# HANDBOOK ON SUCCESSFUL MEDIATION IN THE WORK OF MUNICIPAL COUNCILS

# Handbook on Successful Mediation in the Work of Municipal Councils

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# *Foreword*

*In 2018, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), within its Central and Eastern Europe "Program for Strengthening Interethnic Dialogue and Inclusion of Minorities" returned to democratic governance programming at the subnational leMacedonia.*

*To foster meaningful channels of political discourse among divided communities and foster access points for marginalized groups, NDI partnered with the OSCE Mission in Skopje to work with the municipalities of Gazi Baba, Gostivar, Kichevo, Kumanovo, Struga, Shuto Orizari, and Tetovo.*

*The diversity of these municipalities challenged NDI and OSCE Mission to Skopje to develop a curriculum that was both engaging and relevant. With financial support from the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), we successfully trained over 150 municipal councilors and administrative servants.*

*The COVID-19 pandemic allowed NDI and OSCE Mission to Skopje to reprogram funding and share our direct experience engaging municipal councilors in the preparation of this Handbook for Successful Mediation in the Work of the Municipal Councils. The handbook can serve as a resource for civil society organizations (CSOs), civic engagement experts, the donor community and others who work with subnational commissions for inter-ethnic relations and municipal councillors. To better understand the importance of collaboration to achieve mutually-agreed goals, elected officials may also benefit from the handbook as they work to represent the communities for which they serve.*

*Included are topics centered on mediation and effective communication, challenging the reader to understand their cultural biases and those of others, how to cultivate and build on relationships with elected officials from different backgrounds, tips on engaging inter-community dialogue, the importance of develop a team spirit, and reaching consensus on challenging issues.*

*Tailored for local self-governments where communities are perceived as divided and where groups at-risk of social exclusion feel marginalized, this manual well-documents the training series.*

*We hope you find the content both relevant and useful.*

**Robert Scott Heaslet**
*Senior Resident Director*
*NDI North Macedonia*

# Content

# Handbook on Successful Mediation in the Work of Municipal Councils

## Capacity Building of Municipal Councils: Mediation and Effective Communication

### Context

The transition process in North Macedonia created a democratic pluralist system that has been developing and improving for more than thirty years but still suffers from many of the shortcomings and relapses from the past political system. As the state attempts to match the European Union's economic and social standards by addressing social problems such as corruption, crime, injustice, etc. and stabilizing its economy, it has overlooked building the necessary human and material capacities at the local level. The entwinement of state, local and political interests complicates the local level governance system and understanding the complexity of the system requires significant knowledge of the cultural context.

Although politics in local self-government units (LSGUs) often reflects the logic of central-level government, and it is assumed that authorities depend on each other, the local-level governance requires special skills to balance the interests of local people with those of the central government. On the one hand, having such a mechanism with respect to political parties, especially with regard to their branches at the local level, come to play a particularly important role, and often a destructive one. On the other hand, the difference between the local and the central context puts the political parties at the local level under great pressure to demonstrate success and results, requiring them to find the common interests of all citizens regardless of their political affiliation.

Our society should recognize and value how the state democratization process led to the better understanding of diversification and interculturalism. Such a shift, requires a great skill in dealing with diversity, one the society of North Macedonia has yet to learn. In a homogeneous structure, where political, ethnic, religious, social, economic and cultural affiliations are identical, societal structures can make decisions more easily. But, when personal, ethnic, political, economic and other interests are intertwined, decision-making skills and knowledge are needed to balance these interests. One way to balance such interests is by ingraining a culture of mediation into local communities because it offers all the tools needed to contribute to effective and efficient working of the LSGUs. Unfortunately, in a

political context like the one in North Macedonia, the value of developing conflict resolution skills is often forgotten, meaning that little progress occurs in major processes and decisions because the local population expects to make strides on all issues raised.

## Project History

The co-operation between the NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje led to the establishment of a joint project envisaging a series of *"Workshops for Dialogue Facilitation and Mediation Intended for Municipal Councils, the Municipal Administration and Mayors".*

The project is based on the principles of transformative dialogue and mediation. It includes mixed working methodology processes– from direct mediations with parties to workshops or small meetings with parties or, to training, conferences and diplomacy. Here, unlike other similar activities, the philosophy of transformative dialogue requires that the conflict parties be the center of attention. The parties, i.e. the target groups, as it is often referred to in this handbook, are part of the design, but also of the implementation of the initiative just as they are part of the problem. They lead the dialogue through their choice in process while the organizers offer new skills for parties to be able to conduct a more effective and efficient process of mutual dialogue.

NDI has devoted a significant part of its energy to the sustainability of this initiative since the inception of the partnership with the OSCE Mission to Skopje in relation to this project. Participants were able to learn both from successes and mistakes through the development of the project. At the beginning, the activities focused on councillors, and then began involving mayors. NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje believed this initiative should be sustainable and should be directed towards institutionalization within the LSGUs; therefore, they utilized communication systems with LSGU's administration to involve them in the process of mediation. NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje invited civil society organizations and media to the events, realizing the value of their knowledge and experience. Before writing this handbook, NDI recognized that there was almost no possibility that North Macedonia municipalities would share experiences and problems regarding such a dialogue process, so at the end of September 2019, NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje organized a large conference, inviting municipalities facing similar problems.

