A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO DIALOGUE

The Community Dialogue Critical Issues Series: Volume Two
David Holloway
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The Community Dialogue Critical Issues Series

The Critical Issues Series provides fresh thinking, analysis and accessible overviews of issues that are important to the future of Northern Ireland.

Community Dialogue

Community Dialogue is dedicated to the promotion of dialogue in Northern Ireland on the critical issues affecting our future. We do this through the facilitation of dialogue and the production of issue based dialogue materials.

How To Contact Us

If you require further information or would like to get involved in our dialogues, or wish to comment on the contents of this manual or other Community Dialogue materials then please contact us at:

Community Dialogue
373 Springfield Road, Belfast, BT12 7DG
Tel: 02890 329 995 Fax: 02890 330 482

E-mail: admin@communitydialogue.org Web: www.communitydialogue.org
Preface

The purpose of this manual is to offer a summary introduction and guide to dialogue and the work of Community Dialogue for those who are interested in deepening their knowledge and understanding of dialogue theory and practice. It is targeted both at those who are new to dialogue and experienced dialogue participants.

A companion volume aimed specifically at dialogue facilitators and those interested in becoming dialogue facilitators is also available.

Acknowledgements

While this manual makes reference to the experience and understanding of other dialogue theoreticians and practitioners it is based primarily upon the experience of Community Dialogue.

Community Dialogue is grateful to all those whose experience has contributed to the production of this manual including our many diverse participants, our staff of facilitators and our members.

David Holloway
“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter”.

Martin Luther King

“It must be considered that there is nothing more difficult to carry out, nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than a new order of things. For the reformer has enemies in all those who profit by the old order, and only lukewarm defenders in those who would profit by a new order; this lukewarmness arising partly from fear of their adversaries, who have the laws in their favour; and partly from the incredulity of mankind, who do not truly believe in anything new until they have had actual experience of it”.

N. Machiavelli, ‘The Prince’ 1518
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Section 1: The Background To Community Dialogue

The Context
In the summer of 1997 an Irish Republican Army cease-fire was followed by inclusive multi-party negotiations that were to lead to the Belfast Agreement. This was a time of tension in Northern Ireland as our future was negotiated behind closed doors with many people on all sides fearing the outcome.

The Formation of Community Dialogue
In this context a number of people of diverse political and cultural backgrounds, rooted in community work throughout Northern Ireland, met to explore their understanding of the situation.

While we found much to divide us we agreed that there appeared to be:

- The cross party will to seek a negotiated agreement.
- Consensus between the British and Irish governments and international influencers, that is, the European Union and the United States of America.
- A talk’s process addressing for the first time all the relationships causing conflict, that is, the relationship between the two communities in Northern Ireland, the relationship between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and the relationship between the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

This struck us as potentially fertile ground for reaching an historic settlement. But one thing was missing; the people were excluded from the process and we felt that the process was too important to leave solely in the hands of our political leaders. We believed that without inclusive dialogue at all levels of society a lasting settlement that we could all buy into would be more difficult to achieve.

We concluded that there was a need to:

- Broaden ownership of the process of agreeing our future.
- Encourage informed decision making on the critical issues affecting our future.
- Promote greater understanding of the diverse positions on the critical issues affecting our future.
- Build a ladder of communication between wider society and the negotiations.

As a result of this understanding Community Dialogue formed to develop a broad process of dialogue on the critical issues affecting our future.
How We Have Developed Since Our Formation

Today Community Dialogue has an Executive Committee drawn from its diverse membership of around seventy peacebuilding activists and a staff of seven including four professional dialogue practitioners. We are actively engaged in dialogue work throughout Northern Ireland as well as developing dialogue internationally in partnerships that cover the United States of America and Israel (Stanford University), Cyprus (International Peace Research Institute), England (Bradford University) and the Republic of Ireland.

By the end of 2003 we had organised over 500 general dialogue events including half-day and evening seminars, conferences, think-tanks and workshops, nearly 200 local group meetings, almost 100 one and two-night residential, 19 youth events and almost 100 members dialogues in which over 6, 750 people have participated.

In that period there were also over 30 newspaper articles, 23 publications (See Appendix: Community Dialogue Publications List) and 24 radio interviews. All of these were attempts to publicise the perceptions we were hearing and encourage further dialogue around them.

