



Neutrality: A Cornerstone of Facilitation Practice?

– Analysing the Use of Neutrality within Facilitation of Sustainability Dialogue through Identity Construction

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Abstract

There is a growing need for sustainability transitions in the world. Inclusive environmental governance could be a tool to enable these and is therefore getting increasingly popular. The use of stakeholder and citizen dialogues is recognized to be fundamental to strategies for inclusive environmental governance. Here, facilitators come in to elicit equitable and effective dialogues through structuring diverging interests and thoughts together with the participants. Facilitators hold a special place in the process and several scholars identified tensions that the facilitator consequently faces within the practice. To enable the desired dialogue, they must be able to switch smoothly between different roles; On the one hand, the responsibility for a fair process and, on the other hand, ensuring that the values of the participants are sufficiently acknowledged in the dialogue. There is a common understanding about that a facilitator should be neutral, while at the same time actively making sure that all parties get to have a voice in the process. This causes for tensions in the identities of the facilitators. The potential of facilitation is in the effective representation of resource users' interests in the deliberative process which in turn can contribute to more equitable decisions on resource allocation, access and management rights. Though, the confusion about neutrality tends to make it more difficult to fulfil this potential.

The role of neutrality seems to be underexplored in studies on facilitation practice. This thesis research dives deeper into notions about neutrality that underpin facilitation practice and therefore addresses the research question: *How is the concept of neutrality used in the practice of facilitation for sustainability dialogues?* This research contributes to the practice by deconstructing the use of the concept of neutrality within facilitation practice for sustainability dialogue and further uncovering tensions with regards to neutrality.

Drawing on an interpretative approach, a frame analysis has been carried out on facilitator identities through facilitation guidance documents and interview data from experienced facilitators active in the field. The analysis revealed four identity frames connected to neutrality, namely the *facilitator as mediator*, the *facilitator as transparent practitioner*, the *facilitator as value-neutral expert* and the *facilitator as a multi-partial process guide*. Further analysis of underlying ideas and assumptions underpins the conclusion that neutrality is a central concept in facilitation practice. The findings show that two identity frames subscribe to and use neutrality when facilitators explain who they are, namely that of the *mediator* and that of the *value-neutral expert*. Contrarily, in the other two identity frames, that of the *transparent practitioner* and that of the *multi-partial process guide*, facilitators distinguish their identities by contrasting what they want to be, with neutrality.

The value in this thesis lies in its potential for the findings to be used by facilitators as a language for reflection and explaining choices. If facilitators were to use the findings in clarifying processes and establishing trust, this in turn may lead to more equitable decisions.

Keywords: Facilitation, Neutrality, Equity, Frames, Sustainability dialogue, Conflict management, Planning process, Equality, Trust, Deliberation, Multi-partiality, Reflective practice, Deliberative democracy, Natural resource management, Environmental governance

Preface

In 2020, I attended a lecture by Kaisa Raitio about designing and facilitating in the face of structural inequalities. She talked about the collaboration and dialogue between the Sami people, an indigenous community in northern Scandinavia, and the Swedish authorities. She explained that because of colonialism and inequality, this collaboration and dialogue has not always been smooth. She then showed us *Figure 1* and explained to us that in the first picture, we can speak of equality, because everyone is given the same support. In the second picture, we see equity as there is access to the same opportunities. She explained that the first picture identified how the process with the Sami had been going sometimes and that the second picture is something to strive for.

This idea intrigued me and made me think about the picture in a broader sense of facilitation; is it fair to give everyone the same amount of support or should you support everyone so that everyone gets similar chances? Should you acknowledge power relations and empower the weaker or should you acknowledge them and let them do their thing? I was thinking that power hierarchies might be established for a reason and should therefore also be taken into account. But in what way? I would be unsure on how to tackle this.

From what I have experienced and read about facilitation, I found that there is a puzzle here; On the one hand, a facilitator should be there as a neutral outsider, while on the other hand, s/he should be there to make sure that all voices get a chance to come out. This puzzle was the foundation of this master thesis.

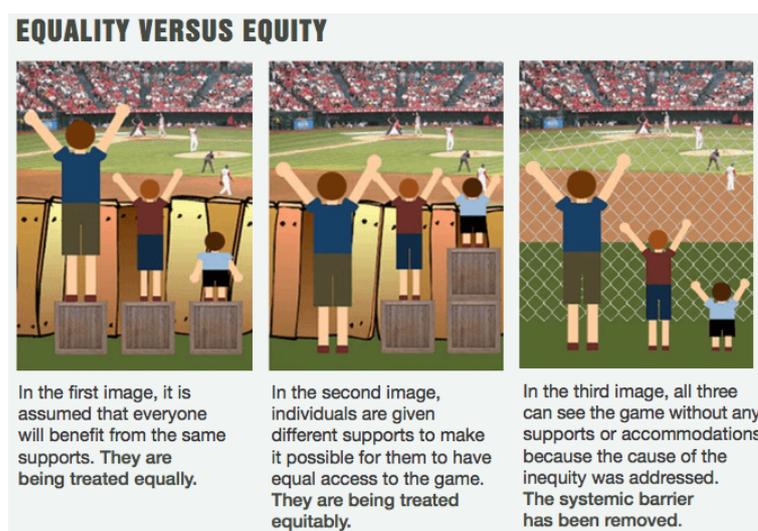


Figure 1. A picture illustrating the concepts of equality, equity and justice by City for All Women Initiative (2015)

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

With a growing world population and the current way of living on our planet, more and more issues such as climate change cause for the need of sustainability transitions in environmental governance. Since the start of the 21st century, major environmental governance reforms have taken place in Europe. Clear trends are the promotion of integration between policy sectors and involving and engaging citizens in decision-making processes. However, there is an ongoing need for further development of such participatory planning practices. (Nadin et al., 2020)

Already since the 1980's there has been an upcoming trend in representative deliberative processes for wicked issues such as climate change. Wicked issues "are characterized by a high degree of scientific uncertainty and a profound lack of agreement on values" and have no perfect solution (Balint et al., 2011, p. 9). Nowadays public decision making exists in almost all levels of government. (OECD, 2020) There is an increasing need and interest for such inclusive environmental governance (Kleemann et al., 2007; Nadin et al., 2020; OECD, 2020). Inclusive governance strategies could for example be deliberative, collaborative and participatory processes such as citizen and stakeholder dialogues. Throughout this thesis I will refer to these strategies as *sustainability dialogue*, while acknowledging that there are nuances.

Policy issues concerning urban planning and environment are found to be the ones that are most addressed through representative deliberative processes (OECD, 2020). With a growing pressure on natural resources, conflict management and facilitation practice become increasingly important within natural resource management (NRM). For example, for addressing natural resource competition and conflict, multi-stakeholder dialogues could be carried out. (Ratner et al., 2018)

Generally assumed about dialogue processes is that they "can strengthen marginalized voices" and that they can "provide examples of innovation that lay the groundwork for more systemic reforms" (Ratner et al., 2018, p. 810). However, Ratner (2018) suggests that participatory processes can also reinforce existing power inequities if they are not grounded in awareness of the broader governance context. Conflicts in planning processes are more likely to emerge when certain groups are marginalised or excluded from decision-making. Moreover, governance institutions should be legitimate, inclusive and transparent in order to smoothen

project implementation and to enhance social sustainability of projects. (Ratner et al., 2018). Overall, one can say that the practices of participation, collaboration and deliberation are needed within sustainability transformations within for environmental governance. However, like Stoll-Kleemann et al. (2007) say; besides the many benefits of participation and sustainability dialogues, there are also difficulties.

This is where facilitators come in. Facilitators are there to elicit equitable and effective participation in sustainability dialogue. They structure diverging interests and thoughts together with the participants. (Ratner et al., 2018) Several scholars have acknowledged that a facilitator is important in the process of participation and dialogue in order for it to be effective and successful (e.g. Barnaud & Van Paassen, 2013; Forester, 1999; Kleemann et al., 2007; Westin, 2019; Escobar, 2011). The word ‘facilitation’ stems from the word ‘facilis’ in Latin, which means ‘easy to do’. The Cambridge international dictionary of English (1995) defines facilitation as ‘the process of making something possible or easier’. Facilitation is a practice used in many areas, such as participatory planning, environmental governance and NRM. Facilitation within these contexts oftentimes concerns wicked issues such as sustainability and climate change and it involves NGOs and the inclusion of the voice of nature.

1.2. Research Problem, Aim and Questions

A facilitator is the one that leads a discussion and continuously interacts with other participants in the conduct of discourse. S/he is therefore crucial to the achievement of internal deliberative quality within organized deliberations. (Moore, 2012) Exploring the role of the deliberative facilitator is important as the facilitator holds a special place within the deliberative process. The facilitator namely is ‘‘both part of the structure within which deliberation is supposed to emerge, and self-evidently a participant in the actual discourse itself’’ (Moore, 2012, p. 147). Therefore, s/he is in a privileged position over the other participants. The facilitator has to ‘‘bring out representative viewpoints while not imposing his or her own view as to what fair representation would be’’ (Moore, 2012, p. 155). And just like Moore (2012), I wonder how facilitators in practice manage the tension between necessarily initiating and eliciting discourse while not directing or dominating it.

According to several scholars, this tension cannot easily be resolved and they therefore stress the importance of the concept of reflective practice (e.g. Escobar, 2011; Moore, 2012; Westin, 2019). Escobar (2011) emphasizes that as a facilitator you must be aware of the powerful position that you are in and that in order to be a good facilitator, it is important to reflect on your observations, feelings and interpretations that guide your actions. Besides, exploring the role of the facilitator is important because effective representation of resource users’ interests in a deliberative process can contribute to more equitable decisions on resource allocation, access and management rights (Ratner et al., 2018).

