

6 MODULE

FACILITATING CONVERSATION EVENTS AND ADDRESSING CHALLENGES



Preparing for the facilitation of Conversation Events in advance, contributes to setting up an environment that is most conducive to both constructive facilitation and optimal participation. Advance preparation includes facilitators preparing themselves, others, as well as the environment around them. It also includes anticipating facilitation challenges and discussing the best ways of managing these in a respectful, dignified, participatory, and inclusive way.

This module provides guidance on the following:

- How to prepare for participatory facilitation?
- What facilitation challenges might you encounter?
- How to manage and encourage participation?
- How to shift power imbalances?
- How to manage gender issues?
- How to manage timing and pacing?

NOTE

This module is not a comprehensive Facilitation Guide. See [Section 6](#) for links to *Further Readings*.



How to prepare for participatory facilitation?

GLOSSARY

Participatory facilitation: A style of facilitation used to guide participants through a participatory process in which they feel safe and supported to engage in dialogues and interaction, and to share, learn, and take action around a lived experience or challenge, such as AMR.



Advance preparation

The facilitation team can prepare a lot in advance to ensure that Conversation Events run smoothly and provide a conducive environment for participation. Consider the following activities in your preparations:

Prepare to facilitate

Make sure that each member of the facilitation team knows and understands the facilitation process, the flow of the sessions as a whole, and the flow of each session in itself. Adapt and adjust as necessary. Decide on the roles and responsibilities

each facilitator will take on before, during, and after the Conversation Event. This includes, for example, checking who will present each session, who will guide participants through which activities, and who will take notes and monitor what is happening. See [Module 8](#) for more on documenting and analysing Conversation Events.

Prepare logistics, resources, and materials

Ensure that you have prepared everything you need for each session, in advance. See [Module 5](#) for more on preparation.

Prepare to manage challenges

Anticipate challenges you might encounter and together plan how to address these. For example, role-play how to deal with sensitive issues, such as dominant participants. See [below](#) for more on addressing challenges.

Brief experts and stakeholders

At various times in the Conversation Events you may invite experts to provide input and evidence on antimicrobial resistance (AMR), and stakeholders to engage in certain processes – to listen and learn from participant's experiences, or with participant's permission, to participate in the co-creation process.

The **timing** of when you invite 'external' people is important. For example, in the initial stages participants are still building up their trust and confidence in each other, in the facilitation team, and in the process. Inviting an expert, for example, to provide input on AMR is important, but this person needs to be properly briefed ahead of time.

Tips for briefing experts and stakeholders

- **Who participants are and the ground rules** they have developed for themselves and others who come into Conversation Events. Explain the consequences of breaking the ground rules. See [Module 7](#) for more on ground rules.
- **What evidence to present and how to present it** in a way that is most appropriate and accessible for the participant group. The evidence needs to be objective and as non-judgemental as possible.
- **Input from experts needs to be short and concise**, and not presented as a lecture.
- **How to present AMR messages in a constructive and appropriate way**, and how to allow for different perspectives, for example, if participants do not understand or agree with the messages.
- **How to initiate and stimulate inclusive dialogues** around the evidence.
- How to answer questions **without using jargon**.
- Why it is important to **listen to participants**, rather than dominate discussions; and the **consequences of power imbalances** for participation.
- What **group dynamics they need to be aware of**, for example, gender sensitivities or other inclusivity issues and power dynamics (see [Module 7](#) for more on group dynamics).

Likewise, brief and prepare other stakeholders, like local leaders, policy-makers, and funders, in advance so that they understand the importance of not dominating or taking control or ownership of the process. (See [below](#) for more on managing power dynamics.)



Example from a Responsive Dialogues project

In the **Malawi** project, facilitators spoke to experts and local leaders in advance of Conversation Events, briefing them about why it's important to work with participants, the experts/leaders roles in the Conversation Event, and the importance of making participants feel comfortable so they are able to share their views openly.

Plan the start of each day to set the mood

Discuss what is culturally appropriate in each context, for example, is opening with a prayer, silent meditation, or a song appropriate? Ask participants how they prefer to start each day or Conversation Event.



Image: Thailand Responsive Dialogues project.

Example from a Responsive Dialogues project

In several of the Conversation Events in the **Thailand** project, the facilitator started some sessions with a moment of silence and meditation to set the mood and encourage mindfulness.

