



PROCESS DESIGN:
PATHWAYS TOWARD DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE
TO TRANSFORM CONFLICT

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Abstract

This paper offers a framework of principles and practices to create deliberative dialogue and collaborative decision-making processes in polarized and conflict-affected contexts. It argues that addressing such challenges involves not only technical issues but also addressing the relational, cultural, political and structural dynamics that sustain conflict. It outlines the ‘upstream’ phases in convening a legitimate and inclusive basis for a process based on consultative assessment. It then provides a developmental arc of process methods to enable the distinctive functions of dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative decision-making through consensus building. When grounded in co-creation and attention to power, such processes can shift entrenched patterns and support more sustainable and legitimate change. The paper outlines key principles for designing inclusive and adaptive processes that foster trust, mutual understanding, and shared ownership.

Introduction

This report offers guidance for designing deliberative dialogue processes to respond to deep-rooted conflict, polarization, and contentious policy challenges. It outlines methods for developing different phases from initial formation through to implementation. Engaging people from across conflict divides in well designed and skilfully facilitated processes can create a pathway toward transforming relationships and systems. As they begin to experiment their way towards generating a system that responds to their divergent needs and interests, they lay the foundation for collaborative stewardship of their shared future.

Such processes tend to be messy, uncertain, and complex because the challenges they seek to address are not primarily technical. Conflict-affected systems are shaped by histories of harm, unequal power relations, narratives of fear and mistrust, and multi-faceted grievances. Process designers need to work carefully with the parties to design engagement that is suited to the context and the core needs of all affected. This includes a purpose that is responsive to the diverse—and often divergent—needs, fears, interests, identities, and aspirations of those within the system. Participants need a voice in both co-creating the process and its outcomes.

Process design in these contexts must therefore incorporate political, relational, moral, psychological, and cultural logics. It requires intentional alignment of purpose, structure, and method: **dialogue** cultivates empathy and shifts narratives; **deliberation** enables joint analysis and innovation; **collaborative decision-making** translates insight into action through inclusive agreements that address the core concerns of all involved. Working toward consensus signals a move away from coercive unilateralism and affirms concern for the good of the whole.

General principles for deliberative dialogue in response to conflict

There are a number of principles that can guide a process to help participants work towards inclusive, equitable and sustainable outcomes through integrative solutions to challenging and conflictual issues.

Design with emergence in mind to transform the ‘rules’ of conflict-habituated systems. Process designers can create conditions that support constructive change, but they cannot compel it. Societies, communities, and organizations are complex adaptive systems, generated through persistent patterns of interaction. These patterns are shaped by the implicit ‘rules’ of habitual ways of interacting that govern how people relate, compete, and cooperate. These rules are rarely codified and operate at the level of mental models encoded in the culture(s) of the group. To change the pattern of interactions is to change the system. As Donella Meadows explains, the most effective ways to change a system is by shifting the “mindset or paradigm out of which the system – its goals, power structure, rules, its culture – arises.”[1]

Transforming conflict-habituated systems requires profound shifts in these underlying mental models. Dialogue can create new ways of interacting that open new possibilities. As people across identities, groups, and institutions begin to engage differently, develop personal relationships, and experiment with cooperation, new ways of relating can emerge that are qualitatively different from past patterns. Such emergence cannot be predicted or controlled; when it arises, it is vital to adapt the process to the momentum it generates.

At the same time, conflict systems are often resistant to change. If deeper systemic forces and logics remain unaddressed, early gains may fail to take hold, leading to a ‘snap-back’ to familiar dynamics. This risk increases when changes are not institutionalized or when processes fail to engage the wider system. Designers, convenors, and participants must therefore grapple honestly with the realities of the context and work together to respond skilfully—with special care to how process outcomes will be used to effect change.

Embrace the ethic of ‘go slow to go fast’. In fragile or combustible conflict systems, careful consultation with those positioned differently across the system is essential. Processes cocreated with those across lines of fracture are far more likely to gain legitimacy and foster the shared ownership needed for sustainability. Rather than relying on prescriptive designs, effective processes adopt an adaptive and responsive ethos. Participants become co-equals in shaping the process and its focus, supporting the gradual emergence of working-level trust.

Prioritize trust building. Erosion of trust is a defining feature of conflict and polarization. Transformative processes must therefore be anchored in sustained efforts to cultivate trust. Organizers must themselves be trustworthy and recognize that trust must be earned. Creating the time and space for trust to develop between participants is necessary to create conditions in which all their subsequent change can occur. As adrienne maree brown reminds us, we must “move at the speed of trust.”[2]

Begin—and continue—with inquiry. Deliberative dialogue unfolds through questions: open-hearted, paradox-holding, and generative questions that invite curiosity and reframe entrenched certainties. Inquiry helps participants move beyond rigid positions toward greater openness and creativity in imagining ways forward.[3]

[1] Donella Meadows. nd. *Leverage Points: Places to Intervene in a System*. Donella Meadows Archives.

<https://donellameadows.org/archives/leverage-points-places-to-intervene-in-a-system/>

[2] adrienne maree brown. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017. p41.

[3] Catherine Barnes. *Framing Questions for Dialogue and Deliberation*. Toda Peace Institute, 11 August 2026.

Reframing conflict to connect around shared human needs. The way a conflict is initially framed is rarely the way it is transformed. Skilled designers listen deeply for the underlying values, fears, and hopes that drive conflict—and that could be reframed as resources for change. Most people long for security, recognition, belonging and connection. Processes that align with these basic needs and offer credible hope for inclusive outcomes can shift how people engage and imagine future possibilities.

Design with power in mind. Dialogue can cause harm, especially when based on an assumption of symmetry between participants who do not have equal power, voice, or vulnerability. Process design and facilitation must address the ways participants' social identities position them differently in the wider context of systems and structures of power. Especially in contexts of systemic oppression, violence, or exclusion, movement building within marginalized groups may be a necessary precursor to broader engagement across the system.

Involve those on the margins. Those on the margins of a conflict system often perceive dynamics that remain invisible to those at the centre. By multiplying vantage points, processes can generate greater systemic insight and innovation. Their inclusion can expand perspectives, unlock new ideas, disrupt binary thinking—as well as help ensure their goals and needs are taken into account.

Beware of dialogue fatigue and cynicism. Poorly designed or inconclusive processes carry real costs. When participation fails to lead to meaningful change, or when outcomes are not enacted, people may disengage and become cynical about future dialogue efforts. Betrayed trust can deepen conflict and make transformation more difficult. Careful design, follow-through, and accountability are essential to sustaining the credibility of deliberative approaches.