However, various scholars have acknowledged pitfalls and complexities within sustainability dialogue connected to for example power and equality (e.g. Escobar, 2011; Moore, 2012; Stoll-Kleemann et al., 2007; Urosevich, 2012; Westin, 2019).

Barnaud and Van Paassen (2013) explain that dealing with different stakeholders and power asymmetries brings about a dilemma for the facilitator:

On the one hand, if they claim a neutral posture, they are accused of being naively manipulated by the most powerful stakeholders and of increasing initial power asymmetries; but, on the other hand, if they adopt a non-neutral posture and decide to empower some particular stakeholders, their legitimacy to do so is questioned (p. 2).

There is a tension between the narrative of making purposeful design choices and that of being neutral (Westin, 2019). Looking at facilitation handbooks, ethical guidelines, research work and interviews with facilitators, it seems that neutrality is an important concept within the practice and is often used as a key concept in framing facilitator's roles. However, neutrality at the same time appears to be a concept that can be interpreted and used in different ways.

It remains unclear which role neutrality plays in facilitations practice. I carried out this research to find out what these different meanings of neutrality are within the practice. In this thesis research I aim to dive deeper into notions about neutrality that underpin facilitation practice. I hereby aspire to contribute to reflective practice by deconstructing the use of the concept of neutrality and further uncovering tensions that might be faced with regards to neutrality. Following the aim, I worked with the overarching research question *How is the concept of neutrality used in the practice of facilitation for sustainability dialogues?*, guided by the analytical questions below:

1. *Which basic notions of neutrality are embedded in the practice of facilitation within sustainability dialogues?*
 - a. *Through which underlying assumptions about neutrality do facilitators justify their actions?*
 - b. *How do practitioners interpret and experience neutrality in their role as a facilitator?*
2. *How do different facilitator identities and ideas about neutrality relate to and interact with each other?*
 - a. *In their neutral role, how do facilitators position themselves in relation to equity?*
 - b. *What kind of tensions arise from facilitators' different ideas about neutrality?*

In this thesis research, the focus lies on facilitation within a European context with an emphasis on Sweden specifically. This means that most empirical data used finds its origin in Sweden. Special about Sweden is that wildlife management and forestry play a major role in their sustainability dialogues (Swedish E.P.A., 2012).

2. A Literature Review on the Concept of Neutrality

I will now situate the research by introducing you to concepts that are relevant in addressing my puzzle. Naturally, I start with the concept of neutrality. The term *neutral* as defined by The Cambridge international dictionary of English (1995) is ‘not saying or doing anything that would encourage or help any of the groups involved in an argument or war’. Other terms that are used to indicate or relate to neutrality are *impartiality*, *objectivity*, *unbiasedness* and *independency*. However, these words cannot one on one be used interchangeably. Desk research on the concept of neutrality and the role that it plays within facilitation practice revealed that neutrality is dealt with in the literature in many ways. In this section I try to elaborate on what neutrality is, which function it plays within facilitation practice and when it might be useful for a facilitator to say that s/he is neutral. I do this by drawing on theoretical work in the field of deliberative democracy and by presenting researchers’ different positions towards neutrality.

2.1. A More Classic Understanding of Neutrality

Westin (2019) analysed documents by Swedish authorities Boverket and SALAR on their notions of power and found the importance of the concept of neutrality within Swedish participatory planning. SALAR sees neutrality as an important order to achieve trust within the process. Neutrality is here defined as impartial, not valuing and compassionate. Furthermore, Westin (2019) found that Boverket assumes that the advantage of neutrality is that the facilitator does not have a stake in the planning; the facilitator gains legitimacy through neutrality. Also Urosevich (2012) defines neutrality as ‘the state or position of being impartial or not allied with or committed to either party or viewpoint in a conflict’ (p. 10). Molloy et al. (2000) say that in practice, being neutral means that the facilitator aims to be unbiased in his/her work. The idea is that the facilitator is there to guide a good process without interfering in the actual subject matter. However, Urosevich (2012) expresses her confusion about what a facilitator is ethically expected to do in certain cases when neutrality seems to conflict with the idea that practitioners should facilitate an equitable process and make purposeful design choices. Westin (2019) says that making design choices will inevitably advantage certain actors and this will in turn undermine the acceptance of the facilitator as neutral by other actors.

Schwarz (2002) in his book ‘The Skilled Facilitator’ suggests four different facilitative roles and explains their inherent assumptions about neutrality. He argues that a facilitator has the role of a substantively neutral third-party, acceptable to all

members of the group, who has no substantive decision-making authority. With substantively neutral he does not mean that the facilitator has no opinion on the issues that are discussed, but that these issues do not show or influence the process or group decisions. Schwarz (2002) argues that if a practitioner becomes more of a leader and also gets involved in the content and the decision-making, s/he should be called a facilitative coach, trainer or leader instead. Furthermore, according to Urosevich (2012), when a facilitator is hired for their content as well as their facilitation expertise, this will naturally affect outcomes and a facilitator can be perceived as too engaged. A nuance to Schwarz (2002) and Urosevich (2012) view on content expertise is given by Stoll-Kleemann et al. (2007). In their book about stakeholder dialogues in NRM they say that in addition to facilitation skills, the facilitator is expected to be neutral in relation to the issue at stake while having sufficient expertise in the field of question.

2.2. A Neutrality-Centred Approach to Facilitation Practice

Urosevich (2012) introduces a spectrum of approaches to facilitation practice, going from neutrality-centred approaches on one side to advocacy approaches on the other. She suggests that a mix of these approaches is needed within facilitation practice in order to address competing interests and personalities. According to Urosevich (2012), neutrality-centred approaches are those in which the facilitator is seen as the neutral third party. This person is expected to be content neutral, meaning that they “do not contribute to the facts and discussions, have no stake in the outcomes, and are symmetrically distanced from all parties” (p. 72). Benefits of this approach are that they provide confidence on the non-biasedness of the facilitator towards any party, they have a fresh view on the situation. They are experts in the process and will make sure that the outcome will benefit each party equally. Lastly, they do not have a stake in the outcome and will therefore be unbiased in the process and content. (Urosevich, 2012).

2.3. A More Balanced Approach Towards Facilitation Practice

Urosevich (2012) identified risks in the more neutrality-centred approaches;

Risks involved in maintaining a neutral position as a third party include reinforcing the status quo that might be fraught with power imbalances [...] ; losing credibility and trust by not knowing enough about content or not having prior relationships with participants; and being perceived as apathic about the outcomes and/or missing opportunities to introduce scientific or cultural knowledge relevant to achieving more sustainable outcomes. (p. 73)

Therefore she introduces the balanced approach which suggest slightly more involvement. This approach acknowledges the complexities that the facilitators experience and is more open to a facilitator position that would allow for more

influence on the creation of an equitable process. Impartiality is an important belief in this approach, while a risk is that a facilitator is actually working with power imbalances by their focus on inclusion and participation. (Urosevich, 2012) According to Urosevich (2012), there is a low desire for neutrality when power needs to be balanced. If there is a power imbalance, the facilitator is expected to ensure that everyone has the opportunity and feels safe to participate in the process and contribute to decision-making. However, this could result in “facilitators spending more time with certain parties, advocating for other, naturally jeopardizing their position of neutrality” (Urosevich, 2012, p. 64).

2.4. Non-Neutrality and The Multi-Partial Approach

Then, Urosevich (2012) argues that there is a multi-partial approach in which facilitators “feel that neutral and/or impartial positions are too distant for either their own comfort or for the needs of the groups they engage with” (p. 75). However, a proposed risk within this approach is a seeming unfairly bias towards one party, which can cause distrust. Furthermore, there is a risk of contributing too much to the content and outcome of the process. Lastly, another facilitation approach is that of empowerment, which is similar to the multi-partial approach as it also assumes that some parties might need extra empowerment in order to elicit an equitable process. (Urosevich, 2012) Urosevich (2012) concludes from doing case studies that the multi-partial approach is “the most strategic and successful approach to engage in the complexities of politics and power to achieve deliberation and decision-making.” (p. 220)

Altogether, Urosevich (2012), just like Westin (2019), connects neutrality and the role of facilitators to issues concerning power. Urosevich (2012) explored the role of a facilitator vis-à-vis power imbalances, political dynamics, relationships with participants and cultural needs and explains that the perception of neutrality plays a role in these concepts. She argues that a position of neutrality is generally not sufficient nor realistic within facilitation practice and that facilitators should go beyond neutrality. Facilitators should actively engage in deliberative democracy. According to Urosevich (2012), the risks for practicing neutrality are two-fold: it may not be an honest expression of our roles and it may not be an effective role for achieving the most just and sustainable solutions. She found that facilitators also generally do not identify as themselves as neutral but rather strive to be fair, trusted, competent and strategic.

Urosevich (2012) expresses her confusion about what a facilitator is ethically expected to do in certain cases when neutrality seems to conflict with the idea that practitioners should facilitate an equitable process. Urosevich (2012) provides suggestions on “how to constructively engage with power and politics to achieve the desired outcomes in just and sustainable ways” and to hereby go beyond neutrality (p. 230). She presents the struggle of ethical dilemmas that engagement in power structures and going beyond neutrality can bring about. Urosevich (2012) therefore introduces the idea of multi-partiality as an alternative to neutrality. A multi-partial facilitator works for the interests of all participants affected by the outcome of a facilitated process.

Helm (2018) adds to this that in a multi-partial approach, the facilitator is there to enable all voices to come to the table. Helm (2018) uncovered a tension for facilitators concerning neutrality and multi-partiality. She argues that a multi-partial practitioner should pay attention to all perspectives and even “seek to bring in those which are not represented in the dialogue, for example by playing the devil’s advocate” (p. 131). This brings the tension of being neutral and suspending your own thoughts and beliefs while also actively making sure that all voices come to the table.