Decide on appropriate ice-breakers and energisers

These should not take up too much time but are really to help participants get to know each other ('break the ice'), or have a short break when their energy levels are dipping.

Practise participatory facilitation skills

As a facilitation team, practise and role-play active listening, paraphrasing, or mirroring what was said to check that you have understood, and checking that what has been said can be shared in plenary. Practise acknowledging and thanking participants for their contributions.

Practise taking notes

Note-takers can practise active listening, summing up key points, and checking that what was said is accurately captured.

‘On-the-day’ preparation

On the day of the Conversation Event there are many different things to prepare and organise prior to starting. The following tips can help with preparations.

Preparation tips

- **Be punctual:** Be ready and well on time.
- **Prepare the environment and the room:** Prepare the room and the seating arrangements in advance. Put out resources and put up visuals, flipcharts, and any other aids on the wall, as necessary. [See Module 5 for more details.](#)
- **Prepare to engage with participants:** Meet participants at the door and greet each one. Be warm and welcoming, and start to build up their confidence and trust.
- **Prepare yourself:** Breathe deeply and adopt a focused mindset. Leave your own ‘troubles’, feelings, moods, biases, and opinions at the door. Switch off your cell phone. Be present for participants and for the process.



NOTE

Try not to have your facilitation notes or session plans on your cell phone. Participants see you looking at it your cell phone all the time and might be prompted to do the same. Rather discuss with participants cell phone etiquette while in the Conversation Events.



What facilitation challenges might you encounter?

Challenges in running Conversation Events may range from needing to encourage more participation and stimulating discussion, through to managing domineering participants or stakeholders. Although it is not possible to anticipate every challenge, the facilitation team can plan how to manage the most common ones. These include, for example:

- **Levels of participation:** In many Conversation Events, participants come from the same community, for example, the same geographical area, profession, or gender group. They share common attributes, such as language, culture, or gender. However, their individual personalities will still vary. Some participants will be more vocal and dominant in discussions, and others may be more silent – creating a need to manage the level of participation of different individuals.

Conversation Events also bring together participants from different backgrounds – they may hold different values, attitudes, and behaviours; they may have different educational and literacy levels, different first languages, and different abilities. Some participants may be experiencing psychological or emotional stress because of, for example, family problems, illness, gender-based violence, money worries, and so on. All these issues shape participation in Conversation Events.

- **Power imbalances and gender sensitivity:** In some cultures, men are expected to be more vocal than women. So, power imbalances and gender sensitivity might be challenging to manage. And, of course bringing some key stakeholders into Conversation Events who may be policy-makers, experts, or researchers, with varying levels of influence and expertise, raises its own particular power challenges.
- **Time and pace of Conversation Events:** Advance preparation of agendas provides a structure to follow and helps with timing and pacing. However, it may become apparent while running Conversation Events that insufficient time has been built in for asking questions or sharing experiences, for in-depth discussion, for the co-creation process, or for any other part of the Conversation Events. This raises the challenge of adjusting and adapting the timing and pacing 'on the go'.

How to manage and encourage participation?

In every Conversation Event there will be participants who are eager to share their ideas. These 'over-participants' may be helpful at the beginning in getting the conversations going. However, over-participants can also become over-dominant, and drown out or silence the valuable perspectives of introverted individuals, or those who take longer to process information.

Strengthening participation

The task of the facilitation team is to be sensitive to and promote healthy group dynamics in a way that strengthens participation by all. This might include practising the following:

- **Awareness of self:** Sensitivity starts with each facilitator reflecting on and becoming aware of their own values and attitudes, and how these shape their behaviours. Self-awareness is the first step to changing behaviour – to leave our own fixed opinions and biases outside the Conversation Events, to dominate conversations less, and to listen more.
- **Awareness with others:** As a facilitation team, encourage honest reflection on each of your responses in Conversation Events. For example, during briefings, trainings, and at the reflection/analysis sessions between each Conversation Event, the team reflects on their own responses to issues, such as passing judgement on what others are saying, dominating discussions, talking too much, and not giving others a chance to participate. Facilitators can either share their feelings and experiences, or keep them to themselves if they are more comfortable with this.
- **Prepare strategies to deal with participation challenges in advance:** For example, a co-facilitator will be ready to step in to assist or to add their voice to stimulate input. As a facilitation team, take the opportunity during breaks or between Conversation Events to reflect on challenges you are encountering, and to support each other to work through these challenges together.