Thus far, the project has been focused on the work of municipal councils and administration in the following municipalities: Gazi Baba, Gostivar, Kichevo, Kumanovo, Struga, Tetovo and Shuto Orizari. NDI and the OSCE Mission held training events in 2018 and 2019 with at least 20 councillors and administration members, and often mayors of the municipalities, at each event.

The following facilitators were involved in this project: Albert Hani (mediator), Sedat Ajdari (OSCE), Suad Salkic (OSCE), Chris Henshaw (NDI), Aleksandra Krsteska (NDI), Lidija Stojkova-Zafirovska (NDI) and Filip Chaparoski (NDI).

## Methodology

Having insight into these matters, NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje created a process to facilitate efficiency in municipal council, mayoral and municipal administration work. This process includes strategically intertwining community mediation models and transformative dialogue with process-oriented and well-thought-out activities, as well as offering knowledge-related content through training. This effort aims to facilitate reconciliation and more effective, efficient and sustainable communication between parties who find it difficult to come to a solution to their problems. After several years of working on this process, NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje realized that many successful reference points of knowledge and experience had been created, which can be used by other municipalities and therefore shared with those who are interested in starting something similar. Therefore, the partners conceived a process of gathering experience and recommendations by organizing interviews through structured questionnaires with pre-identified representatives who were part of the project as participants or as organizers/conceivers of the whole process. To that aim, 13 project participants were contacted: mayors, councillors and members of the local self-government administration from seven municipalities, as well as representatives of the organizing team from within NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje. Because the whole text here is based on the conversations made with them, NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje would especially like to thank them for their time and for sharing their experience without hesitation, as well as their contribution to the development of this handbook. Aiming to identify and collect the project's lessons, as well as inform the general public of the project's values, the partners wanted to share the lessons of knowledge and experience with other municipalities that would like to start the same or similar processes. Since the process of gathering information and recommendations is taking place during the COVID-19 pandemic, the organizers used electronic methods of communication and interviewing.

In order to prepare this handbook, Albert Hani (mediator), Aleksandra Krsteska (NDI) and Sedat Ajdari (OSCE) interviewed the following participants using a pre-written questionnaire:

(In alphabetical order)

1. **Aferdita Hamza,** Administration, Municipality of Gostivar
2. **Alush Doda,** OSCE Mission to Skopje
3. **Boris Georgievski,** Mayor of the Municipality of Gazi Baba, Skopje, SDSM
4. **Bekim Memeti,** President of the Council of the Municipality of Tetovo, DUI

5. **Besa Ziba,** Administration of the Municipality of Struga
6. **Valentina Pereska,** Councillor in the Municipality of Struga, VMRO-DPMNE
7. **Genc Selmani,** Councillor in the Municipality of Kichevo, Alliance for Albanians
8. **Ivana Nikolikj,** Councillor in the Municipality of Kumanovo, SDSM
9. **Isak Vrenez,** OSCE Mission to Skopje
10. **Luca Sasso,** OSCE Mission to Skopje
11. **Chris Henshaw,** former Director of NDI North Macedonia
12. **Suad Salkic,** OSCE Mission to Skopje
13. **Fari Sali,** Councillor in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari, SDSM

## Applicability of the Handbook

This handbook offers a model enabling effective and efficient work as well as a constructive dialogue with regard to the main stakeholders of the local self-government units: the mayor, the municipal council and the administration. The handbook is based on the existing knowledge and experience of stakeholders and it only upgrades the dialogue component with transformative mediation knowledge and methods of encouragement and mediation when needed. The recommendations are representative of the experience gained by the organizers and participants of the project, and they can and should be subject to upgrading and comments as well.

Through a well-thought-out process, this project contributes to strengthening the trust and personal contacts among all stakeholders in the municipality. Because it is based exclusively on the personal experience and knowledge of each individual, this project creates sustainable channels of communication between councillors, municipalities and the mayor through strengthening of communication skills. The process provides an opportunity for all participants to express themselves personally, thus allowing the interlocutors to express things of common interest. When this channel of communication is created, it breaks down stereotypes and prejudices and tends only to create new friendships, something that in the end is not seen as a threat, but as an unprecedented benefit for all.

This handbook can be widely used in many different situations and cases, including the following:

- In a post-election situation when the composition of the council structure is new, the mayor is new and there is a significant mutual distrust and fear within the municipal council or between the council and the mayor; also, when such a composition (with respect to members' political party affiliation) is different from the central government.

- When the municipality decision-making in the administration is politicized or exclusionary causing political decisions to be ignorant of some administrators' viewpoints.
- As a result of power games and extremely polarized positions, one cannot come to a constructive dialogue within the main stakeholders in the municipality and between them: the mayor, the council and the municipal administration.
- There is a need to unblock the stuck decision-making processes within the municipality, especially when such processes are burdened with political, ethnic or religious-related prejudices.
- When local self-government units have difficulties with other stakeholders at the local level, such as: the civil society, media, business sector and other interest groups.