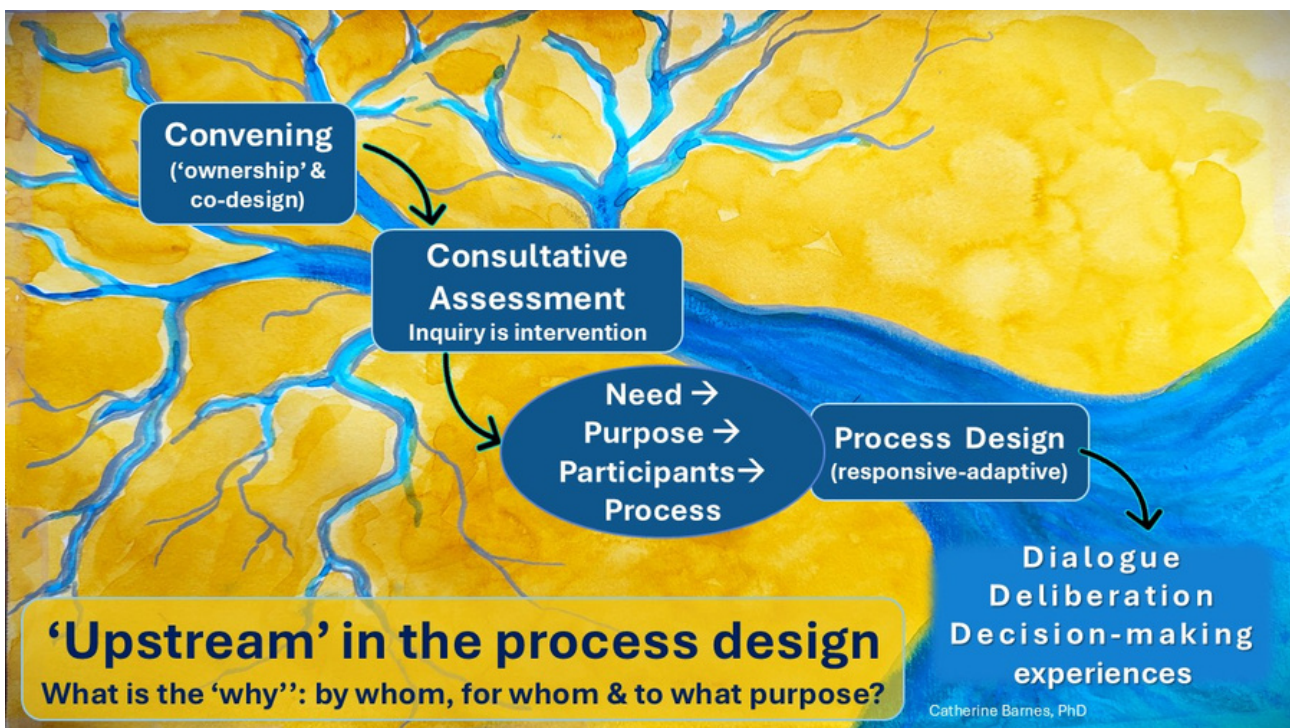


Figure 1: Mapping the 'upstream' of process design

I. Upstream towards creating a process

While the need for a process of some kind may be clear to many, creating the basis for people to come together across divides is difficult. It takes great care to engage the right people in the right kind of process to address the most crucial concerns. This section explores principles and practices for convening, arguing that involving key people who are positioned differently throughout the system to co-create it will increase efficacy and sustainability.

CONVENING GROUPS: SHARED LEADERSHIP IN CO-CREATION AND CO-DESIGN

Every deliberative dialogue process to address entrenched conflict begins with an impulse to act. It arises from a sense—often born of frustration, crisis, or moral urgency—that existing mechanisms for addressing conflict have failed or lost legitimacy. Technical fixes, legal remedies, or adversarial negotiations cannot address deeper relational and systemic dynamics. Something fundamentally different is required.

A critical factor is whether the impetus for the process comes from within the system itself. Shared ownership of both process and outcomes significantly increases the likelihood of sustainability. External actors may contribute skills, resources, or impartiality, but their involvement is often time-bound. Internal actors, whose futures are tied to the system, carry a deeper stake in sustaining change. Effective processes therefore often emerge through partnerships between internal leaders and carefully chosen external allies.

In contexts of deep division, convening a process is rarely effective when led by a single institution; few have sufficient legitimacy to convene across an entire conflict system. Early advocates can reach out to form a group of co-conveners: individuals or institutions with credibility, standing, or moral authority from leadership roles, professional expertise, community trust, or long-standing relationships. Together, they create a broader base to develop and steer an emerging process and help buffer against perceptions of bias or hidden agendas.

Processes may be co-sponsored, hosted by an actor perceived as impartial, or guided by a team that mirrors the wider system and embodies shared leadership. Decision-makers can play an important role by sponsoring or participating, signalling seriousness and opening pathways to implementation. Yet their formal positions may also constrain them. Governments, for example, are often seen as parties to the conflict rather than neutral convenors. Sometimes non-governmental organizations, academic institutions, religious bodies, or international actors may be better positioned to host, while still benefiting from governmental endorsement.

This convening configuration serves as the steering body of the process. They draw on a combination of competencies: political awareness and the ability to read shifting power dynamics; cultural sensitivity and the capacity to create inclusive, legitimate spaces; and an ability to access resources, while remaining attentive to risks of dependency or distortion. Clear terms of reference support transparency, role clarity, and communication with participants and stakeholders.

Beyond convenors, deliberative dialogue processes rely on other intermediaries to provide specialized support. This can include skilled and experienced process designers, facilitators, communications and documentation, logistics, and technological infrastructure. In complex processes, additional roles may emerge, such as coaching participants, supporting trauma-informed practice, managing security concerns, or liaising with external stakeholders and media.

These functions are not merely technical. How intermediaries act, speak, and intervene shapes perceptions of safety, fairness, and legitimacy, often in subtle but consequential ways. The group engages continuously with both participants and context, sensing emerging dynamics, navigating political sensitivities, and adapting in response to what is emerging. They typically assume responsibility for the process, even in moments of uncertainty or backlash.

Their credibility is continually tested and strengthened through their actions, requiring transparency, integrity, and responsiveness. For this reason, they should cultivate reflexivity and ethical awareness: they must consider how their actions are interpreted within contexts shaped by power, identity, and history. In doing so, they help either expand or constrain what becomes possible within the process.

DEFINING THE PURPOSE: THE 'STRATEGIC WHY' AND THE 'STRATEGIC WHO'

Design is shaped by purpose. Yet in contexts where almost everything is contested, it is challenging to develop a coherent purpose that sensitively responds to the divergent needs and perspectives and offers a promising way forward. Powerful processes emerge out of developmental phase of iterative conversations to discover driving forces and dynamics and who must be involved in co-creating the change. It should be strategically positioned within a historical and structural context, shaping both the people involved and the issues at stake. The process must be designed with power dynamics in mind and address the potential for doing harm.[4]

A careful and rigorous conflict assessment feeds into process design, particularly when engaging in socio-political change and conflict transformation. Effective context assessment combines review of secondary sources with eliciting lived perspectives from those within the system. Together, these approaches generate a multi-layered understanding of issues, actors, histories, power dynamics, narratives, and perceptions.[5]

In addition to the sociopolitical context, process designers will need to develop an internal 'map' of the various issues, actors, histories and perceptions that have led to this moment and will shape what is needed and desired in response. An iterative process of identifying the **strategic why** and the **strategic who** helps define the system that is the focus of the process. This involves identifying the focal system to be changed, the focal issues to be addressed, and who would need to be a part of the process to make change happen.

