

Session 3: Facilitation Tools and Meeting Techniques (13:30–15:00)

Objective

Introduce practical tools and techniques that facilitators can use to design and run effective meetings or workshops with stakeholder groups. Participants will learn how to plan a facilitated session (with clear objectives and an agenda) and will practice several facilitation methods such as icebreakers, brainstorming exercises, and group decision-making processes. By the end of this session, advisors should be equipped with a “toolbox” of activities and techniques to keep discussions engaging and productive, from start (warm-ups) to finish (action planning).

Start by emphasizing that **good facilitation is part art, part science** – the art is in reading people and guiding flow, which we have discussed previously; the science (or craft) is in using tested methods and tools that help groups think and work together. This session focuses on the latter.



FIGURE 6. Facilitation arises when art meets science. Agrisilvicultural plot is a picture from French AF4EU workshops conducted by VDT (right) and “Escardadoras” oil on canvas by Laureano Buñol (c.1891)

Planning a Facilitation Session

Walk through the key steps an advisor should take when planning any group meeting or workshop:

- **Set Clear Objectives:** Before gathering stakeholders, be perfectly clear on *what the meeting is meant to achieve*. Is it to identify farmers’ needs for an agroforestry project? To decide on an action plan? To simply share experiences? Defining objectives helps in choosing the right process. Share an example: *“By the end of this meeting, the group will have selected two priority agroforestry practices to trial next year.”* If objectives are unclear or too ambitious, the meeting can wander. A facilitator should work with the organizers or group leaders to nail this down beforehand.
- **Design the Agenda:** An agenda is the roadmap for the meeting. Show a sample agenda outline on a slide or flipchart including elements like: **Welcome/Intro, Icebreaker, Discussion Topic 1, Break, Activity/Topic 2, Wrap-up & Next Steps** with time allocations. Discuss the importance of sequencing: e.g., start with an easy or energizing activity (not a heavy conflictual topic first thing), place breaks strategically, and allocate more time than needed. It can be more facilitator hands-off, focus on coaching individuals or topics likely to generate lengthy discussion. Also, if decision making is needed, ensure to build in a process for that (like discussion followed by a decision method). Encourage participants to always **plan for a wrap-up** that summarizes decisions and assigns any follow-up tasks (so many meetings end without clarity on what was decided or who will do what).

- **Choose Facilitation Methods:** Based on the objectives and the participant mix, decide which techniques will best elicit input and achieve outcomes. For instance, if the goal is brainstorming new ideas, methods like **mind mapping** or **card-storming** (writing ideas on cards) might be useful. If the goal is prioritization, perhaps use a **multi-voting** technique or a **matrix ranking**. We will cover some of these specific tools next. The key is that facilitators have a repertoire to choose from. If possible, reference a **facilitation guide** or **checklist** in the toolkit that participants can use when planning (like a template that asks: What is the objective? Best method? Materials needed? etc.).
- **Logistics and Materials:** Remind that part of planning is ensuring the physical setup and materials support the methods. For example, if you plan a breakout discussion, is there space for groups to spread out? If doing a sticky-note exercise, have lots of post-its and markers ready. It seems basic, but good facilitators think through these details (like arranging for translation if needed, printing handouts, etc.). A well-prepared room (with say, thematic posters or a map for agroforestry) can also stimulate discussion.

After covering planning, shift to demonstrating some **specific facilitation techniques**. It is time to get hands-on and maybe a bit playful, as this keeps energy up after lunch. Here are some techniques to cover, with brief demos or participatory examples for each:

- **Icebreakers & Energizers:** Share a couple of quick activities to use at the start of meetings or when energy dips. For example, *“Two Truths and a Lie (agroforestry edition)”* – each person states three things about their experience (one is false) and others guess the lie. Or a simple physical energizer: *“Tree, Fruit, Storm”* – a fun rock-paper-scissors style game where people pair up and do gestures (tree beats storm, storm beats fruit, fruit beats tree). It sounds silly but getting people to laugh or move can build rapport, which pays off in better cooperation. Emphasize choosing an icebreaker appropriate to the audience’s comfort level and culture. The toolkit handout can include a list of 5–10 icebreaker ideas.
- **Brainstorming Methods:** When a group needs to generate ideas (say, identifying challenges farmers face, or solutions to a problem or challenge), traditional open discussion may be dominated by a few thinkers. Introduce structured brainstorming:
 - *Round-Robin Brainstorm:* Go around the table and each person offers one idea in turn, until people run out of new ideas. This ensures balanced input and can produce a lot of ideas quickly.
 - *Sticky Note (Card) Brainstorm:* Give everyone a pad of sticky notes and a marker. Pose a question (e.g., “What potential agroforestry practices could we try in this region?”). Each person, in silence, writes as many ideas as possible – one idea per note – in 5 minutes. Then the facilitator collects or has them stick notes on a wall. Group similar ideas together (with the group’s help). This method is great for visualizing the breadth of ideas and grouping themes. It also allows introverts to contribute equally.
 - *Mind Mapping:* On a flipchart or big paper, write the central question or topic in the middle (e.g., “Barriers to agroforestry adoption”) and as people shout out ideas, jot them around, drawing lines to connect related ideas. This free-form map can spur creativity, though it works best with a facilitator who can write quickly and organize on the fly. Consider having a volunteer scribe so you can focus on prompting ideas.
- **Prioritization and Decision Tools:** After brainstorming, groups often need to narrow down options or to decide. Introduce tools such as:
 - *Multi-voting/Dot Voting:* Each participant gets a set number of votes (dots or checkmarks) which they can distribute among the options (e.g., after brainstorming 10 ideas, give everyone 3 sticker dots to place on the ideas they think are most important). The ideas with the most votes rise to the top. This is a quick way to gauge the group’s preferences.