> *"I am grateful that we have cooperated with NDI and the OSCE since the beginning of my term as mayor. That cooperation was very important to me because the majority of councillors in my Municipality belong to the political party that is in opposition. Thanks to you, we sat at the same table, including the administration. I am proud that you managed to recognize that I needed help, and now, thanks to your efforts, I have no problems and I serve as an example"*
>
> *(**Boris Georgievski,** Mayor, Municipality of Gazi Baba, Skopje)*

## Main Stakeholders

In local self-government units, the power is shared by the mayor and the municipal council. Although in the pre-election campaign the focus is put on the role of the mayor, this very function cannot be exercised without the support of the municipal council, which is composed of representatives of different political parties, as well as representatives of different ethnic, religious, cultural and social communities.

In regard to how the local self-government in the Republic of North Macedonia exercises its authority, the following four situations are known to complicate the decision-making process, in addition to other dimensions originating from the diversity:

1. **Mayor/government, Council/government:** The mayor is a member of a ruling political party at the central level and a Council whose majority is composed of members who are also representatives of the ruling political party.
2. **Mayor/opposition, Council/opposition:** The mayor is a member of a political party in opposition at the central level and a Council whose majority is composed of members who are also representatives of a political party in opposition.

3. **Mayor/government, Council/opposition:** The mayor is a member of a ruling political party at the central level and a Council whose majority is composed of members who are representatives of a political party in opposition at the central level.
4. **Mayor/opposition, Council/government:** The mayor is a member of a political party in opposition at the central level and a Council whose majority is composed of members who are representatives of a ruling political party.

If these dimensions are added to the ethnic or religious component, as more pronounced parts of the personal identity, it is very complex to manage and make decisions. In addition, given that North Macedonia's political system has not yet managed to perform departization of the administration, it is difficult to run a municipality at the local level, even if the two key bodies belong to the same political party - the mayor and the council. The local self-government administration may also be composed of members of ruling or opposition political parties. They also carry in themselves parts of their ethnic, religious or other identity.

> *"Dialogue is a bridge that connects two banks of a river, those that have different contents, and those that at the end make the whole. Our role as councillors is to connect, to build, to respect and to have an understanding of each other. Many thanks to NDI and the OSCE for the opportunity to be closer to the intention to be between people and institutions, like the bridges of our Struga!"*
>
> *(**Valentina Pereska,** Councillor in the Municipality of Struga, VMRO-DPMNE)*

Although the role of the administration is often overlooked in such analyses, it is very important and almost equal to the function of mayor and councillor, since administrative workers can play a positive and constructive role and, of course, a very negative and destructive role. Their (lack of) motivation can result in total (lack of) success of the municipality and its policies, i.e. irrespective of what the municipality does, they should be respected and involved in processes in which reforms are discussed. A municipal councillor loses power if they lack real information that the administration is supposed to provide them with; the very administration, in turn, often does not see councillors as employers, but as a passing four-year term category.

Presidents of political parties at the local level, as well as at the central level, play a very important role in such processes. Their motivation and interest are of crucial importance to the reconciliation process in the work of the Council and the LSGU. The same applies to coordinators of council groups, the president of the Council, the mayor, heads of the mayor's

office, etc. In order to win their interest, the goals and values of the initiative should be genuinely presented.

# Recommendations

## *TAKING CARE OF THE PROCESS*

### Getting to Know Each Other

a. **Context analysis and getting to know the main stakeholders of the municipality**

If you tend to work on a project with local self-government units or mediate in resolving their disputes, whether it is within the Council or the administration, prepare the idea for presentation but also for criticism. Although you may think you have a brilliant idea that can help the municipality, do your homework, analyse the stakeholders well who can help you and, of course, do a detailed context analysis. Every little mistake made in the beginning can impact the end result. Sometimes you risk rejection by approaching someone first and leaving out the other. Sometimes it is important to refrain from presenting the idea and wait for the right moment. That moment is not always pleasant and may occur during a formal reception, cocktail party or official meeting – sometimes it can occur in a real crisis in the municipality or in a cry for help. Keep in mind that not everyone is open and ready to tell you about their problems at first, sometimes you need to decipher what is left unsaid. Whatever the case, you should not wait for conflicts to grow, it is good to identify the signals of a potential conflict early.

> *"The initial idea came after the local elections held in 2012 when the work of the Municipality of Struga was blocked due to the inability to elect a president of the municipal Council. In our approach to dealing with the issue, we did not focus on resolving the dispute directly, but we started to work on developing the soft skills of the councillors, which then helped the participants resolve the disputes on their own".*
> ***(Alush Doda,*** *OSCE Mission to Skopje)*

An incorrect analysis of the context, especially of the cause-and-effect relationship of the problem between two confronting parties (in this case in the LSGU) may lead to you losing your personal and institutional credibility. In this sense, you should learn how to listen to problems and solutions from others and refrain from offering solutions yourself. You should recognize that the solutions should be theirs, they must live with them, and you should ensure that you lead them skillfully and without risk to the desired outcome. Imposing solutions, even at moments when you think you have the magic key, is not in the spirit of transformative community mediation.

NDI and the OSCE Mission to Skopje's ground building relations with all local and national level political actors helped this project's success.

