

EVALUATION CRITERIA FOR DIALOGUE PROCESSES: KEY FINDINGS FROM RISCOS II

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Introduction

As part of Work Package 4 in RISCOS II¹⁶ work was undertaken on evaluation criteria for determining the success of dialogue processes. This note outlines the key findings of that work. Full reports of the work (Hunt *et al.*, 2001; Hunt, 2001) are available.

Dialogue processes are often evaluated after they have been undertaken to identify lessons that can be learned about what worked well and what could be improved in future processes. Good practice in designing dialogue processes has highlighted the need to set clear aims and objectives for the dialogue and use these to help to design the process itself. The people participating in dialogue processes may have different aims that they would like the process to achieve; these could be quite different from those held by the people organising the dialogue and will impact on the participants' views of the success of the process.

It may be useful to develop the aims of the dialogue process and the criteria for evaluating it with the people who will be participating in it. This could help to build a shared understanding of what the dialogue process is trying to achieve. Evaluation criteria could be developed from the aims of the dialogue process itself and used to determine whether the process achieved its original aims. This in turn can be used to identify lessons that can be learned and ways in which improvements can be made to the design of the dialogue processes.

The criteria that are appropriate for a particular dialogue process will to a certain extent depend upon the aim and objectives of the dialogue and who is to be involved. The relative importance of different evaluation criteria may vary depending on the aims too. Therefore the criteria outlined in the following section may not be applicable in all situations and it will be up to those developing the dialogue processes to decide (with input from the participants) which criteria are most applicable.

¹⁶. RISCOS II is a joint European project funded by the EC under the 5th Framework. Work Package 4 has been undertaken by a consortium of partners from the United Kingdom (UK Nirex Limited, the Environment Agency, Galson Sciences Limited and Lancaster University).

Evaluation Criteria

The people involved in the RISCUM II project discussed and developed evaluation criteria that they felt were important for dialogue processes, in particular the dialogue processes that were being developed as part of Work Package 4. A longer list of criteria that were identified is included in Annex 1.

Some of the criteria could be used while the process is being undertaken and rely on close observation of the running of the dialogue process and the discussions that take place. Other criteria can only be assessed after the event has taken place. Although questionnaires can also be used to quantitatively assess some criteria, it is not possible to quantitatively assess all of them. Pre and post event interviews can give an insight into how people perceived the process, any impact it had on their views and can assess the qualitative criteria. Assessing criteria will incur a cost both in terms of time and money, therefore it is important to understand what benefit will be gained from evaluating the dialogue process against the criteria selected and how the evaluation will be used.

Criteria can be used to evaluate how well the process itself ran for example:

- Was the venue appropriate (in terms of location, facilities, refreshments)?
- How useful was the pre-meeting information? (was it clear and easy to understand)
- Did people find the format of the meeting appropriate?
- How good was the facilitation and/or chairing of the event?
- Were any presentations appropriate and understandable?
- Was everyone who wanted to participate able to do so? (both in terms of attending and contributing to the discussion)

These criteria can be evaluated using a post event questionnaire. They can then be used to help to design future processes and avoid mistakes that have been made. If people are invited to attend the dialogue process but decline it might be useful to follow up why they did not attend to see if there are any lessons that can be learned for the future.

The criteria outlined in the following sections are particularly relevant to dialogue processes that aim to encourage deliberation and the development of stakeholders' views through participation in the dialogue process.

Transparency ensures that participants fully understand who is conducting the processes, and who is sponsoring them, what the results of the processes will be used for, and what the dialogue process' relationship is with decision-making and other processes. There must also be understanding of the relationship between the people conducting and sponsoring the process. This transparency is not just essential for participants, but for the wider public as well. If decisions are to be made on the basis of process results, the public has to be able to see that the results were arrived at fairly. This criterion can be evaluated by using post event questionnaires or interviews.

Legitimacy follows on from transparency. If action is taken by agencies on the basis of results from dialogue processes, it will not be considered legitimate unless the processes themselves were conducted in as transparent a manner as possible. However, the process itself also needs to be judged as legitimate, by the participants as well as wider audiences. Legitimacy is often judged in terms of who is conducting the process. An independent body may be considered to be more unbiased than the agency sponsoring the consultation. A further consideration often raised by lay participants is

the issue of the extent to which agencies respond visibly to the results of consultation. This is generally considered to be the “lynch pin” or central element of the legitimacy of the consultation – has it had an effect on decisions? This criterion can be evaluated by using post event questionnaires or interviews.

Equality of access means the ability to participate in the process. To be able to participate people need to know that the dialogue process is taking place and this in turn requires good publicity of the event and consideration of when the event should take place to enable people to attend. To encourage people to participate in events may require active recruitment. This criterion could be evaluated by recording who attended an event and/or asking attendees how easy it was to attend.

“Being able to speak” refers to equality of opportunities to speak and providing a space where participants feel that their views are valued and that they can express them without fear of harassment or ridicule. Facilitators are often invaluable for enabling the ability to speak. This criterion can be assessed using post-event questionnaires or interviews.

A deliberative environment means creating the space where participants feel able to express their views. However, deliberation also entails consideration of the matters raised, and a development and movement from existing positions and views. Rather than presuming that people have fixed positions (which are then articulated in consultative processes), a deliberative approach assumes that people can and will engage with arguments and that the process itself enables a dynamic construction of the issues, rather than these being pre-existing. Thus, discussion, on an equal footing, between the participants is essential to enabling deliberation. Facilitators can help to encourage deliberation. This criterion can be measured using pre and post-event questionnaires to record people’s views and any changes in them and can also be analysed by evaluating the discussions that take place during the dialogue.

