



## **CIVICUS Democracy Dialogues Guidelines**

### **1. Introduction**

These guidelines are intended to give members of the CIVICUS alliance practical advice on how to convene democracy dialogues. Democracy dialogues are a key part of the process of consulting on and developing the thematic part of the 2018 State of Civil Society Report, on the theme of 'Reimagining Democracy'. For more information about the process of developing the report, which also includes guest articles and interviews with activists, please see our [background note](#).

Democracy dialogues will consist of short, focused sessions in which small groups of people come together to discuss a facet of the theme and the possible responses that can be offered or are already being tried. They will identify key challenges, civil society responses and recommendations for action. As democracy dialogues should not take long to organise or conduct, the intention is that they can easily be added onto existing convening activities.

The following sections offer guidelines and practical tips and suggestions on how to convene a democracy dialogue. These guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive or exhaustive. The democracy dialogue concept is designed to be highly adaptable to any given context, in a variety of civic space conditions, and to the interests of the host organisation and participants. CIVICUS staff will be on hand at all times to give advice on developing and convening a democracy dialogue – if you have any questions, please email [andrew.firmin@civicus.org](mailto:andrew.firmin@civicus.org) or [ines.pousadela@civicus.org](mailto:ines.pousadela@civicus.org)

### **2. In advance of the dialogue – key questions and preparation**

In planning a democracy dialogue, two key and related questions should be considered:

- What is the specific issue to be addressed?
- Who needs to be present to address that specific issue?

Regarding the issue: Democracy dialogues will work best if they speak to a current and topical issue rather than ask questions about democracy in the abstract. They should be focused on practical issues rather than theoretical questions. Key questions to consider when deciding on the issue to be addressed may include:

- Is there a burning issue in this specific context?
- Has there been a recent development that has raised questions or concerns about democratic freedoms and people's ability to participate in decision-making?

- Are there particular institutions about which people have concern?
- Are there coming or recent elections?
- Is there an opportunity for advocacy around an issue that a democracy dialogue can help support?

Regarding participants: Democracy dialogues may be either open to all, or focused on a particular audience. For example, they may be targeted at people who are all members of the same organisation or network, people from a single locality, people working on similar issues or people from particular social groups, including excluded groups. It is envisaged that democracy dialogues will largely involve people drawn from civil society or members of the public, but it may be useful to involve other stakeholders, including from local and national government, political groups, the media, academia and the private sector, as appropriate. Key questions to consider when deciding on the audience include:

- If reaching out to particular groups, how best can you reach them and make sure the people who are in the room are appropriate and representative in some way of the group or groups of people you want to hear from?
- Are there particular people or groups who must be involved, as otherwise the dialogue might be judged as lacking credibility and rejected?
- Are there any special measures that might need to be taken to make people welcome and enable their participation (e.g. disability access, translation into different languages)?

Once a topic has been selected and an audience identified, the agenda should be developed and if possible, circulated in advance so that participants can prepare. A number of potential and adaptable components of an agenda are suggested in the next section.

The following checklist may help in preparations ahead of the dialogue:

- Confirm participants, and identify and invite alternates if needed.
- Share key information with participants in advance and ask them to prepare responses to key questions.
- Identify a facilitator for the dialogue and brief them beforehand.
- Arrange some way of recording the dialogue.
- Undertake social media outreach and conventional media outreach if appropriate.
- Check the meeting room and supplies (e.g. flipcharts, sticky notes).

### **3. During the dialogue**

The following is a suggested agenda that may help in designing a democracy dialogue. It suggests some exercises that could be adapted. Naturally the design of any specific dialogue will be guided by factors such as the issue under consideration, the make-up of the participants and the time available. Where time is limited, it is preferable to skip diagnosis and focus on civil society responses and solutions.

During the dialogue, please take photos, and either before or after the dialogue or during a break, please also consider shooting some short mobile phone videos with participants. These should give the participants an opportunity to speak about one problem of democracy and give of an innovative and creative solution or initiative that is being undertaken to tackle it (for more on this, please see the section on short video interviews in our [background note](#).)

## ***Part 1. Introductions***

At the start of the dialogue it may help to:

- Check that everyone is comfortable with the dialogue being recorded and covered on social media, and whether there are any worries people have about the dialogue.
- Stress that reporting will be under Chatham House rules (points will not be attributed to any particular person) and that the style is informal and conversational rather than formal and presentational.
- Suggest a hashtag (e.g. #democracydialogue) and encourage people to tweet and use other social media.
- Introduce the facilitator and their role.
- Do a tour-de-table – ask each participant to introduce themselves and their organisation/background and briefly say why they came to the dialogue – do they hope to learn something, share something, take away something?
- Give some brief background on what the reimagining democracy process is, why it is important, what will happen with the report of the meeting and what CIVICUS plans to do. Please emphasise the importance of going beyond identifying problems to focus on solutions, and in trying to identify innovative and creative practices to improve democracy. CIVICUS can provide a brief PowerPoint presentation on the rationale and process for our reimagining democracy project if that would help.
- If the participants are unfamiliar with each other, it may also help to do a warm-up exercise before the first session proper begins to build up comfort levels in working in pairs and groups.