>*"We have wonderful relations with our contacts and interlocutors in the municipality. To us they represent reference points, the trust is high, whereas we are proven fair-players"*
>**(Luca Sasso,** *OSCE Mission to Skopje)*

*Remark:* In addition to talking directly to stakeholders, one can talk indirectly to stakeholders, e.g. presidents of branches of political parties, the mufti, directors of some institutions run by the local or central government, civil society organizations, etc.

b. **Introducing stakeholders to the opportunity** and the effects of processes that can contribute to improving the climate in the Municipality.  The idea should be presented very skilfully, while avoiding formulations containing assumptions. Sometimes the very naming of the process determines the success of the initiative. For example, it is meaningful whether during the presentation of a project at a meeting with the mayor you would tell him that you would like to work on a project that you have titled *"Peace, Reconciliation and Resolution of Conflicts and Problems in the Municipality"* or as *"Workshops on Dialogue Facilitation and Mediation Intended for Municipal Councils, Municipal Administration and Mayors."* If the title assumes that there are many problems in the municipality and they cannot be solved, you can create a negative response at the very beginning, and thus you may receive the answer, "We have no problems, help us get a project for computers, etc.".

>*"The title of our project was the subject of a broader discussion between those who came up with the idea and the expert engaged in the process.  We were aware that some notions simply create negative responses, so we decided to use alternatives to some notions that cover the same topics."*
>
>**(Sedat Ajdari,** *the OSCE Mission to Skopje)*

Referring to work and cooperation experience from a certain previous project can be an excellent entry point, and thus you will have to work hard to build relationships and trust.

When you believe that you presented the idea to all stakeholders, make sure that you have not forgotten any important stakeholders that may appear to have the role of a

support factor or a risk factor, potentially leading to failure of the idea. There is nothing wrong in asking your interlocutors to give you recommendations, and at the same time you should take into account that sometimes some persons or institutions, of which you are unaware and that are valuable to the process, can be deliberately hidden.

The benefits may not always be clear to those to whom you have presented the idea, but being a process promoter, you must have a clear picture of where you are going and which of the opportunities might be the main benefits that can be drawn from being involved in such a process.

> *"Inter-donor cooperation is very important! It should not be based on the fear that ideas would be stolen. In our case, we saw that the OSCE has a deep understanding of politics at the local level; we wanted to work with them together, and thus our excellent cooperation started."*
>
> **(Chris Henshaw,** *former Director of NDI North Macedonia)*

When you realize that you have started a successful process, do not hesitate to show success, to brag, and even seek help from other institutions similar to yours. Only in such a way your process can be perfected, making you proud to be part of a great success. Being selfish with respect to benefits from the results will not help you because through cooperation with others, you will produce even better results that you will be proud of. For example, on the one hand, if you are proficient in your work at the local level and if you see that much depends on decisions made at the central level, do not feel ashamed or afraid to seek help from institutions and individuals who have the expertise you need. On the other hand, keep in mind that being successful for someone else may mean losing control. Keep in mind that your success is a pressure for someone who draws benefits from conflicts among councillors or members of the municipal administration.

> *"We realized from the National Democratic Institute that in order for us to be more successful we need experience and contacts with politicians from the central level".*
>
> **(Alush Doda,** *OSCE Mission to Skopje)*

## Interdependence: United We Stand

Building a friendly relationship requires a great deal of commitment towards the interlocutor, while a shake up of trust can occur for frivolous reasons.

- Identify key figures that can make a difference in the municipality and pay special attention to the relationship with them. In order to build friendly relations with stakeholders in the LSGU, time and funds need to be invested constantly because most of them are tied to one term.
- Be honest and do not immediately refuse a request for help, but also do not make promises without being sure. If you cannot help, try to find someone elsewhere who could help; even if you fail to find someone who could be able to help, it is enough that you have made an effort. Be careful as to what you promise. It is better not to promise anything than to make a promise that you cannot keep.
- Do not waste time, start building a friendship with councillors and the mayor at the beginning of their term. Keep in mind that capacity-building training is most needed at the beginning of the term.
- Interpersonal relationships at the local level are quite complicated, you can almost never know the details that can jeopardize the process, so try to find out interlocutors that have a good relationship with other interlocutors or ideally interlocutors desiring to be on good terms with other interlocutors in the future, and of course whether there are other interlocutors that should be involved in the process.
- Be neutral and avoid emotional approach. Keep in mind that your interlocutors will do their best to win you over.
- Feel free to refer to previous experience gained from cooperating with the municipality; you should especially analyse if someone from your institution has ever cooperated with the municipality and what was the experience like.

*"Being aware of the capacities of the newly elected councillors, I myself sought help everywhere so that they could be trained. I have personally attended many trainings and I know about the power of trainings".*

**(Bekim Memeti,** *President of the Council of the Municipality of Tetovo)*

We start seeing the picture when we have slowly put together all the pieces of the puzzle; your way of acting should be a comprehensive one in your communication, it should comprise all the interlocutors and you should try not to miss anyone. Try to apply this principle to key figures who will be helping you in the process; for example, when choosing training participants, do not fail to pay attention to the balance in terms of political, ethnic, religious and cultural affiliation. Equal gender representation is particularly important in these

processes in contexts where politics is predominantly male-dominated. Key figures need to understand the benefit coming from such a comprehensiveness; if that is not the case, then feel free to explain to them how important the support from those currently seen as enemies is and that this dialogue process is precisely aimed at: eliminating hostile images and creating sustainable channels of communication, which will further contribute to the successful activities of the municipality. Although they can calculate the political benefits themselves, you should be aware thereof as well. If you get stuck, you can always refer to the universal goal at the local level: how important it is to solve the problems of all citizens, regardless of their political, ethnic or any other affiliation.

