

Discussion Paper

We need to talk about dialogue

Why it matters for media development
and how to make it work

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Carsten von Nahmen

Proofreading

Loveday Wright

Authors

David Schneider
Dennis Reineck
Folke Kayser

Layout

Elena Stammnitz

Contributors

Hanna Hempel
Rune Meissel
Ines Drefs

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Introduction

Following Ivory Coast's 2010 election dispute, existing divisions in society gave way to violence, leading to an estimated 3,000 deaths (HRW 2018). Though calm was restored in 2012, deep divisions persisted. Against that background, in 2019, the women's journalism federation Réseau des Femmes Journalistes et des Professionelles de la Communication de Côte d'Ivoire (ReFJPCI) and DW Akademie launched their "innover pour dialogue" project, aimed at fostering intergenerational dialogue across the country. In a series of townhall meetings, citizens, activists and politicians discussed the long-term perspectives of the younger generation and of women to develop a common vision for change and reconciliation. Five years on, more than 1250 people have taken part in the meetings. Local media reported on the events, amplifying the discussion for audiences across the country. Local authorities were also involved in the townhall meetings, which made implementing the ideas easier. Additionally, a

vibrant community by the name of "Et si on en parlait" was created, bringing people from across the country together and encouraging them to speak up.

This project is just one example of the potential of development projects that foster **constructive, inclusive dialogue** in polarized settings. Many such initiatives around the world engage in dialogue facilitation, even if they may not always be framed as dialogue projects. In the following, we 1. map out the problem of social fragmentation that dialogue approaches aim to tackle, 2. define constructive dialogue as a possible solution to that problem, 3. present empirical evidence on dialogue approaches that work, and 4. suggest steps that (media) development actors can take to contribute. We also feature the projects we looked at and direct quotes from the people we interviewed for the paper.



Eroding social cohesion and the information ecosystem

Not only people in Ivory Coast, but societies worldwide are faced with a dilemma: On the one hand, there is a growing urgency for common solutions to diverse and complex challenges. On the other, societies and information ecosystems are increasingly characterized by social fragmentation and polarization.

Many voices are underrepresented or excluded from the public debate due to systemic inequalities, socio-economic barriers, biases within media and politics, and the lack of access to platforms. Additionally, public discourse has become increasingly confrontational and hate-driven, stifling mutual understanding and preventing constructive dialogue.

This societal dilemma is complex and widely studied (see for example Lorenz-Spreen et al. 2023 or Kümpel et al. 2015). **Social media** are understood to play a major role as more and more people use them as their primary source of information. While they do lower access barriers to information, social media's algorithms and business models are built on cognitive biases and human behavioral patterns that favor the sensational and polarization over balanced and well-substantiated content. By doing so, they amplify radical voices and consolidate opinions within social bubbles that have little exchange.

Concurrently, both **democracies** and free media are under stress. Authoritarian regimes are obtaining global influence. Within traditional democracies, illiberal populist parties—often supported by autocracies—are gaining traction and increasingly shape public discourse. In their quest to weaken checks and balances, these parties question the legitimacy and credibility of public interest media. They intentionally promote polarization, often using generative AI for production and social media for dissemination

of disinformation and hateful content. Many Big Tech companies opportunistically collaborate with autocrats and populists by reducing content moderation under the guise of promoting “freedom of expression” (Magalhaes 2025).

Meanwhile, **public interest media** are struggling to survive in a world of information oversupply, where few people are willing to pay for quality information and journalistic content. News media, which used to be the main enablers of a public sphere where public opinion could be formed, have lost this gatekeeper position. Individual content creators increasingly shape opinions. Research shows that much of the growing mistrust and alienation between news media and audiences can also be attributed to the universal phenomenon of declining news media at the local level (see for example Newman et al. 2024, Ellger 2024, Hayes et al. 2018).

Commercial media play an ambivalent role in this ecosystem. Some seek short-term gains by spreading polarizing content to increase their virality and by engaging in an “us versus them” discourse to maintain user loyalty. In the long term, however, social division undermines trust in social institutions, including the media. Others, focused on public interest and constructive journalism try to cultivate a constructive debate and include diverse perspectives. Thus, media are victims of and contributors to polarization but can also be seen as part of the solution.

Dialogue as a core function of journalism

In democracies, media are often associated with functions of providing the public with information and holding governments to account.

But it is important to remind ourselves that the media have also traditionally been responsible for providing a forum for public debate (Gurevitch/ Blumler 1990). Due to digitization, the growing role of social media, and a process that has been termed disintermediation¹, journalistic media have been losing ground as the ones who provide a forum for debate. But this function of the media is specifically important for deliberative democracies, social cohesion and peace. Media and journalists therefore need to regain their role as non-partisan facilitators of public fora. An important step in this direction would be to accept the role as facilitators of societal exchange, creating and hosting formats for constructive and inclusive public dialogue.

Beyond normative arguments, particularly local media can enhance their business models through dialogue, generating sustainable revenue (see also Ruotsalainen et al 2021). We see several examples that blend dialogue-driven journalism with membership models — illustrating how sustainable income for local media can be achieved through community engagement. Initiatives like [CORRECTIV](#) in Germany, [New Public](#) in the U.S., and [Agencia Mural](#) in Brazil, for example, are exploring formats that combine public participation with community-supported funding. Such media do not only regain their position as facilitators of public dialogue, they also capitalize on it. Dialogue facilitation can thus contribute to enhancing [media's viability](#) as well.