The paradox of neutrality is that within the traditional rhetoric of neutrality, it implies detachment, while in practice it requires the practitioners’ proactive involvement. Cobb and Rifkin (1991) deconstructed the concept of neutrality within mediation practice and further argue this controversy within the practice connected to neutrality. They found that most understandings of neutrality require the practitioner to be attentive to “hidden interests or agendas (their own included) in order to balance power, avoid ideology and promote justice” (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991, p. 47), but that;

In order not to bias the process, mediators struggle to keep their prejudices and their interests out of the process and are prohibited from judging the substance of the agreement; but in order to bring the hidden interests of the parties to the surface, mediators must attend to the content of the agreement so that all interests are represented. (Cobb & Rifkin, 1991, p. 48)

Forester and Stitzel (1989) also review problems with neutrality. They say that neutrality might mean that the practitioner has no personal stake in the issue. However, they argue that neutrality is a promise that cannot be kept. Moreover, it should not be kept, as it for example hides normative strategic judgements that must be made by the practitioner.

Overall it can be said that while a more classic understanding of neutrality in the practice includes substantive neutrality and non-biasedness, going beyond this idea of neutrality is equally present in the literature. Reasons for going beyond neutrality seem to be twofold; non-neutrality allows for balancing power as well as for making sure that all interests get a voice.

2.5. Neutrality and The Equitable Process

Equity plays a key role in the puzzle about neutrality. Several scholars stress the importance of equity and environmental justice for successful sustainability dialogue (e.g. Deakin, 1999; Emami, 2014; Hampton, 1999; Hay, 1995; Holifield, 2017; Smith & McDonough). The perception of justice in decision making increases trust, support for authorities and satisfaction with outcomes (Lind & Tyler, 1988 see Smith & McDonough, 2001) Literature shows a broadly defined cluster of ideas referred to as ‘equity’, ‘fairness’ and ‘justice’. Subjective ideas of equity by practitioners could influence justification of their acting. For example, Flew (1987 see Hay, 1995) says that *substance equality* is “the clearest justification for positive discrimination policies but is also the most difficult formulation to defend” (p. 502).

Holifield (2017) also connects sustainability dialogue to the idea of environmental justice. Environmental justice is about fair treatment and meaningful

involvement within a process. Holifield (2017) suggests best practices for environmental justice practitioners such as facilitators within sustainability dialogue. These include open communication, flexibility and equity. Open communication is important in order to not hinder collaboration through distrust, preconceived notions and prejudices. Flexibility means that the practitioner should be open to changing their thinking, approach and methodology. Lastly, equity is about addressing power imbalances within a process. Furthermore, Deakin (1999) also stresses the importance of equity, fairness and justice within environmental planning in order to elicit environmental justice. She argues that treating everyone the same is not the right way to enable this.

Emami (2014) argues that the development of an unbiased process is critical element of a decision-making process. Such a process must contain components that ensure fairness of process by for example considering bias minimization and making sure that the right opportunities and information are provided for all parties to be able to participate. Hampton (1999) illustrates this by saying that:

The principles and practice of public participation can serve to promote environmental equity for disadvantaged social groups. The effectiveness of such practice in preventing or reducing environmental inequity depends upon the use of participation methodology which caters to the cultural and social needs of such groups. (p. 163)

Barnaud and Van Paassen (2013) suggest tools to overcome issues of power, equity and legitimacy. They call them 'nonneutral methodological choices' and they include for example the highlighting of the diversity of interests, starting with empowering the less powerful stakeholders and strategically selecting participants to ensure a representation of the diversity of interests. They also say that the designer of a participatory process plays a main role in overcoming obstacles to the emergence of an equitable process. Escobar (2011) adds to this the idea that people can be excluded by the characteristics of the process and forgetfulness of these aspects might reinforce privileges or injustices.

3. Further Situating the Research: The Approach to Researching the Use of Neutrality

3.1. The Interpretative Approach

Following the aim, I have chosen for an interpretative research approach and design with a social constructivist worldview. (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013; Creswell & Creswell, 2017) I chose social constructivism as an underlying worldview because like Crotty (1998 see Creswell & Creswell, 2017), I think that “the basic generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community” (p. 49). The social constructivist worldview assumes that “human beings construct meanings as they engage with the world they are interpreting” and that therefore meanings of their experiences are subjective and there is no one objective truth (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 49). This worldview connects to my research aim in a way that it revolves around meaning making and individual experiences. In this research, I looked into personal experiences of practitioners with regards to their neutral role.

I have used an interpretative research design with an abductive way of reasoning. Abductive reasoning starts with a puzzle, tension or surprise that requires an engagement of more pieces at the same time in order to be figured out. (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013) In this research, this means that I hopped back and forth between my empirical material and theory. This process is iterative, meaning I kept options, questions and choices open and alive throughout the research. The puzzle or tension in my case was the one between neutrality and equity. A facilitator is ought to be neutral while at the same time facilitating an equitable process. Depending on how the concepts are understood, a tension might arise between these facilitator roles and identities.

3.2. Methods of Data Collection and Data Generation

To address my aim, I have collected the data for this thesis through multiple sources, namely interviews and guidance documents in the field of facilitation for sustainability dialogue. In order to produce in depth interpretations of facilitator’s meaning making, I carried out interviews. The selection of interviewees was based

on their engagement within the work field of facilitation in a setting of sustainability dialogues in Sweden. All interviewees were at the time active as facilitators within this area or had previous experience in this role. The interviewees are presented anonymously in this thesis due to confidentiality reasons. The following table presents an overview of the interviewees, their academic background and their engagement with facilitation practice.

Table 2. Overview of interviewees

Interviewee identification	Academic background	Description
Interviewee 1	Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Works with the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) - Collaboration leader, facilitator, project leader, trainer in dialogue and communicator - Focus on environmental protection - Works with cooperation, dialogue, facilitation, innovation and research
Interviewee 2	Marine biology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience as journalist and science communicator - Works with participatory processes and collaborative learning - Focus on natural resource issues - self-employed facilitator, moderator, process- and project manager
Interviewee 3	Law and commerce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience in education, mediation and conflict - Trainer in facilitation - Self-employed full-time facilitator and mediator - Works with local and regional authorities - Focus on dialogue in complex issues
Interviewee 4	Biology, social science and environmental communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience in project management and conflicts - Works with SEPA - Self-employed trainer in conflict management and dialogue - Focus on large carnivore management and wicked issues - Facilitator, director of change, coach and project leader
Interviewee 5	Forestry and journalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Experience in research communication - Self-employed full-time moderator, facilitator and writer - Focus on the area of forestry, biodiversity, water management and agriculture

The interviewees obtained their facilitation skills through different channels. However three out of five facilitators are part of the International Association of Facilitation (IAF). The academic background of the interviewees as well as their way of obtaining facilitation skills is important to take into account when looking at the results because these might influence their views and values on the practice.

As Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2013) suggested, I have interviewed “based on the belief that there are multiple perceived and/or experienced social *realities* concerning what happened, rather than a singular *truth*” (p. 4). The participants were interviewed about their personal perception on- and experience with regards to their identity and the concept of neutrality in their role as practitioners. Working from a constructivist worldview, the particular focus in the interviews lied on how interviewees construct narratives of events and people.

For the themes in the interviews, I was inspired by the website ‘Profiles of Practitioners’ by Forester et al. (2015) in which they explain how one can learn about issues via practical stories. Forester et al. (2015) argue that it can be hard to get concrete information about analytical concerns by asking them directly and that therefore I, as a researcher, should focus on creating questions that enable interviewees to talk about situations and their handling instead.

According to Silverman (2015), open ended interviews require active listening and flexibility. I combined the idea of open-endedness with some probing into the direction of my central concepts. I therefore worked with semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. I prepared an interview guide (Appendix A) that I developed following the literature review, while leaving space for new subjects that might emerge during the interview process. The interview guide was a general guide throughout the interviews, meaning that I could still be flexible with the order and the type of questions if needed. I slightly adjusted my interview questions for each interviewee before as well as during the interview as new interesting topics emerged. These topics were then consequently also considered in the next interview.

All interviews were conducted through online communication platform *Zoom* and they were recorded with permission of the interviewees. Each interview lasted for approximately 90 minutes. First, I wrote down initial thoughts after the interviews. I then consistently transcribed the interviews verbatim while taking notes during the transcribing process. The interview transcripts are available on request.

Additionally, I have included a facilitation handbook and an ethical guideline in my data. This handbook and ethical guideline provide facilitators theoretical and practical frameworks in their practice. I selected a handbook from an intergovernmental organization, the UN, and an ethical guideline from the IAF. The selection was based on a targeted search for publications by internationally recognized organizations within the field. By including both an internationally recognized handbook and ethical guideline, I attempted to shed a light on framing of the concepts by internationally leading experts. Guidance documents such as handbooks and ethical guidelines are suitable study objects because they reflect what is expected of the skills, values and conducts of practitioners within a specific field (Cashmore et al., 2015). Cashmore et al. (2015) suggest that guidance documents within the practice attempt to constitute identities of practitioners. The following table presents an overview of the guidance documents used for this thesis.

Table 1. Overview of guidance documents

Document	Organization	Description
Enabling National Initiatives to Take Democracy Beyond Elections, Chapter 5: For Facilitators – A Practical Guide (UNDEF, 2018)	The United Nations Democracy Fund	The United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) wrote a handbook for the design and operation of ways to make trusted democracy decisions. This chapter is a practical guide for facilitators including an explanation of their role as well as the principles of the practice.
Statement of Values and Code of Ethics (IAF, 2015)	International Association of Facilitation	The officially adopted Statement of Values and Code of Ethics by the International Association of Facilitators (IAF). The IAF is a worldwide participatory organisation for the practice of facilitation.