While the core of our dialogues arise from issues within the unfolding Belfast Agreement and the wider political / peace process our dialogues are not only about Protestants and Catholics in conflict. We have developed to address the issues important to our participants and these cover other and broader concerns including gender conflict, ethnic and other minorities, the impact of the European Union and the world market economy, drug and alcohol abuse, joy riding and so on.
Section 2: What We Do

Dialogue
We enable diverse individuals and groups to engage in dialogue about our future, encouraging people to take ownership of the process of agreeing our future and to develop greater understanding of our varied and often opposed positions because without such understanding an agreed future is impossible.

We aim to:
• Challenge thinking and encourage questioning.
• Offer a process of unfolding understanding of oneself and others, the outcomes of which may be unclear.

How We Do It
• We produce discussion documents on issues of critical importance to our future.
• We facilitate dialogue on issues of critical importance to our future.

The Dialogue Leaflets
By the start of 2004 we had produced 23 dialogue leaflets and circulated over 100,000 copies of these (See Appendix: Community Dialogue Publications List). The leaflets address issues arising from the Belfast Agreement and the wider political/peace process, including police reform, decommissioning, the early release of politically motivated prisoners, education reform, identity and Assembly suspensions. They are designed to promote critical thinking, deepen understanding of complex and controversial issues and enhance dialogue.

We base the leaflets on our own dialogue process. Because our membership and dialogue participants are drawn from across the spectrum of cultural, religious and political beliefs, these leaflets are reflective of diverse views.

Each leaflet:
• Presents the stated positions of our main traditions.
• Articulates the needs and experiences underlying them.
• Encourages critical reflection and questioning.

How Our Leaflets Work
Conventional publications about key issues in Northern Ireland’s conflict often argue in favour of a particular position using evidence to support it. They have a particular point to make and this can exclude equally relevant but opposing information. This means that what is written often lacks balance. Ultimately most such material suggests to the reader what he or she should believe.

Few publications attempt to present a balanced view and fewer still fully explore the experiences, needs, fears, perceptions and hopes that underpin the positions which people hold. Community Dialogue believes that the experiences and feelings underpinning the positions which people hold are at least as important as the positions.
Our leaflets:
- Aim to offer a balanced presentation of opposing positions.
- Articulate the experiences, needs, fears, perceptions and hopes which underlie those positions.
- Render often-complex political issues in a user-friendly accessible style.
- Challenge the views of the reader.
- Do not offer a conclusion and do not suggest what the reader should think.
- Aim to leave the reader with questions, not answers.

In combination we believe that these factors offer an opportunity for a deeper and more rounded understanding of the complex positions that groups and individuals have and, as a consequence, they offer fresh insights into what is really important to us.

**Learning Summaries And Research Papers**
In addition to dialogue leaflets Community Dialogue also produces learning and research summaries, for example, on the role of dialogue in peace building or the role of political identity in the Northern Ireland conflict (See Appendix: Community Dialogue Publications List).

These documents summarise the collective understanding and experience within Community Dialogue (and in engagement with informed others, for example, colleagues in Stanford University) on a particular issue.

While these documents go into issues in greater depth, they are also designed to be readily digestible by the wider community. They are intended for use both as information and learning resources and to influence the political and peacebuilding discourse at a national and international level. Unlike the leaflets these documents may offer conclusions and options for the future.

**Where Do Our Dialogues Take Place?**
We organise residential, one-day seminars, evening gatherings and morning workshops, conferences in hotels, sessions in the workplace, churches, community centres and schools. These events take place throughout Northern Ireland. We also organise extended residential dialogues abroad for Northern Ireland people and sometimes these also involve international participants.

**Who Is Involved?**
People from all walks of life participate in Community Dialogue; working and middle class people, urban and rural people, young and old people, employed and unemployed people, Catholics and Protestants, Nationalists and Unionists, Loyalists and Republicans, members of ethnic and other minorities, community workers, business people, clergy and so on.

We particularly welcome participants who have not engaged in dialogue before.
Is It Always Cross Community?
Community Dialogue does not find terms like ‘cross community’, ‘single identity’ or ‘community relations’ helpful or particularly relevant in its work. Some of the dialogues we organise are for specific communities, groups or individuals. Some of the dialogues we organise are for diverse communities, groups or individuals. In general terms some of our dialogues are reflective of particular interest groups (for example human rights) or specific identifies (for example Loyalists) and some are representative of more diverse interest groups and identities.

Do We Always Stick To A Theme?
The dialogue process is a journey. While we may begin with a particular theme the dialogue may take a different direction. What Community Dialogue does when this happens is very important. We normally go where the dialogue takes us. We find that this results in something exciting, worthwhile and often unforeseen. We think that the reason for this is that people are being honest and passionate about what really matters to them. We follow that honesty and that passion of feeling instead of attempting to steer people away from it and back to a planned theme.