Some definitions

- **Dialogue** is a cooperative form of exchanging ideas, opinions and arguments. Its primary goal is to gain a deeper understanding of the topic and of the other; it is oriented towards, but does not necessarily need to reach consensus, compromise or solutions.
- **Public dialogue** is a dialogue on a public interest issue that is open for the public to take part actively (as participants) or passively (as audience).
- **Constructive dialogue** is a dialogue in which participants follow certain ground rules either by facilitation or self-commitment, especially with regards to fairness, mutual respect and factual correctness.
- **Inclusive dialogue** is dialogue that is designed to give voice to diverse perspectives, in particular marginalized voices.

¹ *Disintermediation refers to the fact that media no longer act as communicators between institutional actors and their publics but persons like politicians and celebrities increasingly try and communicate directly with audiences without the media as intermediaries. (Eldrige II et al 2019)*

The **journalist's role** in public dialogue is not only that of a reporter but also of an enabler encouraging participation of diverse voices and ensuring constructive exchange on issues of societal relevance. Dialogue approaches are not new. They are associated with other well-known approaches such as constructive journalism, solutions journalism, peace journalism or community journalism that put people at the center, are solution-oriented and empathetic. To counter the current negative trends in the information ecosystem and society as a whole, these approaches need to be revisited and expanded.

Dialogue can serve multiple purposes, from promoting inclusion and social cohesion, fostering conflict resolution and peacebuilding, advancing human rights and gender equality, to boosting civic participation and democratic engagement. Many initiatives explicitly aim to include voices that are otherwise excluded – based on religion, ethnicity, gender, or geography. Dialogue can also help people and societies deal with the violent past and present, bridging gaps between perpetrators and victims, as historic examples in South Africa and Rwanda have shown. Finally, as in constructive journalism, dialogue helps activate communities to pursue solutions to developmental challenges.

Dialogue approaches: A heuristic model

In ancient Greek cities, the agora was a central public space, a town square that constituted not only the literal city center, but also the political, cultural and commercial heart of the community, a place in which citizens would gather to deliberate and discuss.

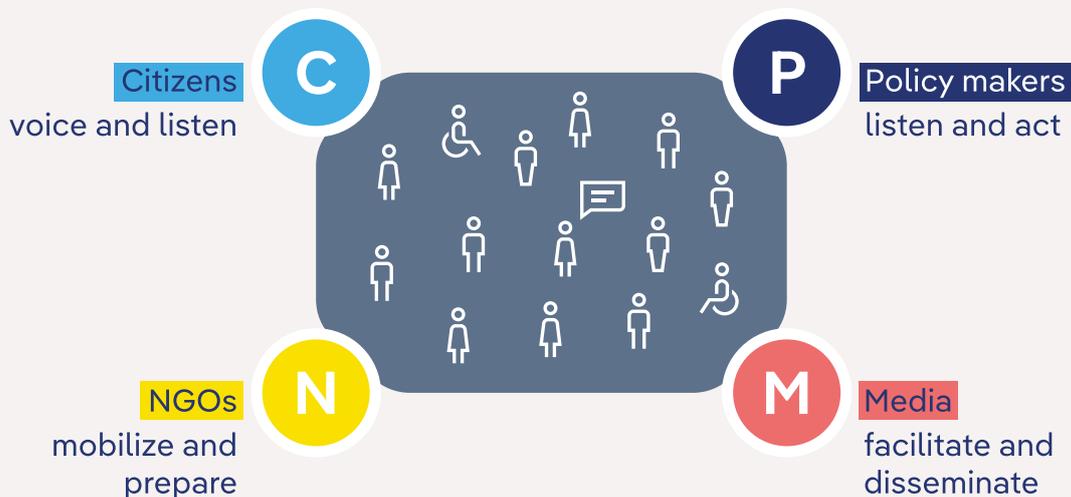
Of course, such spaces for dialogue are hardly something unique to ancient Greece. Engaging in dialogue has long been a part of cultural and political life all over the world.

It is this spirit of exchange, the idea of engaging in constructive dialogue to exchange views and perspectives, that also forms the basis for the dialogue initiatives that we focus on in this paper. We argue that dialogue approaches in the development realm can be modelled as a “public square” consisting of four key stakeholders: 1. Citizens, 2. Policy Makers, 3. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and 4. Media. Taking the first letters of each of these stakeholders, we are calling this the CPNM

model. Of course, dialogue need not take place in actual physical settings such as public squares or town halls, but can be transmitted via offline or online media, social media or even messaging apps. This heuristic CPNM model, based on the idea of the public square illustrates who should be involved in what way in ideal-typical public dialogue approaches.

To further investigate existing dialogue approaches and identify challenges and success factors, we conducted in-depth interviews with implementers and experts from the field (see “Methods and Sample” for details).

Figure 1: The public square of dialogue (CPNM heuristic model)



Methods and Sample

Our research process consisted of two main phases. First, we conducted extensive **desk research** to identify and evaluate dialogue initiatives. We selected relevant initiatives based on several criteria: The role of media/journalism in the initiative, the geographical focus (specifically initiatives active in the global majority), the duration and effectiveness of the initiative, the activities involved, the organizational structure, the objectives, and the target audience.