3.3. Facilitator Identity Frames

Several scholars suggest different identities of practitioners within facilitation practice (e.g. Forester, 1989; Helm, 2018; Möckel, 2020; Westin, 2019). These facilitator identities each entail assumptions about what the role of a facilitator is within a process and what the additional responsibilities and values are within the practice. Furthermore, Helm (2018) adds to this that such facilitators identities provide an explanation on how their identity is constructed and how they position themselves and others in interactions. Altogether, one can say that practitioners within facilitation practice have multiple roles and identities and this can cause for tensions (Forester, 1999).

These identities can be analysed through frame analysis. I carried out a frame analysis with interview transcripts and facilitation guidance documents as the object of study. Frame analysis, a form of discourse analysis, is about studying social constructions of reality. The sociologist Goffmann (1974) wrote about frame analysis and understood a frame as the way that people make sense of phenomena. Frame analysis can be connected to a constructivist worldview by the idea that people construct their own meaning about reality through social interaction (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). I find that a frame analysis suits my research as it involves assumptions and thoughts about concepts, in my case the concept of *neutrality*.

According to Van Hulst & Yanow (2016), uncovering frames can ‘‘entail a reflective practice, to the extent that policy-relevant actors might explore and perhaps question the basic assumptions guiding their thinking and actions, especially when these are bringing them into conflict with each other’’ (p. 103). One of the frame topics they suggest is that of policy-relevant actors’ identities. Van Hulst & Yanow (2016) think that identities have implicit beliefs about the world and that they give expression to what is meaningful to people. In this research, I made use of facilitator identities as a topic.

3.4. Applying Frame Analysis

In this thesis research, I have reconstructed identity frames. These frames in turn lead the facilitator to relate in different ways to the concept of *neutrality*. I focused on identifying frames and their underlying assumptions concerning facilitator's identity and perceptions of- and experiences with in the context of sustainability dialogues. However, I do not strive to be exhaustive in how facilitators or guidance documents frame their identities but rather look narrower into the use of neutrality within identity making. I tried to connect facilitator's identities to the concept of *neutrality* and tensions surrounding that. In order for me to uncover identity frames, I looked at problems and the underlying assumptions and practical implications within my data. Therefore, I worked with the analytical question *How do guidance documents and facilitators use the concept of neutrality to formulate problems and solutions?*. In the guidance documents, the writer's explanations and recommendations were seen as the case. In the interview transcripts, the narratives from the facilitators were seen as the case.

I used Atlas.ti 8 as a tool in the data analysis. I approached the empirical material with my theoretical background in the back of my mind. I first extracted important quotes that I found to be related to my research. Following Möckel's (2020) view on *facilitator identity* as a topic, interview material was considered meaningful regarding this topic when: The facilitator actively talked about his/her role, responsibility or tasks; The facilitator positioned him-/herself within the process and in relation to the group or substance of the process; The facilitator elaborated on values within the practice; The facilitator shared stories about previous experiences. Within the guidance documents, material was considered meaningful regarding the topic of *facilitator identities* when the writer explicitly talked about a facilitator's role, responsibility or task or elaborated on values and principles within the practice.

I then colour coded the documents and transcripts and tried to identify patterns and categories that I could later rephrase into the facilitator identity frames. I repeated some of these steps as I worked iteratively; I went back and forth between interview material, handbooks and ethical guidelines and the theoretical framework. This approach to data analysis fits the earlier mentioned abductive logic of inquiry as explained by Schwartz-Shea and Yanow (2013). I analysed the material until I found that I had used accurate descriptions of how my interviews talked about certain topics.

3.5. Methodological Reflections: Limitations and Trustworthiness

In this section, I will reflect on the quality of my empirical material and my research approach. An assumption in this research is the idea that there are different interpretations of reality depending on how people interpret certain things. Graneheim and Lundman (2004) suggest that "this is an essential issue when discussing trustworthiness of findings in qualitative content analysis" (p.106). They suggest the concepts of credibility, dependability and transferability to

describe aspects of trustworthiness. I believe that I should strive for trustworthiness of my research and therefore I will discuss these three suggested concepts.

The credibility of my research lies within the idea that I want to uncover facilitator's identity frames with a special focus on assumptions about neutrality and I think that the data sources that I used are the right indicators for this research focus. However, an interesting different approach within my research could have been focused on gaining insights into the concept of neutrality through participants within participatory processes instead of facilitators themselves or as an addition to the other data. Hereby, facilitator's rhetoric frames and frames in use could be uncovered. This participant view is currently missing within my research, while the main research question would leave room for such data input. However, I chose not to make use of participant perceptions due to feasibility. As earlier explained, the focus in this study lies on facilitators and their lifeworld.

Also, I have used interview data connected to facilitation practice for sustainability dialogues in Sweden while on the other hand, the guidance documents have no direct connection to Sweden nor to sustainability. This could be considered limitation of this research. Yet, the purpose of the use of these guidance documents was to get an insight into values and thoughts in facilitation practice as such, rather than specifically diving into the case of Sweden or that of sustainability dialogue.

With regards to dependability, it is important to point out that in interpretative research, the researcher cannot be seen separately from the research. Similarly, in facilitation practice, the main tool is the facilitator him/herself. Their presence, body language, speech and ability to engage with different groups makes them a tool (Escobar, 2011). The same goes for interpretative research. I am not objective and I have an influence in a way that I shape the research design and interpret the empirical data. As a researcher, I am the primary instrument for assessing and making sense of the meaning-making processes of the facilitators. One can speak of a researcher bias, which is hard to avoid. I therefore tried to check on my own sense-making through reflexivity, transparency and engaging with my positionality as a researcher. (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2013) For example, from the beginning I had assumptions about what facilitation practice is supposed to be and thought that my work would be about equity. I emphasized equity over neutrality. But then I started to see my work differently and shifted focus towards neutrality.

Lastly, connected to transferability, I would like to challenge the idea of external validity (Bryman, 2012) that is used in classical qualitative or quantitative research. The proposed research will contain a small sample that is not necessarily representative for all practitioners, which makes it impossible for this study to be exhaustive. Therefore, the results will not be able to one on one be generalised beyond a specific research context. This is also not what is aspired. However, the results can provide valuable insights into the area of facilitation within sustainability dialogues.

4. Results – Facilitator Identity Frames

The analysis brought forth four different facilitator identity frames, namely the facilitator as *mediator*, the facilitator as *transparent practitioner*, the facilitator as *value-neutral expert* and the facilitator as *multi-partial process guide*. The frames were assessed on their assumptions about neutrality within the practice as well as their perception of the role of the facilitator and important values within the practice. In the following sections, I explain how these frames came about. Worth mentioning is that none of the interviewees, nor the guidance documents entirely committed to one of the identity frames, but rather used a mix of them in their narratives.

4.1.1. The Mediator

The first uncovered identity frame is the *mediator* frame. The problem diagnosis in this identity frame is that authority and trust are important in order to be a good facilitator. This frame suggests that to gain authority and trust, the facilitator should be seen as a neutral third party and has to be substantively neutral, meaning that s/he cannot take sides or interfere on the substantive matter of the dialogue. This identity frame is connected to mediation practice and negotiation and sees the process as political.

A facilitator drawing on the *mediator* frame is not concerned about implementing their own plan but is there to help the group. S/he is always aware of the risk that their interpretations of situations are coloured by their own person. Interviewee 3 exemplifies this by saying that ‘‘If you listen to somebody and you can [...] stop judging what the person is saying. [...] Then you will listen in a very different way from when you're constantly, in your head, responding to what the person is saying.’’. The proposed solution within this identity frame is to either separate or dismiss own biases, values and opinions from the process.

The interviewees say that they have to be aware of their background and of what participants think about this background. They can think that they have their own agenda. For example, interviewee 5 with a forestry background says to fear that environmental NGOs would regard him or her (hereafter referred to as ‘her’) as a stakeholder for the forestry management side. Interviewee 4 explains that s/he is not a nature conservationist nor a pro hunting person and that this helps her in being open to different perspectives.

Facilitators drawing on the *mediator* frame see the role of the facilitator as someone that tries to minimize their presence and that is only there to intervene when necessary. The facilitator finds the right balance between assisting the group when necessary and actively leading the group through difficulties. The role of the facilitator is to make it easier for participants to have the conversation that they

need to have. The facilitator should be an as little part of the process as possible because otherwise there is a risk that the result is not the result of the group. According to UNDEF (2018), a facilitator should be:

A person who is acceptable to all members of a group, substantively neutral (important, not process neutral) and has no decision-making authority, intervenes to help a group improve the way it identifies and solves problems and makes decisions in order to increase the group's effectiveness. (p. 220)

The facilitator is an outsider and assumed is that a conflict of interest, personal bias and prior knowledge of the organisation may prevent a facilitator from working effectively with the interests of all group members.

In this frame, the facilitator is ought to be neutral because otherwise the participants will not accept her. S/he is be part of the bubble of trust and creates a safe space for the conversation to take place in. According to interviewee 2, it is important to keep reminding yourself that it is not about you and your knowledge, but about the people in the room and how they will manage this situation. It is not the facilitator's issue to set the agenda and to decide what is wrong or right. Interviewee 4 illustrated this risk with two examples:

And they said; 'you should not have an opinion in this because, you know, you don't know anything about this because we are the persons working with it'. And in that, I think also lies the thing that 'we don't trust you and we think you're partial'. [...] Another example is the process of creating a new national park in the northern part of Sweden, where the Sami representatives just explicitly said that: 'well, you're the government, we cannot trust you.

