



# Meaningful rightsholder dialogue

IN SUPPLY CHAINS



FAIRTRADE

Insights from  
Fairtrade pilot projects  
for companies and  
third-party facilitators

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# Introduction

## Can rightsholder dialogue support risk management?

Between 2024 and 2025, Fairtrade facilitated direct dialogue between companies and farmers/workers (rightsholders) in five supply chains. We learned that meaningful dialogue can be achieved – also online – and it can play a significant positive role in risk management and corporate human rights and environmental due diligence (HREDD).

Fairtrade pilots had three main objectives. First, to strengthen the capacity of rightsholders and farmer organisations to engage effectively in HREDD. Second, to support companies in improving their ability to implement fair, inclusive, and effective due diligence. Third, to build Fairtrade's own capacity to act as a facilitator of meaningful rightsholder dialogue.

The pilots were conducted across diverse geographical and commodity contexts, involving farmer organisations and rightsholders in **Kenya, Ghana, Fiji, the Philippines, and India**. The commodities included **flowers, cocoa, sugar, and cotton**, while commercial partners were based in the **UK, Switzerland, and the Netherlands**. This diversity allowed Fairtrade to test the approach across

**We share these experiences of rightsholder dialogue to encourage companies to engage affected stakeholders.**



Kenyan Flower Pilot

different supply chains and operating environments. The dialogue events were held in a hybrid format.<sup>1</sup>

Fairtrade's role as a third-party facilitator was to design an approach that gives all participants influence over the agenda, topics, and flow of discussion. Throughout the process, Fairtrade provided guidance and support, built participant capacity, and prepared them to engage effectively with one another.

**This report is for companies and (potential) facilitators of meaningful rightsholder dialogue.** We present Fairtrade's approach, key lessons learned, and practical considerations for companies seeking to strengthen their rightsholder engagement and better integrate rightsholder perspectives into their due diligence processes.

We also provide guidance for organisations acting as facilitators and/or partners to companies, including voluntary sustainability schemes (VSS), civil society organisations, and consultancies, on how to prepare for and support effective dialogue.

<sup>1</sup> Rightsholders and one facilitator were gathered in one physical location and joined an online call with company representatives and another facilitator.

**Dialogue helps companies understand the salient risks affecting their supply chains, strengthen relationships, and support their supplier in tackling the risks effectively.**

## Key takeaways

The pilots demonstrated that dialogue generates deeper insights into risks, strengthens relationships, and supports collaborative action. At the same time, they highlighted that meaningful engagement is resource-intensive, requires careful preparation, and depends on active facilitation. Dialogue should be viewed as a continuous process, not a one-off activity.

Key lessons include:

- **Preparation and capacity building:** Both companies and rightsholders need to prepare carefully before entering dialogue.
- **Inclusive participation:** Enabling all participants to contribute meaningfully requires purposeful effort.
- **Facilitation:** Skilled facilitation is critical for creating safe spaces.
- **Adaptability:** The same principles, methods, and processes can be applied across diverse contexts, with appropriate tailoring to local realities.

## Why dialogue?

Since the 1980s, Fairtrade has enabled company–producer engagement in multiple ways, including visits, roundtables, meetings, digital platforms such as FairVoice, and surveys. In the HREDD dialogue pilots, we explored how to facilitate a particularly demanding form of engagement: dialogue as two- or multi-way communication, in which all parties share equal influence over the agenda and process. Different objectives call for different types of engagement.

## Why Fairtrade?

Fairtrade has long-standing relationships with thousands of producer organisations and buyer companies, building the trust and understanding needed to connect and support both parties in dialogue. Few organisations are equally well placed to facilitate meaningful dialogue between producers and buyers.

**Companies often struggle to engage with rightsholders meaningfully. Third party support can help.**

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# Part



# Pilots at a glance

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Five company-rightsholder dialogues across Africa and Asia-Pacific, covering four commodities.



	Commodity	Sourcing country	Producer organisation	PO Size	Buyer company	Company base	Company size	Number of dialogue events
<b>PILOT 1</b>	Cotton	India	Chetna Organic Agriculture Producer Company	8,706 farmers. 6490 enrolled in Fairtrade.	Yumeko	The Netherlands	30 employees	2
<b>PILOT 2</b>	Sugar (muscovado)	Philippines	Maria Cecilia Farm Workers Association	63 farmers	Chocolat Stella Bernrain	Switzerland	172 employees	2
<b>PILOT 3</b>	Sugar	Fiji	Lautoka cane Producers Association & Fiji Sugar Corporation Limited	LtCPA: 2,823 farmers FSC: 1,800 employees	Tate & Lyle Sugars Limited	United Kingdom	1,300 employees in Europe	2
<b>PILOT 4</b>	Flowers	Kenya	Flamingo Horticulture Kenya (IBIS and Kingfisher farms)	8,100 in Kenya	Flamingo Horticulture UK	United Kingdom	10,000 globally	1
<b>PILOT 5</b>	Cocoa	Ghana	Asunafo North cocoa farmers union and Asetenapa union	9,540 farmers in 75 cooperatives 550 farmers	Multi-stakeholder setting	-	-	1

Except for Ghana, all dialogue events were held with the producer organisation and their commercial partner participating from separate locations and joining online

## What companies gained

Dialogue helped companies understand the salient risks affecting their supply chains, build stronger relationships, and explore collaborative action to tackle the risks. The companies gained:

- **Meaningful dialogue:** 1–2 facilitated dialogue sessions with their supplier, farmers and workers, who operate in a high-risk environment. The sessions were organised, facilitated and documented by Fairtrade.
- **Supplier risk information:** A report on the salient human rights and environmental risks and potential activities to address the identified risks.
- **Tailored advice:** Maturity assessment of the corporate HREDD process with tailored recommendations for improvement. Training on HREDD and meaningful rightsholder engagement for staff and management.
- **Capacity building for suppliers:** Farmer organisations and farmers and workers gained training on risk management and dialogue.

**Fairtrade has enabled various types of company-producer engagement since the 1980s.**

## Fairtrade as a facilitator

**As a facilitator of meaningful dialogue, Fairtrade builds on its dual role in global supply chains.**

Fairtrade maintains long-standing relationships with farmer organisations through producer networks in Africa, Asia and Latin America. This brings deep understanding of local cultural, social and economic contexts and enables direct engagement with farmers and workers. At the same time, Fairtrade works closely with companies and other market actors, witnessing their pressures, needs and expectations.

In the pilot dialogues, Fairtrade acted as a facilitator, supporting capacity building, preparing participants, coordinating processes, and helping create safe and structured spaces for discussion. Its dual presence on the ground and contacts with companies ensured smooth information flow for all participants.

The two-facilitator model proved effective. One facilitator was physically present with rightsholders, building trust from the start, while the other, familiar with the company, joined online. Hybrid sessions can be challenging, as it is harder to see or hear participants through a screen. Positioning facilitators both physically and virtually, with strong coordination between them, helps overcome these challenges.