Following this initial evaluation, we conducted **18 in-depth interviews with representatives of selected initiatives**. These interviews were carried out via video calls, lasting 45-60 minutes each, in an open interview guide format. This approach allowed for comprehensive discussions and flexible responses from participants. Our sample included dialogue initiatives both within DW Akademie and from external organizations, providing a broad perspective on current practices in the field.

Citizens' need for dialogue often relates to their **community**. Thus, many dialogue approaches tend to choose face-to-face interaction at the hyper-local level. The projects highlighted in this paper from Ghana, Bolivia, Lebanon, and Brazil exemplify this bottom-up participatory approach. Some initiatives further prioritize training reporters and facilitators within these communities to enable reporting from within and to foster a sense of ownership and agency among participants.

Several initiatives specifically focus on **marginalized and minority groups**, including ethnic and religious minorities, women, refugees, and underserved urban residents. Agencia Mural, for example, amplifies voices from Brazil's urban peripheries ([see box no. 5](#)), while the Tribal News Network (TNN) in Pakistan promotes dialogue between Afghan refugees and host communities by training women as local reporters.

One of the most prominent target groups across the initiatives is **youth**, recognizing their potential as agents of change. Some of these initiatives intensify their work during elections, focusing on young and first-time voters. OMNI Ethiopia for example merges community engagement with electoral awareness, preparing citizens for democratic engagement. OMNI's flagship Community Radios for Peace & Dialogue organize dialogue forums for youth which are framed around reconciliation and future-building and are part of nationwide dialogue campaign called "Adwa for Sustainable Peace and Nation-Building".

National or regional initiatives try to reach a broad audience and address the public directly. These initiatives aim to establish constructive and inclusive dialogue on major platforms that reach a wide and diverse audience on a national or regional scale, offering an alternative to conventional debate forums where participants often focus on competition rather than mutual understanding. A good example for this is "Step by Step", a gameshow format which prioritizes collaboration and compromise over agitation and polarization ([see box no.1](#)).

Such types of initiatives for societies as a whole remain rare, because most media environments are still shaped by incentive structures which favor confrontation over cooperation. Therefore, developing formats that appeal to mass audiences while maintaining quality, inclusivity, and deliberative depth is editorially and financially challenging.

Stakeholders in dialogue: Roles and responsibilities

Following the CPNM heuristic model and drawing on the data collected during the study, we describe the key roles of the four most important stakeholders in constructive, inclusive public dialogue approaches as follows:

Citizens

Citizens constitute the actual participants of dialogue formats. As such, their involvement is an absolute prerequisite for public dialogue. Citizens join public dialogue to **voice** their concerns and to **listen** to other perspectives to form their own opinions on issues of public concern. Dialogue initiatives seldom include all citizens of a given country, but take care to target segments of the population that have a stake in the specific topic under discussion. Local, social, political, or cultural factors may play a role in determining who needs to be involved in the dialogue.

Name of the initiative: Step by Step

Country: Tunisia / Arab world

Aim: Step by Step is a game-show-style talk show that brings together 36 contestants from across the Arab world to debate and compete toward real-life problem-solving on social issues. The program seeks to model constructive dialogue in action, demonstrating how debate, empathy, and collaborative reasoning can forge common ground among citizens.

Methods: Structured team-based debate formats; real-world issue challenges guiding each episode's topic; progressive rounds narrowing options toward solutions; mixed live studio audience and broadcast format.

Target groups: Young adult and mid-career professionals with civic interest; viewers across the Arab-speaking public; media personalities and intellectuals.

Media used: Television broadcast (DW); social media clips and trailers; public debate events.

Key highlights: Blending entertainment with civic engagement, Step by Step turns competition into collaboration. Contestants aim not just to win, but to co-create solutions—making each episode a live exercise in democratic practice. With broad regional representation and a wide viewership, the show proves that structured televised debate can foster both engagement and social cohesion.



Policy makers

Policy makers are important recipients of the messages transported through dialogue formats. It is their duty to **listen** closely to the opinions and demands voiced and to **act** upon them by taking relevant decisions and making policies that address the needs of their communities. In this sense, public dialogue seeks to bridge the gap between citizens and their leadership. Successful initiatives often bring both into conversation with one another, fostering mutual understanding and shared responsibility. By connecting grassroots concerns with local or national level policy discussions, these efforts can ensure that public discourse reflects the lived realities of diverse communities.



Our mission is to create local journalism about, for and by the peripheries, amplifying their voices, fighting stereotypes, and guaranteeing access to information.

Vagner de Alencar Silva, Director of Journalism –
Agencia Mural, Brazil

The “Uplifting Community Voices” project in Uganda, and Agencia Mural in Brazil exemplify this approach ([see boxes no. 2 & no. 5](#)). However, it is no coincidence that listening and taking action are mentioned as priorities here. If local leaders usurp dialogue formats to hold speeches rather than engaging in inclusive dialogue, such efforts may turn out to be futile. Dialogue presupposes a readiness to listen – on all sides.