In this frame, it is thought that the facilitator ought to be independent and offering an outsiders perspective because those in the process have too much input and they cannot keep that in the background. Interviewee 1 illustrates this by explaining that when she works for an organization that also has a stake in the process, she gives input even if she should not. Moreover, she says that when a facilitator is presented as someone from one of the parties, this hinders trust building between you and the participants. Also, interviewee 5 explains that in an outsider role you can enquire in another way than you would have been able to if you are part of the organization. Interviewee 3 usually tells the group that s/he has a beginner's mind and therefore can ask the more basic questions. This will help people explain the issue from the roots. Furthermore, information about the content of the issue will come from expert speakers and not from the facilitator. The IAF (2015) suggests for a facilitator to 'practice stewardship of process and impartiality toward content' (p. 3). A facilitator fills an impartial role in helping groups become more effective.

Facilitators in this identity frame perceive impartiality as the absence of prejudice or favouritism of any side as these imply a loss of neutrality. Interviewee 3 explains that s/he will always tell the group that s/he will try not to prejudice anyone in any way concerning the group and that if this happens, the participants should tell her. S/he finds this a risk and apologises when it happened and tries to restore the trust.

If I express my views, I will be taking sides for somebody and against somebody else. [...] If I side with the conservationists and express some view about 'I like hunters, I like this or that', I will immediately be seen to be on the side of the conservationists. And I will no longer be able to create a safe space for the hunters to express freely. [...] That's what I call neutrality, it's the

combination of non-judgement and not making a judgement about what somebody is saying, no matter what they are saying. (Interviewee 3)

Facilitators drawing on the *mediator* identity frame argue that using ground rules about how people should behave around each other in a process can be helpful especially when there is tension or conflict. The whole group should agree on these rules so that the facilitator can refer back to them in moments of tension and perceived disobedience. They can make use of the values in these ground rules that are for example written on a flipchart in the room instead of thinking themselves if they believe that a certain way of communicating is rude or disrespectful.

However, facilitators identified a risk in this identity frame; It is seldomly feasible to be an outsider on the process. How can a facilitator drawing on the *mediator* frame live up to the expectations of their client? The client might have a certain outcome in mind with regards to the content of the issue. While in this identity frame, a facilitator should not interfere nor steer the content in a direction.

4.1.2. The Transparent Practitioner

The second identity frame that could be derived from the guidance documents and interview data is that of the *transparent practitioner*. In this frame, it is assumed that trust is needed in order to gain authority. But the problem is that if you are not open and honest, then you cannot be trusted either. Therefore the solution is to be open and transparent and tell everyone what you are thinking about and doing. Facilitators drawing on the *transparent practitioner* frame stress the importance of openness, transparency and authenticity.

In this identity frame it is believed that a facilitator can never be objective, but s/he can strive for it. The *transparent practitioner* acknowledges that s/he has her own values and views which s/he cannot put completely in the background. However, in order to maintain trust and authority, s/he is open about her thoughts and views and is transparent on when these thoughts and views come up. Besides, oftentimes a facilitator is employed by an organization or company. This background inevitably peeks through in your work. This should not be a problem as long as it is clear that those are the facilitator's thoughts and assumptions and not that of the group.

The IAF (2015) says that a facilitator's effectiveness is based on personal integrity and trust. Therefore, it is important to define and be open about the values and ethical principles that guide our actions. By discussing openly and honestly any possible conflicts of interest and personal biases, a facilitator can prevent misunderstanding that could detract from the success or credibility of them or their client.

Facilitators drawing from the transparency frame think that facilitation is not something you learn once and for all; you should constantly review your experiences and knowledge about issues. You are your best instrument so you should be aware of what's happening in yourself and know your strengths and weaknesses.

Transparency is a key element in this identity frame. The facilitator for example shares project dilemmas with participants. Additionally, s/he from the start is clear about the problem that the group is solving and what process will be used to do this.

Also, the facilitator gets to choose who will speak as an expert in the room while thoroughly explaining why s/he choose this source of information.

According to the *transparency* frame, a facilitator can have content knowledge or have a stake in the question. Within the *transparency* frame, input on both the process and the substance level is allowed as long as the facilitator is open about it. According to the IAF (2015), when a facilitator has content knowledge not otherwise available to the group, but that that group must have to be effective, s/he should offer it. Interviewees also say to make use of their content knowledge if they felt like it might add something to the discussion. The *transparent practitioner* is always open about their substantive input. S/he does this by explicitly explaining the change of role. For example, interviewee 5 and 1 say that:

I then say; 'well now I'm walking out of my facilitation role and walking into another role, me as a person knowing something that might contribute to your process'. (Interviewee 5)

And then I can say, 'you know what? Now I take on a different hat and now I'm going to tell you what my opinion is'. And then I say 'now I will take it off again, and I'm the facilitator'. [...] Because my role is facilitating. But I happen to know a lot about it. (Interviewee 1)

A *transparent practitioner* is aware of the fact that they are there to contribute through open-mindedness. By articulating that they take of the facilitator hat and putting on the governmental hat for example, they remind both the participants and themselves of their changing role.

There is a risk of bringing in your own assumptions into the process when you have knowledge on the issues. However, it might also make you a better facilitator by being able to ask the right questions. Furthermore, some interviewees regarded knowledge on the substance level of the issue or the field as crucial in obtaining the job as a facilitator for that process. Both participants and initiators of dialogue value the facilitators knowledge. Interviewee 5 further explains that knowing something about the topic makes you more likely to be seen as legitimate and get the mandate to be in the process. S/he thinks that when you work for example with climate change, it is in your advantage if you know the language of ecology so that you can speak with the participants and make them feel safe. Again, to maintain trust, it is important to be open about what you know and what you do not know.

In this frame, facilitation is seen as collaborative learning. As a facilitator, you have to collaborate with the group and be open about the process strategy and tools and also about the thoughts of participants. Also, a facilitator can discuss with the group what a fair process is. Interviewee 5 explains this as:

It's about structure; showing that you know what you..., to be transparent about how I perceive the purpose and the aim. [...] Like 'This is how I, together with your manager, we have planned it like this, we will have an idea about working like this. How does it sound to you? Any questions?'

Within the *transparency* frame, an important tool in gaining trust is to be open about your thoughts and concerns about the process. Interviewee 5 suggests asking the group 'What is happening now, how are we getting along?' and 'Could I do something in another way?'.

That honesty is to say, 'look, you know, I really don't know what to do now'. That can also be OK. [...] It's hard because then you think 'are people going to trust you, If you say that you're nervous?' And it's also part of being real. (Interviewee 3)

The *transparent practitioner* thinks that with this reflection you enhance the dialogue process through building capacity and awareness.

Facilitators drawing on the *transparency* frame stress the importance of being aware of your assumptions, values, views, opinion and your position and feelings. It is assumed that you always bring your own personality into the process and that this inevitably affects the group. For example, interviewee 1 says that ‘‘I'm usually not saying that I'm objective because, hmm, that's probably what I would like to say. While I'm employed at the Swedish EPA, I don't think people expect me to be objective because I work where I work.’’.

Like creating national parks in the northern part of Sweden with the Sami and reindeer herding are also difficult processes when you're coming with a backpack of being the government who has for hundreds of years oppressed these people. (Interviewee 4)

You then have to express that you understand a group's distrust and you have to restore this trust.

Lastly, a *transparent practitioner* does not go into defence when someone in the room provoked her because s/he does not share those values. Interviewee 3 adds that you should be aware of the inner committee inside you. Even though these inner voices constantly come up, you should try to not allow yourself to be influenced by them. This requires self-knowledge and self-awareness. I conclude this frame with two quotes by interviewee 4 that clearly illustrate the *transparency* frame:

I see myself as a conservation person, a biologist. I have all these values that they also have. [...] And in that I am not objective. [...] But in dialogues and in facilitated meetings I try to, what I talked about in the beginning, be aware of myself in order to be as objective as I can. And I can also express like; 'But I don't share your opinion on this, I think that we should have it like this and this' and that is also being open with the subjectivism that I have.

To me, you can never be objective. I come in with a perspective. I come in with a way of living in society, of being raised with certain values and all of that. But I can try to not express them and try to not make them affect me when I facilitate. And by being aware of where I'm not neutral makes it easier for me to not use them.

4.1.3. The Value-Neutral Expert

Another identity frame seen in the guidance documents and interview material is that of the *value-neutral expert*. In this identity frame, trust and authority from the participants is also valued within facilitation practice, but this can be achieved by being an expert on the process. Being an expert on deliberative processes makes them eligible to make decisions about the process design. Assumed is that a facilitator is the advocate and representative of a good process and not a representative of views. As the IAF (2015) says:

We practice stewardship of process and impartiality toward content. While participants bring knowledge and expertise concerning the substance of their situation, we bring knowledge and expertise concerning the group interaction process. (p. 3)

Facilitators drawing on this frame, think that facilitating is something that you learn and that you can be an expert on. They are more conventional experts in process design and facilitation and that is why people should trust them. The facilitator is a leader that is outside of the group.

According to the *value-neutral expert frame*, the essence of facilitation is to lead a group towards common agreed objectives and help people advance their learnings. Interviewee 3 says that “the facilitator needs to look for the potential within every situation and see how can dialogue lead to that potential”. The practice is not political and the outcome of a process is objectively neutral as the *value-neutral expert* creates the best practice and process for the best outcome.