- **Share the challenge with participants:** Discuss the importance of respecting each other and valuing an inclusive and fair environment, free of discrimination, domination and inequality.
- **Stress active participation but not domination!** Do not look at the person who is always speaking or encourage/acknowledge them by asking them more questions or inviting them to speak. Say: “We’ll come back to you after others have spoken” or “Let’s hear from someone else.”



Visual image captured in a Conversation Event, showing one way to manage dominant participants.

Image: Thailand Responsive Dialogues project.

- **Discuss how to respond to participants appropriately:** For example, in the Malawi project, facilitators discussed the challenge of participants who seemed to lack confidence to share their views during the first Conversation Event. Through discussion, facilitators decided how to provide these participants with more encouragement. This led to a greater readiness by participants to engage in discussions and articulate issues.
- **Allow time for participants to respond:** For example, when you ask open-ended questions, invite feedback and opinions and let participants speak without interruption. But also allow for 'silence' – it may mean some people are thinking!
- **Develop rapport with participations:** For example, in the Zambia project, the facilitation team spent time getting to know participants during the breaks and this helped participants to feel at ease and contribute more openly.
- **Do no harm!** Personal verbal attacks, insults, humiliating comments, bullying, and other harmful behaviours are not acceptable. Consider taking the 'offender' aside and explaining why their behaviour is unacceptable, asking why they behaved that way and whether it was intended. In extreme cases, the person may need to be 'removed' from the group.

How to shift power imbalances

Power – in all its forms – is evident in all relationships, and especially in Responsive Dialogues and in Conversation Events. It may be visible and obvious; or hidden, invisible and difficult to ‘see’. However it shows up, power has the ability to influence others, and can translate into ‘privilege’ and entitlement. This is especially evident in gender relations and interactions (see later).

One way to address **power dynamics** in Conversation Events is to name them and make them visible so that everyone is aware of their **influence** and potential to shape dialogues in a way that benefits one group or individual at the expense of others. For example, in a space where there is a senior expert, introduce the expert by their proper title and role, acknowledge their expertise, and explain that in this space everyone brings their own level of experience or knowledge, but that everyone’s experience and expertise is equally valid, important, and relevant.

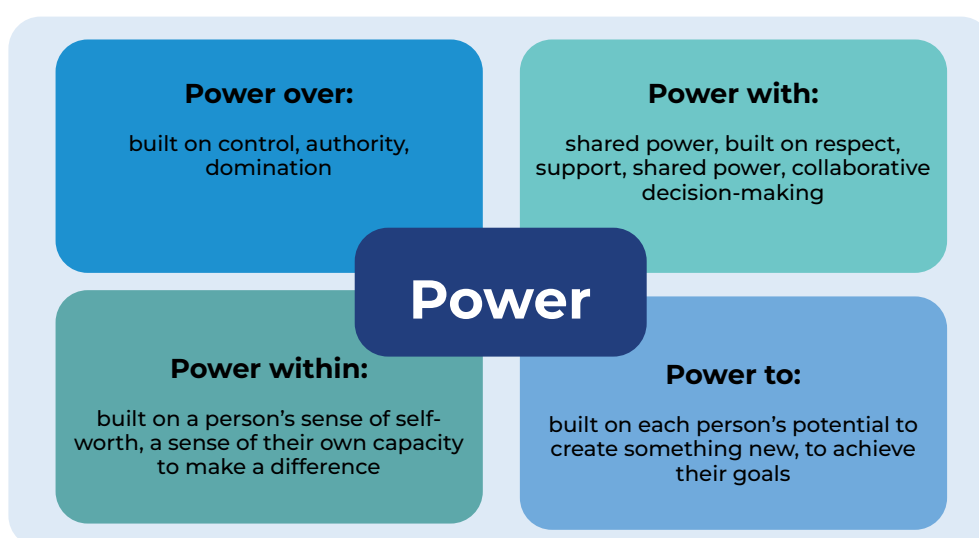
The ideal is to harness power to influence the process of working collaboratively together and to commit to buy-in. In other words, to move away from using ‘power over’ others, to building power and decision-making to become more about ‘power with’ others, ‘power to’ act, and being empowered, i.e. ‘power within’ (as shown in the diagram below from VeneKlasen & Miller, 2007). See the *Cross-cutting themes* for more on shifting power imbalances.

GLOSSARY

Power dynamics: The balance of power between people when they engage with each other.

Influence: The use of power to change how something (decisions) develops, or how people behave, act or think, based on their relationships.