# Part



## Benefits and relevance for companies

# Benefits and relevance for companies

**The combination of field presence and market engagement makes Fairtrade a strong facilitator.**

## Hard and soft law require engagement with rightsholders

Meaningful engagement with affected stakeholders is a core part of HREDD. It's emphasised in seminal guidance, including the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), the OECD Due Diligence Guidance, and guidance by the German BAFA<sup>2</sup> authorities.

Further, rightsholder engagement is required by several due diligence laws. For example, the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD, 2026) requires in-scope companies to engage stakeholders meaningfully, particularly when assessing and addressing risks. Similarly, the EU's Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD, 2026) requires companies to report on whether, and how, they consult stakeholders.

However, many companies struggle to implement meaningful engagement. Evidence shows that affected stakeholders are rarely consulted in risk assessments and even less frequently involved in shaping solutions ([Social Benchmark](#), January 2026).

The CSDDD notes that companies may rely on trusted third parties to support engagement (except for engagement with their own employees), highlighting the potential role of facilitators, including industry and multi-stakeholder initiatives and voluntary sustainability schemes such as Fairtrade.

## Business case for engagement

Meaningful engagement is not only a legal requirement but also a smart business practice. Engagement with rightsholders, who are directly affected by corporate operations and supply chains, can bring invaluable information that companies would otherwise miss and support effective, collaborative action. Fairtrade finds dialogue valuable both in new and older business relationships.

<sup>2</sup> The BAFA (Federal Office for Economic Affairs and Expert Control) is responsible for enforcing the German supply chain due diligence act and supports companies in implementing their duties.

Rapar and Dhrangadhra Farmer Producers Company, photograph by NAPP

## When companies pay attention to rightsholder perspectives, they

- **Gain a better understanding** of salient human rights and environmental issues.
- **Assess how** their business models, pricing, and practices may contribute to risks or violations, based on rightsholder feedback.
- **Access expertise** from rightsholders and local organisations, leveraging their knowledge of local contexts and challenges, to design more effective programmes and policies.
- **Strengthen processes** to prevent issues from escalating into reputational, legal, or financial problems/conflicts and to build customer trust and loyalty.
- **Reduce costs** by proactively addressing risks and avoiding costly incidents, supply disruptions, the costs of remediation measures, and the need to secure new sourcing partners.
- **Discover new** partnership opportunities or strengthen existing ones.
- **Identify innovation** opportunities as listening to rightsholders can inspire product improvements or new solutions.





Sugar production in Cuba, photograph Carlos Gasparatto / Teresa Iarapoli

Engagement can take many forms, including information gathering, consultation, negotiation, and dialogue. The most appropriate form depends on multiple factors including the parties' objectives, previous engagements, and the severity and complexity of issues being assessed or addressed.

Dialogue is two- or multi-way communication, in which all parties share equal influence over the agenda and process.

### What is required from the company?

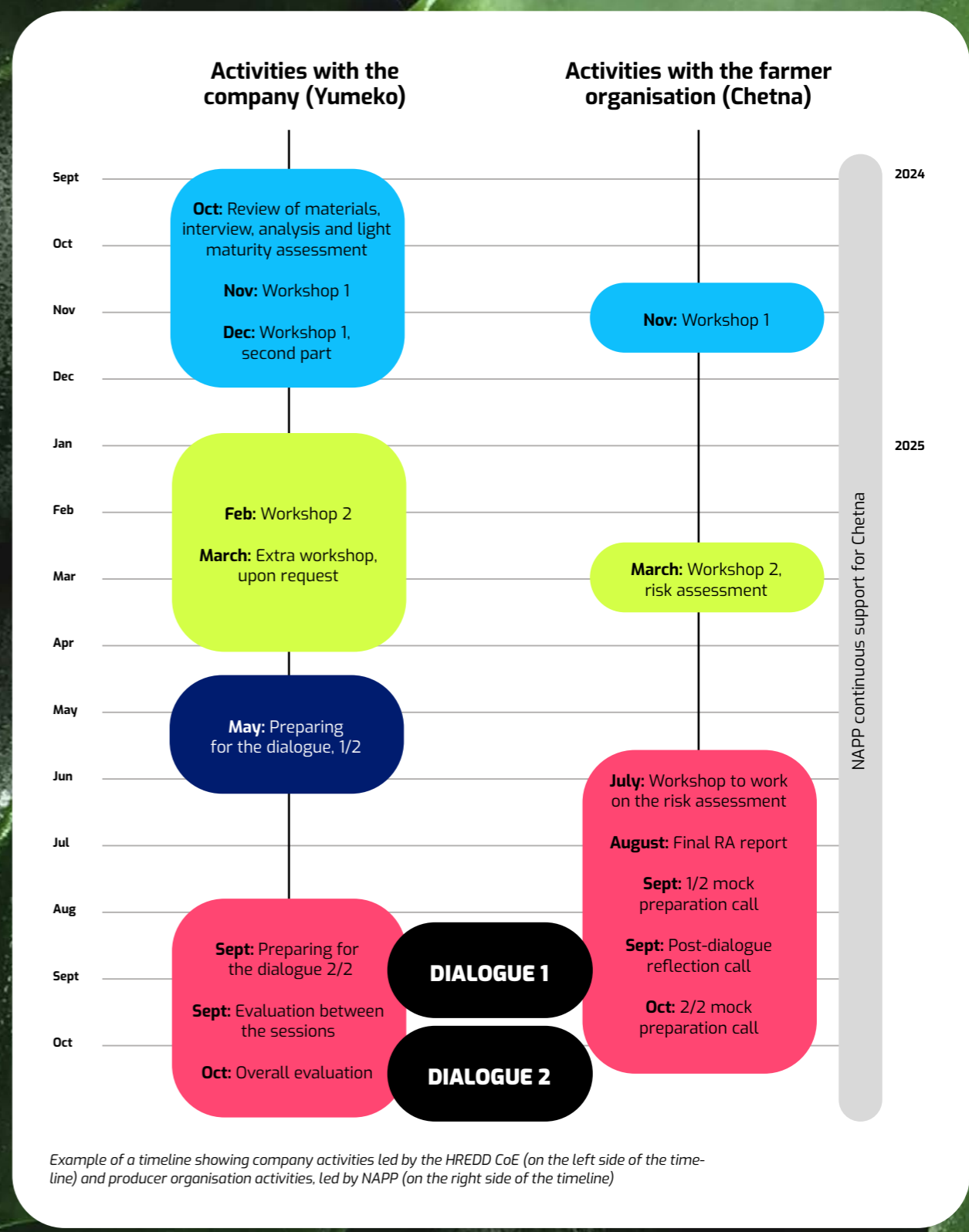
Meaningful dialogue requires both investment and a commitment to jointly address identified risks. Companies need to recognise shared responsibility and take an active role in prevention, mitigation, and, where relevant, remediation.