What Does It Cost?
Community Dialogue receives funding for its work so there is no financial cost for participation. All our events are free, and where appropriate we can offer a limited contribution towards expenses incurred through travel or arranging childcare provision. Any other ‘cost’ is in terms of your commitment to the process.

Who ‘Owns’ What We Do?
Many groups in the Northern Ireland community sector find themselves embroiled in competition for resources, recognition and control of services. It is important for the work of Community Dialogue that we do not to engage in such competition.

We encourage others to use, adapt or borrow our process as long as they do not use our name without our agreement. Through being open about what we do and with what we produce we have found that interest in dialogue has spread beyond our immediate sphere of influence as people who first engaged in dialogue through our events subsequently developed their own dialogue processes. We think that this is good.
Section 3: What We Do Not Do

Introduction: Working In A Divided Society
Community Dialogue operates within a divided society. Its staff and members reflect those divisions. Because perceptions of what we do and why we do it can sometimes be framed within those divisions, it is very important to understand what Community Dialogue does not do.

Answers
We do not tell you what to think or if you are right or wrong. That is your responsibility. We aim to encourage you to think and to question.

Mediation
While dialogue is a skill integral to conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation and other forms of problem solving Community Dialogue does not practice conflict resolution, negotiation, mediation or other forms of problem solving as part of its process.

But while we do not attempt to solve problems through our dialogue the process can help to transform the individuals involved in those problems.

Relationships between divided people may on occasion develop and ideas about the way ahead may become clear as a result of our dialogues. But this is entirely a matter for those who experience it. Community Dialogue offers dialogue as a process and as a tool. What, if any, concrete actions result from participation in the process or application of the tool is a matter for the concerned individual/s.

Party Political Agendas
The promotion of dialogue in Northern Ireland is sometimes perceived as part of a particular party political agenda.

Some people view it as part of a government sponsored community relation’s policy designed to suck people into a non-violent middle ground and make them more accepting of a status quo that otherwise they would find unacceptable.

Others consider it to be a process that undermines belief and erodes identity; an attempt, for example, to ‘green’ a people or to generate a new shared identity that supersedes Nationalism, Unionism, Republicanism and Loyalism.

Real dialogue has only one agenda, the deepening of understanding of oneself and of others through sharing, listening, critical thinking and questioning.

Community Dialogue staff and members have diverse personal political affiliations and views and we are open about this, but Community Dialogue does not pursue a party political agenda. We aim to enable people to reach their own informed decisions through dialogue whatever those decisions may be.
Community Relations And Reconciliation?

i Overview
We do not find the terms community relations and reconciliation helpful in the development of our dialogues. They are at one and the same time too restrictive and too vague.

Neither do they necessarily reflect the purpose of Community Dialogue, which is to provide dialogue as a process and a tool to deepen understanding of oneself and others through listening, sharing and questioning. The understanding that participants reach as a consequence of the dialogues that they engage in are not determined in advance by Community Dialogue and are the sole responsibility of the participants.

Dialogue may lead to better community relations and reconciliation or it may lead to a clarification of why we cannot agree and why we must follow separate paths.

ii Community Relations
We do not regard ourselves as a ‘community relations’ organisation in the traditional sense. Our work is broader and deeper than addressing only relationships between Nationalists and Unionists in political conflict or Catholics and Protestants in sectarian conflict.

We work within as well as between groups. We also work with people who do not define themselves as Nationalist or Unionist, Protestant or Catholic including people from other racial, ethnic, cultural and political backgrounds. While our dialogues explore the political / peace process they also range across broader national and international issues including gender, age, the rural / urban divide, class, ethnicity, sexuality, drug abuse and so on.

Ultimately we dialogue about the issues that are important to you. Inevitably this means that we have to look at a broader and a deeper conflict of which traditional community relations is but a part.

iii Reconciliation
Likewise we do not regard ourselves as a ‘reconciliation’ organisation in the traditional sense. Some positions and behaviours cannot and should not be reconciled. In some circumstances following separate paths to separate futures may be necessary.

Reconciliation is only one potential outcome of dialogue’s use. Clarifying that differences are too great to allow for reconciliation is as valid an outcome of dialogue as is the reconciliation of difference.
Section 4: The Dialogue Process

Introduction
We use the term *dialogue* a lot in Northern Ireland these days but there is considerable confusion about what dialogue actually means. Consequently there is also divided opinion over the value of engaging in dialogue.

