

## 10 tips to ensure a meaningful dialogue with your primary constituents

Resilient Roots: conquering the feedback loop - Part 4 of 5: “Dialogue”

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*In the Resilient Roots initiative, 14 organisations from all over the world are running pilot projects to test new primary constituent accountability mechanisms. In most cases, these mechanisms focus on collecting and using feedback from the key constituents of each organisation.*

*Feedback is an important element of improving accountability, and for this process to be meaningful feedback mechanisms must include all 5 stages of a closed feedback loop. You can read more about primary constituent accountability in [this blog post](#), and learn about “closing feedback loops” in [this 2 minute video](#).*

*In this blog series, we want to highlight some key considerations for every stage of the feedback loop, share solutions to common challenges and simple tips that can help you harness feedback to improve primary constituent accountability. To illustrate this process, we are using examples and learnings from Resilient Roots pilot projects.*

*Are you ready now? Then let’s get started!*

By now, you have [designed](#) your accountability feedback mechanism, and you have [collected](#) and [analysed](#) the feedback from your primary constituents. Now it is time for perhaps the most important part of building trust with your primary constituents: **meaningful dialogue**.

Meaningful dialogue means going back to the people who gave you feedback and discussing the questions, findings, and responses together. This can happen in a number of ways that do not necessarily involve an in-person conversation. Below we list several examples of how Resilient Roots partners have done this. The dialogue step allows your primary constituents to directly inform the decisions and changes you make in response to the feedback you received, and like so “[close the feedback loop](#)”.

In this blog post we want to share common challenges you may encounter during dialogues with your primary constituents, and 10 tips for how to make this process more rewarding.

### 1. Share feedback back in an interesting way

If we want to build lasting relationships with our constituents we need to come back to them with the preliminary findings of a feedback exercise. To determine what you need to discuss with your constituents, it is important to first identify what information is interesting for them and what requires further discussion. This first response should balance: having content that is useful and sparks discussion; efficiency (time considerations); and a good platform (both in format and in place) that will allow you to have the exchange you desire.

One of the ways [Projet Jeune Leader](#) (PJL) has a dialogue with their constituents is through their monthly newsletter. The newsletter includes updates about their work, general findings from feedback activities and how they plan to respond. To ensure this newsletter has maximum reach and impact, they also ask students to take the newsletter home and do an exercise with their parents about the organisation's work. For example, they ask their female students to ask their mothers about their experience of getting their first period. They also ask students and parents to react to the feedback shared in the newsletter, through an open section at the end that can be returned to PJL staff. In this way, both students and parents get interested in the work of PJL, read about the feedback PJL receives, and can respond to the findings in a pretty accessible and non-resource intensive way for the organisation.

## **2. Better understand how representative your feedback is**

When you start collecting feedback you will probably not be able to hear from absolutely all of your primary constituents, especially if they live in remote areas or if your time and resources are limited. Therefore, once you collect and analyse feedback from a certain group, you can also use the dialogue stage to cross-check your findings with other groups you work with. How useful this is depends on the nature of the feedback exercise and how relevant the findings are from one group to another one. But when the conditions are right, this can help you to get a better impression of how representative the feedback is of other constituents' experiences. Ultimately, this will help you devise better responses to what you are hearing.

A good technique to gauge the representativeness of "negative" feedback is sharing a critical quote or statement with a wider group and inviting them to react to it. This often helps open up "hard" conversations, as people tend to feel more comfortable sharing a critical opinion or experience once they notice they are not the only ones who feel that way.

Our Resilient Roots partner from Uganda, for example, organises several feedback-centred Focus Group Discussions that build on one another. The group from the second meeting is shown feedback and quotes from the first meeting, to spark a discussion. This also gives them the opportunity to dig deeper into issues and how these are experienced by different constituents.

## **3. To have a constructive dialogue, you first need good communication channels!**

If you have been following the blog series then you have definitely heard this one before: it is vital to identify the engagement channels and approaches that work best for your organisation...we cannot emphasise this enough!. This is the foundation of your relationship with your constituents - **without a strong means to communicate you cannot build accountability**. These can be a combination of digital or face to face approaches; written or oral, and take an infinite number of formats ranging from a social media post, to traditional media and radio, magazines, newsletters, or a focus group discussion.

If you are unsure what channels (yes, plural) are best for you and your primary constituents, you can simply ask, and test some out until you find the ones producing the most consistent and high quality results. This is how the [Palestinian Center for Communication and](#)

[Development Strategies](#) (PCCDS) built a more effective dialogue with their constituents. After any engagement or activity they would ask their participants how they would like to stay informed, for example during the final minutes of a meeting or in a question at the end of an online/paper survey. They found out that in urban areas people preferred WhatsApp and Facebook groups as a means to keep in touch virtually. Meanwhile in more rural areas, PCCDS organises in-person tea sessions with constituents to discuss and report back on issues related to their work. Whatever the means you end up using, ensure you check they work for your primary constituents!

#### **4. Verify whether you've understood the feedback correctly**

After collecting and analysing feedback from the people you work with, you will likely have MORE questions than when you started. *What did they mean by X? I wonder how many people also feel this way? If we did Y instead, would that be any better?* - Enter the dialogue phase, to help you get to the bottom of feedback and clarify any unanswered questions you may have.