### Companies need to allocate time and resources to key activities, including:

- **Internal coordination:** Assign a team to participate from start to finish, integrate the lessons learned into corporate decisions and processes, and coordinate with facilitators (if applicable).
- **Capacity building:** Ensure staff is prepared to engage, including training provided by external experts where relevant. Provide support for rightsholders' capacity building as needed.
- **Dialogue events:** Prepare for and attend sessions.

We discuss these costs in greater detail in the following chapter.

### Timeline of the Indian cotton pilot



Example of a timeline showing company activities led by the HREDD CoE (on the left side of the timeline) and producer organisation activities, led by NAPP (on the right side of the timeline)

**The overall time commitment should not be underestimated.** In Fairtrade pilot projects, the process often took up to one year. While timelines can be shortened, time is needed for capacity building among company and supplier participants and for supplier's risk assessment, where relevant.

**Costs can be reduced by utilising an experienced third-party facilitator,** known and trusted by both the company and the supplier and rightsholders, such as a strong voluntary sustainability scheme. External facilitation allows company participants to focus on the dialogue itself. Chapter Five explores the role of facilitation in greater depth.

## What is the cost of dialogue

The cost of dialogue varies, depending on the scope of activities involved. Digital and online tools help to reduce costs and support scaling by providing broader access to HREDD training, risk assessments, and dialogue preparation. Also, hybrid/virtual dialogue formats can improve efficiency by reducing travel and logistical requirements, as demonstrated in the Fairtrade pilots.

Where engagement is virtual or hybrid, key cost components typically include:

### Participation costs

- **Human resources:** Staff for preparing and engaging in dialogue and utilising the lessons learned in company decisions and due diligence.
- **Travel:** Applies if dialogue events are physical.

### Facilitation and coordination costs

- **Expertise:** Facilitation, capacity building, and preparatory workshops with company participants, and technical support to both companies and rightsholders.
- **Event organisation:** Planning and organising the dialogue sessions, including logistical and technical arrangements.
- **Travel and accommodation:** Applies if dialogue sessions are physical or hybrid, so that one facilitator is present with rightsholders while another facilitator participates remotely.

### Rightsholder participation costs

- **Capacity building:** Training on HREDD and dialogue, to enable rightsholders to participate actively in shaping the aims, agenda, and process of dialogue. Where relevant, support for rightsholder driven risk assessment and action planning prior to dialogue events.
- **Workshops' logistics and infrastructure:** Costs associated with preparatory workshops and dialogue events, including venue hire, interpretation (if applicable), catering, materials, local travel and accommodation for long distance participants and equipment (e.g. projector, internet connection)

After the dialogue, additional resources may be required to follow-up on identified risks. Dialogue should be seen as a starting point for ongoing action, rather than a stand-alone activity or cost.

## How scalable is dialogue?

Scalability is a key consideration for companies with many high-risk supply chains. The pilots show that meaningful dialogue can be reached in a wide variety of contexts, and some elements can be standardised: For example the same dialogue process, training materials and tools for risk assessment can be used across contexts.

However, other elements need to be adapted or developed anew in each location. Finding facilitators who understand local culture, language and dynamics, reaching out to vulnerable groups of rightsholders, and trust-building have to be done again in each location. For example, trust building often requires repeated, in-person interaction.

Dialogue requires time, preparation and commitment to utilise the findings – so it is not always easy to integrate into existing processes. However, companies can save effort and resources by using available guidance and digital tools, capturing lessons learned, and working with experienced facilitators that have strong relationships with rightsholders.

Not all supply chains require the same level of engagement. A risk-based approach helps prioritise deeper dialogue where it matters most, focusing on high-risk regions or sectors while using lighter-touch methods in lower-risk areas.

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ The pilot with Fairtrade helped me better understand how supply chain due diligence can be designed in a people-centred way that goes beyond relying solely on risk data analysis. At the same time, it remains a challenge to ensure that all vulnerable groups within a community are meaningfully involved in this process.

For our company, the goal is therefore to continue engaging in dialogue processes as a key element of our supply chain due diligence.”

–**Manuel Holzer**, Head of Sustainability, Chocolat Stella Bernrain (Switzerland)



# Part



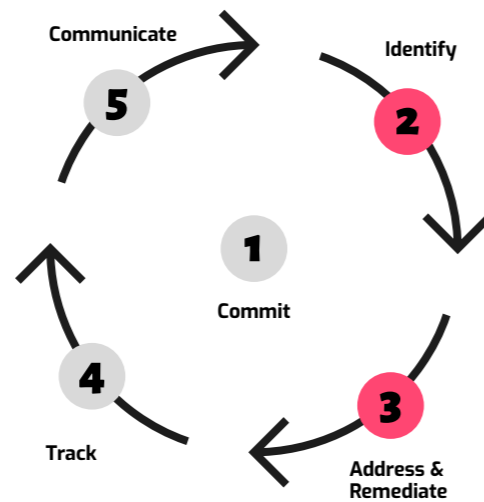
# Fairtrade dialogue approach

# Fairtrade dialogue approach

The dialogue can be linked to any HREDD step, from the development of a human rights commitment to strengthening grievance mechanisms and monitoring remedial measures. The Fairtrade pilots focused on identifying risks and solutions (steps 2 and 3 of the HREDD process).

The pilots supported both companies and primary producers in understanding their roles in managing risks. Producers developed skills to carry out risk assessments and create action plans, while companies gained clarity on how to prevent, mitigate, and address risks. This shared understanding fostered constructive dialogue and collaboration.

The approach consists of three stages:



**Dialogue is a demanding form of engagement: Parties share equal influence over the agenda and process.**

## STAGE 1

### Building HREDD knowledge

Fairtrade's approach begins by building the capacity of both companies and rightsholders, in order to ensure a shared understanding of the HREDD process, the value of meaningful engagement, and shared responsibility in mitigating salient risks and remediating harms. Separate workshops equip each party with the knowledge and skills needed to make dialogue meaningful.

Drawing on its experience with farmers and workers, Fairtrade adapts materials and sessions to participants' backgrounds, balancing technical content on international policies with the practical realities of small-scale farming.

For companies, Fairtrade can assess HREDD maturity through document review and an interview, and provide tailored workshops that highlight strengths and areas for improvement.

Capacity building is modular and adaptable, reflecting that companies and producer organisations are at different stages of their HREDD journey. A one-size-fits-all approach does not work.

**Light maturity assessment fostered discussion about fair due diligence and shared responsibility with the companies.**

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“It has been an insightful journey from the initial meeting through to the risk assessment, validation and most importantly how we were guided to prioritize our human rights and environmental risk. The whole process began to make sense to me and my colleagues both at management and worker level. [...]

Also, the dialogue with Flamingo UK eased my anxiety as to how to fund the action plan. This has enhanced our capacity to address our risks through a clearly laid out due diligence path.”