We will start this section by considering some of the difficulties inherent in having conversations about contentious issues. We will then outline the key elements of what dialogue is before clarifying what it is not.

Some Problems With Talking About Conflict

i “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing”
We have a saying in Northern Ireland: “Whatever you say, say nothing.”

This attitude motivates the avoidance of conflict at all levels of our society. While avoidance can be useful for trivial issues it is normally counterproductive for serious issues.

Avoidance allows us to go our own course and pretend that there is no conflict, supporting an illusion of normality that will not last.

Avoidance:
- Suggests to others that you don’t care.
- Allows the conflict to simmer and grow.
- Reinforces the notion that conflict is terrible and best avoided when in fact it can be necessary, creative and productive.

We routinely practice denial, avoid responsibility and maintain an artificial appearance of normality. As a consequence, we exist uneasily with each other in a state of mutual suspicion and misunderstanding. While we inhabit the same small corner of the world and share much in common we do not understand each other.

ii Divided By Language
While we speak a shared language we are often divided by our use and understanding of words. *Consent*, for example, signifies respect for many Nationalists while for many Unionists it implies permission or sanction. Nationalists often speak of *parity of esteem*, signifying an important component of equality, which for many Unionists can be perceived to mean discrimination against Protestants.

So while we may use the same words when we talk to each other, we do not necessarily share the same understanding of what those words mean. This leads to misunderstanding.
iii “Calling A Spade A Spade”
In many gatherings with people from diverse backgrounds, interaction on contentious issues is often characterised by politeness, silence, defensiveness and a fear of discussing issues of conflict.

When people do actually engage with each other on divisive issues, “calling a spade a spade”, they often become embroiled in heated shouting matches where positions are stated and re-stated in a series of circular arguments. As a consequence of this they tend to leave with their views both of the other side and of their own positions unchallenged and even reinforced.

Dialogue Is…
Dialogue is a different and a more effective way of having conversations or discussions about contentious issues.

i A Flow Of Meaning
Dialogue is an unfolding process of transforming understanding of oneself and others.

‘Dialogue’ comes from the Greek word *dialogos*.

*Logos* means ‘the word’.

*Dia* means ‘through’.

*Dialogue*, therefore, suggests a stream of meaning flowing among, through and between us, out of which may emerge some new understanding. As such it is a process rather than an end result in itself.

ii A Tool For Conflict
Conflict of itself is neither good nor bad, it is a natural, necessary and inevitable consequence of life. But it is how we use conflict that renders it good or bad, creative or destructive. This is where dialogue comes in because it is a tool, which we can use to mould conflict into a creative, positive and productive process. It does so by deepening our understanding of the positions of others and ourselves and of the conflicts between others and ourselves.
iii A Different Way Of Talking
Dialogue is a process involving active listening as well as talking. It also implies accepting and respecting the views of others and trying to understand where they are coming from (getting into their shoes). Diversity and division are openly addressed in this process.

Dialogue deepens understanding of our own, and each other’s positions, often leading to shared understanding and an enhancement of our ability to make informed decisions.

It does this by shifting the focus from the stated positions that we so often argue over to the needs (often shared), which underlie them.

The process may:

- Lead to trust, respect and the building of a shared future in which we all belong.
  Or:
- Clarify our disagreement and our need to follow separate paths to separate futures.

iv Question, Question, Question
Dialogue aims to transform understanding of issues through open, honest sharing and deep listening.

- It does not aim to provide answers.
- It does aim to leave people questioning.

One of the most important outcomes of a dialogue is not what answers the participants have arrived at but what questions they will leave with.

In the materials we produce and the dialogue process we facilitate we ask people to:

- Question their own positions and look at the needs underlying them.
- Question the positions of others and look at the needs underlying them.
- Explore how to meet those sometimes shared and sometimes-conflicting underlying needs.

We encourage a re-examination of stated positions, based on the assumption that we all want something different and we are all unlikely to get what we want.

We also ask:

- What do you want?
- What do you really need and why do you need it?
- What could you live with, given that the needs and hopes of others may differ from yours?

Dialogue Is Not…
This is not to say that on some occasions there may not be outcomes such as agreement or the emergence of new ideas for resolving old problems. But it is important to understand that these are neither pre planned nor even necessary as part of a successful dialogue process.

**Summary**

Dialogue is an unfolding process of transforming and deepening understanding of others and ourselves through listening, sharing and questioning.