Non-governmental or civil society organizations

Non-governmental or civil society organizations often play a crucial role in **supporting and sustaining** connections between local communities and decision-makers, as illustrated by the Ugandan and Brazilian projects mentioned above. Their role is to **mobilize** the population and to help translate community concerns to the policy level. Local NGOs are in a good position to do so because they are trusted by communities, they are familiar with communities’ specific context and needs and can thus prepare the discussions in such a way as to ensure that they are understood by local authorities. Civil society involvement provides both legitimacy and continuity to dialogue processes, particularly in contexts where trust in government institutions and media may be limited.

In Lebanon, for example, civil society groups collaborate with dialogue initiatives to address issues such as women’s rights, religious diversity, and anti-bullying ([see box no. 3](#)). Their on-the-ground presence and thematic expertise allow them to facilitate sensitive discussions and advocate for inclusive policy change. In Bangladesh, organizations like Bonhishikha and Kotha partner with dialogue projects to implement community-based programs, offering both technical guidance and local credibility. These civil society actors are instrumental in ensuring that dialogue feeds into larger systems of accountability and reform. By working alongside communities, media, and policymakers, they help institutionalize inclusive practices and promote democratic engagement at multiple levels.

Name of the initiative: Uplifting Community Voices

Country: Uganda

Aim: To enhance public service delivery, foster inclusivity, and ensure local challenges are understood and addressed by decision-makers at all levels.

Methods: Community radio broadcasts; local dialogue organized by community reporters; quarterly village-level dialogue; district and national level dialogue facilitated by the Media Challenge Initiative (MCI)

Target groups: Local community members; local leaders and policy-makers; journalists from rural radio stations

Media used: Community radio; WhatsApp for story tips and feedback collection

Key highlights: The initiative's success lies in its ability to foster trust by recognizing community reporters as credible local voices. It bridges gaps between citizens and local authorities by turning stories into actionable dialogue, particularly in areas where formal communication is limited. Its flexible, locally tailored approach has made rural reporting more feasible and impactful.



Media

Media have a central role to play in dialogue initiatives, although this is not always acknowledged. Journalists and media professionals can **facilitate** dialogue. In fact, this is a core function of media in democracy (see chapter “Dialogue as a core function of journalism”) and media professionals are accustomed to **moderating and hosting** such formats in an inclusive way, enabling citizens to hear all sides of the argument and to form their opinions. At the same time, media can elevate discussion beyond the direct participants and the confines of the physical event to inform a wider audience. This helps all members of a community to take part in the discussions.

In several projects examined for this study, media serve as a direct platform for dialogue. For instance, DW Akademie’s initiatives in Ghana and Uganda leverage radio programs and live townhall broadcasts to connect communities with local authorities and encourage public discussion. In Uganda, the project “Uplifting Community Voices” helps local radio stations report more affordably on rural issues and foster dialogue between communities and authorities—an approach explored in more detail later in this paper.



Journalism is facing a profound existential crisis, largely due to a loss of trust and credibility—both from intentional attacks and broader systemic changes. [...] To rebuild trust, journalists must redefine their relationship with audiences, and one powerful tool for doing so is facilitating structured dialogue that brings diverse perspectives together.

William Bird, Director—Media Monitoring Africa, South Africa

A number of projects deploy creative and artistic media to stimulate dialogue and reconciliation. In Iraq, MiCT’s visual arts based programs use art to open discussion on trauma and coexistence. In Colombia, DW Akademie together with Consejo de Redacción (CdR) supports communities in creating timelines and collective narrative projects to advance local peacebuilding. A similar approach is visible in Lebanon through Adyan Foundation’s “Alwan Debate” project, where teachers and youth are trained on pluralism, nonviolent communication, and inter-faith dialogue, backed by manuals and experiential learning activities.

Some interventions encourage journalists to critically examine their own role within public discourse—particularly in contexts shaped by conflict or its aftermath. In such settings, journalism takes on added dimensions such as reconciliation, representation, and collective healing. The Colombian project mentioned above, for example, seeks to rebuild trust between journalists and survivors of conflict through public dialogue and storytelling workshops designed to foster mutual understanding. Likewise, MiCT’s “Restoring Hope” project in Iraq brings together local journalists and artists to engage with the difficult legacy of enforced disappearances. In both cases, media professionals are not only storytellers but also active participants in broader societal conversations about justice, memory, and the path forward.

All four stakeholders presented above play an important role in ensuring the success of dialogue initiatives. The driving forces, however, remain civil society and the media. The credibility of local media as trusted sources of information within communities significantly contributes to the legitimacy of dialogue processes. When civil society organizations (CSOs) partner with outlets, the public perception of dialogue initiatives often improves, fostering stronger community participation and acceptance. From an operational standpoint, these collaborations facilitate more effective use of resources. CSOs bring deep contextual knowledge and community access, while media partners offer communication expertise and platforms for dissemination. This symbiosis forms the backbone of efficient and impactful dialogue initiatives.

Name of the initiative: Dialogue formats and support to alternative media (DW Akademie, Maharat Foundation & Utopia)

Country: Lebanon

Aim: The dialogue initiatives in Lebanon seek to strengthen dialogue and mutual understanding among diverse religious and social groups, particularly among youth. It promotes inclusive civic discourse in a fragmented media and political landscape.