Moving away from ‘power over’ others to building ‘power with’, ‘power within’ and ‘power to’ act



Source: VeneKlasen, L. & Miller, V. (2002). A New Weave of Power. See: <https://www.powercube.net/other-forms-of-power/expressions-of-power/>

“Power is never static, for power is not a thing that we can hold or store, it is a movement, a relationship, a balance, fluid and changing. The power one person can wield over another is dependent on a myriad of external factors and subtle agreements” (Starhawk, 1990).

Ideas for shifting power imbalances

Potential power challenge	Potential solutions
Knowledge power and privilege of experts	
<p>Some experts have specific subject knowledge and may use this to marginalise or disregard the contribution of others.</p> <p>For example, they use unfamiliar words and jargon to shape the direction of ideas, solutions, and policy recommendations. Others might feel intimidated and so defer to or simply agree with these experts.</p>	<p>Brief experts in advance to hold back with their input and responses. (See above for more on briefing experts.)</p> <p>When there are questions, ask participants to respond first before automatically deferring to experts.</p> <p>Encourage participants by reinforcing their ‘expertise’. Explain that we are each ‘experts’, with our own experiences, stories, and important contributions.</p> <p>Use first names and avoid titles like ‘Doctor’ or ‘Professor’, as a sign that all voices are equally important, unless you specifically want participants to acknowledge a person’s expertise or the use of titles is important in the setting.</p> <p>However, be aware that calling participants by their first names is not always appropriate. For example, in the Zambia project, it was not appropriate for younger facilitators to call older people by their first names. Instead, participants were asked what they wanted to be called.</p>
Seniority power and privilege of social or economic position	
<p>Some people in the Conversation Events may have more status, for example, because of their economic or social position, or because of their age or gender. They feel entitled to speak, while those with less status feel less empowered to voice an opinion.</p> <p>Participants may be subconsciously driven by what their community leaders would ‘expect’ of them – even if these people are not physically present in the room.</p>	<p>Make seniority power visible by discussing the expectations of those with seniority, but stressing that we each have equal status in this space.</p>
Power or privilege due to familiarity with other participants	
<p>People who know others in a Conversation Event may feel more comfortable to participate than those who do not know others present.</p>	<p>Create an environment that builds understanding and trust between participants so that everyone feels comfortable working together. This is an ongoing process. (See above for more on preparing the environment and building trust.)</p>



As a facilitator, you can 'challenge' anyone who has power by asking questions that are ... challenging. This requires confidence and a level of expertise as a facilitator – but having a few questions ready can help break the sense of the powerful person 'knowing it all'. For example, if an expert talks about how 'illiteracy and ignorance leads to AMR or antibiotic misuse', ask how effective awareness-raising campaigns have been in countries with a high level of literacy, for example, in the USA or Italy.



How to manage gender issues?

It is important to consciously integrate gender issues into every Responsive Dialogues process and activity. However, the way the facilitation team does this will vary, depending on the topic of the Conversation Events and the cultural contexts in which they occur. This is why it is vital to plan for this, together in advance. See the *Cross-cutting themes* for more on inclusivity and gender sensitivity.



Most Conversation Events involve both men and women – with some being single gender groups and others being mixed gender groups. Participation may vary in these different groups. In many settings, only involving women as participants may be complex. Often women may be unable to participate because they cannot leave their domestic or childcare responsibilities. If they do participate, they may be reticent to contribute to discussions due to lack of confidence, deference to their husband's viewpoint, or a concern about contradicting their husband or family's standpoint.



Photo: Framaja Photography.

Example from a Responsive Dialogues project

In the **Zambia** project, a gender expert was invited in as a consultant and to train the core implementation team and facilitators on how to manage gender dynamics and power relations. This was considered important as the topic of the Responsive Dialogues was Urinary Tract Infections (UTIs) – a sensitive and gendered issue.



The gender expert suggested devoting a session of a Conversation Event to gender issues, and using gender probing questions to facilitate the deliberation on the issues, such as:

- What is the difference between sex and gender? How do they relate to each other?
- What are our own gender values and norms? How do these affect our relationships and behaviour?
- How do factors affect men and women differently, for example, long queues at healthcare facilities? How do these factors impact on health-seeking behaviour?
- Is it easy for men/women to tell their partners about their own challenges with antibiotic usage and AMR? Why or why not? How would their partner react? Why?
- How does gender determine opportunities, rights, and access to resources and medicines?
- How do our gender identities impact our participation in Conversation Events?

