

# How to start and sustain a community dialogue to solve local problems

March 2024

How to  
Guide

## Introduction

Since 2015 the Institute for Security Studies (ISS) has established and convened platforms for dialogue between government, researchers, bilateral development agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and communities to find solutions to high levels of violence in South Africa. The dialogue processes, at national, provincial and community levels, have been formally evaluated<sup>1</sup> and assessed<sup>2</sup> to identify lessons for practitioners interested in creating space for dialogue to increase safety and prevent violence.

This guide emerged from the experience of the community dialogue that started in 2021 between the communities of Touwsrante and Hoekwil in the Southern Cape. The monthly dialogue meetings bring together people from Touwsrante and Hoekwil, adjacent communities divided by Apartheid-era spatial planning. The aim of the dialogue is to build a safe and prosperous community for all who live in the areas, and to build bridges across lines of race, class and nationality.

The guide is intended for individuals and organisations who wish to initiate dialogue in their own communities to solve local problems.

Anyone seeking more detailed knowledge and experience can contact the Justice and Violence Prevention Programme at the ISS.

- **This guide is for**  
Community development practitioners, community leaders, non-governmental organisations working with communities, development partners interested in collective problem solving, and the donors who support work to prevent violence and strengthen accountability.
- **Purpose**  
Share lessons with individuals or organisations interested in starting a dialogue to solve local problems.
- **Contact**  
For more information please contact the coordinator of the Violence Prevention Forum: [vpf@issafrica.org](mailto:vpf@issafrica.org)



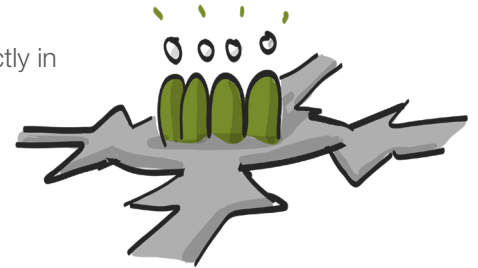
VIOLENCE  
IS...  
PREVENTABLE

## What is a community dialogue?

A facilitated process that brings members of local communities together to address a shared problem or concern, and that seeks to build understanding, increase participants' ability to deal with conflict, and develop and strengthen relationships to enable collective action.

### Purpose of a community dialogue

- Provide a platform where community members can participate directly in identifying common problems, and develop practical solutions
- Share and create knowledge between community members and public officials
- Build trust between people to enable action and collaboration
- Support community development and unlock resources



Community dialogues provide a space for community members to come together in conversation and to understand common problems from many different perspectives. They cannot be once-off undertakings and should be sustained over time if they are to have impact.



In a dialogue, participants listen to each other's concerns and ideas and together find solutions. Often, in the search for solutions, there are failures, and things that don't work as expected. This is quite normal, and necessary, because the best learning comes from experiencing what does not work and trying new solutions. An important principle of any community dialogue is to be open to learning from failure.

The term 'community' is traditionally used to refer to people who live in the same area; however, it can also refer to a group of people who share something in common, such as an experience or interest.

## Why a community dialogue?

Community dialogues have at least three benefits.

### Creation of cohesive communities

Community dialogues have been found to strengthen people's sense of belonging and connection to one another through the process of building relationships. They can also improve participants' understanding of their identities, how they got to where they are, and how they might create well-being in their communities.

When people in a community get to know one another, are open to hearing each other's perspectives, and are united in a common goal, they can work together towards shared solutions and draw on the resources that can help them. This is particularly important for achieving safety and increasing prosperity.

The opposite is also true: when there is a lack of trust between community members and communities are divided, it is very hard to work together to create safety; and very easy for prejudice and negative assumptions to undermine cohesion.





## Building trust between community members

Trust is broken or deficient when people do not understand how decisions are made, when they do not feel that their experiences and perspectives matter to those who are making decisions that affect them, and when they are isolated from each other. A lack of trust is associated with social dysfunction, a lack of investment in activities that build community, and indifference to others' conditions.

## Sensemaking and social learning

Through discussion and deliberation, stakeholders with different perspectives and information can learn from each other and develop a shared vision and plan for moving forward. As a platform for sensemaking, community dialogues allow participants to reach a common understanding of the issues they are challenged by, and by so doing, create the basis for shared action.