- *Matrix Ranking:* For more complex decisions, create a grid with options vs. criteria. For example, if choosing an agroforestry practice to promote, criteria might be cost, environmental benefit, farmer acceptability. Score each option against each criterion (possibly using group discussion or even scoring in subgroups). This analytical approach can help in transparent decision-making, though it is more time-consuming.
- *Consensus Building Techniques:* Explain that sometimes the goal is not just majority rule but general agreement. Techniques like **Facilitated Discussion to Consensus** (keep discussing and modifying options until no one strongly objects) or **Gradients of Agreement** (where participants indicate their level of support on a scale, aiming for a level everyone can live with) can be used. Consensus is powerful but requires skill to avoid endless debate; it is often helped by breaking issues into smaller chunks or finding hybrid solutions that incorporate multiple viewpoints.

While explaining these, pick one method to practice quickly. For instance, do a dot voting with the class on a light question: “What’s the best energizer to wake up after lunch?” Give them each two dot stickers (or simply raise hands) to vote among a few options listed. Show how to tally and interpret results. Or practice a mini sticky-note brainstorm: “List one challenge you have when facilitating groups” – have them write and post, then cluster the notes. The goal is not the content they generate now but the experience of the method.

Facilitating Discussions

Address techniques for guiding open discussions, since a lot of a facilitator’s time is spent simply steering conversation. Mention using a “**parking lot**” flipchart for off-topic ideas that are important but not immediately relevant – this honours contributions without derailing the meeting. Discuss how to **handle dominant speakers** (politely thank them and invite others, or tactfully interrupt and redirect, as discussed in Session 2). **Draw connections** among points (“Building on what Maria said, does anyone have an example of that on their farm?”) to create a coherent flow. These are softer skills but important tools too.



Activity – Facilitator’s Toolkit in Action (30 min):

Now, have participants get active with the tools. Split into small groups (4–5 people each). Assign each group one facilitation technique to demonstrate to the rest (if possible, one group does an icebreaker, one does a brainstorming method, one does a decision tool, etc.). Give them 5–10 minutes to prepare a quick demonstration as if the rest of the class were their stakeholder group. For example, Group A might lead the class in a quick energizer; Group B might pose a question and do a mini sticky-note exercise with everyone; Group C might simulate a dot vote on a sample issue.

After each demo, debrief briefly: ask the group how they felt using the technique and ask observers what they noticed. This peer teaching not only reinforces the techniques but also boosts confidence as they see that they *can* lead these activities. As a trainer, be ready to assist groups in planning their demo (give them any materials they need, and suggestions if they are stuck). Keep time tight so each demonstration is just a few minutes. The aim is a lively, learning-by-doing segment.

Methods Used: Discussion with visual aids (for planning steps and tools), demonstration and class participation in techniques, small-group practice and presentation. Ensure a balance of explanation and activity; avoid lecturing too long about each tool without letting them experience it. The post-lunch timing is ideal for interactive exercises to avoid the afternoon slump.

Conclude Session 3 by highlighting that a good facilitator is never short on methods to engage people – with preparation and creativity, meetings can be both fun and fruitful. Encourage participants to personalize their toolkit: “*Not every technique fits every person or situation. Find the ones you’re comfortable with and have a few*”



alternatives if one isn't working. The more you practice these, the more fluidly you can incorporate them." Let them know that in the next session, we will apply these ideas to setting norms and planning for real action in groups, rounding out the Day 1 learning.

Tip for Success: Always have a couple of backup energizers up your sleeve in case the group's energy wanes. Also, gauge the group's interest – if they are really engaged in trying out brainstorming, you might expand that part. Conversely, if they seem overwhelmed by too many techniques at once, focus on a few key ones and remind them that more are in the toolkit document for later reference. Please an emphasis on quality over quantity.