–Joyce Eusebia, Human resources Officer, Flamingo Horticulture, IBIS Farm (Kenya)

## STAGE 2

### Developing practical skills on the chosen topic(s)

Dialogue can relate to any stage of the HREDD process and can serve both specific and broader objectives. When companies engage directly with farmers and workers, they gain first-hand insights that go beyond initial mapping and scoping.

**Risk assessment and action planning are natural focal points for dialogue.** They help companies understand risks and their root causes while creating opportunities to co-develop practical solutions with rightsholders. This shared approach strengthens responsibility and offers clear advantages over more extractive methods, such as relying solely on surveys or codes of conduct.

Targeted support in risk assessments and action planning equips producer organisations to conduct and update assessments independently. This capacity building fosters ownership and enables more effective engagement with commercial partners on prevention and mitigation, supporting more sustainable supply chains.



Kenyan flower farm workers in the Kingfisher-Naivasha region learning about HREDD



STAGE 3

### Preparing and facilitating dialogue events

The understanding of shared responsibility, local risks and possible responses lays a fertile ground for meaningful dialogue. The dialogue sessions allow farmers and workers to share their realities, and companies to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities of those impacted.

Preparation is key. Before the dialogue events, it is important to **hear all parties' expectations and agree on an agenda and programme of mutual interest** for each dialogue session. This ensures that participants have a congruent view of the dialogue goals, share clear and realistic expectations, and the dialogue takes place in a safe, supportive environment.

Ahead of the dialogue, it is also helpful to reflect on potential biases and risks related to the dialogue process, agree on principles for maintaining a safe space, and prepare for an open discussion where new ideas and solutions can emerge.

**To avoid superficial exchange and reach meaningful dialogue, it is crucial that participants recognise shared responsibility in addressing risks and harms.**

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ One of the most significant positive outcomes of the pilot with Fairtrade has been the meaningful dialogue between supply chain stakeholders and the emergence of improved communication channels between us. The miller's data driven presentation added significant value to the dialogue process, and farmers' participation demonstrated commitment, contributing their perspective across both sessions. The dialogue enabled shared future planning.

Looking ahead, the Human Rights Due Diligence Process could benefit from a stronger focus on building the capacity of all stakeholders to assess data with greater confidence and objectivity.”

–Julia Clark, Director Sugar Ethics, Tate & Lyle Sugars (United Kingdom)

**“Many farmers are not yet familiar with their rights, labour standards, and the principles of HREDD so capacity-building is important.”**

Staff member at Fairtrade Network of Asia and Pacific Producers (NAPP)

**Observers commended the facilitation, noting the safe and respectful environment and the lead facilitator's close work with rightsholders.**

### Participant feedback and experiences from dialogue sessions

Fairtrade collected feedback from the participants as well as project's advisory partners and Fairtrade support staff who had observed dialogue sessions. In most cases, participants reported feeling safe and able to speak openly during the sessions. Based on 67 responses from 7 events, a vast majority reported being highly satisfied with the sessions, including the openness, transparency, and respect for safe-space principles.

The dialogue helped strengthen direct engagement between producers and buyers, **increasing the visibility of producers' perspectives and providing a basis for follow-up support and action.**

Observers noted that more participants contributed during pre-prepared agenda items, such as the presenta-

tion of risk assessment findings, while some groups, such as women farmers, spoke less during open conversation. While immediate barriers can be mitigated, addressing deeper power imbalances requires sustained commitment, trust-building, and ongoing dialogue. Fairtrade's pilot dialogues contributed positively; parties became more familiar with each other and began building trust.

Rightsholders also gained a stronger understanding of HREDD processes, enabling them to explain production-level risks and local realities directly to companies. With increased confidence, many producers raised issues, such as pricing, payment terms, debt, and climate impacts.

**Companies valued these firsthand insights, which enhanced their understanding** of systemic challenges and highlighted the need for collaborative solutions.



Workshop focusing on risk identification at Maria Cecilia Farm Workers Association (MACFAWA) in the Philippines.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ The HREDD Dialogue Project has built a strong partnership with our local trader (FSC). This is the first time we have managed to put our differences aside and sit at the same table to discuss issues affecting our core business and agree on strategies moving forward.

During the project, our members gained valuable knowledge about HREDD and how to prevent, mitigate, and remediate risks affecting our supply chain. The risk assessment exercise was well understood by the members, as it helped us identify the most important areas to focus on moving forward.

Future projects should fund activities to mitigate and remediate identified risks through a concrete action plan. We lack the resources to implement the agreed activities, so we need more investment from buyers and donors.”

–**Bala Dass**, Chairperson, Lautoka Cane Producers Association (Fiji)

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ The HREDD project in Fiji was very timely for us as a trader. We gained valuable insights on HREDD, including risk assessment. This knowledge will help us implement HREDD processes in our supply chain and maintain Fairtrade certification. We need more training on risk assessment tools, funding, and long-term commitments from buyers.”

–**Sandeep Kumar**, Risk, Compliance and sustainability manager, Fiji Sugar Corporation



Part

04

Dialogue events

# Dialogue events

**Our pilots demonstrated that online dialogues are possible and they can work.**

## Format and structure

The dialogue pilots culminated in events where companies and rightsholders met.

**In our pilots, we tested a hybrid format.** For example, in the Fiji sugar pilot, the company representative joined from the United Kingdom via Zoom, while sugar cane farmers, staff of the farmer cooperative, and mill representatives gathered in person in Fiji.

The hybrid format brings both challenges and advantages. While structured discussions work well online, trust-building and relationship development are more challenging. Language and interpretation add complexity, and the lack of physical engagement limits the depth of contextual understanding.

However, the hybrid format reduces travel and carbon emissions, saves time and costs, and lowers barriers to engagement.