In the Hoekwil/Touwsrante community dialogue, research about what prevents violence was shared with participants along with information and research findings about young people's use of alcohol and drugs, and what could be done to prevent it. This helped community members find ways to engage young people in activities that would make them feel seen and connected, and beat boredom – such as by building an outdoor gym.



## How to conduct a successful community dialogue

Community dialogues have been studied and assessed in various settings to determine what makes them work and how they can be improved. On the next page is a checklist that you can follow to ensure the dialogue is purpose-driven. You don't need to have all the answers before starting the dialogue – some of these questions, such as when and where to meet, should be discussed and agreed on in early meetings.

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Who will convene the dialogue?

Do they have credibility in the community so that when they call a meeting people will come? If not, who could be asked to join the convening group?

Do the conveners represent the diversity in the community?

Can the conveners make the time to plan meetings, report on meetings and invite people to attend to sustain the dialogue?

**Objectives**

Why is the community dialogue needed? How might the community benefit from having one?

Who needs to be consulted? (This could be key people in the community, or existing structures.)

**Information about the community**

Who needs to be at the first meeting to make it a success?

What is controversial and difficult in the community? And how will this be addressed in the first meeting?

Who are the people who are not represented in existing structures or who are on the fringes of the community?

**Inviting participation**

Is the invitation welcoming, clear, and inclusive?

How will you disseminate the invitation?

Who is really important to have at the meeting, and how will you ensure that they come?

**Dialogue**

Is the venue's location easily accessible to all?

Is the venue big enough?

Is the timing of the meeting suitable for most people who need to participate in the dialogue?

Who will write the minutes and decisions?

In one of the early meetings of the dialogue, participants should agree on how decisions will be made.

How will reports about meetings be shared and who should receive them?

## Convening and facilitating dialogue

Conveners are the people who make the meeting happen. They secure a venue, invite people to participate, welcome people and plan how the meeting will unfold.

After the first meeting the people who started the dialogue might continue as conveners, or could ask participants who would like to be involved in convening subsequent meetings. It is important for the conveners to be transparent about what they want to get out of it, and what they are willing to put in.



## Who should be in the room?

Successful community dialogue must serve a purpose that has been identified and agreed on by community members. This can be done at the very first meeting, or it can come later.

People make the community dialogue work. To be successful, community dialogue needs community members who are willing and able to work towards change; some who have access to power and resources (e.g. local councillors); and local actors who have an interest in the community, such as the police, local government officials, NGOs, and people who own and run businesses. If all these people don't come at first, that is to be expected; you can always identify and expand participation as you go.

Three categories of people are necessary for a successful community dialogue: conveners, facilitators, and participants.

- A **convener** is an individual or group of individuals responsible for bringing people together to address an issue or problem. Conveners are responsible for providing strategic leadership and guidance for the dialogue and for managing logistics.
- **Facilitators** play a critical role in framing the discourse, ensuring every participant feels confident to share their opinions and can trust that the space will be safe enough for discussion.
- During the community dialogues the facilitators engage **participants** in the discussion, enabling them to share their opinions, experiences, views and values in an interactive and participatory way.



The Hoekwil/Touwsrante community dialogue is convened by a group of five volunteers from the community. They meet before the meeting to draft invites, agree on the agenda, and handle logistics. After the meeting they assess how it went and what lessons were learnt.

The community dialogue is also facilitated by community members. Some have been trained in non-violence facilitation techniques. The facilitators are mentored and supported by a professional facilitator.

*Dialogue underway in the 17<sup>th</sup> meeting of the national Violence Prevention Forum*



Ownership of the dialogue process is important for the sustainability of a community dialogue. How it is facilitated and who facilitates discussions can build ownership of the dialogue.

Community dialogues are spaces where partnerships are formed between those who attend the dialogue, whether as community members or in their professional capacities.

Participation can be fluid. There will be some people who attend regularly, others who come to one meeting and don't come back, and some who come from time to time. This is to be expected. Regular participants play an important role in bringing in people who they think are important to include.