## Supply and Demand: Dialogue as a Sole Solution

In order for you to be able to match your supply with the demand, you need to keep in mind that you need: (1) **a clear vision**, both from you and from those for whom it is intended for; (2) **continuity**, not just a sporadic activity; (3) the vision **should be realistic**, it should not be a utopia; (4) the vision **should be co-created** with those to whom it is supplied, it should be the property of those to whom it is consecrated, and it should not be only yours; (5) you need to have **personal and institutional credibility**; and finally (6) **be flexible with you and your institution**, thus you will be responding better to the needs of your target group, in this case municipal councillors and the municipal administration.

1. **A clear vision:** You should make sure you know the problem well enough in order to be able to help others see the solution, and you should know exactly where you are leading others as well. When the picture is clear to you, then you can start a conversation with key stakeholders in the process. If you manage to convey your vision to them, make sure that they will not find it difficult to convince their superiors and even other participants that should be part of the process.
2. **Continuity:** If you have already started the capacity building process through training, make sure that it is a continuous process. No one can give as much time as is necessary, so try to find allies at the beginning that will ensure continuity of cooperation activities with the municipality, in that way your friendship will become longer and better. Feel free to ask interlocutors what they are expecting from the process and assess whether you can meet their expectations or you will need help from somewhere else.
3. **Reality:** Any idea that is built on unrealistic utopian bases cannot be turned into concrete activities. Such an idea or vision is doomed and cannot be expected to be supported by anyone. Therefore, be realistic in what you offer, everything that is

above reality is a promise that you cannot fulfil and that will harm your relationship with others whom you want to help.

*"After attending meetings organized by NDI and the OSCE, we returned with a greater self-confidence, better communication skills and improved ethics. The training also helped us improve in terms of ethics and transparency."*

**(Genc Selmani,** *Councillor in the Municipality of Kichevo)*

4. **Ownership:** From the very beginning of the process you should make sure that there is full ownership of the idea. Provide interlocutors with the opportunity not only to buy your idea and vision but also to invest material goods therein and develop it to a level so that they can be able to feel it as their own. Yes, you may be the initiator, but once your vision falls into the hands of those who need it most, it can take on an ideal form and yield best results. You should be watching, be proud and enjoy the successes achieved by others.

5. **Institutional and personal credibility:** If you do not have personal and institutional credibility, you will hardly be able to come up with an idea. Personal credibility comes not only from your knowledge of the issue, but also from a number of other things related to morality and the past, whereas institutional credibility, from which you draw power, can sometimes be even detrimental, especially if your institution has a bad reputation. So, institutional credibility strengthens the legitimacy of what you will offer, but, of course, your personal credibility and knowledge are of great importance as well. Good mediators are welcome to such processes. Keep in mind that your credibility cannot be jeopardized by putting some humour in the communication with interlocutors who need to be told the idea; on the contrary, by doing that your credibility can only be strengthened.

*"Councillors need to be responsible and understand their role and position. Having seen the shortcomings in the daily work, we asked for help with respect to capacity building through training. Now we are pleased that the communication among councillors and with the administration has been facilitated. "*

**(Fari Sali,** *Councillor in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari, Skopje)*

6. **Flexibility:** Fearing no changes in the course of the project implementation can help you be successful. It is of great importance to have institutional support with respect to this. Through a real implementation of the project you can perceive certain shortcomings or opportunities for improvement. During the implementation of this

project, it was realized that municipal administration should be involved, although initially the project was focused on capacity building of municipal councillors. During the implementation, it was also realized that there was a very important link that should be included. Also, during the implementation of this project, it was realized that it would be appropriate to organize a joint event where participants from the municipalities would have the opportunity to exchange experience among each other and to learn from among each other. Also, during the implementation of the training, it was realized that civil society organizations can make a great contribution, so such organizations were invited to attend some training events.

> *"In all the NDI programs we have been trying to include civil society organizations that often represent the voice of those who are disadvantaged. Advocating for the rights of marginalized communities is a proof that a municipality cares for all its citizens."*

> **(Aleksandra Krsteska,** *Senior Program Manager at NDI North Macedonia)*

## Omni-Partiality

When conducting any operational activity, you should be guided by the principle of neutrality and impartiality. Neutrality as a principle is the guiding star to success. This principle should be ensured in every sense. Being impartial or partial towards everyone can only make you more successful in such a sensitive process.

- **Place:** The place where you have decided to lead the dialogue will determine the success in terms of developing communication with the chosen group and improving the mutual relations. It should be a neutral point where all participants will feel secure. The biggest dilemma here is whether the training should be organized outside the city where the municipal councillors and the administration work and operate or whether the training should take place inside the municipality. The main recommendation is that any opportunity should be taken towards organizing the training outside the environment in which one works and lives; that is primarily because participants are much more focused on the content and at the same time, they are more relaxed and develop better mutual relations. However, this should not be a strict rule. Sometimes when you see that participants start cancelling attendance because you are planning to hold the training outside the place of residence, you need to adjust and consider holding it in the municipality where you operate. For example, for cultural reasons, sometimes women cannot stay in a hotel outside their place of residence. Sometimes,

to be gender sensitive, you need to be creative and consider including others through the internet or electronically for women who are unable to attend.