For most people it is a new experience to disagree with others but still to be heard and accepted and not to be argued with or disapproved.

It takes courage for people to get to the point of finding this out.
Section 5: Some Basic Ground Rules For Dialogue

Introduction
Dialogue is a complex process and a life skill that you can learn and develop with practice. Here are some key ground rules that will help you to engage in the process of dialogue:

Trust
For dialogue to work you need to take a chance and share with other people something of your feelings and experiences. Many of us have been brought up to treat such information as private and personal so this can be difficult especially with people you do not know or where the background of some people may make you feel uncomfortable. Our experience indicates that within an agreed dialogue process this is normally a calculated risk that is worth taking.

Confidentiality
Dialogue is not possible without an absolute commitment to confidentiality. Treat what you hear in confidence. Dialogue participants often share sensitive information. Telling others what someone has said during dialogue may lead to difficulties for those participants and will damage the credibility of the process.

When we use the term confidentiality we mean that no attributable comments should be shared with anyone outside of the boundaries in which they were heard. Neither should you tell people who was present. Beyond this, any discussion of what took place within a dialogue should remain at the level of general themes and the relative merits of the process.

Acceptance
It is difficult to listen to beliefs you disagree with but everyone has the right to have and express their beliefs.

Acceptance of the right of an individual to hold beliefs you regard as wrong is different from respecting those beliefs.

All participant’s contributions and ideas have value.

Respect
Dialogue can involve dealing with people whose beliefs you feel you cannot respect because they are utterly wrong to you. You do not have to respect beliefs that are wrong to you. But you should treat all participants with the same level of respect you expect towards yourself. This means that you should aim to separate the beliefs (and actions flowing from those beliefs) from the person who holds them. Sometimes this can be difficult.

You don’t have to hide your dislike of what you hear, however, because dialogue has no value without honesty.
**Balance Sharing And Deep Listening**
Sharing means revealing what makes you tick, the experiences, needs, fears, perceptions and hopes that lead to the positions you hold.

Deep listening means really concentrating on what you are hearing and thinking about what it means for the person who is sharing as well as for you. This is both demanding and tiring work.

So dialogue is a two-way process involving deep listening and open, honest sharing. When someone is sharing you should listen, don’t interrupt. This is both a sign of respect for the value of the person who is sharing and an opportunity for you to think deeply about what you are hearing.

- People who speak loudest and longest often have less of value to say.
- People who listen more than they speak often have more of value to share.

Try not to dominate a dialogue with overly long sharing, remember that time is limited and other people also need to share. Make a conscious and continual effort to find a working balance between talking and listening.

**Full Participation**
It is vital that everybody is present for the full process; absences can have a negative and disruptive impact on the process of dialogue.

Participants often view late arrival and early departure, without legitimate excuse, as a lack of respect.

Your experience is valuable; if you are absent it is lost to the group.

**Confusion Is Okay**
You do not have to have a clear position on everything, it is okay to be confused and you can change your mind.

- Dialogue is more about searching than certainty.
- Dialogue is more about questioning than finding answers.
- Confusion is part of the process.

**Agreement**
Do not aim for agreement. Do not try to convince anyone of anything. Scoring points, being more articulate than others and proving people wrong are all pointless exercises where dialogue is concerned. These are not its purpose and erode its value.

Dialogue is not about reaching agreement, it is about deepening understanding and developing shared understanding. There is no task to achieve so just engage in the process and see what happens.
Represent Yourself Not Your Group
Do not aim to represent the views of a wider group, concentrate on sharing about your own personal experiences, needs, fears, perceptions and hopes. Dialogue aims to reveal the humanity behind opposing positions. For this to happen it is necessary to move away from the ‘party line’ and explore the individual behind it.

Share What Feels Right For You
To share about who you are, how you feel and what you have experienced can be a healing and satisfying experience. This ‘telling of stories’ to each other is a critical part of the dialogue process, not just in developing understanding of oneself and others but also often in generating a powerful new sense of shared humanity, common identification and understanding.

Sometimes, however, sharing can leave you feeling vulnerable and having second thoughts about the appropriateness of some of the information that you revealed.

- Share what feels right for you; trust your own judgement and don’t go beyond what you feel comfortable with.
- Do not feel obligated to reveal things in response to someone else’s urgings or example.

This means finding the balance between taking risks in trusting others and remaining in control of what you choose to reveal. Ultimately this is a judgement that you alone can make. Experience in dialogue will lead you to become more skilled in this.

