

# Ecosystem Dialogue

The ecosystem dialogue is a method for surfacing tensions, contradictions and issues among a group of participants. It is valuable as a form of conversation, because it allows participants in the 'ecosystem' to **plug into and connect to a diversity of views, experiences and perspectives**, and develop empathy and appreciation in the process.

## How it works

There are a number of logistical points to take into consideration:

- **Number of participants:** A dialogue should ideally have between twenty and fifty participants.
- **Facilitation:** The method requires facilitation to guide the process. If possible, it is useful to have up to two facilitators to help move the process along.
- **Time allocation:** It is ideal to have at least three hours allocated to this method, as this amount of time allows for different experiences, feelings and perspectives to surface, and also allows time for the group collectively to think together about how to shift those experiences, feelings and perspectives.

### Resources you will need for this activity

- Coloured paper
- A marker pen

## The process step-by-step

### 1. Setting up the conversation

- Invite participants to sit in a circle. If the venue has chairs, the format of the space can be set up beforehand by arranging the chairs in a circle.
- Invite participants to propose areas or issues of discussion that have importance for them, and collectively agree on one of those issues for the sake of the exercise.
- Ask participants how this issue manifests – what are the tensions, pain points or realities that get in the way of the issue being resolved? Give at least ten minutes for participants to surface this.
- As tensions surface, different types of actors in the 'ecosystem' will be named. Allow for at least eight voices or actors to emerge from the discussion.
- Write these voices on separate pieces of coloured paper, and place these pieces of paper on the floor around the room.
- Invite participants to choose which voice they would like to speak from in the dialogue. The voice they speak from does not have to be their own identity or embodied

experience.

- Invite participants to get up and stand at the piece of coloured paper that represents their chosen voice.

**Remember!** If the ecosystem dialogue is your first session of the event, remember to first run through the 'must-haves' of an agenda, which include, introductions, welcome, icebreakers, principles for participation, and any other framing you would like to offer to participants for collectively holding space before you start.

## 2. Dialogue part 1: Surfacing key tensions

- To initiate the dialogue, invite one of the voices to start by giving their perspective on the issue.
- Encourage the flow of dialogue by inviting other voices to respond.
- It is important to allow the dialogue to flow. If participants get stuck, the facilitator can step in and act as provocateur in the discussion.
- Let participants know that they can move from one voice to the other, especially if they feel a particular voice is not fully present in the space.
- If new voices emerge, allow those to also enter the dialogue.
- Note that at this point, the dialogue may focus predominantly on the problems, the tensions and points of difference. Allow that to surface for at least 15-20 minutes.

## 3. Dialogue part 2: Shifting from problem to deepen dialogue

- Pause the dialogue for a moment. Suggest to participants that, now, their role is to think about how to build on what another actor or voice is saying. For example, if one voice surfaces a problem from their perspective, another voice can ask questions about that problem, or ask what that actor feels they need.
- Remind participants of the principle of 'yes, and...' This ensures all issues that surface are acknowledged as opposed to invalidated or broken down, and at the same time, actors are encouraged to think about how to shift those issues.
- Again, allow at least 15-20 minutes for this stage, depending on the number of participants in the dialogue.

## 4. Dialogue part 3: Appreciation

- Again, pause the conversation. Acknowledge what has been accomplished so far: surfacing issues and working to shift from problematising to thinking together in dialogue.
- Allow at least ten minutes of dialogue from different voices to express appreciation for one another and what each one brings, and how it contributes to the greater ecosystem.

## 5. Debriefing

- Invite participants to return to their chairs in the circle.
- Allow at least ten minutes of debriefing. Ask participants what the dialogue raised for

them.

- Invite participants to give feedback on the process: what they appreciated about it, what surprised them, and what challenges it presented.

## **6. Moving forward**

- Note some of the issues that surfaced in the debrief.
- Split participants into break out groups to discuss what could be done to address those issues as the whole ecosystem. A good framework for discussions could include addressing strengths, struggles and solutions that are relevant to different actors.
- Allocate time at the end of the break out group discussions for feedback to the larger group.

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