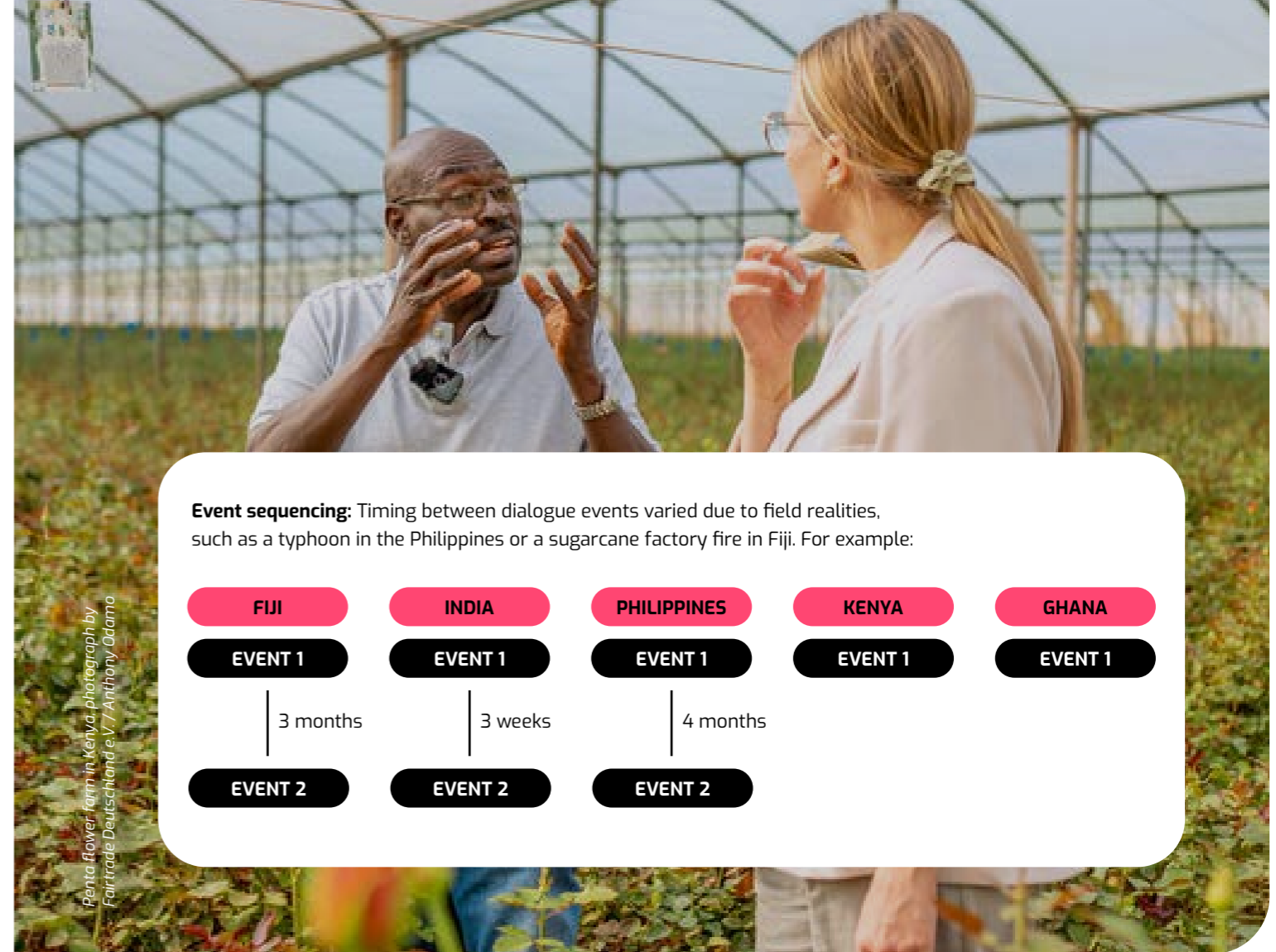
**The pilots showed that online dialogue is possible and can be meaningful.** Connectivity issues were minimal, and while some company representatives noted that in-person meetings might be a logical next step, the pilots showed that well-planned and facilitated online dialogues can be fruitful and effective too.

**In each pilot, one (Ghana and Kenya) or two dialogue events (Fiji, India, the Philippines) were organised.**

The sessions were structured but flexible. In practice, they involved a combination of:

- Presentations by producer organisations and companies
- Clarification questions
- Open discussions on root causes, prevention and mitigation measures
- Exploration of next steps after the dialogue events

Single-session dialogues lasted between 4–6 hours, while the dialogues that were split into two sessions ran for approximately 2 hours and 15 minutes per session.



**Event sequencing:** Timing between dialogue events varied due to field realities, such as a typhoon in the Philippines or a sugarcane factory fire in Fiji. For example:



Penta Flower Farm in Kenya, photograph by Fairtrade Deutschland e.V. / Anthony Odama

In India, three weeks between events proved too short, as each session requires extensive preparation and follow-up, including possible written clarifications. Flexibility in scheduling is essential, and the pilots highlighted the need to factor potential delays into project planning.

While the original plan focused on two-party dialogues between rightsholders and commercial partners, some pilots expanded the scope. In Fiji, the local sugar mill/exporter (government-owned) joined for a three-party dialogue, and in Ghana, the dialogue involved governmental bodies, civil society organisations, and local buyers in a multi-stakeholder format.

**Objectives for each dialogue were set through preparatory workshops and calls with the parties.** The facilitation team helped to draft the agenda and provided two facilitators per session, one supporting farmers on-site and another joining virtually, with strong coordination between them.

**The goal was not just to hold two dialogue events, but to establish a process that continues beyond the pilot.**

### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“Participation in the dialogue sessions has broadened discussions about HREDD and helped shape the intervention plan to address the issue.”

–YMM Srika, CSR & Sustainability, Chetna (India)



Capacity building workshop in the Kenyan flower pilot.

**Buyer–producer dialogue is a strong starting point. Still, some risks call for multistakeholder dialogue and solutions.**

## Dialogue participants

### Rightsholders

Across the five pilots, rightsholder participation included male and female farmers, farmers who also serve on the board of their cooperatives and staff of the producer organisations. The goal was to engage the same participants throughout the project, from initial workshops to the dialogue sessions. Efforts were made to include women, youth, and other potentially vulnerable groups.

**To ensure meaningful dialogue between companies and rightsholders, it is essential to include the rightsholders themselves:** farmers, workers, and other directly affected groups. Where direct participation is not possible, their representatives, such as producer organisations or trade unions, should be included. Participants should be selected so that the perspectives of those most affected are represented, rather than excluded from the dialogue.

### Company

Company representatives typically included sustainability managers, product and product development specialists, and sourcing experts. In some pilots, senior management joined opening sessions to signal commitment, while detailed discussions continued with operational staff.

Companies were encouraged to nominate multiple team members and most company teams included 1–3 participants. As producer organisations were typically represented by 6–25 participants, broader participation from within each company would in future enable more dynamic breakout discussions and support companies in translating insights into their own policies and processes.



**Part**

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**Role of facilitation**

# Role of facilitation

**Just before a dialogue event, facilitators have two key goals: ensuring that all parties have realistic expectations and feel safe and keen to engage.**

Third-party facilitators can bring invaluable support to companies and rightsholders throughout the dialogue process. We summarise the possible contributions in [chapter 7](#).

**Adept facilitation is most crucial in designing and guiding the dialogue events.** They can help dialogue parties define the purpose, goals, and agenda of the dialogue, align expectations, structure discussions, and create a safe and inclusive environment.

Having a neutral, experienced facilitator brings clear benefits: participants can focus on the dialogue itself, while facilitators guide discussions, manage conflicts, and ensure all voices are heard.

In hybrid or online settings, a well-coordinated facilitator team, one present with rightsholders and another with the company, can overcome technical and communication challenges.

**1 Selecting participants**  
The quality of dialogue depends on who is in the room. Bringing together a diverse and representative group of rightsholders is essential for meaningful engagement.

The facilitator plays a key role in supporting inclusive participant selection before the first capacity-building sessions. In the dialogue events themselves, it is advisable to maintain the same group of participants, to utilise the shared understandings developed through preparatory workshops.