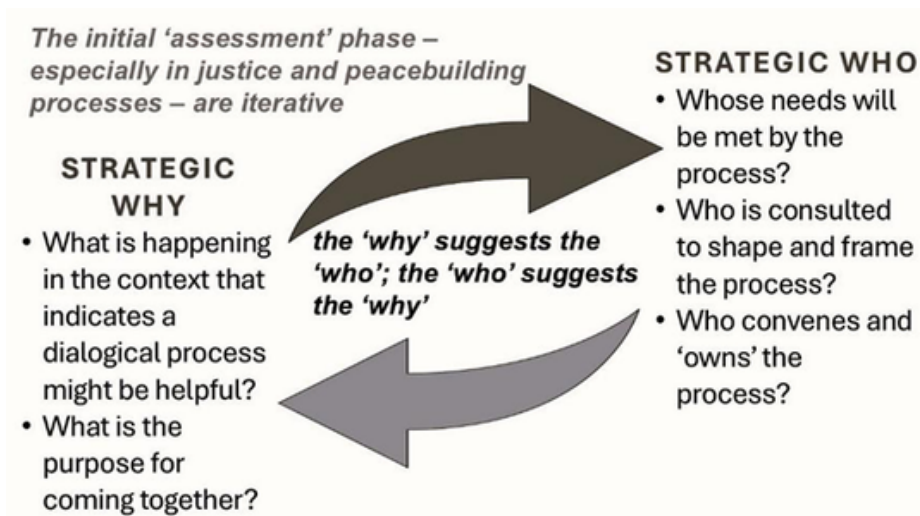


Figure 2: Iterative identification of the 'strategic why' and the 'strategic who'

[4] Catherine Barnes, *Empowering the Polity: Governance, Conflict and Deliberative Dialogue*, Toda Peace Institute, 27 April 2026.

[5] A useful guide to conflict analysis at the societal level is Lisa Schirch. 2013. *Conflict Assessment and Peacebuilding Planning: Toward A Participatory Approach to Human Security*. Boulder and London: Kumarian Press.

CONSULTATIVE ASSESSMENT: INQUIRY AS INTERVENTION

To create a sound basis for deliberative dialogue, convenors need to engage in extensive consultation with people positioned differently across the system. This consultative assessment shapes how the situation is framed, who is involved, the methods used, and how the process is framed. These consultations begin to build trust and signal an invitational ethos: the process is being created with people not just for them.

A key principle is to talk with people who reflect the diversity of perspectives, interests, and identities present in the wider context. to participate in the process. Conversations typically explore how people frame the situation, how they understand its history, what they see as motivating different groups, and what they aspire to or fear. They examine who must be involved, what conditions are necessary for participation, what risks participation may entail, and what futures are imagined if change occurs—or if it does not.

Consultation itself is an intervention. The choice of who to engage, how questions are framed, and how conversations unfold all shape the emerging process. Inquiry and change begin simultaneously; well-crafted questions can spark reflection on assumption, encourage perspective taking, and serious thought about alternate ways of addressing the situation – all before a dialogue process begins.[6]

These consultations require time, care, and intentional inclusion, particularly of those who are marginalized or distrustful. The principle of ‘go slow to go fast’ is foundational. The aim is to build legitimacy, avoid reinforcing existing power imbalances, and strengthen the resilience of the process. As engagement deepens and perspectives accumulate, purpose becomes clearer and momentum grows, drawing in those who recognize the process as responsive to shared concerns and possibilities for change. As such, these consultations are key to forming relational foundations of trust that can power dialogue.[7] Through these iterative conversations, the core parameters for the process design begin to emerge, with greater clarity around three interlinked questions: [8]

- **What is the purpose?** – an understanding of changes that would likely be possible if this process were to succeed; clarifies the strategic why.
- **Who needs to be involved?** – the groups or individuals whose participation is necessary if its purpose is to be fulfilled; identifies the strategic who.
- **What conversations must take place?** – an emerging sense of the key issues at stake and the guiding questions at the centre of the process, along with what methods might help the group work towards fulfilling the purpose.

CODIFYING INTENTIONS: PURPOSE, MANDATE AND STATUS

A deliberative dialogue process is grounded in a clear and compelling sense of purpose: what is happening in the context that calls people to invest themselves in shaping a new way forward? It frames issues in inclusive language that respects divergent perspectives while holding open the possibility of collaborative work. It should speak directly to the need inherent in the situation, providing intrinsic motivation for participation that helps sustain engagement through difficult, uncertain, or emotionally intense phases of the work. Often, a powerful purpose emerges only through dialogue itself. When it does, participants tend to recognize it intuitively. It becomes the organizing frame for deliberation, guiding choices about participation, methods, sequencing, and outcomes.

In addition to the purpose, the convening group will need to clarify key parameters for the process. Key considerations include whether the body will have decision-making authority, the status of the process (ranging from confidential to fully public), and how the outcomes will be used to inform change—including possible pathways for implementation. Clarifying these parameters strengthens legitimacy and increases the likelihood that outcomes will be acted upon rather than ignored or contested.

[6] Barnes, *Framing Questions*.

[7] Barnes, *Framing Questions*.

[8] The three basic questions are widely attributed to Ron Lippett, one of the originators of the field of organizational development. The author has elaborated on them to link back to other aspects described in this paper.

In many contexts, emerging intentions are formalized through written documents such as concept notes, mandates, charters, and terms of reference. These documents help align expectations, clarify authority, and communicate with stakeholders and sponsors. They also support transparency and accountability, which are critical for building trust in polarized or conflict-affected environments.

II. Creating the overall process design

Once the overall basis for a process has been developed, it is time to design how it can be implemented. Processes designed for conflict transformation rarely consist of a single event. Instead, they typically involve multiple moments of engagement, activities between convenings, spaces for reflection and learning, ongoing communication, and continual monitoring and adaptation over time. Designing for this unfolding requires both clarity of intention and flexibility in execution. This section explores logics for representation in the process, modalities and practical parameters, and methods for ‘harvesting’ what emerges through the dialogue.

PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION: ENGAGING THE ‘STRATEGIC WHO’

Participants and purpose are co-determinant of the process: without one, the other will not succeed. Defining the parameters for participating and then determining who should be invited to take part are crucial decisions in the process design stage. Selection criteria must be grounded in context, address power dynamics, and be responsive to the lived experiences most relevant to the process. Including marginalized voices—such as youth, women, or those who span boundaries between groups—can expand the range of perspectives, challenge dominant narratives, and open new pathways for innovation.

Sometimes it is fairly evident who, at a minimum, needs to be in the process. If the process is addressing a smaller system and is face-to-face only, then it may be possible to directly involve all key people. Yet when addressing a larger system, participants in effect ‘re-present’ the range of perspectives, interests, needs and values within the dialogue. Representation is inherently complex. They need to form a microcosm of the system, manifesting the attributes of the whole. Ideally, participants will bring developments within the process back into their communities, creating a valuable communication channel connecting them to the process in ways that lay foundations for ‘whole of system’ change.

Different purposes call for different participation logics. Processes focused on public policymaking often seek to mirror the broader population through open calls or random selection (sortition). By contrast, processes addressing conflict, polarization, or political settlements typically require the inclusion of recognized stakeholder groups—such as political actors, government institutions, civil society, business leaders, or traditional authorities. Even in these cases, intentional inclusion of marginalized actors remains essential.

WORKING WITH SCALE: FROM THE FEW TO THE MANY

Another central design challenge concerns scale. Some processes are necessarily small and intensive, while others must engage hundreds or thousands of people. Different modalities can be used to move between depth and breadth.