The *value-neutral expert* does not express any view. S/he does not try to steer the dialogue into any direction but rather tries to “set the stage in a way that people can contribute as much as possible” (Interviewee 2). Therefore, being a good dialogue designer, is what makes someone a good facilitator. As a process expert, the facilitator knows which behaviour and methods can contribute to a high quality dialogue. The main role of the facilitator is to choose relevant exercises, tools and methods while not setting the agenda. Furthermore, she is flexible with methods to handle unexpected situations. Interviewee 1 identified risk here; The facilitator holds power by deciding on the methods. S/he gets people to speak about the right things and the right amount of time and so on. As a facilitator, you are aware of the fact that you might influence the process this way. A way to tackle this is for people in the room to give input on the agenda as well as on the ground rules and decision making process in the group. This legitimates the facilitator to intervene when someone is not following this code of conduct.

According to interviewee 4, preparation is important in dialogue; s/he should know about the people, how the conflict works, why certain people should be involved and about the goals and the incentives for each session. Interviewee 5 exemplifies this:

And sometimes to just know 'How can I understand this question? How can I...' Well, I need to hear more perspectives before I can plan the meeting or the process. Maybe I've only heard the client perspective, their assumptions about other perspectives. And then I think I need to talk to some of the stakeholders to understand their perspective more and maybe to also help them take one or two steps before they get into the room, because it might... well to engage them or help them engage in the question.

In order to gain trust and authority, one could have knowledge on the process as well as the substantive level of the dialogue. A facilitator can be value-neutral while at the same time contributing with the knowledge that s/he feels like adds something positive to the dialogue as such. Interviewee 2 reflects on this:

A lot of facilitators argue that you should not have knowledge because then it's really easy to confuse your roles, to start being someone who actually interacts and steers the questions in certain directions. [...] I think that if you don't have any knowledge, you most of time ask stupid questions that have been asked before. You don't know where the conflict lines are. You don't know the basic things. As a facilitator, my strongest tools are designing the workshops or the

meetings and also asking questions to help the process go forward. So I think it's mostly a thing about how do I handle my knowledge? [...] I can ask questions out of my knowledge to help them advance their collective knowledge.

Interviewee 2 explains that even though s/he thinks that facilitation expertise is most important, s/he experiences that having knowledge on the issue benefits her as well.

Researchers in large carnivores want someone who knows about large carnivores. Reindeer herders want people who know about reindeer herding. They would never trust a guy who does all sorts of facilitation. [...] And I get the feeling every now and then that I'm contracted by the environmentalist side because they think that I'm like them. Then I am contracted by the forestry side because they think I'm one of them. And that's perfectly where I want to be. I want them all to think that I understand their issues. But I think this field is kind of different from other fields, as they put so much faith in that, that you should be knowledgeable about the issue. [...] I actually don't think they're right in that.

A facilitator has to show to the participants that s/he works with the process and does not have an opinion. A facilitator must never engage in a conflict or value issue. S/he just guards the process and values the group's performance instead of that of individuals. A *value-neutral expert* is aware of how much they should lead and where they should step in to create reflection and learning. Also, a *value-neutral expert* tries not to make her own values affect her role, because this would make her less effective in creating open conversation. The participants in turn have to trust the facilitator that s/he does not let her values influence her. Interviewee 4 explains this through a previous experience:

For example, I'm not pro Wolf hunt. [...] But at the same time, the government has decided that this is something we should try out and use. So I agree when the conservationists say that this is not a good tool to use, but I don't show that. I try to be curious instead. [...] And try to use questions, digging deeper in change theories of the people instead of expressing my own opinions. [...] And there I was accused for being like, 'but you're just interested in their point of view. And this is only a game for the gallery. You're not valuing nature conservation and your bossed by these people.

And interviewee 3 explains how s/he remains value-neutral through being aware of the voices in her head:

And being able to see so 'can I reflect on what's happening in me while we are having the conversation?'. [...] And the question is, are you aware of what those voices inside you saying. [...] you're aware of it or not, it's actually affecting the way you listen. If I listen to somebody and I think that guy's a real idiot, it's going to affect what I hear. (Interviewee 3)

According to interviewee 4, a facilitator is ‘not just someone who is going into the room and using different methods, it is someone who also designs the dialogue that you want to achieve’. And for this, sometimes s/he has to put herself in the perspective of the client and think for example about ‘what does SEPA want to know here and how can we collect this information or co-create this understanding together with these stakeholders?’ (interviewee 4).

Thus, being a *value-neutral expert* could still mean that you are employed by a company or an organization. According to interviewee 5, a responsibility of the *value-neutral expert* is then to not have preconceptions but be consultative in the

process; to listen to the client, to make them reflect and to ask questions to try to make them put own words to their needs. But this also means to hold them back and ask “Have you really thought about this? Have you reflected enough of the right people in the room?” (Interviewee 5). Sometimes a *value-neutral expert* might also draw on his or her facilitation expertise and express to the client that a process is not feasible or should be rethought. Interviewee 1 says that sometimes she is asked to facilitate a meeting where the organisers already have decided what they would like the outcome to be. S/he says that this is not facilitation but moderation of an information meeting.

4.1.4. The Multi-Partial Process Guide

A fourth identity frame that was uncovered in the guidance documents and interview material is that of the *multi-partial process guide*. The *multi-partial process guide* is the one that is attentive to and cares about power imbalances. S/he values equal involvement so that all voices come to the table. The problem framing here is that a facilitator in her or her role meets power imbalances or pre-established power relations and social systems. The solution framing for that is that the facilitator should be a guide within the process and they should make sure that all voices can get heard. The goal for the facilitator is to improve the dialogue and to find out what actors have for kind of challenges and solutions to different things, to explore perspectives.

Facilitators drawing on the *multi-partial process guide* frame emphasize that the field of nature conservation and environmental issues is complex. Involving every group has benefits in the long term. Therefore diversity in ideas and contributions is good. Everyone should be included and it is important not to miss anyone. In environmental questions, a lot of parties can be involved. Interviewee 1 explains that when you think that there are too many parties and you decide to leave some out, this will get back to you on the long term.

A facilitator is there to act as an independent process guide serving the public good and creating a balance between participation and results. S/he strives to help the group make the best use of the knowledge and personality of each member. Values that are important here are respect, safety, equity and trust. The facilitator is there to develop a vibe in the room that ensures equal voices and evens out the power dynamics. Consequently, s/he deals actively with power dynamics.

A facilitator drawing on this frame listens with equal attention to all participants and create a place where all participants trust that they can speak freely. S/he should use her “skills, knowledge, tools, and wisdom to elicit and honour the perspectives of all” (IAF, 2015, p. 3). All relevant stakeholders should be represented and involved. Promoting equitable relationships within the room means ensuring that all participants have an opportunity to examine and share their thoughts and feelings. IAF (2015) says that “we work in ways that honour the wholeness and self-expression of others, designing sessions that respect different styles of interaction” (p. 3).

A *multi-partial process guide* works effectively with the interests of all group members and makes sure not to use her position to “secure unfair or inappropriate privilege, gain, or benefit” (IAF, 2015, p. 2). A *multi-partial process guide* pays attention to the majority voice as well as the minority voice, as there is wisdom in

this more silent voice. For all voices to come to the table, the facilitator creates an open and safe space for people to express what they want to say to each other. Creating a code of conduct with ground rules could help with this. The idea is to come to an agreement on these rules together with the group and also to ask “how can we collaborate to do what we just agreed upon doing today?” (Interviewee 5). Ground rules that the facilitator could refer back to could be: “hearing from everyone and not just those who like talking, respecting difference of view and encouraging everyone to be inquisitive” (UNDEF, 20178, p. 175).

A *process guide* does not take sides, but rather does s/he favour groups when they need extra help in for example speaking a bit more, so that each of the interests gets on the table. This means that s/he should sometimes not remain neutral but instead judge situations and get actively involved in restoring power imbalances. Interviewees stated that they cannot be neutral because there are such huge disparities and therefore they have to support some people extra. Though, interviewee 5 provides an interesting twist to the frame by saying that s/he does not recognize helping people to get a voice and encouraging people to take space as being less neutral. She acknowledges that she affects the system, but that it is her task by doing this in a way to get more equal involvement.

A *multi-partial process guide* strives for having a diversity of views represented in the room. Interviewee three calls this listening in 360 degrees; everybody who is in some way a stakeholder or connected to this problem has a different perspective. Ideally, the participants themselves get to choose the best representatives for each perspective. Interviewee 2 adds that “you cannot have ten from the forestry sector and one reindeer herder, that's not OK, so I always tried to have an equal representation from different interests”. The interviewees emphasize that it is equally important to have each of the interests represented in the room as the number of people that representing these interests. However, several interviewees mentioned that they oftentimes are not the ones to decide who gets to be in the room and this is a risk in making sure that everyone gets a voice. And that it is also often not feasible to include each party due to high costs and lack of time.

The *multi-partial process guide* is attentive to power imbalances and either makes them visible or interferes in the social system to make sure that everyone gets the same opportunities. S/he is concerned with the process while having to compensate strong and weak parties. Interviewee 1 says that sometimes, some organizations do not have the resources to put much effort into cooperation and they cannot be there every time. S/he then talks with the group about these different conditions for different parties and asks the group what they think is the best way to tackle this; “How should we do this so it gets equal?”. The facilitator helps those that cannot or are not allowed to be part of the collaboration as much as others. Tools for involving these people in the meeting are for example the use of questionnaires or interviews before the meeting.

The *multi-partial process guide* designs a meeting so that everyone has the opportunity to speak up their views or values on the issue and can share their knowledge. Sometimes certain people dominate the main session of the meeting. For example, interviewee 1 says that researchers have a lot of experience and knowledge and are used to voicing their ideas and to people listening to them. Then sometimes they can talk for half an hour where others only can speak for two minutes. Then the facilitator can actively interfere and encourage everyone for their

input and to speak up for their interests and share their perspectives and thoughts. Tools for this could be the use of passing on a talking stick or of speaking times. During the meeting you have to think about methods that get people with different communication styles engaged and involved. Interviewee 5 says that when s/he feels that some people or groups are dominating in the room, s/he divides the group into small groups and asks for contributions from each group. S/he says that this is ‘‘a useful technique to empower silent or shy people to share things’’ and that this is a way to break through the everyday power roles that might otherwise appear in the room.