How you get back to your constituents to delve deeper into the feedback does not need to follow the same process as collecting it, or even entail another formal feedback collection process. [Avanzar](#), for example, holds consultations with several of their *Consejos Promotores* (constituent advisory groups) to together unpack the feedback Avanzar receives. These groups also help them identify priority areas for action (from a constituent perspective) and what elements need to be brought back to a wider audience for further discussion. Going through it together also helps Avanzar mitigate against any possible misunderstandings, blind spots and wrong assumptions when devising responses.

#### **5. Be open about what you can and can't do!**

Often organisations receive requests from their primary constituents that are not necessarily in line with the organisation's mission, activities or capacities. No matter the reason, or how far this feedback is from your organisation's reality, it is really important to not disregard it.

Unrealistic expectations are usually a symptom of constituents not understanding what the organisation does and does not do, which should be repeatedly clarified. Part of this process entails clearly explaining **why** expectations and feedback are out of scope whenever you are establishing a dialogue with your constituents. Remember that at the core of any accountability process, you are trying to ensure your primary constituents feel heard and that you are taking their opinions seriously!

[FemPlatz](#)' primary constituents have very high expectations about the activities the organisation should do with their communities. However, the organisation is primarily advocacy focused and therefore much of the feedback and suggestions they receive around service provision are out of scope. As such, FemPlatz explained their constituents through their newsletter and during in-person meetings why they are/aren't able to meet different such demands. This step is a crucial part of managing expectations and receiving better feedback next time! FemPlatz have also gone one step further in this process by connecting their constituents with other women's organisations in Serbia whose line of work is closer to the needs they are hearing.

## **6. Listen to understand and not to respond!**

Sometimes the dialogue phase can be the most vulnerable step in the feedback loop, as we often have to go back to our constituents and have deeper (often difficult) conversations.

Receiving critical feedback about our work can be hard to hear, especially if we feel the criticism isn't particularly justified or something that we can do anything about. However, we must learn to not take feedback personally (we know this is easier said than done!) and put creating an open and trusted environment at the forefront of our dialogue. Remember that the purpose of this process is to learn and not to measure success.

To do this, [Poverty Reduction Forum Trust](#) (PRFT) works hard to listen and make sure their constituents feel heard during dialogue sessions. They openly invite their partners to share everything that is on their mind by creating a safe space for people to express themselves freely. They capture what is shared without judgement and only wait until the end to respond to what they've heard, always giving people the chance to ask further questions. This approach creates an atmosphere where their primary constituents can open up without the fear of negative responses and start to appreciate being consulted.

When we create positive experiences listening to our constituents, this encourages them to give more and better feedback next time. As a wise CIVICUS colleague once put it, **whatever you do, prioritise the relationship!**

## **7. Be open about things that have gone wrong**

Another way to improve the dialogue phase is to be very open about our mistakes. We know there is enormous pressure on CSOs to perform, focusing our attention on the positive outcomes and results of the activities we carry out. But this success-driven culture can be toxic (or even unattainable), and strongly affect the relationships we are trying to build with our constituents. To be able to have a dialogue with people we need to be honest about both the highs and lows, including our failures. If we make mistakes (even when we don't realise them!) it is very likely they will come up when we collect feedback, and we must address these head on, resisting the urge to sweep the "difficult comments" under the carpet. After all, failure is a natural part of any learning and growth process!

For example, during a feedback session [Video Volunteers](#) (VV) found many of their primary constituents were unhappy with their decision to close some of their regional offices. This decision was driven by financial necessity, but was done without consulting their Community Correspondents. After discussing the situation, VV openly recognised this failure and has since engaged in proper consultations on other major issues such as pay and internal communications. Admitting this mistake and then demonstrating its commitment to doing things different has helped clear the air and let the organisation and its constituents move forward together.

## **8. Show how feedback has already led to action**

To support your claim that you will take feedback seriously you can use the dialogue stage to showcase small changes you are already implementing. This sends a signal to those who

haven't given you feedback before that their effort is worth their time, and makes those who did share their input feel heard and validated. [Kusi Warma](#) followed this approach to improve their theater and drama workshops with children. At the end of each lesson they asked for quick feedback, and the next time they started each meeting explaining what they had changed in response to what they heard. These changes can be as small as changing the time of a meeting or the theme of each session, and clearly signal to your constituents how seriously you take their feedback .

### **9. Involve other stakeholders in your dialogue as well**

Depending on what your organisation does, you might have a variety of other stakeholders beyond your primary constituents that you need to bring on board to unpack an issue and find possible solutions. The dialogue stage can thus serve as an opportunity to mobilise support and catalyse action on the feedback received.

Depending on the scope of the feedback, [Marviva](#) involves some key actors with decision making-power in the dialogue phase. For example, this could entail bringing together fishermen with local government authorities to clarify environmental, security, and social welfare issues related to their work. This also helps build accountability between government and communities on these topics. To ensure transparency in this process, they share the findings of the dialogue phase with a broader audience through various communication channels (social media, WhatsApp, and reports), and internally to their Board, management, and other staff at the organisation.

### **10. Use continuous dialogue for relationship-building**

As we've highlighted before, this stage is especially important for building meaningful relationships with your primary constituents. Regardless of how you approach this step, it should always remain a top priority.

[OVD-Info](#) primarily engages its constituents through online channels, allowing it to receive anonymous feedback which protects the identity of the respondents. But this means that building a strong connection with its constituents is more challenging than for organisations engaging in face-to-face dialogues. However, they quickly noticed that by regularly going back to their readers and activists to ask for more input or clarify feedback, they were able to create a more active online community. This incited their network to be more engaged and follow more closely the news and messages OVD-Info published, ultimately strengthening the connection they had with their constituents and expanding their regular following.