

THE BAOBAB NETWORK

How to start building trust as a
dialogue facilitator: Experiences
from the Dutch Caribbean

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How to start building trust as a dialogue facilitator? For this interview, Dr. Kizito Tenthani sits down with Dr. Nilda Arduin, a dialogue facilitator working on the island of Sint Eustatius in the Caribbean. Nilda shares her strategic approach to building trust among political parties and navigating complex relationships. Her story reveals the critical steps of trust-building for dialogue facilitation, from initial preparation to creating spaces for genuine communication and understanding.



Dr. Nilda Arduin, Sint Maarten's first Ombudsman, is a pioneering legal professional dedicated to institutional strengthening, dialogue, and community development in the Caribbean. Dr. Kizito Tenthani has facilitated interparty dialogue in Malawi since 2003. He currently works as the Registrar of Political Parties in Malawi.

Historical Background

To appreciate the dynamics of my work, let me first provide some context. In 2018, the Dutch government took unprecedented action on the Caribbean island of Sint Eustatius, a Dutch overseas territory operating at the level of a municipality. Arguing that the island's governance was malfunctioning, the national Government dissolved the democratically elected Island Council and appointed a Government Commissioner.

This decision was aimed to bring about reforms to the island's governance, public finances, and other sectors, including education, healthcare and infrastructure. The move was met with significant resistance, creating tensions between the Dutch government and Sint Eustatius political representatives, as well as between the political representatives themselves.

In this very difficult moment for the island, it was my job to set up a dialogue platform, as the representatives wanted a way out of this very tense period and move forward together. A conflict mediation process had already been concluded by two former prime ministers from the region, and this is where we could pick up the dialogue process.

Preparation and initial approach

The first crucial step in my work was thorough preparation. I spent considerable time reading all available documents from previous years to understand how they reached their stalemate. As a facilitator, I knew that earning trust and respect was paramount, and I firmly believe a facilitator can earn this trust through showing a deep and clear understanding and diagnosis of the problem.

You don't need to trust me for us to build trust

I was very aware that my first moves in reaching out to the political representatives would be critical in determining the success or failure of the whole dialogue process. I knew I had to be extremely careful in my approach. Yet, my strategy was simple: listen first.

I decided to initiate bilateral talks with all political party leaders and relevant stakeholders. I told the party leaders, 'listen, I'm coming to Sint Eustatius, and I'm going to have bilateral talks with each one of you, your party board and stakeholders to understand the core of the conflict.' While everyone accepted to meet me, we had trust issues to deal with. I was going in as a consultant, hired by NIMD – a Dutch organization. So they asked why they should trust me. My response was simple. They did not need to trust me at this juncture. But I told them that if they do not want to go to the table to talk, let them offer an alternative to get out of the stalemate. No alternative was offered. This became a breakthrough moment allowing us to move forward, and to start building trust.

One of their own

My background also helped significantly in this process. As a lawyer and the first ombudsman for Sint Maarten in 2010, I was considered "one of their own." This prior relationship with, and my reputation on, the island provided me with an initial level of credibility.

In this work of facilitating dialogue, in most of the cases, it is desirable to have facilitators who are from the same country. But sometimes, this becomes a challenge in itself because of trust issues. This was especially the case in Sint Eustatius. Being a very small island, it was difficult to find a person from within who could be considered neutral and accepted by all involved. So, coming from the neighbouring island Sint Maarten, divorced from the local politics, but with adequate knowledge of the context, was very helpful.

Trust-building in tense times

Despite an upcoming election in March 2023, I insisted on a joint session of all political parties to help participants understand the essence of dialogue. We sat together in a room for two days, focusing on building mutual understanding, while there was a busy campaign and some serious mud throwing going on outside that room.

But this was the basis that we needed. The dialogue capacity-building approach of this first session was critical – it helped participants understand the essence of dialogue itself before attempting to resolve specific issues. And while doing so, we worked on trust-building among political parties, on trust-building in the dialogue process – and in the dialogue facilitator as a neutral person to guide the process. Luckily, my position as an external expert, yet someone familiar with the regional context, provided a unique advantage in these early days of trust-building.

Dialogue as end product of trust-building

Facilitating dialogue is a delicate process that requires patience, deep understanding, and a strategic approach to building trust. My experience in Sint Eustatius reinforced that successful dialogue is not about immediate agreement, but about creating a space for genuine communication, mutual respect, and incremental understanding.

My most important lesson? Dialogue takes much more than sitting around a table. It's a carefully constructed process of listening, understanding, and gradually building trust among parties with complex, often conflicting histories. Dialogue is the end product of a lot of steps that happen before people actually sit at the table. Understanding and keeping abreast of the dynamics among the participants is vital to lead the process.

Want to know more?

The Baobab Network is an informal network for and by dialogue experts. Our purpose is to connect experts across the globe so they can support each other by sharing stories, lessons and experiences.

We want to support democracy by serving as impartial facilitators, and as a platform for learning, exchange and mentorship. NIMD hosts the secretariat of the network. Reach out for questions, comments and ideas to violetbenneker@nimd.org.

Want to know more about the dialogue platform on Sint Eustatius? Check out the NIMD website; [Sint Eustatius - NIMD](#)