**In the Hoekwil/Touwsranten community dialogue there was a conscious effort to ensure diversity in participation: young people and older people; people from different racial groups; men and women. It took some time to achieve this.**

## Some of the challenges faced by community dialogues

Community dialogues face several challenges, including a lack of trust; overlapping mandates with existing community organisations; cultural expectations; rank and power differences among participants; and attendance.

- Lack of trust: trust in the community dialogue process can be strengthened by having rules of engagement. These rules of engagement along with shared values should be codeveloped with members of the community dialogue and reinforced through meeting facilitation.
- Existing community organisations and cultural expectations and priorities can have an impact on a community dialogue's success. Community organisations may act as gatekeepers and barriers to effective community dialogue if not engaged. When starting a community dialogue it helps to consult with the leaders of existing community structures. This can also happen as you go along. It is important to make sure that community members understand the difference between the dialogue and other structures that already exist.
- When engaging in dialogue, the distribution of power between participants is key. Participants who experience themselves as lacking power may feel intimidated and not participate freely, while those used to having power might feel their views are more important or relevant, or believe they have all the answers. The convening team and facilitators should promote the sharing of power and influence as much as possible. This is not always easy because those who have power usually also have resources and connections that they can draw on to support their ideas.

**In the Hoekwil/Touwsranten community dialogue, sitting in a circle during meetings, rotating facilitators, having a diverse group of conveners, and making sure there is a chance for all participants to speak and be heard in meetings have been effective strategies to distribute power and influence.**

- Securing consistent attendance from community members is a challenge faced by community dialogues. At the same time, research on community dialogues has shown that even a small group of people (eight to 15 community members) who meet regularly, are committed, and have the power to implement ideas or mobilise resources, is enough to achieve change and improve cohesion.



## Can community dialogues make a difference?

### Some of the key outcomes of the Hoekwil/Touwsrante community dialogue

#### Relationship building and increased police accountability

One of the original objectives of the Hoekwil/Touwsrante dialogue was to build relationships across lines of race in the community. After two years, those who had attended reported feeling more connected and less suspicious of strangers.

#### Collective problem-solving

Despite the challenges to sustained collective action faced by the community dialogue, participants view the space provided for collective problem solving as a good thing. The dialogue addressed the problem of uncollected rubbish and tried various solutions, such as providing black bags to community members who did not receive them from the municipality. The dialogue also was able to mobilise the local municipality to provide safe and secure toilets for households who did not have them.

### Some final tips

- If you are considering whether a community dialogue would benefit your community, you can start by sharing your idea with other people in the community and hearing what they think.
- Consultation with other community leaders (formal and informal) is important, right at the start, otherwise you might be seen as a threat or competition.
- It is very important to make sure that meetings are inclusive. This means that the facilitators need to build in activities that enable everyone to have a chance to share their ideas and views. This can be done by having everyone introduce themselves and say something about themselves at the start of the meeting, and by having discussions in small groups or pairs.
- It is very important that the dialogue is able to show participants what it has achieved, even if these are small things. No one wants to make time to take part in a process that does not achieve anything. Yet, achieving big change is slow and hard. Celebrate the small wins regularly.



### Notes

- 1 The national Violence Prevention Forum was formally evaluated in 2020. MM Amisi, The Violence Prevention Forum: A model for intersectoral collaboration to prevent violence, Evaluation Report, [www.violence-prevention.org/docrepo/VPF%20-%20A%20model%20for%20intersectoral%20collaboration%20to%20prevent%20violence%2012.1.21.pdf](http://www.violence-prevention.org/docrepo/VPF%20-%20A%20model%20for%20intersectoral%20collaboration%20to%20prevent%20violence%2012.1.21.pdf), 2020.
- 2 In 2023 three case studies assessed how the national Violence Prevention Forum impacted research organisations, government departments and NGOs that participated in the dialogue. A separate assessment of the Hoekwil/Touwsrante community dialogue was also carried out.

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How to guide prepared by Andisiwe Makwecana, Barbara Holtmann, Chandré Gould and Matodzi Amisi.  
For additional resources on the community dialogue: [www.violence-prevention.org](http://www.violence-prevention.org)

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ISS Addis Ababa Tel: +251 11 515 6320 | ISS Dakar Tel: +221 33 860 3304/42 | ISS Nairobi Tel: +254 20 237 84 75/79

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