An **accordion design** alternates between small-group intensive dialogue and wider engagement. Insights generated in smaller groups are periodically shared, tested, and enriched by larger constituencies before being brought back into more focused deliberation. This allows the process to retain relational depth while benefiting from broader input and legitimacy.

Simultaneous small-group designs link many parallel dialogue groups together through shared questions, harvesting mechanisms, and iterative feedback loops. When grounded in dialogical connection, these designs can scale engagement without losing coherence.

Enlarging over time: from small micro- to larger-macro systems levels. Processes can move from small yet representative group (sometimes in the form of a convening group, as described above) to a larger and even more inclusive group and then up to a wider open public process. Such processes enlarge sequentially over phases.

Asynchronous and digitally enabled modalities extend participation across time and geography. They allow people who cannot be present simultaneously to contribute, reflect, and respond. While such modalities cannot fully replace in-person dialogue—particularly in high-conflict contexts—they can complement it and increase inclusivity.

Movement-building and cross-system dialogue. In some contexts, especially where there are profound power asymmetries, it may be neither ethical nor effective to begin with cross-system dialogue. Instead, the initial work may focus on movement-building or capacity-building within marginalized or oppressed groups. Creating safe spaces for internal dialogue enables these groups to articulate their experiences, clarify their interests, and build coherence before engaging across divides. Paradoxically, stronger internal coherence often makes more effective cross-system dialogue possible. Process design must therefore remain attentive to when separate spaces and shared spaces are each appropriate, and how they can be sequenced over time.

PRACTICAL PARAMETERS

Process designers must attend to practical parameters such as time, scale, congruence of methods, resources, and costs. These parameters are not merely logistical; they shape what kinds of relationships and outcomes are possible. Methods should reinforce rather than undermine one another, and should align with the values the process seeks to promote. A process that aspires to inclusivity and shared ownership must embody those principles in its design.

- **Time** is often one of the most constraining factors. Deep dialogue and trust-building require time, yet political or organizational pressures may demand rapid results. Designers must balance realism with integrity, sometimes advocating for slower processes in order to achieve more durable outcomes.
- **Scale** affects methodology. What works well for ten people may fail with one hundred. Designers must therefore select and adapt methods appropriate to group size, and consider how different scales of engagement can be linked coherently.
- **Resources** and costs inevitably shape design choices. While limited resources can constrain ambition, excessive funding can also distort accountability and ownership. Sustainable processes tend to be those that remain grounded in the capacities and commitments of those within the system itself.

PLANNING FOR THE HARVEST: GATHERING WHAT EMERGES

Deliberative dialogue aims to generate outcomes that extend beyond the intrinsic experience of participation. Harvesting refers to the intentional practices used to gather, make sense of, and communicate what emerges through the process. Products such as reports, visual summaries, or multimedia outputs can help translate learning to wider audiences and support accountability. Anticipating this function and planning for gathering, developing and producing these products should be included in the planning stage.

Harvests may be tangible or intangible, collective or individual. They can include insights, shared narratives, relationships, commitments, prototypes, recommendations, or decisions. In conflict transformation work, shifts in understanding or relationships may be as significant as formal agreements. When emerging insights are reflected back to participants, it can strengthen learning and enable the group to build on their discoveries.

Participatory processes require participatory harvests. Meaning-making should be shared rather than imposed by convenors or facilitators. When done well, harvesting strengthens the impact of deliberative dialogue by making learning visible, transferable, and actionable. It connects the internal experience of participants with the wider system and supports sustained transformation over time.

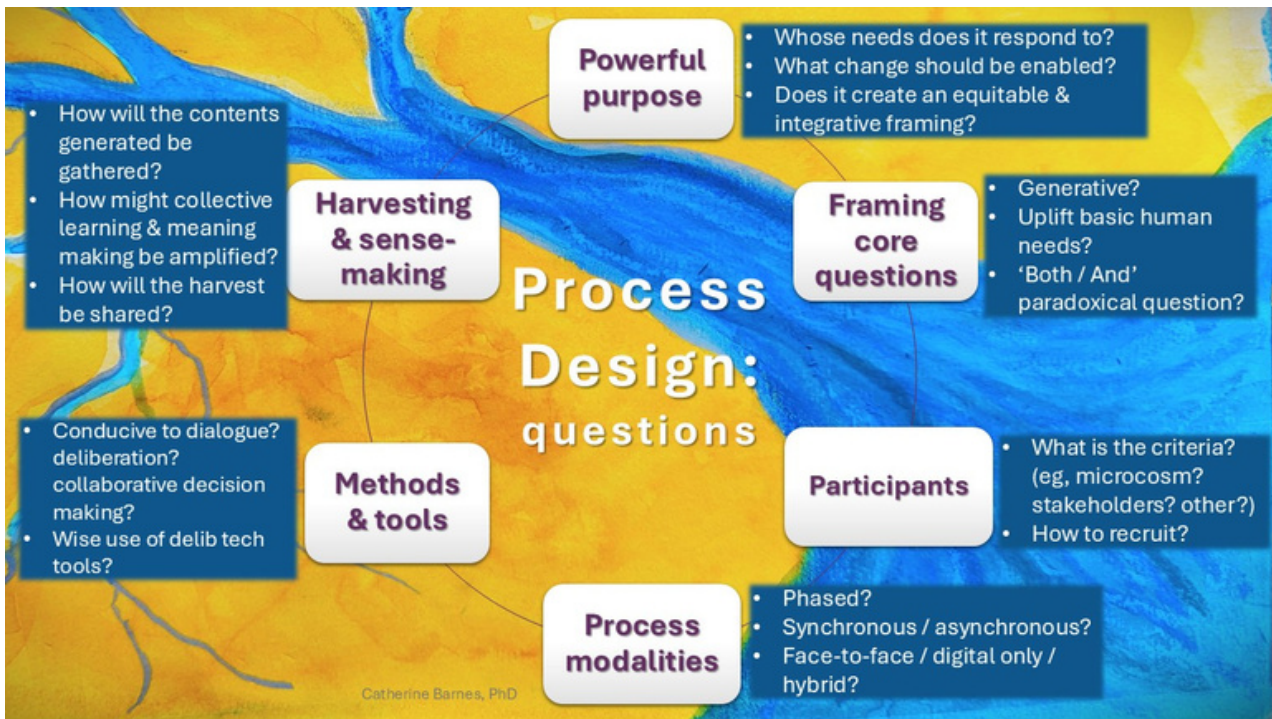


Figure 3: Key questions for process design

III. Designing for dialogue, deliberation and collaborative decision-making

Dialogical processes to support conflict transformation cultivate a developmental arc. Dialogue helps generate empathy, respect and the will to work with others across divides; deliberation enables the group to generate a shared framework incorporating multiple perspectives of what must be addressed and innovation on how they can do so; collaborative decision-making based on consensus-building enables groups to reach agreements that address the core interests and needs of all involved. Process designers can cultivate these changes by using methods and focal questions conducive to laying the foundations for each stage.