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*"The active learning methods, the humour, the collegiality and our personal and institutional credibility were just some of the most important factors for the success of this project."*

**(Chris Henshaw,** *former Director of NDI North Macedonia)*

- **Time:** Regarding time, we recommend to try not to organize the dialogue and mediation event during weekends or holidays. Participants want to be free on weekends and holidays, and weekend engagements are not very welcome, especially if their expenses are not reimbursed in the form of per diems. This should not represent a strict rule. When it is indicated that participants have started to valorise the investment in building their personal capacity is the moment, you will know that it no longer matters to them whether the training is taking place during a weekend or weekdays or when they do not find it important of how many stars is the hotel in which the training will be held.

- **Authority:** The way you manage authority, which usually comes from the position, function, and economic power of individuals, will be your path to success. Authoritative people are welcome, they should have the power to decide, but the skills of organizers and trainers should put such people in a position to realize that they should be equal with everyone during the training. This is a very sensitive issue and it should be seriously considered even at the beginning of the activity. The main recommendation is to let such persons know that they should be equal among equals and that only by being equal, can they achieve a positive experience. The risk here is that such people often take revenge unless they see the benefits. If you bring authoritative persons/ officials on one side, make an effort to create an equal situation with respect to the other side, thus enabling a balanced power, but by no means should dialogue take place solely among such authoritative personalities. Everyone should be equal in such a dialogue and have equal decision-making power. One recommendation on how to neutralize participants with authority is to give them some responsibility in the part regarding the training, workshops or the process of organizing mediation, instead of giving them too much space to speak in plenum.

*"Nobody can do anything alone, only if we are all sitting down together at a table can we achieve everything; we saw that even during the workshop exercises."*

**(Boris Georgievski,** *Mayor, Municipality of Gazi Baba, Skopje)*

- **Selection of participants:** This is a process that is often overlooked. Sometimes it is left to the target group to choose participants or is done by the main (key) stakeholders. This is a process that can only be performed if you have full confidence in the key stakeholders or interlocutors with whom you have started a conversation about the initiative, and they should share the same principles and values as you and your institution. In order for the relationship to develop in a positive direction, for a constructive dialogue to occur, and for a certain relationship to begin to improve, you need to be careful who you put at a table. Sometimes just because you have forgotten to invite someone, a whole group will not come to your event. Sometimes the fear of inviting conflicting persons to be part of a broader dialogue can result in solidarity not only within the group to which such person belongs, but also within other groups. It would be ideal if you take responsibility for the selection of participants, even if it is through a public announcement in the municipality. Interlocutors or key stakeholders will gladly give you that role because they are aware of the risks involved in selecting participants.

- **Language:** Participants need to be made sure that in this process of dialogue they will have the opportunity to express themselves in a language in which they feel they can express themselves best and, of course, in a language that they think others can understand them best. It should be made possible for participants to receive translation and to have their speech interpreted as well. On one hand, this should be a rule, although it is known that if the participants know the language spoken by the interlocutor and are receiving translation, then they get tired because the process of receiving translation requires much more concentration. On the other hand, in dialogue processes the language can be used as an introductory point for negotiation. That can be a good exercise where the language could score points from its dual role as a common code for successful dialogue and as an obstacle creating the basis for misunderstandings. This means that if the use of translation is problematic during the training, the mediators and organizers should not be afraid; instead, they should put it as a negotiation subject even at the beginning and the messages received from the very dialogue should be used in direction of encouraging participants to make decisions on even more sensitive topics.

## Coffee Chat

In our culture, when someone asks you to meet over coffee, it means that they want to convey a message to you, normally through conversation or a chat. That does not mean that you have to drink coffee, but to prepare for a conversation through which something will be conveyed to you through words.

Many event organizers, where dialogue is at the epicentre of the activity, neglect the social part of activities as something irrelevant, as something being outside the scope of the task of the organizer and as something that should not be invested in.

Dialogue does not mean a conversation between interlocutors, but something that goes through a word. We all use words and sentences to convey a message to our interlocutors. Such communication is not realized without a goal; in order to achieve the goal when we communicate with our interlocutors, it is not necessary that the very communication take place in formal circumstances (meeting, training, conference, etc.). In fact, the best communication takes place in informal circumstances, at informal places, because in such circumstances there is freedom from public pressure. Such circumstances provide you with the opportunity to learn more about the other by unveiling something more about yourself - and so the more you give, the more you get in return.

If the main goal of your activity is to contribute to the creation of communication channels, then you should try not to formalize the informal part of activities. This means that you need to incorporate elements of informal dialogue even during training sessions.