## ***Part 2. Defining democracy***

The purpose of this session is to debate key concepts relevant to the theme and to arrive at a shared understanding of terminology around democracy.

Suggestion for this session (30 minutes): The facilitator puts participants into pairs and asks them to discuss for a short time (no more than five minutes) what the word ‘democracy’ means to them, and to come up with a definition they can both agree on. On a sticky note they write a response that they both agree on. If there are ideas they disagree on, they may write these up separately. Notes are stuck to the wall. The facilitator then clusters them according to key themes, in conversation with the group, asking the group if they agree with the common points, which is most important, what is missing, and what they disagreed about when working in pairs. Key definitions and concepts that the group agrees on are written up and displayed throughout the session so participants can refer to them in their discussions.

## ***Part 3. Diagnosis: The current state and direction of travel of democracy***

The purpose of this session is to identify current challenges in democratic practices, trends and drivers and enablers of trends. If time is short, this and the previous sessions could be skipped and instead participants could be asked to think about these questions in advance and come prepared to give answers at the start of the meeting.

Before running this session it is important to define clearly the context to which this exercise applies, i.e., whether it applies to a country, city, locality, institution or particular field. It may

also help to clarify if participants are being asked to speak only from the position of their own experience, or more generally about the context as a whole.

Suggestion for this session (45 minutes): Ask the participants to go into pairs or small groups, depending on the meeting size, and discuss and respond to the following questions:

1. What is the health of democracy in my context?
2. Has it got better or worse in the last five years?
3. Do I expect it to get better or worse in the next five years?
4. What do I think are the main causes of this?

Participants could respond to these questions by such methods as answering on a scale of one to five, or by choosing a traffic light colour (green for good, red for bad, yellow for in between).

Participants then present their responses to the group and the group discusses them. The facilitator in particular asks them to consider why they think the situation is as it is; why it has improved or worsened; and whether it seems likely to improve or worsen. The facilitator encourages participants to focus on identifying the drivers and enablers that lie behind the situation described. The facilitator writes these responses up as they come, and then clusters them. The facilitator asks the participants to identify and agree on three or four key drivers and enablers.

#### ***Part 4. Civil society responses***

The purpose of this session is to focus on civil society responses that are underway, the challenges encountered in responding, what further responses are possible and what support civil society needs to respond.

Suggestion for this session (45 minutes): Again, depending on the number of participants, participants should be divided into pairs or small groups to discuss the following questions:

- How is civil society impacted upon by the key drivers and enablers identified?
- How is civil society already responding to these?
- What innovative and creative ideas are there to improve the practice of democracy?
- What is the one thing civil society could do more of or do additionally to respond most effectively to the drivers and enablers identified?

Groups are asked to identify one good example of a civil society response, and one more thing civil society could be doing to respond. Groups report back, and the facilitator clusters their responses. Participants discuss which of the responses identified is most likely to be possible and effective, identifying two or three key responses overall. If necessary, participants can vote to choose their favoured responses. They then discuss what would be needed to bring their favoured responses about – including in terms of resources, support, connections between different parts of civil society and connections with other actors. Participants may also make recommendations for actors other than civil society.

#### ***Part 5. Wrap-up***

At the end of the dialogue, the facilitator asks each of the participants to identify one personal commitment for action that they can take away with them, based on the discussions held.

#### **4. After the dialogue**

Following the dialogue, please send CIVICUS as soon as possible a short report on the dialogue (see suggested format below) and any other material, including a recording of the session if available, photographs and audio-visual material, any presentations given and photos of material generated during exercises. Please also share any conventional media stories and social media content generated, and include @CIVICUSalliance in any tweets so we can retweet. Please consider writing a short blog about the dialogue for the CIVICUS website. Any content generated will be republished on the CIVICUS website and will be drawn on and potentially referenced in the final synthesis of the report.

Reporting format (2-3 pages are ideal):

- Date and location of the democracy dialogue
- Organisation/organisations convening it
- Number of participants and participant list (name, affiliation, gender and contact details of each participant if possible)
- Focus of the session
- Ideally 3-5 bullet points each on key issues raised during the session, including:
  - Definitions and concepts of democracy
  - Key problems/issues in the context
  - Key civil society responses
  - Challenges/issues in civil society responses
  - Recommendations for (a) civil society and (b) other actors in reimagining democracy
  - Support needs for civil society in responding
  - Any creative/innovative ideas on reimagining democracy not otherwise covered.