Use The Facilitators
Community Dialogue facilitators are enablers. They are there to provide support and guidance for you and to create a safe environment in which you can engage in dialogue. If you are concerned about something, if for example, you feel uneasy, hurt, offended or fear that you may have shared too much, then talk to a facilitator in private. Facilitators will accept and respect you and treat what you have to say seriously and in confidence.

Mutual Support
During a dialogue all the participants are in the same boat, irrespective of their diverse experiences, backgrounds and views. The dialogue is made both easier and more fulfilling when those participants make a conscious effort to look after each other during the process.
A Summary Of The Ground Rules For Dialogue

1. Everyone is encouraged to speak.
2. Do not pressurise anyone into speaking.
3. Dialogue is a two-way process, which involves balancing deep listening and open honest sharing.
4. People who listen more than they speak often have more of value to share.
5. Question what you hear and what you think.
7. When someone shares do not interrupt.
8. Do not volunteer others.
9. Be open-minded.
10. Trust others with your feelings and experiences.
11. All participant’s contributions and ideas have value.
12. Treat what you hear in confidence.
13. Accept the right of others to believe differently from you.
14. Treat others with the respect that you expect for yourself.
15. All participant’s contributions and ideas have value.
16. Do not aim to represent the views of a wider group, share about your own personal views and feelings.
17. Do not aim for agreement.
18. You do not need a clear position; it is okay to be confused or to change your mind.
19. Be present for the full process; absence can have a negative impact.
20. Help and support each other throughout the process.
Section 6. The Role Of The Facilitator

Impartiality
Community Dialogue facilitators reflect the political, cultural and religious diversity of our membership (they are open about their background and views if asked). Nevertheless all of our facilitators provide a professional and impartial service. Their role is not to tell you what to think or whether you are right or wrong. They will encourage you to think about where you and others are coming from irrespective of your background, beliefs and views. They will encourage you to share honestly, listen deeply and question critically.

Guidance And Support
Our facilitators are there to create a safe space and to guide and support participants through the process of dialogue. They do so with concern for the well being of each participant and with due regard to the need for confidentiality. Do not hesitate to speak to a facilitator in confidence should you have any concerns.

Challenge
We expect that, where it is appropriate, our facilitators will question and challenge participants.

The Devil’s Advocate
Where key positions, ideas or experiences are absent from a dialogue our facilitators will endeavour to reflect them. That is, they may play ‘devils advocate’, irrespective of their own views in order to ensure a more balanced and challenging dialogue.

Sharing By The Facilitator
On rare occasions our facilitators may offer their personal position and underlying feelings and experience where, in their judgement, it is relevant and appropriate to do so. In this eventuality they will be clear with participants what they are doing and why. Such sharing will be brief and will not attempt to focus subsequent dialogue on the facilitator’s perspective.

Reasons for this occasional approach are:

- To build trust in the process and in the facilitator.
- To share the difficulties of the dialogue process with the participants.
- To lead by example.
- To challenge participants.
- To promote questioning and critical thinking where these are felt by the facilitator to be absent.
Section 7: Some Difficulties With Dialogue

“You Can Lead A Horse To Water But You Can’t Make It Drink”
People perceive dialogue differently. Some people misunderstand it, some fear it, some lack the confidence to engage in it and some think that it is a waste of time. Not all of those that we would like to see engaging in dialogue are ready, willing or able to do so. We can only invite, encourage and welcome participation; the decision belongs to the individual.

Commitment
Dialogue needs genuine commitment from the participants to make the process work and it can be vulnerable to wrecking by participants operating to a different agenda. A participant, for example, may remain determined despite the ground rules to ‘prove their point’ or to ‘win the argument’. Facilitators will intervene in situations like this; nevertheless it may have a negative impact on the dialogue.

An Unfolding Process
Some groups and individuals will only engage in a dialogue if they expect it to lead to a negotiated outcome with agreed actions. They regard dialogue without such an outcome as pointless. Dialogue, is not a negotiation, a mediation or a problem solving exercise; it is an unfolding process of transforming understanding that is worthwhile in and of itself even though the outcomes may not always be clear.

Fear Of Dialogue
Many people fear that engaging in dialogue will in some way dilute or undermine their deeply held beliefs and their political and cultural identities. In our experience this is not the case. Dialogue informs, clarifies and deepens your understanding both of who you are, what you believe and what really matters to you and who others are what they believe and what really matters to them. Ultimately, you are in control of what and how you think both during and as a result of a dialogue process.