Methods: Dialogue facilitation training for educators; individual and group dialogue formats;

participatory topic selection; development of shared understanding of dialogue

Target groups: Students and young people; teachers and educators; religious and community leaders; youth organizations and civil society actors

Media used: In-person dialogue workshops; digital learning platforms; classroom-based activities; online videos and discussion guides

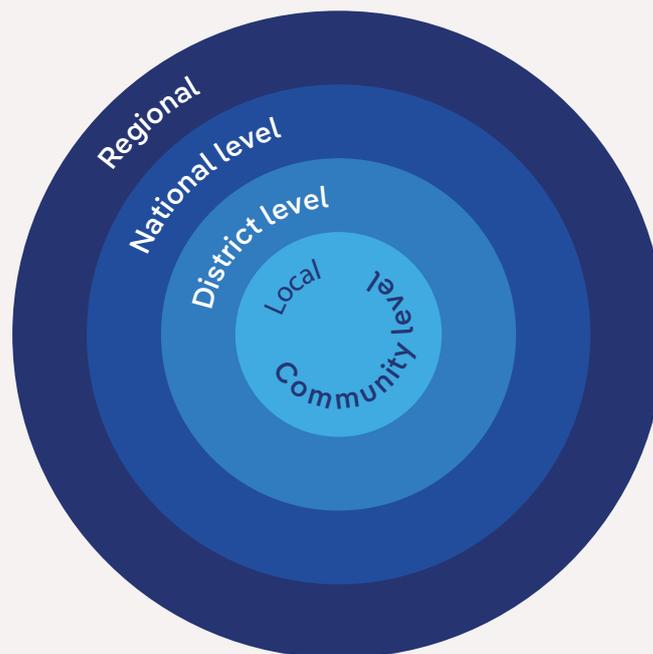
Key highlights: The initiative emphasizes preparing youth and facilitators for respectful, meaningful dialogue. By beginning with individual sessions before group discussions, it builds a shared foundation of trust. This process-oriented approach equips participants to engage Lebanon's complex social landscape with empathy and informed conversation.



Levels of engagement: Scale and scope of dialogue initiatives

The scale and breadth of dialogue initiatives depends heavily on the target group. It ranges from highly localized dialogue to broad national campaigns. This diversity in scope reflects strategic choices about how best to respond to local needs and opportunities for impact. We can broadly categorize the responses from our interviews into four categories:

Figure 2: Levels of engagement in dialogue initiatives



Many of the initiatives studied here are **local-level** initiatives focused on grassroots engagement, such as school-based programs in Lebanon, community radios in Uganda, or storytelling circles in Colombia. Their strength is that they are deeply embedded in communities and their success relies on relationships and proximity. They are often led by community-based organizations or local educators encouraging ownership and sustained participation. These initiatives often struggle to gain visibility or influence beyond their immediate context.

When successful, many projects try to scale their efforts to the **district level** or even **national level**, building a network that spans multiple communities. Some initiatives also start at this level. Projects like OMNI Ethiopia's "Voice of Peace" radio campaign involved state-level actors and regional dialogue from the start, demonstrating how government partnerships can expand reach ([see box no. 4](#)). At this level, dialogue initiatives can serve as a bridge between local experience and broader institutional frameworks. Projects often aggregate and amplify grassroots voices and scale them up to the next level. Their success frequently depends on local government buy-in and media representation.

While scaling remains a persistent challenge in participatory civic media, several promising initiatives have demonstrated the potential to bridge effectively between local and national level. Initiatives at this level often aim to shape societal narratives, influence policy, and institutionalize civic engagement. They require strong partnerships with media institutions and/or policymakers and are often accompanied by legal or institutional advocacy. However, they risk being disconnected from lived experiences, if they are not grounded in local feedback.

In Uganda, the project "Uplifting Community Voices" supports radio stations in reporting on rural stories more affordably, helping bridge communication between village, district, and national levels. At the district level, the radio stations themselves take on the role of dialogue facilitator. The outcomes of these discussions are then carried forward by the project partner, Media Challenge Initiative (MCI), which reports on the district-level dialogue to ensure that grassroots concerns are elevated to the national level ([see box no. 2](#)).

Despite the potential of scaling and multi-level engagement, dialogue initiatives are not universally applicable or feasible. Structural and political limitations can significantly restrict the level of engagement possible. In repressive environments or highly polarized contexts, open dialogue may pose risks to participants' safety, especially when speaking out challenges the interests of those in power. Additionally, a lack of political will or active opposition from authorities can severely constrain outreach and impact.

These constraints highlight the importance of assessing preconditions carefully: dialogue is not a one-size-fits-all tool, and it cannot substitute for political freedoms or safety. Where these are lacking, efforts may need to focus on building safer spaces, awareness, or networks of solidarity, before more formal or visible dialogue can be pursued.

Name of the initiative: *OMNI Ethiopia*

Country: Ethiopia

Aim: OMNI Ethiopia aims to enhance media literacy and community engagement by empowering local actors with the tools to report on their own realities. The initiative strengthens democratic discourse from the ground up by embedding media within daily civic life.

Methods: Participatory training of community reporters; media co-creation and collaborative storytelling; local dialogue events and community discussions

Target groups: Local media practitioners; youth; women; marginalized communities

Media used: Community radio; digital platforms; print newsletters; in-person events

Key highlights: By co-producing content with local communities, OMNI amplifies diverse perspectives and fosters trust among participants. Its participatory model bridges the gap between content creators and audiences, turning passive consumers into proactive citizens.