About these power roles, interviewee 4 says that some parties get a natural voice in to the authorities and some do not. Interviewees 1 illustrate this in the following quote:

If we have land owners and we have environmental organisations, sometimes we struggled with that a little bit because some of them are really, really strong and have a lot of money to work with, to influence people and so on. And the other one doesn't. It might be 10 people here and 1 here, then it's not very good if all 11 then get the same amount of time.

Interviewees recognize the importance of empowerment and that this can also be done through ensuring that people get the space to express themselves clearly. It is important to check with participants if they are comfortable in the meeting, if there is something they specifically want to raise or if they feel like they need more of their people in the room. Enabling each participant to express their perspectives completely also means that a facilitator does not allow for debate, discussion or interruption in the first round of storytelling.

However, interviewee 3 identifies a risk in trying to provide equity in a room as it denies that people have rank and privileges. S/he says that it could however be meaningful to make these privileges visible and to recognize and discuss the inequalities rather than pretend that everyone is equal. I now illustrate interviewee 3's view by quoting her:

The reindeer herders, they talk a lot about their sense of powerlessness in relation to the majority population in Sweden [...] 'every time we come to a meeting, we have to explain our culture and our ways of seeing things from the beginning, because [...] nobody ever seems to listen or take notice'. So we will have a meeting in Jokkmokk with herders and others and conservationists.

I don't think it's my job to adjust power balances with all sorts of techniques, but rather to make the power imbalance visible because that's the reality. There are people with more power than others. So empowerment for me is more about enabling that what somebody wants to express, to be expressed in the clearest way possible and for people to find their voice.

S/he says that the purpose of dialogue is for people to find their voice and tell their stories themselves. S/he believes that interfering in the social system and explicitly silencing the powerful people and propping other people to speak up, is not empowerment.

5. Discussing the Use of Neutrality

5.1. Deconstructing the Use of Neutrality

Coming back to my initial puzzle and research questions, I here discuss how the frames relate to ideas about neutrality in previous research. A recurring thought among the frames was that the purpose of a facilitator is to enhance the quality of the dialogue on the long term. Also trust and authority were found to be an overarching theme. There is a common understanding that gaining trust and authority within your role as a facilitator is crucial. The perception on neutrality plays an important role in establishing themselves as trustful facilitator. Similar to what Urosevich (2012) found, the strive for fairness, trust and competence was found to be more essential than being neutral. However, the identity frames have different ideas about how fairness, trust and competence can be brought about and what role neutrality plays in this.

In this section I discuss how the four identity frames lead the facilitators to use the concept of neutrality in their identity making. The findings in this thesis resonate with earlier research done on neutrality within deliberative democracy; there are many ways in which neutrality can be understood and used. The findings show that there are two identity frames that subscribe to and use neutrality when they explain who they are, namely that of the *mediator* and that of the *value-neutral expert*. Contrarily, the other two identity frames, that of the *transparent practitioner* and that of the *multi-partial process guide*, distinguish their identities by contrasting what they want to be, with neutrality. (See Figure 2)

The facilitators draw on different frames that lead them to the use of the concept of neutrality in different ways. They have assumptions about the concept through which they justify their actions. In the *mediator* frame, facilitators make use of a more classic understanding of neutrality, similar to that of Molloy et al. (2000) and Schwarz (2002). Assumed about neutrality is that facilitators should set aside their personal opinions and support the groups right in making their own choices. Being neutral means that a facilitator is impartial and not interfering in power relations, as empowering one party more than the other means a loss of neutrality. S/he should be there to guide a smooth process while interfering as little as possible on both substance as well as process level.

According to the *mediator* frame, being neutral means that you are a neutral third party, outside of the organization, and not taking sides. Facilitators drawing on the mediator frame generally understood neutrality as acting separately from the one paying you, to be impartial. Otherwise they would identify as a moderator

instead. The ideas in this identity frame resemble that of the neutrality centred approach by Urosevich (2012). Both see neutrality as impartiality and unbiasedness. Assumed is that neutrality is central to creating trust and safety. When participants perceive the facilitator as such, they are more inclined to accept his or her process.

Facilitators drawing on the *value-neutral expert* frame interpret neutrality as being aware of and managing your own bias. The facilitator is seen as someone that is an expert on, and advocate of the process. The facilitator sees herself as the expert that knows about the best practices. Moreover, s/he can be value-neutral while at the same time contributing with knowledge that s/he feels like adds something positive to the dialogue as such.

The source of neutrality in this frame is the idea that facts and the language of expertise are objective. The facilitator is neutral because s/he does not let her own values or opinions influence the process. Instead, s/he uses his or her expertise in the field and in facilitation to create the best process. As the UNDEF (2018) says; neutrality lies within the substance, not within the design choice.

When facilitators use the language as in the *transparency* frame, they use neutrality to create contrast to what they do; namely being open about their position, their thoughts, their values and their actions. The *transparent* facilitator acknowledges that s/he has own values and views and that s/he cannot put these completely to the background.

Connected to reflective practise (Escobar, 2011), a *transparent practitioner* understands that any action taken by them is an intervention and may affect the process. The *transparent practitioner* says that regardless of how hard you try to maintain an impartial stance, your views and opinions will influence your way of working somehow. You bring your own person into the process and can therefore naturally not be neutral because you have your own background, values and assumptions. It is better to acknowledge this and work with it than to deny it. Just like Holifield (2017), facilitators drawing on the *transparency* frame see being open and honest as a best practice and as a tool towards trust and authority. They think that the only solution is to be open and reflect on your own thoughts ideas and actions and try to not make them influence you.

Other than the *mediator* and the *value-neutral expert*, the *multi-partial process guide* thinks that a more traditional understanding of neutrality cannot be used as it is about being rather inactive and not engaged. Facilitators drawing on the *multi-partial process guide* frame would, just like Cobb and Rifkin (1991) say that an active and involved approach to facilitation is needed in order to deal with power imbalances and get all interests on the table. Tools that *multi-partial facilitators* use, such as empowering less powerful stakeholders and strategically selecting stakeholder, are those that Barnaud and Van Paassen (2013) call *nonneutral methodological choices*. A *multi-partial process guide* should be nonneutral in a way that s/he cares enough about every voice in the room to notice power imbalance and act upon this. S/he should be alert to oppressive acts, including their own. The *multi-partial process guide* thinks that when you strive to be seen as neutral and not favouring anyone over the other, you inherently favour the more powerful parties. Just like Hay (1995) explained, positive discrimination is seen as something that is needed within the *multi-partial process guide* frame. Like Deakin (1999), the *multi-*

partial process guide thinks that in order to elicit an equitable process, you should not treat everyone equally but rather look at the different needs of groups.

Multi-partial process guides see the understanding of neutrality as used by the *mediator* and the *value-neutral expert* as not sufficient as it poses a risk in reinforcing the status quo on power balances. This *multi-partial process guide's* view on neutrality is similar to that of the balanced and multi-partial approach by Urosevich (2012); non-neutrality enhances inclusion and participation. To promote justice, you have to be attentive to hidden interests of yourself and participants. *Multi-partial process guides* rather identify with being fair and trusted than with being neutral.

However, if a facilitator drawing on the *multi-partial process guide* identity frame was to explain what role neutrality plays for her, s/he could say that 'I can be neutral on the substantive level as well as the process level, because neutrality means that I can suspend my own views, opinions, thoughts and beliefs, but I can also empower participants for the sake of equity'. However, they often reckon that therefore you should go beyond neutrality. The multi-partial facilitator wants to do better in a situation of power imbalances and therefore cannot be neutral in a way that is described in by the *mediator* frame. Neutrality is understood as making sure that the room is ready for everyone to speak, there is a neutral, respectful and open vibe to include all voices.

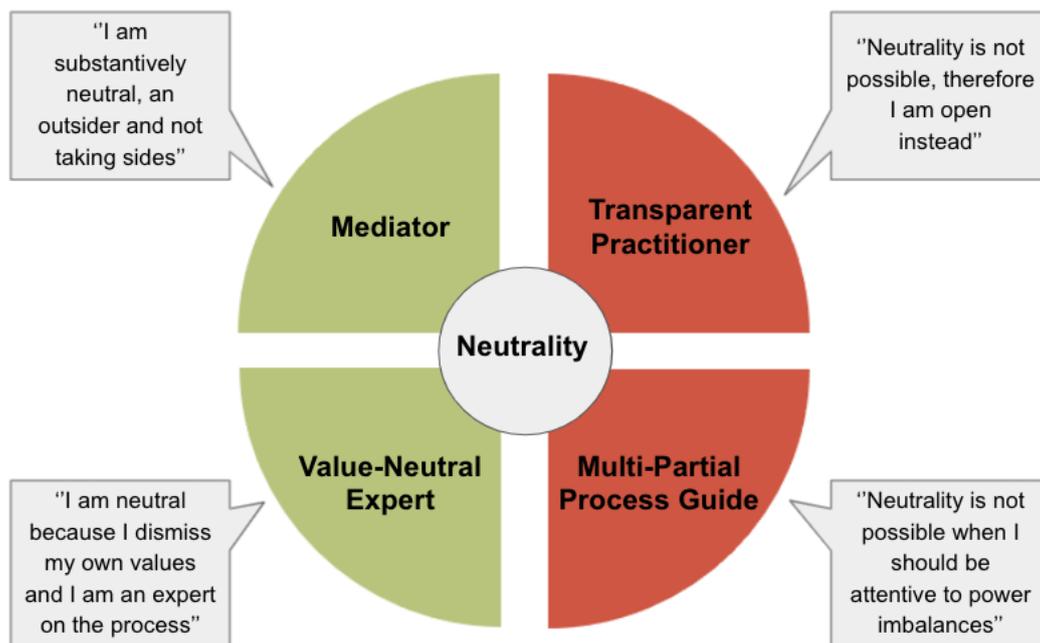


Figure 2. An overview on how facilitator identity frames position themselves in relation to the concept of neutrality

5.2. Tensions that the Frames Bring About

In my interpretation, the neutrality dilemma is multifaced. The different identities have different ideas about the understanding and use of neutrality and thereby enable different challenges and tensions. There are two identity frames that critique

the use of neutrality within facilitation practice. They portray neutrality as an illusion.