Figure 4: Dialogue, Deliberation & Decision-making Cycle, based on Pruitt & Thomas (2007) and Kaner et al. (2014)

CREATING THE CONTAINER TO HOLD DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

While the early consultations to convene a process will have begun to lay the foundations for engagement, participants are likely to remain wary about what is possible and about each other. Dialogue practitioners must be attentive to creating the conditions conducive to engagement: the quality of the space created within a process and the quality of the container that holds it. As a metaphor, the ‘container’ of dialogue demarcates the material and relational boundaries that shape the experience within the space. It holds people together in ways that feel physically and psychologically safe enough for participants to share stories and ideas—including to risk engaging complexity and conflict—in an exploratory journey of discovery.

Especially in contexts of violence and conflict, this container must have the integrity of a crucible. A crucible is a vessel able to withstand intense heat so that transformation can occur without destruction. In dialogue, emotions generate this heat. The process must enable participants to release energy constructively so that old, dysfunctional perceptions and patterns can be melted away—without people themselves being harmed. The deepest source of this heat is vulnerability. The container must therefore hold participants with sufficient care that they feel humanly supported even as they take risks.

Creating a container capable of holding difficult dialogue requires intentionality across several domains:

- **Invitation and pre-engagement**, grounded in consultative assessment. Thoughtful invitations that speak to participants’ priorities, conditions, and aspirations foster willingness to engage and begin cultivating shared ownership of the process and its outcomes.
- **Security needs**, explored explicitly rather than assumed. Participants must feel that their concerns are taken seriously and addressed. Even when people are willing to take risks, being invited to name those risks demonstrates duty of care and builds trust.
- **Communication agreements and values** that clearly articulate norms for engagement and support participants in bringing their “best selves” to the dialogue.
- **Confidentiality and clarity** about how the process may be discussed beyond the group, aligned with security needs and communication agreements.
- **Qualities of the physical or virtual space**, including layout, aesthetics, accessibility, and design principles that support ease, dignity, and connection.
- **Hospitality**, offered in ways that help people feel welcomed and cared for. Whether through shared meals or intentional openings and transitions online, hospitality eases anxiety and nurtures belonging.
- **Spiritual, creative, and artistic dimensions**, which can support meaning-making, healing, and imagination. These may be intentionally incorporated or emerge organically, always with sensitivity to cultural and religious dynamics.
- **Intentional openings and closings**, which ground participants in purpose, honour what has occurred, and orient attention toward what comes next.
- **Well-designed process methods**, which act as the structural boundaries of the container and build confidence that the group can move together toward its purpose.
- **Facilitation and logistics**, where calm presence, clarity, and care signal competence and reliability. When logistics are smooth, participants are free to focus on the work; when they are chaotic, trust can erode.

Together, these elements create a container capable of holding the heat of difficult dialogue — strong enough to sustain the fire, yet humane enough to protect those within it.

DIALOGUE GENERATES EMPATHY, CONNECTION AND A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IS AT THE HEART OF THE MATTER

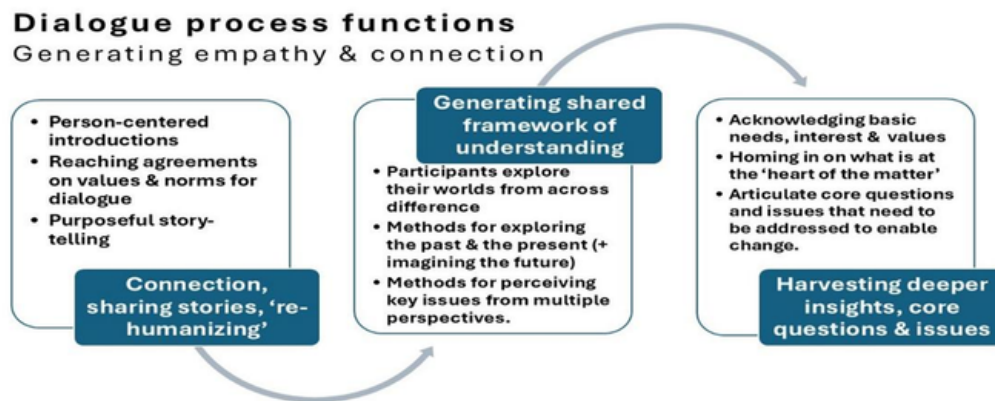


Figure 5: Key process functions for dialogue

Processes that cultivate dialogue foster human connection around difficult issues. Participants can deeply reflect on diverse views, values and perspectives—both their own and others—to develop the foundation of mutual understanding needed to shift into more constructive relationships and engagement in their shared world. As we listen deeply to each other’s stories, we activate the potential for empathy.[9]

Participants begin to understand why people care about the things that matter to them, why they feel the way they feel, believe what they believe, and want what they want. This does not necessarily mean *agreeing* with others’ viewpoints, but it does involve authentic respect and understanding. This can help to shift prior perceptions that ‘they’ are wrong, crazy, or bent on intentionally causing harm.

As participants begin to develop awareness of multiple perspectives and to contextualize their own views and experiences within a fuller whole, **conflict narratives** become more nuanced and complex. This can lead the group to a new level of understanding of their shared context and a better sense of what they want to change and what kind of future they would wish to create.

When people feel acknowledged as human beings and feel that their stories and needs have been heard and recognized—and they are in turn able to acknowledge and better understand the views and interest, needs, values of others—then the basis of their engagement fundamentally changes. They become more willing to collaborate across divides and develop the will to work together to change their situation.

Sharing stories, shifting conflict narratives, fostering connection. Intractable conflicts and toxic polarization are characterized by highly congruent in-group narratives, low levels of complexity in the discourse, and rigid commitment to positional goals. These discourses are almost always organized along ‘us vs them’ binaries that, in turn, intensify polarization.[10]

[9] Empathy enables people to share experiences, needs, and desires and promotes pro-social behavior. This capacity requires an exquisite interplay of neural networks that enables us to perceive the emotions of others, resonate with them emotionally and cognitively, so as to take in the perspective of others, as well as to distinguish between our own and others’ emotions. See, for example, Helen Riess. “The Science of Empathy.” *Journal of Patient Experience*. Vol. 4,2. 2017: 74–77.

[10] See also: Peter Coleman. *The Five Percent: Finding Solutions to Seemingly Impossible Conflicts*. 2011. Public Affairs; Jamil Zaki. *The War for Kindness: Building Empathy in a Fractured World*. 2019. Crown Books.

Dialogue processes are often rooted in narrative storytelling and personal reflection. Participants are invited to speak from their lived experience and how this has shaped their values, beliefs, and aspirations. We learn things that unsettle our prior assumptions, helping to create understanding and complexify narratives. By creating conditions in which a multiplicity of stories can be shared, the hegemonic grip of the dominant ‘single story’ is disrupted.[11] This can loosen the influence of internalized narratives that encode established norms and reinforce institutionalized power relations. Sharing stories offers powerful pathways towards mutual learning; what is deeply learned is not easily unlearned.[12]

Explore the past to make sense of the present. From individual stories, groups can move toward exploring the wider context—their shared story. Methods can include co-creating timelines of their history to better understand how things became the way they are, to identify pivotal moments and missed opportunities, and to perceive repeated patterns and the deep structure of the system they inhabit.

When the group develops awareness of the dynamics shaping present realities, they can focus on what is at stake at this moment in time. It may even lead to acknowledgment of the role a group played in creating harm. It may also support acknowledging the sources of multiply wounded identities. This can lead to the resolve that is necessary to embark on a process of accountability to build justice and repair relationships.