© Petros Teke / DW

OMNI combines media literacy and dialogue to empower local communities in Ethiopia

Tools of the trade: Dialogue formats and approaches

Initiatives employ multiple formats and approaches to facilitate dialogue, such as in-person meetings, online platforms, media channels, and collaborative workshops. The scale goes from traditional structured dialogue to innovative approaches such as games, storytelling, and artistic projects.

This diversity of methods allows for greater reach and impact, accommodating various preferences and contexts. It is also important since dialogue approaches need to ensure relevance for their target group and effectiveness in reaching tangible outcomes.

We can broadly categorize the formats that were used in the projects we analyzed into three broad categories:

- Public gatherings and town hall meetings
- Policy dialogue and public policy dialogue
- Storytelling and artistic projects

One of the most popular and accessible forms used is the facilitation of **public gatherings and town hall meetings**. Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA), with the support of DW Akademie, organizes town hall meetings in Ghana, which are broadcast live on radio. These events offer a transparent forum for public discussion. Similarly, Consejo de Redacción (CdR) in Columbia integrates public discussions and film screenings to spark community-level dialogue around memory, identity, and peacebuilding. This approach not only informs but also emotionally engages participants, encouraging reflective conversations. Another example is Agência Mural in Brazil, which creates forums for marginalized communities—especially in urban peripheries—to voice their concerns and articulate their experiences in dialogue with civil society and local governments.

Name of the initiative: Agência Mural

Country: Brazil

Aim: Agência Mural democratizes information and reshapes media narratives by amplifying the voices of residents in São Paulo's and other Brazilian cities' urban peripheries. Through hyperlocal journalism, it challenges stereotypes, fosters civic engagement, and highlights everyday struggles, solutions, and realities in marginalized communities.

Methods: Hyperlocal news reporting; community-based correspondents (“muralistas”); in-depth storytelling and investigative journalism; dialogue workshops in local neighborhoods

Target groups: Residents of urban peripheries; aspiring community correspondents with basic

writing and communication skills; local community leaders and activists; broader Brazilian public

Media used: Online news portal; Social Media platforms (Instagram, X, Facebook); podcast and radio features; in-person community events

Key highlights: Agência Mural practices proximity journalism—stories by and for peripheral communities. By training local “muralistas,” it builds trust and visibility in areas overlooked by mainstream media. Its reporting covers mobility, education, culture, and public policy through a lens of dignity and empowerment. The initiative also fosters dialogue through storytelling events and debates, linking communities with the public sphere and decision-makers.

Box no. 5

Some initiatives go a step further by embedding **dialogue within public policy and governance structures**. The Panos Institute fosters public policy dialogue that connect citizens with policymakers, ensuring that the voices of ordinary people influence legislative and administrative outcomes. In Ghana, MFWA and DW Akademie's projects include dialogue around the implementation of the Right to Information (RTI) law, promoting civic education and institutional accountability. These policy-centred dialogues bridge the gap between public demand and political action, reinforcing democratic engagement.



Dialogue is a powerful tool for social change, but it must be persistent, informed, and rooted in community. It is not just about reporting – it's about fostering ongoing conversations, challenging biases, and empowering others to speak up and take action.

Irina Matvienko, Founder and CEO, NeMolchi.uz;
Uzbekistan

Beyond conventional methods, **storytelling and the arts** can also be important tools for dialogue, especially in fragile and post-conflict settings. In Colombia, Consejo de Redacción (CdR) supports communities in building historical timelines and collective narratives. With projects like “Cotidianidades: Narrativas Juveniles del Caribe Colombiano”, they are supporting youth in producing audio, visual, and photographic content that reflects their lived experiences, which are then publicly exhibited to strengthen cultural identity and social recognition. These creative productions are also shared through online platforms, and cultural events, contributing to broader dialogue around memory and equity in Colombia.

These initiatives allow people to tell their own stories, reconstruct local histories, and engage in reconciliation processes through shared memory. Such creative approaches resonate especially in contexts where verbal dialogue alone may be insufficient or impossible. They also offer inclusive formats for those who may feel excluded from traditional discussion forums, thereby showing potential to expand the audience and the impact of dialogue formats.

Name of the initiative: Ciudadanía Inteligente

Country: Chile (operating regionally across Latin America)

Aim: Ciudadanía Inteligente aims to tackle power concentration by strengthening citizen participation, promoting transparency, and redistributing decision-making through civic tech and policy advocacy. The initiative empowers communities to access information, hold authorities accountable, and help shape public policy.

Methods: Development of open-access civic tech platforms (e.g., Del Dicho al Hecho, Vote Smart); policy monitoring and transparency advocacy; LabCívico methodology for collaborative problem-solving; training programs for young activists and civil society actors

Target groups: Marginalized and politically disengaged communities; youth interested in civic and political processes; civil society organizations and grassroots leaders; public officials and policymakers

Media used: Interactive digital platforms and apps; podcasts and explainer videos; social media campaigns; in-person and online civic workshops

Key highlights: Founded in 2009 in Santiago, Ciudadanía Inteligente began with Vota Inteligente, providing open access to political information. It has since expanded regionally, combining feminist, civic-tech, and participatory approaches. Through platforms like Del Dicho al Hecho and the LabCívico model, the initiative bridges grassroots voices with institutions to build more inclusive and accountable governance.