During the Conversation Events themselves, participants were asked how they would like to be divided into groups. For example, in one of the sessions where participants were asked to share if they had been diagnosed with a UTI, females said they were more comfortable doing this in a female-only group, without the presence of their husbands.

Participatory facilitation tips



In all participant groups, but especially in mixed gender Conversation Events:

- **Set targets for the participation of different genders.** Carefully monitor this and address any barriers.
- **'Swap shoes'.** Ask men to 'walk in the shoes of women' and women to 'walk in the shoes of men' to see things from each others' point of view.
- **Encourage full and equitable participation.** Give women and men equal opportunities to answer questions, lead discussions, or present group feedback. Make everyone aware of this.
- **Include activities that encourage women to speak out.** Allow more time for women who may be shy or afraid to express themselves.
- **Include positive role-models of both genders,** for example, in the facilitation team, and amongst the experts and stakeholders who are invited to join the events. The Malawi project adopted this principle to promote positive reinforcement for both women and men.
- **Make gender bias visible** and help participants to explore and understand where gender bias or prejudice comes from, and to explore values and attitudes related to gender and power. If some participants continue to disrespect others or discriminate on the basis of gender, facilitators may need to speak to them in private.
- If gender dynamics are leading to conflict or hostility amongst participants, **remain calm, stop everyone, breathe, and take a short break** or do an ice-breaker to de-escalate negative emotions.

- **Invite a gender expert or organisation to help address gender issues.**
Remember, the same briefing process as mentioned previously applies to any expert who comes into Conversation Events, for whatever purpose.

Gender sensitivity applies to both men and women, as seen in the example below.

Example from a Responsive Dialogues project

In the **Malawi** project, men spoke about having a strong preference for self-medication and buying antibiotics from drugstores. Time and the impact on the household of not being able to work were critical aspects affecting their health-seeking behaviour.

As a man, you are the breadwinner, and when you think of Queens (government health facility) and the long queues, you may simply decide to just go and buy medicines due to the productive roles men engage in. (Male participant of Conversation Event, Malawi)



How to manage timing and pacing?

The quality and outcomes of the deliberations depends on sufficient time and monitoring the pace of the Conversation Events. How you time and pace each session and the Conversation Events as a whole depends on the participant group and local context.

Running Conversation Events to time

During the preparation phase, Conversation Events will have been scheduled with the communities at times that they agree are most suitable for them to meet. However, flexibility is key. Circumstances may change, and if the scheduled timing does not work, the members of the facilitation team need to adjust their own schedules to fit the community's schedule. Similarly, if sessions take longer to complete, or if the community would like another session, this may be added during the course of the Conversation Events – provided that the entire group agrees to it and can find a suitable time to attend, and provided that the project has the budget and resources for this.

Running sessions to time

This is always a challenge and while it is important to cover all the sessions, giving adequate time for all participants to really take part and steer the outputs can mean that some sessions run over time.

Break-out sessions

In some cases where there are break-out sessions, it is possible that different groups take different amounts of time to carry out a task. A good idea is for each small group to appoint a timekeeper. Always check with the group before calling a session to a close and consult with co-facilitators about when and how to stop a session.

Sessions may finish quicker

Although this is less common, it can happen, for example, if a presentation was particularly clear. However, sometimes this is a sign that no one understood anything, or that there is something else going on in the community which is preventing participants from giving their full attention to the session. Similarly, if the 'power' in the room is dominated by one person, others may simply 'switch off' and discussions may not be as rich as intended.