Once they develop a sense of how past decisions shape present realities, they can reflect on how current choices will shape future possibilities. Participants may begin to accept the necessity of change and begin to reappraise goals and beliefs—laying the groundwork for the collaborative will to find ways of moving forward, together.

Engage deeply held value differences and ideological polarization. In contexts where conflict stems from profound worldview and value-based differences, dialogue may generate a sufficient level of understanding and respect that the group can explore how best to coexist, despite the enduring conflict over core values. Sometimes this is through building upon ‘common ground’ concerns. Sometimes it rests on commitment to civil relationships founded in respect, despite disagreement.

Another approach is to use ‘polarity management’,[13] a structured process that engages groups in dialogue around values that appear contradictory but are in fact interdependent, such as unity vs self-determination or individual freedom vs collective security. By exploring tensions, participants surface both the benefits and risks of each pole, building shared understanding and identifying ways to enhance the upsides of each and mitigate the downsides, enabling more integrative, non-zero-sum collaboration.

Acknowledging needs, interests and values as a path towards transformation. As participants develop greater empathy for each other—even if it is primarily of the analytic variety (“*I understand why you believe what you believe and want what you want – even if I do not agree with you*”)—they can turn towards systematic exploration of the underlying values, needs and interests that motivate each group. Once participants can understand and acknowledge the ‘whys’ of their counterparts, they are poised to engage in collaborative conflict resolution.

[11] As Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, points out “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. “The danger of a single story”. TEDGlobal 2009. July 2009. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

[12] We begin to see many unique perspectives and values underpinning what motivates each person. The types of language we use to co-create an understanding of a shared reality is through storytelling, metaphors, and references to powerful images and symbols. These are far richer and more complex than the language typically used in bargaining over specific issues.

[13] For more, see: Barry Johnson. *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvably Problems*. 2014. HRT Press

DESIGNING FOR DELIBERATION: ENABLING JOINT ANALYSIS AND INTEGRATIVE IDEATION

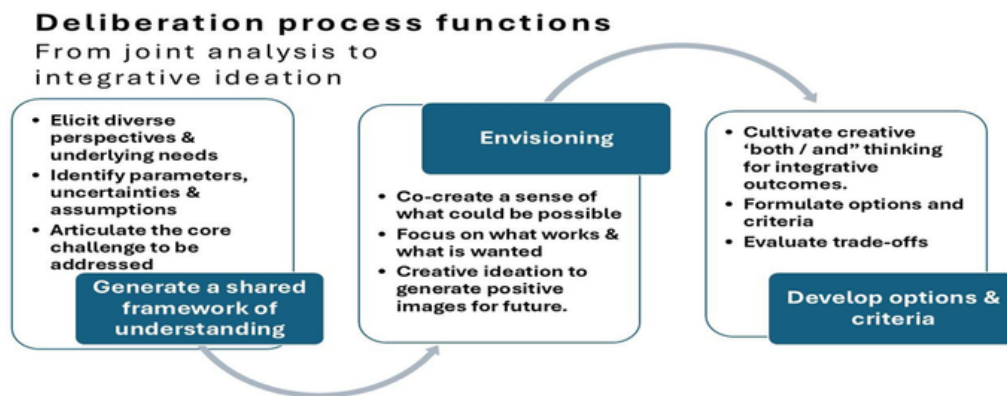


Figure 6: Key process functions for deliberation

When participants have been able to develop sufficient open-mindedness and willingness to take other points of view seriously, the next step is to think together about what can and should be done. Facilitators can work with the group to identify an integrative framework of the specific issues that need to be addressed through deliberation.

- **Homing in on what is at the ‘heart of the matter’**—including an articulating of values and aspirations that will serve as a kind of compass guiding efforts towards the direction they want to move towards.
- **Integrative naming and framing of the key issues** that need to be addressed in an agenda for change.
- **Articulating core questions** that can guide deliberation of these issues, channelling joint analysis in constructive ways.

Deliberation [14] lays the foundations for participants to do their best creative thinking together to create stronger relationships and institutions through joint analysis of the issues at stake to generate ways to address them. This requires innovative thinking to avoid replicating the patterns that have led to dysfunction. Through joint analysis, participants develop their understanding of the issues, generate ideas that can be developed into proposals for a decision-making process.

Deliberation embraces diversity of thought as its greatest resource.[15] Differences arise from participants’ varied identities, lived experiences, disciplinary knowledge, positional roles within a system, or neurodivergent capacities. Constructively embracing differences can help shift people out of their default assumptions about how things could be and should be done. Diversity becomes a catalyst for innovation.

Effective deliberative design follows a rhythm of diverging, emerging, and converging. **Divergence** elicits many ideas and options from multiple perspectives and data sources. **Emergence** enables participants to make sense of what has been shared, seeing connections and patterns as ideas simmer and build upon one another. Convergence then draws the group toward conclusions about what matters most and what actions best meet shared interests, needs, and aspirations.[16]

[14] The English word ‘deliberate’ has its roots in the Latin *librare* “to balance, make level,” from *libra* “pair of scales, a balance” into past participle of *deliberare* “consider carefully, consult,” literally “weigh well.”

[15] Groupthink, in contrast, develops when conformity overrides authentic expression and the urge to maintain harmony suppresses difference. Participants may feel implicit pressure to align with prevailing views, hesitate to introduce dissenting ideas, or disengage and simply “go with the flow.” In contexts where there is hierarchical control or where conflict remains unspoken, avoidance and passivity take hold. Processes then feel uncomfortable, muted, and lack in generative energy.

[16] Adam Kahane, *op.cit.*

There are a number of principles that should be embraced for the deliberative phase:

- *Innovation key for transformation.* Initial ideas often reflect existing mental models—including biases—that may have generated the challenge or conflict in the first place. The search for ‘common ground’ without developing a basis for common insight may lead to lowest common denominator outcomes rather than transformative ones.
- *Lean into what is most deeply cherished and into the basic human needs that must be satisfied.* If deliberative processes can help participants hold the tensions and explore much more deeply the ‘whys’ underlying their positions, insights can then be channelled into the creative ideation that is needed to meet needs and maximize opportunities.
- *Expand the ‘space of possibility’ through a shift from ‘either/or’ to ‘both/and.’* To cultivate integrative ‘win/win’ outcomes the group must shift from the either/or mindset that assumes the situation involves a choice between competing alternatives to a ‘both/and’ approach to generating ways of addressing core needs and aspirations of all parties.
- *Move through iterative, non-linear analysis of ‘what is’ to spark the most innovative insights into ‘what could be’.* Instead of jumping straight to possible solutions, design opportunities for the group to gain fresh perspectives on challenges from different angles to better understand both causes and ways of changing them. Then explore ‘what we want’ before attending to ‘how might we create it?’

GENERATE A SHARED FRAMEWORK OF UNDERSTANDING

Collective analysis often gets bogged down in complexity before emerging into clarity. This can generate frustration. To ease the cognitive load and help participants stick with it, process designers create a clear and purposeful path forward. Joint analysis is enabled through a developmental sequence of guiding questions; deploying a clear process method to explore each question; tracking and building on the ideas and analysis so they are always available to participants; periodically reviewing and synthesizing what is emerging.