Success factors

What exactly constitutes success in the context of dialogue?

Engaging in dialogue can have **individual effects** on citizens, from changes in knowledge and attitude to changes in behavior. For instance, an evaluation of a project run by the South African NGO Social Transformation & Empowerment Projects (STEPS) and DW Akademie (publication forthcoming) found that community members had gained an increased understanding of causes and effects of migration, registered increased conversations on these issues and even noted shifts in attitudes and perceptions of migrants. The project used films to foster dialogue amongst citizens in Gambia, Malawi and Zimbabwe around issues of flight and migration.

Involving local media and social media in the process can **expand the scale** of the dialogue in terms of audience reach and levels of engagement. For example, the Ivory Coast project mentioned at the beginning of this paper saw 180 media stories published on dialogue events in the period 2022–2024 alone. The NGO ReFJPCI and DW Akademie specifically partnered with local media to amplify the town hall meetings beyond the narrow confines of the events themselves.

Ultimately, the biggest success that dialogue can achieve is **societal change**. This is exactly why dialogue is regarded as a fundamental pillar in constructive journalism aiming to find solutions to problems faced by communities. In collaboration with DW Akademie, the Pakistani radio station Power99 managed to effect change after it aired a format in 2021 discussing the state of the classrooms Afghan refugee pupils were being taught in. The program led to Pakistani officials looking into the issue and improving the circumstances in these classrooms. Of course, whether these kinds of impact are indeed achieved depends on a multitude of factors and they should not be taken for granted.

So what are the requirements for a successful dialogue initiative?

Factor 1: Ensure participant engagement

- **Co-create relevant topics:** Begin with individual or small-group consultations to understand the priorities and lived experiences of participants. Use these insights to jointly define what “dialogue” means in their context and collaboratively select topics that resonate with their concerns. This approach can increase ownership, relevance, and participant engagement.
- **Engage stakeholders early:** Involving key stakeholders—such as local leaders, community organizations, and government representatives—from the beginning by including them in the planning process and hosting consultative meetings. This can help to ensure early buy-in, align expectations, and open access to networks and resources that can be vital for successful implementation.
- **Train locals as contributors and facilitators:** Identify and support community members who can take on roles as dialogue facilitators, community reporters, or content creators. Provide tailored trainings in areas such as moderation, conflict-sensitive communication, or storytelling to equip them with the necessary skills. This not only builds capacity but also enhances legitimacy and sustainability at the local level.
- **Involve local leaders meaningfully:** Consider involving local leaders to actively engage as advocates. Their role can include mobilizing participants, endorsing the initiative publicly, supporting implementation, or helping

translate dialogue outcomes into action. Their involvement can lend credibility and open pathways for dialogue to influence real change.

- **Engage diverse stakeholders:** Design outreach strategies that intentionally include underrepresented voices—such as youth, women, marginalized groups, and those from rural or conflict-affected areas. Facilitate cross-sector collaboration by bringing together policymakers, journalists, activists, and community members in the same dialogue space. Diversity can enhance the richness and impact of discussion by introducing multiple perspectives.
- **Build trust among participants:** Trust is at the heart of all dialogue initiatives and building it needs time and patience. The examples show how it is cultivated through transparency, fairness, and consistency. This also involves setting clear rules for respectful engagement, clarifying roles and expectations, and ensuring everyone feels heard and included. Facilitators should create safe spaces where sensitive issues can be discussed without fear of reprisal or marginalization. Demonstrating commitment and follow-through can be essential to build credibility and trust.

Factor 2: Capacitate facilitators

Training and capacity building

Effective dialogue require skilled facilitators equipped to navigate sensitive topics. Training ensures they are confident and capable in their roles.

Key elements of effective facilitation

- Trained moderators: Equipped with facilitation skills to guide discussion constructively
- Sensitized staff: Aware of cultural and emotional nuances
- Conflict-sensitive communication: Can defuse tensions and encourage exchanges
- Non-polarizing information: Sharing facts to avoid biased narratives

Time and flexibility

Facilitators need sufficient time to implement dialogue processes and the flexibility to adapt to crises or changes.

Fostering agency and ownership

Transparent communication and credible facilitation are essential to creating an environment where community members feel empowered to take initiative. Several projects have shown the transformative potential of equipping local actors with the skills to serve as reporters, dialogue facilitators, or community representatives. By taking on these roles, they can shape the narrative and outcomes of the dialogue themselves.

Factor 3: Clarify topics, objectives, and expectations

Relevance of topics

Ensuring that discussion topics resonate with participants enhances engagement and impact. Again, we see potential in placing this responsibility within the community through a participatory and inclusive process.

Aligning goals with participants' needs

Tailoring project objectives to reflect community priorities fosters deeper commitment and actionable results.

Setting clear expectations

Clarifying participant roles and expected contributions leads to more active involvement and constructive dialogue.

Flexibility in implementation

Adapting to evolving needs and feedback ensures continued relevance.

Prerequisites and limitations

The examples presented throughout this paper highlight the importance of context-specific approaches to dialogue.

While many elements — such as **participatory methods, trust-building mechanisms, or inclusive facilitation** — can serve as guiding principles across different regions, there are no universal blueprints. Each context requires careful adaptation, informed by the local cultural, social, and political environment.