> *"Some people think that such seminars are just an opportunity for travel and visiting places. For me that was not the case, it was a training producing benefits on both personal and institutional level"*
>
> **(Ivana Nikolikj,** *councillor in the Municipality of Kumanovo)*

In our project focusing on the work of municipal councillors and the municipal administration, we made efforts to make every agenda minute well-thought-out and in function of improving communication channels. This means that we carefully considered the possibilities in the proposed activities regarding the social part in order to avoid creating an image of usurpation of free time. Such activities should be guided actually by a single principle such as the voluntariness. You will do your best if you make the participants be part of social activities, but you must not force them into doing anything that you think is good at the moment.

When organizing informal parts, it is good to hire a special person for that, aimed at having the work of the trainer and the animator differentiated, but this should only be a recommendation, not a rule. Organizers should be partaking in the social part, where, in fact, the best moments occur. These are moments that can serve as an indicator of success or an opportunity for correction in case you have done something wrong in the process of implementing activities. In the social part of the project, one evaluates what has happened during the day and one's expectations are expressed as well. It is a part where participants discuss common points of interest, be it sport, profession, and hobby or solve a real problem. Consider that the target group you have chosen rarely has the opportunity to discuss free topics.

In fact, the best negotiations took place in the background of our training events, precisely in the informal social part. In this part the best agreements were made!

This part should consist of real social activities, such as: quizzes, movies, music, outdoor or water sports activities, relaxing conversation moments, etc. The main message is that in the social portion one should not be saving nor be putting pressure on participants.

> *"The councillors and administrative workers socialize much more now, they are much more effective now. The performance is obviously improved and the working atmosphere is much more relaxed"*
>
> ***(Besa Ziba,*** *Administration, Municipality of Struga)*

# *TAKING CARE OF THE CONTENT*

## Creating Conditions for Acknowledgement

The content makes the difference. Explaining the meaning of the content is as important as taking care of the process. When designing content you should be careful with respect to:

**A) How the training content and the dialogue process is designed**

Create content that appeals to all participants. The content should have the experience of the participants in the center of events, thus respecting their knowledge and experience. The most common mistake in designing content is to ignore the knowledge and experience of participants and to have a training approach that makes participants be passive listeners of lectures. As to any training in which your main goal is to facilitate community dialogue between two conflicting stakeholders, a well-designed content can create the basis for a carefree elaboration of the most sensitive topics and issues between stakeholders. In order to reach the moment when the facilitator will be able to assess that the parties are willing to engage in dialogue on more sensitive topics, the content should provide participants with knowledge, skills and tools that are most relevant to the effective and non-violent communication and beyond. It is ideal if the additional skills and tools that enhance the communication skills refer to life skills, from which participants could draw some benefits after their training or the mediation process. If participants know from the very beginning that, apart from being part of the solution, they will go home with life skills that they could make use of in their everyday life, at home or at work, then they will give themselves up to the process.

When creating content, event organizers usually assume what the participants' and stakeholders' needs would be, but it would be best to provide space and time for the very stakeholders or training participants to get involved in the conceptualization of the content.

The content should not be a rigid matter. It should be flexible and adaptable to the needs of participants at a given time. That means that event organizers and mediators should not fear any agenda change.

**B) The role of the facilitator**

Anyone making efforts to facilitate the creation and processing of the content, apart from the many features that they should have, should be a true mediator knowing the context well, as well as a very sensitive person with regard to different cultures and possible conflicts. The same applies to event organizers because they will be asked to mediate if training participants notice an imbalance or taking sides. The most difficult moment in the facilitation, even for the

most experienced dialogue facilitator in the community, is to maintain neutrality, especially if part of the identity (usually ethnic, gender or political, in our country) is merged with the identity of some participants. Even the slightest imbalance can shake the authority of the facilitator and contribute to failure of the dialogue process between the confronting parties. In such cases, it is advisable to provide additional facilitation from two mediators who have had previous experience working together. Mediators, being good hosts, should make sure that their guests are respected and enjoying their central role, while not endangering the process by letting participants be excessively relaxed and overcome by frivolity in the process and the training.

> *"Trainers should create interactivity moments.  It was very important for me to be part of the exercises because they were interesting and funny and I could draw very good lessons therefrom."*
>
> *(**Fari Sali,** Councillor in the Municipality of Shuto Orizari, Skopje)*

### C) Respecting the role of councillors and administration members

Being both stakeholders and participants in training events and workshops that are part of a broader mediation strategy in the community, municipal councillors should be respected as leaders in their society - they are not just officials of a certain political party. On the one hand, it should be made known that councillors have three basic functions: making decisions, representing their municipality and controlling the work of the very municipality.  On the other hand, the municipal administration has expertise in more specific areas, which neither councillors, dialogue facilitators nor organizers can have.

## Melting the Differences:  Teamwork

> *"At the beginning of the project we were not functioning as a team, but as the project was being implemented, we understood that we could be functioning as a team and we were able to understand the philosophy that we cannot be successful without each other. Now I cannot even imagine how compact we all are".*
>
> *(**Ivana Nikolikj,** Councillor in the Municipality of Kumanovo)*

Irrespective of whether it is about workshops, training or meetings, in dialogue facilitation processes or in mediation, the working methodology should be firstly focused on the person and not on the function or the political background; in addition to this:

- In order to ensure a good working atmosphere, dialogue organizers and facilitators should create conditions that will enable participants to see each other as equal members in every sense, regardless of what they represent. The role of authority mostly originates from the formal position of participants in the municipality or in the political parties. It is very important to include such officials because, at a certain moment, the process will require legitimization of the decisions made in such workshops, where the goal is to achieve a long-term solution and reconciliation through the dialogue facilitation process. The participants themselves need to understand that their formal functions and titles are a transient and changeable category, and that, however, in the end everyone will have to live with each other, and that without each other they will find life difficult.