Forester and Stitzel (1989) already mentioned that being an outsider and having no personal stake in the issue is a promise that oftentimes cannot be kept and that this could be problematic. A facilitator that has been hired by a person or organization inherently has a stake in the issue by being economically or professionally dependent. Therefore, s/he needs to keep in mind the client's expectations about the process or about their involvement. There could be a tension here that the facilitator might favour people on behalf of the process outcome. The question is if you can hold your ground value as a facilitator in that position or not. It also makes a difference whether you are hired as an outsider or you are working as an internal facilitator that is part of one of the stakeholders in the process. Interviewees found it easier to be neutral towards the content of a session as an external facilitator. The majority of the interviewees stated that the ideal situation would be to be an outsider in the process as described in the *mediator* frame, but that in practice, this is seldomly feasible and therefore they rely on other identity frames instead.

Like Urosevich (2012) and Schwarz (2002), the interviewees also identify a risk in their shifting role when they are also hired for their content knowledge. Bringing in and getting involved in content knowledge will affect the outcome of a process and might taint the legitimacy of their role as a facilitator. However, a certain amount of expertise in the field can also be used to gain trust among participants. There seems to be a fine line between too little, sufficient and too much content expertise and input. It remains unclear whether adding own knowledge or expertise on the substance level of an issue is a way of breaking neutrality, and if this is then harmful.

The *transparent practitioner* would identify another challenge with the assumption of being neutral; sometimes it is hard to know when you are biased, as biases can be subconscious. Though, a risk in the *transparency* frame is the question if transparency, openness and honesty are enough to justify your actions as a facilitator. Some interviewees argue that reflection and openness in itself is not enough and that a facilitator should try to actively avoid using their biases and personal views. According to the *mediator* and *value-neutral expert* frame, the facilitator should go beyond transparency and also make sure to deal with their own influence, views, reactions and ideas. It could be that this identity frame otherwise allows for unfair practices within the process.

The same neutrality dilemma as explained by Barnaud and Van Paassen (2013), could also be found in the findings in this research. If the facilitator claims to be neutral, they might be regarded as passive towards clearly visible power imbalances and biased by powerful groups and hereby contributing to environmental injustice. Whereas on the other hand, if they go beyond neutrality by empowering weaker groups, they are blamed for intervening and engaging in the process too much.

Contrasting the definition of the word *neutral* by the Cambridge international dictionary of English (1995), the *multi-partial process guide* thinks that encouraging or helping groups is inevitable in enabling equitable dialogue. A facilitator that sees neutrality as impartial might have a difficult time balancing out power. It is difficult to see how you can be on the side of the disadvantaged, how you can help them without necessarily prejudicing or favouring them over other

parties. The identity frame of the *multi-partial process guide* can elicit equitable processes. Facilitators drawing on the *multi-partial process guide* frame say that if you do not intervene in power relations, not every voice will get enough opportunity to come forth. This is why s/he should make use of nonneutral tools in order to influence the process so that every voice can be heard. It is thought that neutrality facilitates power imbalances and that is not good.

Another tension is that in order to not bias the process, facilitators try to keep their prejudices and their interests out of the dialogue and do not judge the substance of the agreement. But in order to bring out all interests of the parties, a facilitator must attend to the content of the dialogue so that all interests are represented.

However, the question remains when something should be considered as 'going beyond neutrality'? If a more narrow understanding of neutrality would be used in which a facilitator does not favour one party over the other and rather favours the quality of the conversation instead, then even the *multi-partial process guide* could work with neutrality as a concept. For example, as interviewee 5 says, s/he is not sure if encouraging people to get their voice out should be seen as being non-neutral.

A recommendation coming from these tensions is for the facilitator to explain what they do and which idea about neutrality is behind their actions and choices. Facilitators should use the different ideas about neutrality to reflect on their experience. Once again, reflective practice (Escobar, 2011) is key here.

6. Conclusion

To conclude this research, I go back to the main research question; *How is the concept of neutrality used in the practice of facilitation for sustainability dialogues?* Based on an analysis on facilitator identity frames, I found that neutrality is a central concept in the practice. A prominent idea is that neutrality can be used to gain trust, authority and fairness. However, the four identity frames' different assumptions about neutrality and the role that it plays within the practice, entail different ways to obtaining these values. The identity frames lead the facilitators to use the concept of neutrality in their identity making in four different ways.

There are two identity frames in which the facilitator accepts neutrality and uses it in explaining who s/he is, namely the *mediator* and the *value-neutral expert*. However, a facilitator drawing on the *transparency* frame rejects the use of neutrality as explained in these frames and explains that s/he is open and honest instead. Lastly, facilitators following the frame of the *multi-partial process guide* explain to go beyond neutrality in their process design in order to enable an equitable dialogue. However, it remains unclear when something should be called 'going beyond neutrality'. Furthermore, in specific situations, there are tensions within and between the frames. My findings help us to understand these tensions.

Altogether, neutrality could mean that you do not know anyone or anything about the issue. It could also mean that you do not have nor show your own views and values on a situation. Or it could mean that you have no personal nor professional stake in the process issue. On the other hand, neutrality is sometimes discarded as a valuable concept to use within facilitation practice. I found that neutrality plays an important role and should not be discarded, but rather should we be clear about how we use it. Neutrality is a role and a tool that requires practice and awareness.

This research contributes to the field of facilitation practice by giving insight into the use of neutrality. This thesis is valuable in its potential for the findings to be used by facilitators as a language for reflection and explaining choices. The facilitator's own reflection on their identity and their actions plays an important role in the use of neutrality within the practice. If facilitators were to use the findings in clarifying processes and establishing trust and legitimacy, this in turn may lead to more equitable decisions.

For further research I propose to look into participant perspectives on concepts of neutrality and equity within sustainability dialogues. Including the view of participants makes it possible to verify frames in use rather than relying on facilitator's rhetorical frames. Another interesting aspect could be that of the voice of nature in the light of equity and neutrality. How is nature taken into account by the neutral facilitator? And does nature get to be represented in the multi-partiality approach?

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Appendix 1 – Interview Guide

1. Introduction

- Presenting myself and the project aim and design
- Practical information about the interview
 - o Length
 - o Language: English. However, I could understand and speak some Swedish in case this would be needed.
- Ethical concerns
 - o Confidentiality, anonymity and recording.
- *Is there still anything you would like to say or ask before we start the interview?*

2. Personal introduction

- *Can you introduce yourself?*
- *Can you give me a brief overview of what it is that you do in your work?*
- *For how long have you been working in the area of facilitation?*
- *How did you get engaged with facilitation?*
- *Where and how did you obtain your facilitation skills?*

3. The practice of facilitation

- *How do you see your role in a facilitation process?*
 - o *Can you explain your role as a facilitator?*
 - o *Does your role differ from that of a negotiator or a mediator, and if so how?*
 - o *Which responsibility/responsibilities do you feel like you have in your work?*
- *What are the goals you most want to accomplish in your work?*
 - o *Does your role or goal change with each new case?*
- *What do you value about facilitation?*
 - o *When do you think that a facilitator is needed or will be beneficial?*
- *Which skills and values do you think are important within your work?*

4. Stories and experiences

- *Which forms of facilitation do you engage with mostly? (stakeholder dialogue, town hall meetings, etc.)*

I would like to zoom further into one specific aspect of facilitation, namely situations in which you facilitated meetings, dialogues or workshops.

- *What is your goal while facilitating a meeting/process/dialogue etc.?*

- *What do you think about/consider when you start a meeting?*
- *What do you think about/consider when you end a meeting?*
- *Can you tell me about an example when your work was successful?/Can you tell me about a nice experience that you had during a meeting/dialogue/workshop?*
- *Can you tell me about a negative experience that you had during a meeting/dialogue/workshop?*
 - o *Could you give me an example of a situation in which you would have liked to have done something differently?*
 - o *How do you handle situation in which you feel like the process gets stuck?*
 - o *Can you share a story where there were some critical moments?*
- *Have there ever been any surprises during a facilitation process that stayed in your memory?*

5. Optional, when the topics comes up: Neutrality and equity

I would like to go back to what is expected from you in your role as a facilitator. Handbooks and ethical guidelines often stress the importance of being objective/neutral and fair/just within the practice of facilitation. By connecting this to some of your experiences [give example]:

- *How do you try to stay objective in your work?*
- *How do you think that you personally contribute to facilitating a fair process/meeting?*
- *How do you handle situations in which someone mentions that something is unfair?*

6. Reflections

- *How would you think that you are the same or different than other facilitators or than what handbooks or facilitation guidelines describe?*
- *In all your experiences, what are lessons you learned that you would give me as advice?*
- *Looking back at some of your stories, and if you would go over the process again, would you do anything different?*

7. End of interview

- Thank you for your time and for your openness.
- *Is there anything that you would like to add?*

Helping questions

Why was that?

How did/do you feel about that?

What were you thinking at that time?

Could you give me an example of that?

What happened then?

What did you/s/he do then?

Could you describe that in more detail?