The most important prerequisite for dialogue is a readiness on all sides to engage in an **open discussion** on issues of public concern. Everyone involved should be willing to adhere to the rules of the format and embrace an inclusive constructive approach with a real conviction towards achieving societal change for the common good.

Beyond this, practical considerations like a **suitable neutral location**, a date and time that will enable all important stakeholders and segments of the community to participate, and an **adequate choice of channels** that reach the targeted audience are key preconditions for fruitful dialogue. Just as crucial is **Media and Information Literacy (MIL)**, which enables participants to navigate information critically and engage with dialogue formats in an informed and reflective manner. For this reason, MIL trainings are often embedded within dialogue initiatives — so that participants are better equipped to contribute meaningfully and responsibly.

An important building block in ensuring that media professionals can fulfil their obligations as facilitators of dialogue is development of **capacities needed to foster meaningful dialogue**. For example, the Adyan Foundation's project in Lebanon supports both teachers and journalists in navigating sensitive conversational settings. In schools, trained teachers go on to empower students to lead their own dialogue. One such initiative, the "Alwan Debate" project, trains teachers in debate techniques,

enabling them to pass these skills on to their students. As part of the program, students also learn non-violent communication methods, helping them engage in respectful and constructive discussions.

It is also important to recognize that in some situations, these basic prerequisites for meaningful dialogue simply do not exist. When extreme power imbalances prevent participants from engaging on an equal footing, or when the political context is so repressive that expressing dissent or even participating in a public conversation can pose personal risks, dialogue cannot be pursued safely or effectively. In such cases, insisting on dialogue may risk legitimizing undemocratic conditions or placing vulnerable participants in harm's way.

Dialogue is not a silver bullet. It cannot, on its own, dismantle entrenched power structures, end marginalization, or resolve systemic injustice. It is also not a guaranteed solution in contexts where repression or exclusion are prominent. However, where there is space and willingness — however limited — **dialogue can be a powerful tool for building understanding, promoting civic agency, and fostering collective action**.

While dialogue may not always be possible — or sufficient — it remains one of the few tools capable of re-integrating fragmented public discourse and establishing inclusive and constructive engagement.

Recommendations

Dialogue approaches have been present in media development for many years. In fact, an internal survey at DW Akademie found that over 80% of long-term projects at our organization featured a dialogue component in some shape or form. But elements of dialogue have been hidden from view within concepts, programs and approaches without much reflection on what they are capable of and what factors lead to their success. This paper has sought to summarize what we know about dialogue in media development and provide guidelines for future endeavors in this domain. The conceptual and empirical groundwork to this paper leads to the following recommendations for three major stakeholders:

For donors and policy makers

- **Increase funding for dialogue approaches:** In a world focused on reaction rather than proactive trust-building approaches, dialogue initiatives offer inclusive and constructive alternatives to more traditional media development projects. They deserve to be funded and explored.
- **Adhere to the CPNM model:** Ensure that dialogue initiatives include citizens, policy makers, NGOs and media outlets to maximize the relevance, scope and impact of public dialogue interventions.
- **Integrate dialogue where sensible:** As shown, dialogue can serve multiple purposes, from peacebuilding to civic mobilization. Consider integration of dialogue components where this makes sense to ensure inclusive and constructive development interventions.

For civil society and media development organizations

- **Explore synergies and common agendas:** NGOs should regard the media not merely as an amplifier for their messages but involve them meaningfully in ensuring engagement around issues of public concern.

- **Flexibility in choice of dialogue formats:** NGOs and media need to strike the right balance between dialogue formats that have proven to work and more innovative channels that may mobilize citizens otherwise not reached in more traditional dialogue settings.
- **Let the community set the agenda:** Rather than having the agenda dictated by donors or international partners, choose a community-centered approach that puts the dialogue needs of local citizens first.

For media and journalists

- **Accept your role as facilitators of dialogue:** The media have always been platforms for public dialogue, but in recent years journalists have settled for being “neutral observers”. This is a call to reclaim the facilitation role in an age where constructive, inclusive public dialogue is dwindling due to social media.
- **Amplify and engage:** Media also have an important role to play when it comes to carrying dialogue beyond the town hall. They need to expand the impact of dialogue and continue engaging with their communities around topics of public concern.

Looking ahead: Questions for the future of dialogue

As this paper has shown, dialogue initiatives are dynamic, adaptive, and deeply rooted in context. They are facing evolving challenges—including shifting media landscapes, polarization, disinformation, and changing civic spaces.

As we continue our work, we see the need to ask not only what dialogue is today, but what it could become in the future:

- How will public discourse evolve in this increasingly digital, fragmented, and fast-paced media environment?
- What new forms might dialogue take—and what risks or opportunities do these bring?
- Is there a chance that journalism can reshape its place as a facilitator of public dialogue?
- How can media—both traditional and emerging—support constructive and inclusive forms of public dialogue?

It remains to be seen whether more media outlets can build business models around, or meaningfully integrate, initiatives that create inclusive and constructive dialogue—within the current information ecosystem marked by fragmentation and polarization. Our conviction is that the future of democracy hinges on the readiness of citizens, policy makers, civil society and the media to join forces and build bridges across these divides.

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- Step by Step
- STEPS
- Tribal News Network



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