Openness of framing the key to this criterion is that the processes chosen do not predetermine the way in which the issue to be discussed is viewed. All processes require some level of information provision. However, it is possible for that information to be presented in a way which jeopardises the openness of framing as little as possible. The openness of the framing of a problem can be restrained by the decision making process which the dialogue is part of. This criterion can be evaluated by looking at how open the framing of the dialogue topic is and what issues are raised during the dialogue.

Developing insight into range of issues, new meanings are generated. It is important that the design of dialogue processes allow participants to listen to, and understand, a range of different points of view. This gives the broadest possible picture. Once people have taken on board the knowledge and experience of others it is possible for them to generate new meanings, or to view the issues in a new and different light. This criterion can be evaluated using questionnaires to determine what insights people have gained from participating in the dialogue process and analysing how the discussion progresses.

Inclusive and “best” knowledge elicited this criterion requires an approach that elicits the knowledge of the various participants, and which encourages the critical assessment of the available knowledge. This criterion can be evaluated by analysing the information that is shared during the dialogue process and how much each attendee participates in the dialogue.

Producing acceptable/tolerable and useable outcomes/decisions. How acceptable outcomes are can be assessed by using questionnaires and talking to participants after the dialogue. The tolerability of outcomes may take time to establish and may depend on the steps taken after the

dialogue process is completed. The usefulness of the outcomes can be determined by evaluating how easy it is to feed them into the wider decision making process or by analysing the wider implications of the dialogue, for example the relationships that are developed through it.

Improvement of trust and understanding between participants building relationships takes time and short dialogue processes may not provide enough time for this to happen. Understanding between participants can be enhanced by encouraging deliberation and reflection during the dialogue process. This criterion can be evaluated using post event questionnaires.

Developing a sense of shared responsibility and common good. Thinking in terms of the common good, or what is best for society as a whole, is in direct opposition to thinking in terms of individual or localised interests. It implies a shared responsibility, rather than an allocation of responsibility to specific groups (such as regulators, or waste producers). The development of a sense of shared responsibility and the common good can be encouraged by using processes where people do not act solely as individuals, are not in situations where they feel it necessary to defend individual, or local interests, and where they are explicitly asked to address issues within the framework of the common good, rather than being formulated into competing groups. This criterion can be evaluated by analysing the outputs of the dialogue process.

Summary

In order to continue the development of dialogue processes it is important to evaluate and learn from the experience of engaging with stakeholders. Criteria can be developed to evaluate how successful a process has been, these can range from very practical criteria relating to how well the process worked or be linked to more subjective criteria developed from the aims of the dialogue process itself.

Evaluation will incur a cost in terms of time and money, but will help practitioners to be able to develop processes that meet the needs of those who participate and improve the way that we try to engage people in the debate.

References

Hunt, J., Day, K. and Kemp, R. (2001) Stakeholder Dialogue: Experience and Analysis. *RISCOM II Deliverable 4.1* (March) [<http://www.karinta-konsult.se/RISCOM.htm>]

Hunt, J. (2001) Designing Dialogue. *RISCOM II Deliverable 4.5* (July) [<http://www.karinta-konsult.se/RISCOM.htm>]

*Annex I***EVALUATION CRITERIA FOR DIALOGUE PROCESSES
AS DEVELOPED BY RISCUM II***Process*

- Transparency of the process and content of decision making
- Formal and transparent accountability of decision makers; participants are also held accountable by themselves and others
- Framing is open to redefinition by the participants
- Participants are not bound by the disciplining nature of the event
- Discourse equality of access (being able to speak) and providing an environment in which participants are willing to defend claims
- Deliberative production of views and positions
- Appropriate resources (including information and time) are available to all participants in order that they have the ability to participate
- Improves understanding between participants/avoids misperceptions of each other becoming embedded
- Inclusiveness of all relevant/appropriate entities
- Representative of different views and groups of stakeholders
- Capture by inappropriate interest groups is avoided

Framing

- Project initiators develop insight into a range of values
- A clearer definition of the issues at stake is achieved
- Alternative values are articulated

Results/outcomes

- Initiators meet objectives
- Results are usable by institutions
- Results are justifiable with reference to legitimate process and procedural legitimacy is achieved in the view of participants
- Producing more acceptable/less contentious policies/strategies/plans

Knowledge

- New ideas/ways forward are elicited
- “Best knowledge” is elicited
- Knowledge is inclusive of expert, lay and critical domains
- “Sound science” is elicited

- Outcome is well supported by evidence and/or argument
- Truth/fact claims are challenged and verified or otherwise, assumptions and uncertainties are identified
- New meanings and understandings are generated
- Active sense making occurs
- Participants learn
- Reflexivity is induced

Efficiency

- The expenditure is worthwhile and intangible benefits are recognised (cost-effectiveness)
- The benefits could not have been obtained for less cost (participants time being recognised as a cost)
- Capacity building

Relationships

- Increasing responsiveness and growing ability to listen meaningfully to participants
- Improves trust between participants
- Reduction of conflict
- Interest and engagement of participants
- Motivating

Generating new meanings

- Developing sense of shared responsibility for problem and acceptability of solution (ownership)
- Developing sense of the common good