Ill-defined problems yield ill-conceived solutions. Avoid the risk of focusing on solutions to the wrong problems—typically one that is only a manifestation of dysfunctions more deeply embedded in the system. A more complete picture can reveal both the entrenched problems and new opportunities. Methods at this stage are geared toward widening understanding of what is happening and why it matters. Participants are invited to identify the multiple factors at play in a context. This can also include identifying positive dimensions around ‘what is going right’ and ‘when are we at our best’ as well as problems. It can be helpful to have multiple perspectives feeding into this process. Even in situations where a conflict is seemingly structured around two ‘sides’, a process that includes the multiplicity of views within each of the sides will open more aspects that can become a source of innovation later in the process.

Some participants may remain stuck on demands or push for predetermined solutions before developing a fuller understanding of what is going on. Deliberation begins with joint analysis. Participants suspend advocacy of unilateral diagnoses and engage instead in collective inquiry. Participants need to be encouraged to suspend, at least temporarily, their advocacy of unilateral diagnoses.

The key to moving beyond opposing positions and seemingly irreconcilable goals lies in understanding underlying motivations. Methods at this stage are geared toward exploring the ‘whys’: the underlying interests, needs, and values. This can reset deliberations at a deeper level of thinking, creating conditions for innovation. They then need to reframe the challenge as a shared problem and a shared opportunity. This reframing can enable them to re-perceive both what is and what might be possible. In many cases, this represents a paradigm shift.

Identify fixed parameters, critical uncertainties, and untested assumptions. As participants develop a more coherent sense of their shared system, they can dive into systematic analysis of unresolved questions, disputes over factual claims, and untested assumptions. Some factors can be addressed with additional attention and resources; others are more fixed. These parameters must be addressed in any realistic analysis and possible solutions. They should also identify and address critical uncertainties, whose future trajectory could dramatically alter the system. Process designers can structure conversations to systematically assess parameters, uncertainties, and assumptions. These insights enable participants to analyse the dynamic drivers of the system and develop a more sophisticated sense of where change efforts might be focused.

Incorporate expertise, data and fact-finding to enhance a comprehensive and accurate view of the system.

Two challenges commonly arise. First, participants may face gaps in their own knowledge. Drawing on expertise from relevant disciplines can deepen understanding and spark new insights. Inspiration may also come from the arts and humanities, which offer alternative lenses for sense-making, clarify what is at stake, and foster hope. Envisioning is often an intensely creative process that requires grasping a compelling whole-system view.

The second aspect is to respond to factual questions and disputes that arise earlier. Especially in hot conflict or highly polarized contexts, where truth is contested and ‘facts’ can be marshalled for ideological contests, the process can include special measures to increase trust. Joint fact-finding trips, joint commissions of experts, and inviting those with specialized expertise from each party’s own groups can help to build an evidentiary basis to inform deliberations.

Sensemaking: developing clarity about “so what...?” From the process of jointly analyzing the challenges they are facing, participants then need to identify “*So what does this mean for us?*” The process should be structured to help participants with collective sensemaking around emerging themes, key tensions, intriguing opportunities, and the core interests, needs and values that need to be addressed for developing options for moving forward together. Harvesting outcomes at this stage centres on two objectives: (a) set of insights with explanatory possibilities; (b) a statement defining meaningful and actionable challenge(s) to be addressed, framing the situation as a joint concern that focuses on deeper drivers rather than surface manifestations. This discernment lays the groundwork for the next stage of ideation.

ENVISIONING: CREATIVE IDEATION TO DEVELOP A POSITIVE VISION

In many ways, we envision our worlds and then act on those visions. Focusing exclusively on problems limits imagination to problem-saturated stories. While addressing problems is essential, a powerful resource for transformation lies in envisioning what we want for the future. Compelling images of a desired future stimulate present-day action. The more hopeful the image, the greater the willingness to act toward bringing it into being.[17]

Structured opportunities for groups to generate shared images of a desirable future can attract energy and momentum. Some processes intentionally ‘flip the script’ by focusing on times when the system has functioned at its best. Identifying the conditions that enabled those moments can generate a positive core to inspire future action. Process methods can support participants in articulating “*What do we want and why does it matter?*” through reflective and evocative questions that surface both personal aspirations and collective concerns. Artistic and creative elements can deepen this work. From this ideation, groups may articulate goals or a vision statement that provides direction and helps shift them into generative thinking—and action towards change.

[17] This point is similar to the ‘Anticipatory Principle’ from Appreciative Inquiry. “Images Inspire Action: Human systems move in the direction of their images of the future. The more positive and hopeful the image of the future, the more positive the present-day action.” Cooperrider Center. *Introduction to Appreciative Inquiry*. 2023. <https://appreciativeinquiry.champlain.edu/2023/04/07/introduction-to-appreciative-inquiry/>

DEVELOP AND ANALYSE CRITERIA AND OPTIONS

By this phase, participants typically share an understanding of why the situation exists, the core challenges to be addressed, and a vision for the future. While disagreements may persist, participants are aligned around the purpose of moving forward together. The focus now turns to ‘now what?’ Groups must develop criteria, generate options, weigh trade-offs, and ideally innovate toward integrative solutions.

The creative possibilities of both/and thinking to resolve incompatibilities. Conflict often involves a paradox: how to satisfy one’s own deepest concerns while enabling others to achieve theirs. Addressing this requires returning to underlying interests, needs, and values. When these core concerns are acknowledged as legitimate, participants can identify what must be addressed for outcomes to be good enough for all. Integrative thinking requires moving beyond either/or framing. Paradoxical questions—such as “*How can we both x and y , while also z ?*”—explicitly channel thinking toward inclusive solutions. Responding to such questions almost always demands new thinking, aligning with Einstein’s insight that the thinking that created a problem is not the thinking that will resolve it.

Learn from elsewhere. Every situation is unique and the ways to address it need to be responsive—and often, for legitimacy, seen as ‘home grown’. Yet learning from innovations elsewhere can spark new thinking. Field trips, case studies and expert input can expand ideas for what is possible, as well as what to avoid. The group can then work to develop options from this input.

Develop criteria for strong integrative proposals. It is important to be clear on how the group would know if they have developed a good or a ‘good enough’ agreement. What are the criteria that would need to be satisfied if options were to be satisfactory? Use the insights developed in the envisioning stage to generate shared criteria. Facilitators can also help the group to identify the relative significance of each criterion to different groups, as this can help to enable ‘trades’ across qualities that have greater importance for some and less for others.

Generate options and weigh trade-offs. Developing options that can respond to these integrative questions can nevertheless remain challenging. Designers can structure clear process methods to cultivate brainstorming, with evaluation of ideas at a later stage. Techniques such as minimum specifications, removing constraints, and reversing assumptions can loosen conventional thinking and open new pathways.[18] Given the complexity of issues and ideas, facilitators can offer robust frameworks to guide the group through their analysis in a logical way.[19] The group needs to visually ‘hold onto’ ideas that are generated yet not fully developed so that potentially good thinking does not get lost. Visual aids can also add transparency to the deliberations. Even those not directly participating in the joint analysis can understand the logics used—and may be able to expand on the thinking with new issues, options and considerations.

