices:

- Being **genuinely curious** about the experiences and perspectives of the other person.
- Being **open** to what the other person is sharing, their views and experiences.
- **Suspending assumptions and judgements.** This means intentionally not falling into familiar opinions. One of the ways to reduce assumptions and judgments and demonstrate respect for others is by using open-ended questions. These are questions that provide plenty of space for the other person to share their thoughts, feelings and perspectives. See the [Active listening thematic bloc](#) for details and exercises on open-ended questions.
- Being **empathetic** and **understanding**. Empathy is the ability to emotionally understand what other people feel and see things from their point of view. Learn more about [empathy](#) in this article.



⁵ Kendra Cherry, "[What is Empathy? How it helps strengthen our relationships](#)", updated 3 July, 2024. Retrieved on 2 November, 2024.

KEY STRATEGIES FOR INCLUSIVE DIALOGUE

14

- **Active listening.** This is about keeping the focus on the other person, listening to understand their perspective and refraining from giving advice (see the [Active listening thematic bloc](#) for details). Active listening involves these communication skills:
- **Clarifying** by asking questions where information isn't clear to you.
- **Reframing**/summarising what the other person has said to let them know you have heard them, and asking for their confirmation or clarification.
- **Validating** others. This is about showing you respect the other person's opinions, even if you don't agree with them or even share your own opinions.
- **Paying attention** to non-verbal communication, both your own and the other person's, to better understand the interpersonal dynamics of the conversation.
- **Patience.** Accepting that people have different ways and speeds in communicating and not interrupting people when they are speaking.



INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

Which of the (inclusive) dialogue skills and practices are you stronger in and which are you weaker in? Since we may not easily see our own weaknesses, think back carefully to a recent dialogue with someone or ask someone you trust to give you honest feedback.



RESOURCES

You can find various exercises to practice the building blocks of inclusive dialogue in the [Active listening](#) and [Power and bias thematic blocs](#).

For more practical tools and inspiration in relation to inclusive dialogue, see:

- Newby-Alexander, Cassandra and Danielle Wingfield, "[Guide to Constructive and Inclusive Dialogue](#)." Virginia Center for Inclusive Communities. Retrieved 10 November, 2024.
A useful guide to planning, designing and holding inclusive dialogues.
- Pruitt, Bettye and Philip Thomas. "[Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners](#)." (General Secretariat of Organization of American States; International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance; UN Development Programme. 2007). Retrieved 1 November, 2024.
A handbook covering the concepts and practice of dialogue in different contexts.
- McKnight, John and Ivis Garcia. "[Bridging the Divide: Strategies for Reducing Polarization at the Neighborhood Level](#)." (Asset-based Community Development Institute at DePaul University). 2023. Retrieved 13 November, 2024.
A publication offering suggestions on how to bridge divisions and polarisation in communities.
- Harvard Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging unit. [Inclusive Dialogue Cards](#). Retrieved 10 November, 2024.
A very quick guide to inclusive conversations.
- Galette, Fritz. "[Inclusive Dialogue](#)." Loeb Leadership. Retrieved 13 November, 2024.
A short piece on dialogue and creating 'safe and brave spaces' for dialogue.

RESOURCES

A few approaches that can support inclusive dialogue:

- Leadership Forum Community, Inc. "[Kiva - A Process for Inclusive Dialogue](#)." 2024. Retrieved 10 November, 2024.
- Geer, Richard O. and Jules Corriere, with Melissa Block, Melissa, Juanita Brown and David Issacs. *Story Bridge.: From Alienation to Community Action*. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2012).

and

- Geer, Richard O. and Quinghong Wei. *Open Circle: Story Arts and the Reinvention of Community*. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

Two books on the contribution of stories and theater to inclusive dialogue in communities.

- Taylor, Crystal; Wei, Qinghong. "[Storytelling and Arts to Facilitate Community Capacity Building for Urban Planning and Social Work](#)." *Societies*, 10, no. 3 (September 2020): 64. Retrieved 25 November, 2024.

and

- Lange, Zechariah. "[Bridges Don't Make Themselves: Using Community-Based Theater to Reshape Relationships: Rethinking the Idea of Abundance in ABCD](#)." *Societies*, 10, no. 3 (July 2020): 54. Retrieved 25 November, 2024.

Two longer examinations of cases highlighting the value of stories and theater in inclusive dialogue and community building. The second piece focuses on rural areas.

- Center for Courage & Renewal. "[5 Habits of the Heart That Make Democracy Possible](#)." Adapted from Parker J. Palmer, *Healing the Heart of Democracy: The Courage to Create a Politics Worthy of the Human Spirit* (2011). Retrieved 12 November, 2024.

A more conceptual essay on the relevance of inclusion to democracy and community building.

Return to the [Useful tools page](#).



NADACE VIA