Opposition To Dialogue
Dialogue promotes questioning and this is often something that authoritarian groups and organisations do not wish their membership to engage in as it runs counter to their felt need for unquestioning obedience in pursuit of their goals.

A Sign Of Weakness
Some groups, organisations and individuals believe, or fear that showing a willingness to dialogue with the ‘other’ side may be interpreted as a sign of weakness, as a granting of unwarranted legitimacy or as a concession.

Misconceptions About Dialogue
Dialogue is a powerful transformative mechanism and there are many misconceptions about its meaning, use and implications. This arises partly from the fact that different people can, rightly or wrongly, use it in different ways and for different purposes. A number of our political leaders, for example, often refer to the need for dialogue between certain groups when they are in fact referring to the need for negotiation.
A Summary Of Misconceptions About Dialogue

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<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
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<tr>
<td>It will erode beliefs and identity?</td>
<td>No: It will clarify your beliefs, and enhance your identity.</td>
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<td>It will make you think like ‘them’?</td>
<td>No: It will improve your understanding of ‘them’.</td>
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<td>It will create a single identity?</td>
<td>No: It will help clarify understanding of where you and they are coming from.</td>
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<tr>
<td>It is mediation or negotiation?</td>
<td>No: It is a process of sharing and developing understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a hidden agenda?</td>
<td>No: The agenda is to promote dialogue leading to greater understanding of each other’s positions.</td>
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Section 8: Some Rewards Of Dialogue

Dialogue is more about searching than certainty but you may:

- Develop and exercise self-determination and self-reliance.
- Understand more clearly where someone else is coming from.
- Clarify your own position, needs and values.
- Develop a new insight into an issue and its solution.
- Disentangle issues that got tangled together, for example, the Irish language and nationalist political aspirations, and deal with each one on its own merits.
- Feel empowered because you have been heard and taken seriously.
- Be more confident of who and what you are.
- Be more able and willing to engage in dialogue with those around you.
- Find the basis for new and deeper relationships.
- Handle disagreements in a way that weighs arguments and comes to a balanced view rather than building antagonism.
- Discover strengths and resources within you for dealing with conflict.
- Develop decision-making processes that are inclusive of all views leaving nobody feeling ignored.
- Balance your internal, unconscious and natural bias leading to more impartial and informed decision-making.

In addition dialogue underpins mediation, negotiation, conflict resolution and other problem solving processes. As you develop your dialogue skills you will become more proficient in all of these techniques as well. This makes dialogue an extremely useful life tool.
Section 9: The Experience And Impact Of Dialogue

Taking account of our experience of delivering dialogue and the feedback of our participants we have listed a number of summary points about the experience and the impact of our dialogues:

**Participants Feel Free:**
- To be themselves
- To be wrong
- To not know
- To be confused
- To explore

**Participants Feel:**
- Accepted for who they are
- Heard
- Safe
- Challenged
- Respected

**Participants Experience:**
- Fellowship
- Support
- Empowerment
- Common identification
- Ownership of the process

**Participants Feel They Received:**
- Time and space to think
- Transformed understanding
- Clarity
- Reinforcement
- Recognition
Section 10. The Purpose And Value Of Dialogue

Adapted from Robert A Baruch Bush and Joseph P Folger: 
The Promise Of Mediation: Responding To Conflict Through Empowerment And Recognition 1994 pp 84-88 The Jossey-Bass Conflict Resolution Series

Robert Baruch-Bush and Joseph Folger offer a summary of dialogue’s purpose and value in which they argue that dialogue is an opportunity for moral growth and transformation, offering participants a transformative orientation to conflict.

This involves, on the one hand, strengthening the self. This occurs through realising and strengthening one’s inherent human capacity for dealing with difficulties of all kinds by engaging in conscious and deliberate reflection, choice and action.

On the other hand this involves reaching beyond oneself to relate to others. This occurs through realising and strengthening one’s inherent human capacity for experiencing and expressing concern and consideration for others, especially those whose situation is different from one’s own.

Responding to conflict through dialogue helps transform participants from fearful, defensive or self-centred beings into confident, responsive and caring ones.

Empowerment; through a heightened sense of self worth, and recognition are the two most important outcomes of dialogue.

Empowerment
You are empowered when you reach a clearer realisation of what matters to you and why and realise that what matters to you is important.

- You realise that choices exists about who and what you are and what to do and that you have some control over those choices.
- You learn and develop skills including how to better listen, communicate, analyse issues and so on.
- You gain awareness of resources already in your possession.