**2 Motivation and needs**  
Facilitation begins before the dialogue. The facilitator ensures that dialogue parties reflect on what they hope to achieve (e.g. learning, compliance, reputation, shared responsibility), discuss their expectations and constraints, and reach a shared understanding that the company has a responsibility to act on outcomes of the dialogue.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“These pilots demonstrate both the benefits and the challenges of bringing different parties together. Actual dialogue - not just extractive interviews - takes considerable amounts of preparation and time and even more consideration could be given to the differing power dynamics.

Fairtrade is well placed to do more in this area due to its producer centred structures. It would also be good to have more corporate staff from different teams engaging in the dialogues.”

–**Clare Lissaman**, former head of Oxfam Business Advisory Service (OBAS), project advisory partner

**“Farmers need safe and inclusive spaces for participation, where they can express their views without fear of discrimination or retaliation. This includes ensuring that women, youth, and seasonal or migrant workers can join discussions freely and be heard.”**

(NAPP staff)

**3 Existing biases**  
All participants, including facilitators, bring biases that can foster distrust, defensiveness, misinterpretations, or fixed positions, which stifle meaningful dialogue. For example, rightsholders may question the company's sincerity and wonder whether its engagement in dialogue is merely a “tick-box” exercise. Companies may, in turn, assume that farmer organisations expect immediate solutions.

The facilitator supports participants in identifying and reflecting on these biases ahead of the dialogue, creating conditions for more open, honest and balanced participation.

**4 Managing expectations**  
Dialogue is a long-term process and not a one-off solution. That's why each dialogue event needs to be designed with realistic and jointly defined expectations, supporting participants to see that outcomes take time and resources. For example, it may be better to exclude some difficult or big topics, which require systemic and long-term solutions, from the event agenda.

**5 Goals and topics**  
Defining the focus is key to successful dialogue. Whether the goal is relationship-building or addressing a specific risk, it must be clearly recognised, articulated and agreed. The topics should come from the participants themselves, reflecting their priorities and concerns. The facilitator listens to dialogue parties and helps to formulate goals and agenda topics.

**6 Structured programme**  
A well-structured programme helps participants prepare and engage actively. Most time should be devoted to dialogue rather than presentations, but first-time meetings benefit from a slower start and some presentations to help participants get to know each other. The free-flowing discussion usually develops more easily afterward. If rightsholders are not used to presenting, facilitators can hold a preparatory session, increasing confidence and preparedness.

**7 Safe space and equity**  
 Creating a safe, respectful environment is essential for successful dialogue. Co-creation and agreement on safe space principles can help participants to contribute freely. Facilitators help maintain this environment by reminding participants of the principles when needed.

When facilitators understand all dialogue parties' needs, expectations, and cultural norms, they can actively mitigate the risk that any person or perspective would dominate the discussion. In addition to inequality and differences between rightsholders and the company, there may be notable disparities in social standing within the participating rightsholder group as well.

**8 Logistics and practicalities**  
 Facilitation also involves practical coordination, such as scheduling (taking note of time zones, harvesting seasons, which time of the day); session length and format; physical or online setting; interpretation; participant seating, technical and camera setup; documentation and feedback collection. The facilitator ensures that barriers are addressed in advance so that the dialogue event can run smoothly.

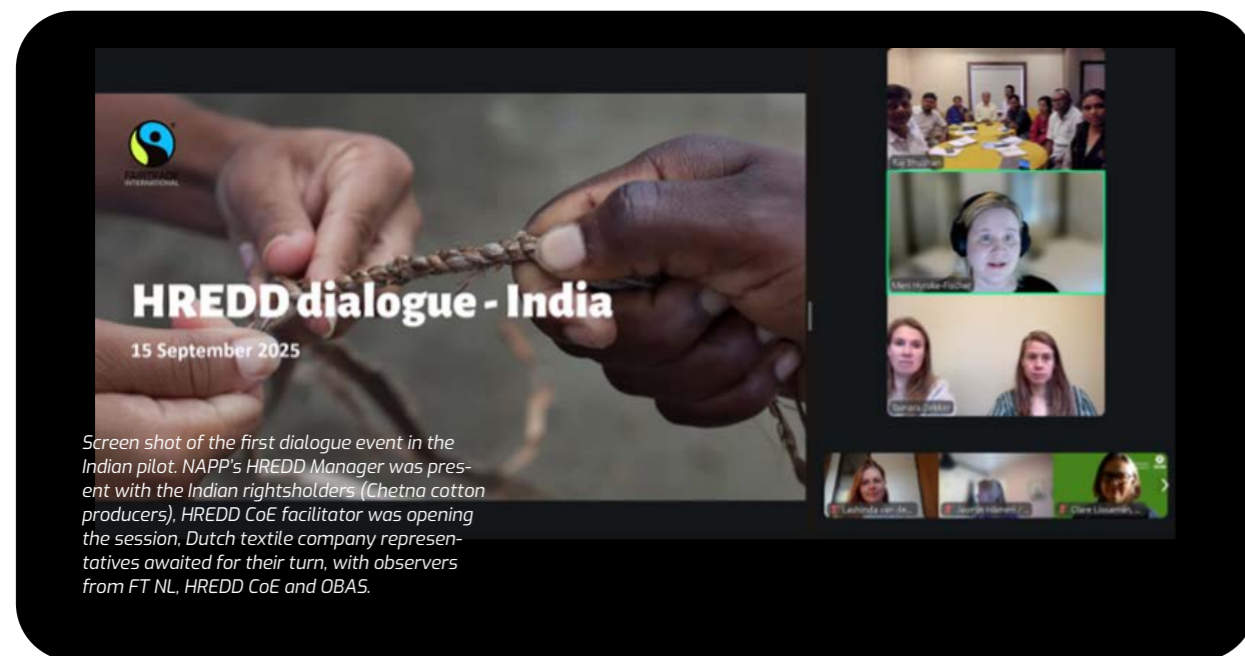
**9 The role of facilitator in dialogue events**  
 A good facilitator or team is well prepared, understands the participants, their context, and the subject matter, including responsible business conduct and HREDD. They build trust, help participants feel comfortable, manage time, uphold safe-space

principles, and ensure no one dominates the discussion. At the same time, a good facilitator draws as little attention to themselves as possible – the dialogue parties should do as much of the talking as possible.

The Dutch Social and Economic Council SER has listed points on what makes a good facilitator. [Read more here.](#)

**10 Keeping dialogue alive**  
 The facilitator ensures discussions are documented, notes shared, and immediate action points followed up. They may also support long-term follow-up, supporting parties to honor commitments and continue dialogue after the formal events, such as through regular check-in calls. However, the dialogue parties remain responsible for the process and for implementing and respecting agreed decisions and commitments.

**Dialogue topics suggested by producers and buyers should be discussed in advance so both parties understand each other's priorities.**



Screen shot of the first dialogue event in the Indian pilot. NAPP's HREDD Manager was present with the Indian rightsholders (Chetna cotton producers), HREDD CoE facilitator was opening the session, Dutch textile company representatives awaited for their turn, with observers from FT NL, HREDD CoE and OBAS.