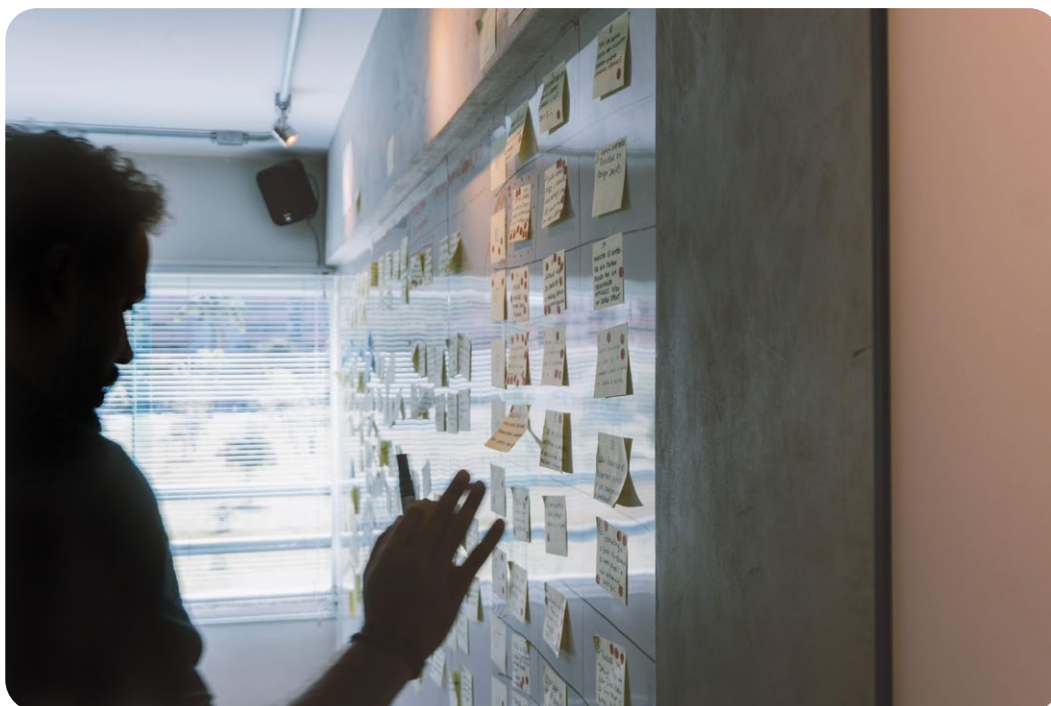
Try to find out why a session is not running to time and adjust the agenda accordingly. If there are adjustments to the agenda on the day, or more time needs to be scheduled, share this with the participants and jointly agree on how this can be done.

There are some tactics that you can use to help a group keep to time better. Some of these relate to managing power and gender dynamics, which have been covered above. A few other tips are presented below. However, despite the best management tips, be prepared to adjust the agenda and change the session plans if the participant groups want to do so.

Participatory facilitation tips

- **Agree with the group about starting sessions on time** and where appropriate, the 'penalty' for late-comers. For example, in the Zambia project, participants in Lusaka agreed that any late-comers had to 'do a dance' – and they held everyone to account, including one of the core implementation team who showed up late because he was organising lunch!
- Check that the **agenda is detailed and realistic in terms of the time** and has allowed for in-depth discussion and deliberation. Share the agenda and timings with participants and agree any changes with them.
- **Keep to the timing of breaks/refreshments and start and end times** of each Conversation Events to avoid participant fatigue and discomfort.
- **Keep monitoring timing and pacing** so that the team can identify the need for any extra Conversation Events earlier in the process, rather than later.
- **Enlist a co-facilitator or one of the participants to assist with monitoring time and pace.** Time-keeping tasks can be shared and rotated around different people who will all feel a sense of responsibility to time-keeping.
- **Write down questions/issues which keep coming up and which cannot be resolved or finished in a session, for future discussion or resolution.** Check this 'parking lot' list at the end of the session or Conversation Event/s to see if any of the issues are still outstanding, and decide on how to take them forward.
- **Always check with a break-out group how much time they need.** Balance the needs of different break-out groups. If a group needs to wrap up and leave before their discussion or activity/task is finished, explain what the consequences of leaving early are. For example, they might need to work on the task in their own time between Conversation Events and be ready to give feedback first in the next Conversation Event.
- **Decide which sessions in the Conversation Events are critical and cannot be dropped** and work out any re-adjustments around them. As an example, in the Zambia project, due to various resource and budgetary constraints, the core implementation team needed to combine sessions in a creative way so as to cut six Conversation Events to four Conversation Events. They needed to adapt and adjust the programme without losing any key content or shortcutting processes, bearing in mind the constraints they were facing.





A facilitator adapting and adjusting the programme in a creative way to ensure that no key content or processes are lost.

Photo: Startaê Team, Unsplash.

Checklist of guidance in this module

Tick completed activities/tasks and those that still need completion.

Activities	Yes	To do
The participatory facilitation of Conversation Events is prepared in advance		
Challenges encountered in Conversation Events are identified		
How to encourage and balance participation is planned		
How to manage power is planned		
How to manage gender sensitivity is planned		
How to manage time and pace of Conversation Events is planned		