From emergence to convergence: working towards outcomes. Having moved through divergence toward emergence, participants must now converge on what they will recommend or decide. Sustaining engagement through this transition enables the group to agree on concrete steps for moving forward together in addressing complex and conflictual challenges.

[18] Kaner, *op cit.* pp 80–84.

[19] Tools such as Issue Maps or Decision-Evaluation Matrix can ease the cognitive load and channel group thinking in purposeful directions, amplifying the collaborative nature of their analysis.

COLLABORATIVE DECISION-MAKING AND INTEGRATIVE AGREEMENTS THROUGH CONSENSUS BUILDING

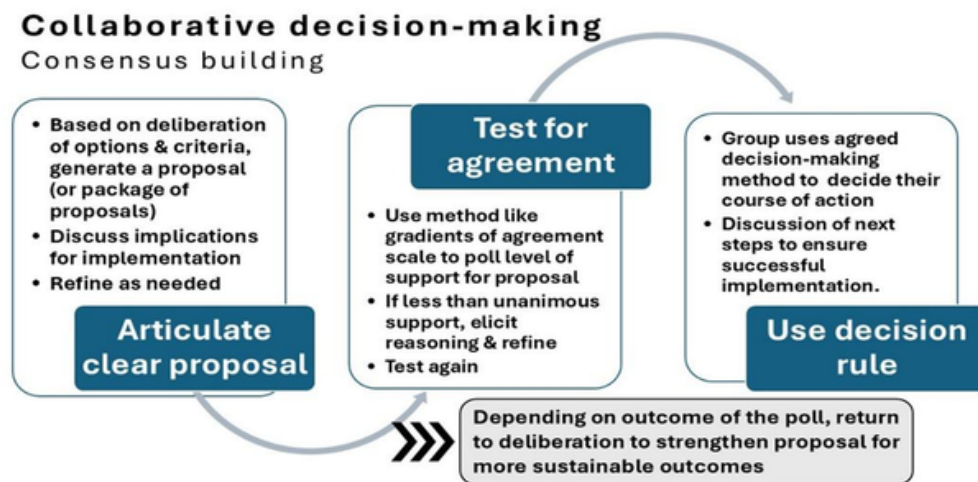


Figure 7: Key process functions for collaborative decision-making and consensus building

A robust collaborative decision-making process enhances legitimacy and accountability while preventing confusion and premature action. Participants are challenged to develop solutions with broad support. Consensus building enables groups to develop and test proposals and can be understood as both a value and a method—as described below. It reflects the core value of working towards an optimal outcome that everyone can support.[20] It not only enhances decision quality but also signals a shift away from coercive unilateralism toward a transformed way of relating. It completes the dialogical pathway toward conflict resolution.

Building on the earlier stages, the group should collectively have: (a) a shared sense of the wider landscape of their context; (b) an integrative framing of the core challenges and opportunities they need to address; and (c) a set of assessed options and inclusive criteria for evaluating them. The group now works towards agreeing outcomes. They articulate and test proposals to identify zones of agreement and disagreement. Where issues remain unresolved, groups can return to analysis and ideation to improve proposals, enabling groups to refine proposals toward optimal solutions.

Clarifying purpose and mandate. Effective process design depends on clarity about the purpose of the engagement. From the outset, it should be clear whether the group (a) has a mandate to decide on a course of action; or (b) is engaged in an exploratory or consultative process and outcomes will be used to inform decision-makers or participants' own constituencies. If the purpose of the process is to make a decision, there should be agreement on a clear method—the decision rule—they will use. Whether deciding or advising, consensus building helps ensure that proposals are integrative and broadly supported.

Clarifying decision-making authority and the decision rule. [21] Decision rules fundamentally shape participation and the sustainability of outcomes. A decision rule answers the question: “How do we know when we’ve made a decision?” Typical decision rules are: a leader decides, voting, negotiating, or unanimous agreement. Each form can have variants, depending on the group’s governance arrangements. Without clarity on the decision rule, groups may experience confusion, frustration, or disengagement. Where decision rules are agreed in advance, deliberation can move more confidently toward closure.

[20] It can be insightful to more clearly distinguish between the concepts of unanimity and consensus. **Unanimous** comes from the Latin words: *unus*, meaning ‘one’ and *animus*, meaning ‘spirit’ so that a group that reaches a unanimous decision is a group acting from one spirit. Consensus is a combination of the Latin word *con*, meaning ‘together with’ and *sentire*, meaning ‘to think and feel’ – thus **consensus** is to think and feel together. Consensus implies the process, while unanimity describes the outcome.

[21] This section is heavily informed by Kaner, *op.cit.*

Where groups have decision-making authority, they must clearly engage in the act of making the decision through their agreed **decision rule**—whether by vote, leadership decision, negotiated agreement, or unanimity. Every decision rule has strengths and risks.[22] One way to mitigate these risks is to integrate consensus building and testing for agreement prior to invoking the decision rule. Groups that work toward consensus prior to final decision-making increase the likelihood that proposals are robust and inclusive.

The closure zone: from deliberation to decision. Where the purpose is to agree recommendations or make decisions, there must be a coherent transition from deliberation to collaborative decision-making. Deliberation should yield options and criteria that support convergence. These must be synthesized into coherent proposals. In complex situations, multiple inter-related proposals may be required. Groups must identify linkages, assess trade-offs, and address gaps or contradictions, sometimes returning to deliberation to refine thinking.

Consensus testing and gradients of agreement. A key method is to test the levels of agreement for a proposal before using the decision rule. Without testing for consensus, groups may not know whether a proposal is truly optimal or only has weak support. A simple ‘yes/no’ binary obscures the continuum of views within a group; a ‘yes’ may conceal ambivalence, while a ‘no’ may reflect addressable concerns. There are various ‘gradients of agreement’ instruments that allow participants to express their level of support or disagreement along a continuum.[23]

Testing for agreement functions as a quality assurance checkpoint. Testing for agreement asks each participant to take responsibility by expressing their own views on the proposal. People who are not enthusiastically supportive of a proposal can be invited to share their reasoning, which often surfaces areas in need of further work. The results trigger a robust understanding of where the group stands. This provides a systematic framework addressing objections and concerns upfront. If these points are used to then develop new/refined proposals and tested again for support, the group can move forward collectively with less concern about passive-aggressive resistance or sabotage during implementation.

Deciding and living with decisions. After refinement, the group must determine whether there is sufficient agreement to proceed. The group can then use the decision rule which ultimately resolves deadlocks.

Durable decisions must both make sense and feel right. Consensus testing helps balance sound reasoning with values and commitment. This capacity to cooperate amid differences is a powerful antidote to polarization and coercive unilateralism in conflict-habituated systems. Even where disagreement remains, a well-designed deliberative and consensus-building process enables participants to ‘agree to disagree’ with greater respect and understanding.

*This work was supported by a grant from the **Ford Foundation**.*

[22] In formal governance settings, decision rules are often predefined, commonly through voting. In multi-party conflict contexts, however, reaching agreement on how decisions will be made is more complex and often requires a negotiated agreement. Informal or movement-based groups may be especially vulnerable to confusion if they are not clear and precise about who has authority and when and how decisions are made – too often leading to misunderstandings, lack of follow-through, or even group collapse.

[23] See Kaner et al. for more on the methodology and an especially effective gradients of agreement scale.

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