# Part

# 06

## How to get started – tips for companies

# How to get started – tips for companies

For companies looking to strengthen their engagement with rightsholders, the pilots suggest several practical steps.

**1 Focus:** Dialogue is most urgent in your highest risk locations and suppliers. Start by mapping and identifying risks in your supply chains and prioritise locations and suppliers based on severity and likelihood. Map your stakeholders and identify the affected stakeholder groups or their representatives with whom to engage.

**2 Preparation:** Ensure that the value of rightsholder dialogue, and the shared responsibility of suppliers and buyers in addressing supply chain risks, are understood within your company. Invite individuals from different teams in the process and allocate sufficient resources to it. Preparation is one of the most critical factors for success. If you want a quick assessment of your readiness to engage with stakeholders, you can complete [the SER self-assessment questionnaire](#).

**3 Facilitation:** Consider partnering with a neutral or trusted third party, such as a strong voluntary sustainability scheme, who can facilitate the dialogue. This can be particularly helpful where the relationship between dialogue parties is tense or marked by significant differences in influence.

**4 Rules:** Formalise the roles, responsibilities, data confidentiality, and mutual commitments of each party and the facilitator in agreements or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). A third-party facilitator can help mediate. The agreement should be balanced and include a commitment to maintain business relationships, even when risks are identified and disclosed.



Penta Flowers Kenya. Photograph Fairtrade Deutschland e.V. / Santiago Engelhardt

**5 Representation:** The quality of dialogue depends on who is in the room. It's crucial that the perspectives of those most affected are heard. Engaging through farmer organisations or other representative bodies can help reach rightsholders more effectively.

**6 Barriers:** Identify potential obstacles for rightsholder participation (e.g. time, resources, language, location, gender or social vulnerabilities) and plan how to address these issues. Special attention should be given to including groups that are often underrepresented, such as women, youth, or migrant workers. This may require targeted outreach, adapted formats, or additional support.

**7 Follow up:** Ensure engagement leads to action and collaboration by deciding in advance how outcomes will be used, communicated, and revisited. Meaningful engagement is not a one-off activity, but part of a continuous due diligence process that evolves over time.

## IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“I really appreciate the direct contact with the cotton farmers. I learned a lot about their main struggles but also gave me an insight into how the pricing system in India works.”

–**Tamara Dekker**, Product & Impact Specialist, Yumeko (the Netherlands)

**Preparation is one of the most critical factors for success**



Workshop focusing on risk identification at Maria Cecilia Farm Workers Association (MACFAWA) in the Philippines

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ We are now in the position to back our claims of human rights and environmental risk with evidence when engaging our commercial partners and other stakeholders about the risks in our organization, farm and communities.

Also, as a board member, this has shaped my advocacy at the board level for more resource allocation in our social interventions that reduce youth and women vulnerability.”

– **Boahen Dwumoh**, a young cocoa farmer, and a youth representative on the board, Asunafo Cocoa Farmers (Ghana)

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ Personally, I see the HREDD Dialogue project as a social justice enabler for cocoa producer organizations. As a Women Organizer of the Asunafo North Cocoa Farmers Union, which boasts over 10,000 cocoa farmers, of whom 46% are women, there has never been a conscious effort to assess and document risks facing women cocoa farmers. [...]

The ability to learn about practices that harm women's rights to livelihood and income, and to come up with plans to address them, gives me joy.”

–**Faustina Ofori Tawiah**, the women organiser, Asunafo Cocoa Farmers and Marketing Union Limited (Ghana)



# Part



## Tips for third-party facilitators

# 07 Tips for third-party facilitators

Companies can benefit from collaborating with external facilitators. Strong voluntary sustainability schemes (VSS) can be strong facilitators where they have trusted relationships with both the company and rightsholders, and a deep understanding of both parties' operating environments.

**At their best, VSS can support companies throughout the dialogue process:**

**1 Focus:** Help identify highest risk locations and suppliers committed to transparency and collaboration, drawing on risk assessments, supply chain data, and relationships with primary producers and other actors.

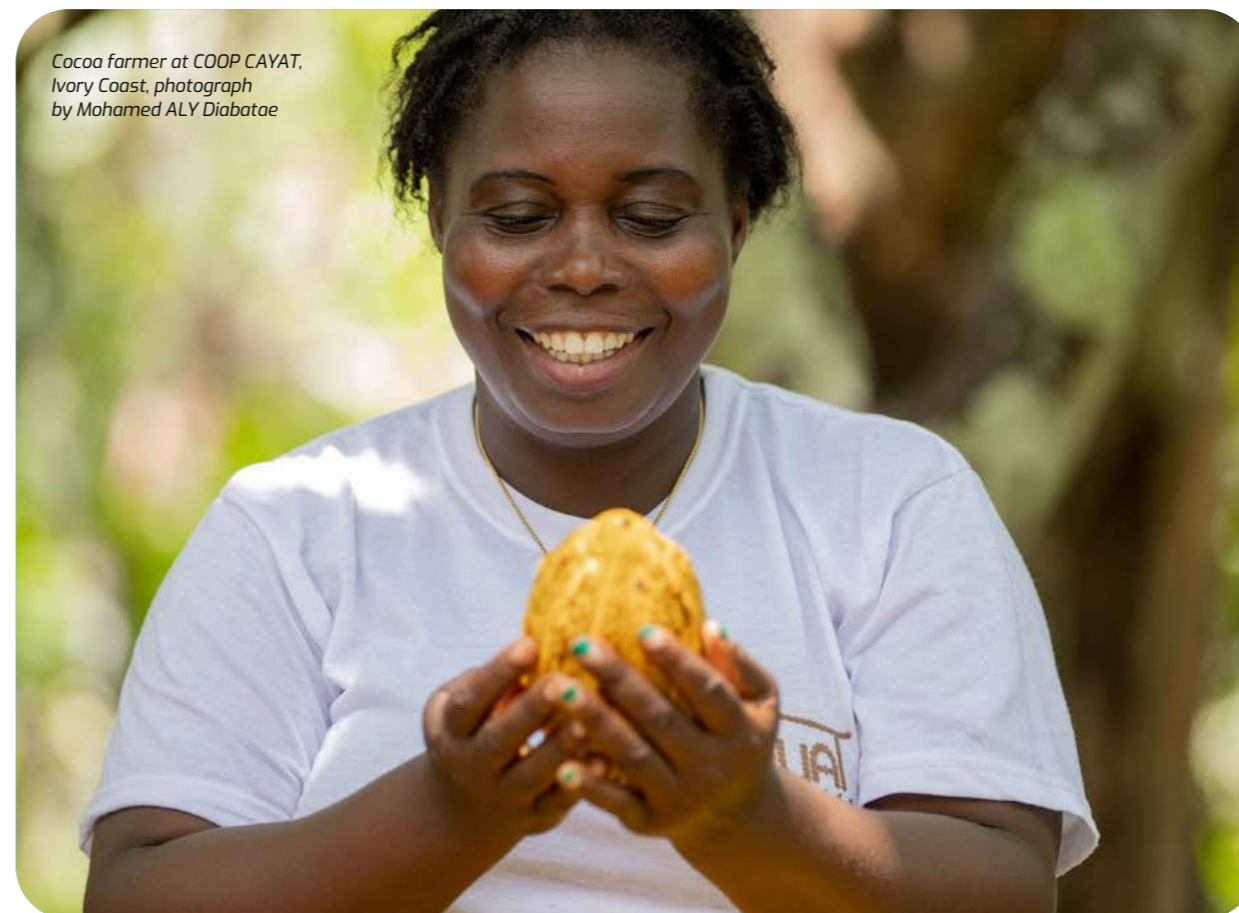
**2 Preparation:** Support the company and supplier in preparing for dialogue by sharing expertise on rightsholder engagement and salient human rights and environmental issues. Ensure all parties recognise their biases and shared responsibility