> *"The environment, the atmosphere, the topics we covered and the way we were working during the training made us feel like belonging more to Gostivar, and not like belonging to a certain political party. The most important thing is that we have understood that instead of being stubborn, we should go soft on others."*
> *(Aferdita Hamza, Administration, Municipality of Gostivar)*

Training should be aimed both at strengthening communication skills and strengthening self-confidence. It should also be aimed at turning rivals into friends and making them fully independent, thus paving the way for them to become more critical and more active actors in their municipality as well.

> *"We are not aware that we lack knowledge about many things. We need to be informed what possibilities there are for capacity building."*
>
> *(Ivana Nikolikj, Councillor in the Municipality of Kumanovo)*

- Small successes should not be ignored, they should be promoted because they help multiply successes.
- Building personal capacities contributes to personal success, so when designing the training, think of a way to offer participants life skills that they will find useful after the end of their term.
- Strengthening the local identity helps to neutralize the ethnic or political party identity of participants. Local and personal interests and goals are elements that are always

welcome to the processes in which you would like to break the obstacle that prevents the communication between interlocutors.

> *"Many things have changed at the institutional level.  I come from the Social Work Department.  After the training, good ideas and proposals made by opposition parties are analyzed and accepted by consensus".*

> **(Aferdita Hamza,** *Administration, Municipality of Gostivar)*

## Dancing With Politics

When conducting such activities, dialogue organizers and facilitators will be faced with the following dilemmas: How to neutralize the infiltration of political interests in the content? How to avoid political abuse-related manipulation and how to remain fearless if there is politics related stuff in the content? Let us try to answer some of them here:

- **The participants** will try to abuse the process and the content in order to gain sympathy from others or score political points, but it is up to you to ensure that there is an environment in which everyone will feel like an integral part without which it is impossible to make any progress. It is up to you and your training objective whether you will allow your goal of bringing conflicting parties closer to be hijacked by politics, whether you will incorporate politics into the content and then use it.  Keep in mind that politicians have a duty to be politicians and to use every moment for political purposes. During their participation in workshops, they will use every moment to praise the achievements of their political party or they will sharply criticize and try to disqualify representatives of political parties to which they do not belong. If this is not the purpose of the content, then skillfully neutralize such conversations, but do not be afraid of such a discussion. In our case, we are proud that the participants of our workshops, through a series of well-thought-out steps in the process and in the content, managed to get out of their anchored positions and roles of politicians and started solving problems as individuals. Such a transformation of a person is not an easy process and it does not mean that they have changed the political party, but it means that they have created another communication channel that would benefit them in future.

> *"Political goals should never be put before the interests of citizens. Citizens and the local community should not suffer from political games because*

- **Facilitators and organizers** should be neutral individuals whose personal political beliefs should not be the subject of any discussion. The facilitator will have to skillfully deal with any kind of labeling that may jeopardize the mediation process. The same goes for labeling related to organizers of reconciliation events. First of all, keep in mind that this is a very risky management zone and a zone that could jeopardize the credibility of the institution you represent. Here, we do not want to suggest that you should be afraid of labeling, on the contrary, this recommendation should encourage you to be politically correct and gain sympathy from all stakeholders at the reconciliation table. On the one hand, because it is often the case that the parties will ask you to solve the problem instead of them, thus rejecting any responsibility for the solution, it will be useful to be knowledgeable about mediation skills just as it is useful to be knowledgeable about effective communication tools. On the other hand, building trust with stakeholders will give you an opportunity to be called upon to mediate in resolving their disputes, as it was the case with several examples in the Municipality of Gostivar, where the OSCE Mission to Skopje was called upon to mediate in disputes between the Municipality of Gostivar and the Roma community in the same city, as well as in other disputes within the very municipality. These opportunities should be taken. If you do not feel ready to take such a responsibility, then it is best to look for a professional mediator.

- Representatives of international organizations are of special importance for neutrality. They are often seen through the prism of the institution they represent, so stakeholders will do their best to gain sympathy. So be prepared to see in action how the parties will try to win you over and convince you of their truth.

- If stakeholders understand the purpose of your activity, they will become part of your vision and at the same time they will feel your sincerity in finding a common solution to their problem, thus they will understand on their own that the processes of

achieving common goals and interests can only be jeopardized by political manipulations.

# *Gratitude*

*We would like to express our gratitude to all 7 municipalities that had confidence in us and allowed us to be part of their reality and successes: Gazi Baba, Gostivar, Kichevo, Kumanovo, Struga, Tetovo and Shuto Orizari.*

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*We would like to express our gratitude to all project participants: councillors and members of the municipal administration of all seven municipalities, who not only wholeheartedly committed themselves to the solutions and successes in their municipalities, but also created opportunities in direction of sharing their knowledge and skills.*