Empowerment is independent of outcomes. It carries spill over effects into every walk of life including; increased confidence, awareness, skills and decisiveness.

Recognition
Recognition kicks in where, beyond the strength to deal with your own situation you have the capacity to reflect about, consider and acknowledge the other party’s situation.

- You feel secure enough to stop thinking solely about your own situation.
- You let go of your own view and try to see things from the other party’s perspective.
- You develop a genuine appreciation for the other party’s situation.

At such moments ‘the penny drops’ or ‘the light bulb goes on’. This is a transformative moment and the central point of dialogue.
Section 11: Quotations From Participants

Community Dialogue routinely evaluates its events and receives an overwhelmingly positive, although not uncritical response, from its participants. Here is a sample of comments taken from Residential Participant Evaluation Forms throughout 2003.

“It was sometimes difficult to listen to what others were saying.”

“We emerged with new perceptions of the problem.”

“I was encouraged that other communities were in the same position as us but came through.”

“This gives ordinary people the opportunity to express their feelings on the effects the ‘Troubles’ had on them; that was empowering for me”.

“Some were dismayed at comments people were making, but I liked the real honesty.”

“The process was good, the lack of pressure, the sensitivity of facilitators.”

“I got to engage with people I wouldn’t normally meet. It was especially interesting to listen to ex-paramilitaries; their perceptions of the troubles and the future.”

“It was a safe space to be open and honest.”

“It was fascinating to hear other people’s perceptions of me and my community.”

“I’ve been to many cross community events; this is different, much more powerful.”

“There was a lot of shared understanding between very diverse people.”

“I was struck by the openness and friendship shown by everyone.”

“I said things out loud that were just questions in my head and if asked a question I could say ‘I don’t know’. I’ll go away and process this experience further.”

“I was surprised at the level of agreement between such different people.”

“People were very open and this created trust.”

“I will use a lot of what I learned in my everyday life.”

“I’ll be more open to people whom I would hitherto avoid or not be honest with.”

“I want to bring others from my group to this and see what comes out of it.”

“It was a little stressing but very educational; a good way to break down barriers.”

“There was no agenda, wherever the discussion went was okay. We had ownership, which was good.”
Section 12: Conclusion

The growing role of dialogue throughout our society is a key factor in the slow progress away from violent political conflict within Northern Ireland.

Community Dialogue has learned that despite deep conflicts over political and sectarian issues in Northern Ireland, dialogue often reveals surprising agreement on the underlying fears, needs and hopes that people express. It is striking how this commonality emerges only after the participants deal seriously with issues of division by sharing deeply about and listening carefully to the experiences underlying each other’s strongly held positions.

When we share with each other about the experiences, needs, fears, perceptions and hopes underlying our often-opposed positions we often uncover a common sense of humanity, a deep identification and a shared understanding. This can be a truly transformative experience.

Sometimes, however, deep identification is not the outcome and the shared understanding rests on a clarification of implacable difference and the need to follow separate paths towards separate futures. We believe that this is also an outcome of value.

Whether dialogue leads to shared identification and understanding or to the clarification of difference it remains the single most powerful tool for use in the transformation of conflict and for the development of effective relationships out of conflict that we have experienced. It has the power both to transform understanding and empower the individual and it forms a firm platform on which to build a better future where diverse peoples can feel that they belong and are secure and valued.
Appendix: Community Dialogue Publications List

**Leaflets**
Summary Of The Agreement 1998
The Agreement On Prisoners 1998
The Agreement: Yes Or No: What Are The Consequences 1998
The Assembly Elections: How To Use PR 1998
Patten: What Do You Think? 1999
What Price Peace? 1999
The Way We Are 1999
Symbols And Marches: Your Consent? 2000
Collapsed Or Suspended? Your Choice! 2000
The Agreement: Three Years On 2001
North Belfast: Where Are We At? 2001
Where Are We Now? Options, Consequences And Possibilities 2001
Who Are We? What Matters To Us? 2002
Education: Bridging The Divide? 2002
The Burns Report The 11+ And Post-Primary Education 2002
United Ireland: Practical Possibility Or Political Fantasy? 2002
Down Again: The Forth Suspension 2002
IMC Report: Truth Or Political Manipulation? 2004
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<tr>
<td>What If The Review Fails? Plan B</td>
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<td>Increasing The Peace? Community Dialogue And Academics In Conversation About Peace Building</td>
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<td>Identity And The Northern Ireland Conflict: An Overview</td>
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<td>A Practical Guide To Dialogue</td>
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