in addressing risks, and facilitate the joint development of goals, agenda topics, and principles of safe space. VSS can also support risk and HREDD maturity assessments.

**3 Facilitation:** Guide discussions and manage any tensions during dialogue sessions, and provide practical guidance ahead and between sessions, building on the understanding of dialogue parties' goals, expectations and cultural, social, and economic backgrounds.

**4 Rules:** Help clarify roles, responsibilities, data confidentiality, and mutual commitments in a balanced manner at the outset.

**5 Representation:** Use local knowledge and relationships to identify and engage rightsholders, include the most vulnerable groups, their organisations and other relevant stakeholders.



**6 Barriers:** Identify potential obstacles to rightsholder participation and address them through targeted outreach, support, and adjustments to the dialogue process. A strong understanding of the local context is essential to engage vulnerable groups.

**7 Follow up:** Document insights and outcomes to support dialogue parties so that dialogue leads to action, continued collaboration, and value for all parties.

**Use your local knowledge and relationships to identify and engage rightsholder, including vulnerable groups.**

#### IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“ The Fairtrade HREDD Pilot Project created a space where our voices were heard, and where our fundamental rights, environmental concerns, and safety risks were clearly identified through inclusive and participatory workshops.

We were able to openly share our realities and identify key HREDD risks affecting our communities and our place in the supply chain. This is a meaningful first step. However, we want to be clear that the risks have been identified, but they are not yet addressed.

We see the need to strengthen direct communication between farmers and buyers, especially to enable co-investment in mitigation measures. Addressing these risks should be a shared responsibility across the supply chain, we cannot carry this burden alone.”

—Antero Embang, Chairperson, Maria Cecilia Farm Workers Association (the Philippines)

# Dialogue as one form of engagement

## Different forms of engagement

Meaningful rightsholder engagement can be more bottom-up or top-down. Researchers note that companies have a tendency to favour top-down approaches rather than community-based engagement.

In a top-down process, the company is in full control of the engagement process and has a larger influence on the outcomes. The company may also delegate stakeholder engagement to staff that have little leverage for operationalising the outcomes.

In a more bottom-up process, the inputs of participating rightsholders and stakeholders shape the next steps of the company. To mitigate power imbalances and achieve a more bottom-up process, a neutral facilitator may help.

**Different formats of engagement** that can be utilised in HREDD include information gathering, consultation, negotiation, and dialogue. The most suitable format depends on multiple factors including the parties' objectives, previous engagements, and the severity and complexity of issues being assessed or addressed. When selecting the relevant format, it can be helpful to consult with relevant stakeholders.

**Information gathering** through desk research, surveys or interviews can be suitable when the potential adverse human rights and environmental impacts are minimal. It's important to actively seek and consider inputs from all key stakeholder representatives, including trade unions and civil society organizations.

**Consultation** through surveys, interviews, group meetings or consultative forums may be appropriate to understand the operational context and stakeholders' concerns and expectations.

**Negotiation** can aim to obtain stakeholder agreement on the terms and conditions of a particular project or activity. In negotiation, stakeholders have influence over the process and timeline of the engagement.

**Dialogue** with rightsholders is a key part of HREDD. The interpretive guide to UNGPs defines stakeholder engagement as "an ongoing process of **interaction and dialogue** between an enterprise and its potentially affected stakeholders".

## Dialogue

Dialogue is an ongoing process of two- or multi-way communication, where all parties have influence on the engagement process and agenda. A rich definition of the concept of two-way communication can be found in the OECD Due Diligence Guidance (2018, p. 49):

*"Two-way engagement means that the enterprise and stakeholders freely express opinions, share perspectives and listen to alternative viewpoints to reach a mutual understanding. It also means that relevant stakeholders have the opportunity to help design and carry out engagement activities themselves."*

Dialogue is not about efficient gathering of information for corporate sustainability work: The agenda needs to be set jointly by the company and the stakeholders.

Compared to a negotiation, dialogue requires greater flexibility from the company, with regards to the process, timelines, resourcing and utilisation of engagement outcomes. Dialogue can bring up issues and proposals the company was initially not aware of and hence demand strong corporate commitment to considering the rightsholder input in good faith.

Dialogue can take on different aims. In a **normative** dialogue, the company and its supplier seek shared understanding of what types of production, purchasing or business practices are acceptable and beneficial. A **strategic** dialogue can identify different means to achieve a certain goal – for example higher farmer incomes. An **operational** dialogue addresses a specific issue, such as how to improve grievance mechanisms in the specific value chain. All three types of dialogue can be valuable to identify, address and remedy human rights and environmental impacts within the value chain of a company.

While it is **difficult to achieve** meaningful dialogue between a company and affected rightsholders, numerous researchers encourage companies to aim at it. Research refers to dialogue as "the best way for businesses to act responsibly" and "ideal" stakeholder interaction.

Dialogue can play a significant role in fostering **trust**, between a company and its stakeholders, and advancing a sense of 'creating shared value'. **Social dialogue** between companies, trade unions and worker representatives is a crucial form of stakeholder dialogue where an employment relationship exists.

Selected sources:

[Buhmann, Fonseca, Andrews and Amatulli, 2025](#), *The Routledge Handbook on Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement*.

[Ethical Trade Norway and Norad 2020](#), *Engaging Stakeholders in Due Diligence: A beginner's roadmap for small and medium sized companies (SMEs)*

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[Brodeur/Oxfam America, 2023](#), *Meaningful Rights Holder Engagement: An Introduction*.

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Cover

Cocoa farmer at COOP CAYAT, Ivory Coast, photograph by Mohamed ALY Diabatae

Kenyan Flower Pilot

Penta flower farm in Kenya, photograph by Fairtrade Deutschland e.V. / Anthony Odamo

Rapar and Dhrangadhra Farmer Producers Company, photograph by NAPP

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