

## Session 5: Managing Conflict and Difficult Situations (09:15–11:00)

### Objective

To equip participants with strategies to handle conflicts and other difficult dynamics in stakeholder meetings. They will learn how to anticipate sources of conflict, apply techniques for de-escalation and mediation, and practice a structured approach to resolving disputes while maintaining a neutral stance. By the end, advisors should feel more confident in turning tense situations into opportunities for learning and consensus-building, rather than fearing conflict.

Start by normalizing conflict: in any group working on complex issues like land use or resource allocation, disagreements will happen. Especially in agroforestry networks, conflicts might arise from differences in values (e.g., conservation vs. production), personal dynamics, or external pressures (policy changes, market stress). Emphasize that conflict **is not a sign of failure**, but rather something to be managed constructively. A skilled facilitator does not necessarily prevent all conflict (that could even suppress important discussions) but keeps it productive and respectful.

### Common Sources of Conflict in Agroforestry Groups

Briefly list some typical scenarios participants might encounter:

- Competing priorities (e.g., a farmer in the group wants quick economic returns, while an environmental Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) member pushes for long-term ecological gains).
- Miscommunication or misunderstandings, possibly exacerbated by jargon or different knowledge levels.
- Personality clashes or historical mistrust (maybe two stakeholders had a prior disagreement outside the group).
- Unequal power dynamics (a situation where a powerful stakeholder might be dismissive of others' input, causing resentment).
- External conflicts spilling in (for instance, a policy debate on land rights that polarizes the group).

Ask if anyone has witnessed any of these in their experience. Acknowledge a couple of stories if shared.

### Conflict Resolution Techniques

Present a step-by-step approach that facilitators can use when conflict arises:

1. **Stay Neutral and Composed:** The facilitator's demeanour sets the tone. Even if accusations or emotional comments fly, maintain a calm, neutral presence. Avoid taking sides or showing frustration. Sometimes just your calmness helps defuse tension.
2. **Ensure All Sides Are Heard:** Often conflict escalates when people feel unheard. Use active listening: allow each party to explain their viewpoint without interruption and paraphrase their points to show understanding. For example, *"So, I hear you saying that you're concerned the proposed tree planting will reduce your grazing land. Is that correct?"* Do the same for the other side. This alone can cool emotions, as people feel their concern is acknowledged.
3. **Find Common Ground:** After hearing both sides, identify any shared interests or goals. *"Both of you want the project to succeed in the long run, correct?"* or *"We all care about making this farming system more sustainable, right?"* Highlighting common ground reminds everyone that they are ultimately on the same team, even if they differ on approach.

4. **Reiterate Group Norms (Respect):** If the conflict is getting heated or personal, remind the group of the ground rule about respectful communication. Do this gently: *“Let’s remember, we agreed to listen without interrupting. Let’s give each other that respect.”* If someone is out of line (insults, etc.), you may need to intervene directly: *“I understand you’re upset, but that comment was personal. Let’s keep our comments focused on the issue.”* Enforcing civility is part of the facilitator’s job.
5. **Use a Structured Process if Needed:** In more complex conflicts, a structured mediation or dialogue process helps. One approach: **problem-solving dialogue** – clearly define the issue, then have the group (or the conflicting parties) brainstorm solutions together. Another is a simple **conflict resolution flowchart** guiding to either compromise, consensus, or agreeing to disagree (such a flowchart could be provided in the toolkit for reference). You might break the group into smaller pieces to discuss solutions if the large group setting is too charged. For example, put the conflicting parties each with a few neutral group members in two subgroups to generate suggestions, then reconvene.
6. **Focus on Interests, Not Positions:** This is a classic negotiation principle. Help people move from fixed positions (*“I want X”*) to underlying interests (*“I need my cattle to have enough pasture”*). Once interests are clear, the group can explore alternative solutions that satisfy those interests. As facilitator, ask probing questions like *“What is most important to you about that outcome?”* to get to the root needs. Then reframe the conflict as a mutual problem: *“It seems we need to find a way to give the cattle enough pasture **and** ensure tree planting can happen. What ideas do we have to achieve both?”* Now it is the group versus the problem, not person vs. person.
7. **Generate and Evaluate Options:** Encourage brainstorming of multiple solutions. Perhaps the group can adjust the plan (e.g., plant trees in alleys wide enough to still graze, or phase planting). Write down proposals. Then guide a discussion or use a decision tool (like multi-voting if appropriate) to move toward an option that most can accept. Sometimes the resolution is a compromise, other times a creative win-win emerges.
8. **Confirm the Resolution and Next Steps:** Once an agreement is reached, articulate it clearly and ensure all parties acknowledge it. *“Okay, so we agree to reduce the tree density in the grazing area and seek an alternative site for the remaining trees. The cooperative will also look into fodder bank options to support grazing during tree establishment – correct?”*

Get nods or verbal confirmation. Thank them for working through the conflict, reinforcing that through dialogue they found a solution. If no full resolution is possible in the meeting, at least summarize what was discussed and propose a way forward (e.g., schedule a dedicated conflict resolution meeting or bring in an external mediator if needed).

## **Role-Play Activity – Mediating a Conflict (40 min)**

Now the group will practice handling conflict. Use a realistic scenario to make it concrete. For example–

*The stakeholder group is discussing how to allocate a new grant funding for an agroforestry initiative. One farmer (Alice) strongly feels it should go toward buying fencing to protect trees from livestock, as she had losses to free-roaming cattle. Another farmer (Johan) is upset at this idea, arguing that money should go to buying better tree seedlings, and fencing will prevent common grazing rights, which he values. The discussion in the group becomes tense.*

Ask for 3 volunteers: one as facilitator, and the two as the conflicting farmers (coach the “actors” quickly on their positions and let them ad lib specifics). The rest of participants will be observers (and can play the role of other group members if needed). Have the volunteer facilitator attempt to manage the conflict for about 5-7 minutes. If the facilitator reaches an impasse, you can freeze the role-play and ask the group for ideas, then continue.



After the role-play, debrief thoroughly: What did the facilitator do well? What could have been done differently? Observers can share what they felt during the process. Possibly run a second round with a different volunteer facilitator to try another approach or to conclude the scenario with a resolution. This exercise lets participants test their conflict resolution skills in a safe setting and learn from each other. It often brings out the stress a facilitator can feel, so reinforce positive efforts and remind that preparation (like having ground rules or anticipating such conflicts) makes it easier in real life.

## Dealing with Other Challenges:

Briefly discuss a few additional tough situations and tips:

- **Dominant Participants or Side Conversations:** These were touched on Day 1. Reiterate how to respectfully regain control (direct questions to others, break into small groups, physically position yourself near the talkative person which can subtly inhibit them, etc.).
- **Lack of Participation or Apathy:** Sometimes you face silence or reluctance (maybe the group is meeting due to a mandate, not intrinsic motivation). Suggest strategies: acknowledge the situation (“I sense people are quiet – is there an underlying concern?”), use more engaging methods (like a game or a controversial statement to spark debate), or check if the objectives align with their interests. One might need to circle back to “what do you want to get out of this group?” to energize them.
- **Emotional Reactions:** In discussions about livelihoods, people can get emotional (anger, frustration, even tears if someone feels overwhelmed). Encourage empathy: let the person express themselves, thank them for sharing, and perhaps take a short break if needed. Ensure the person feels supported (maybe a quick private check-in during a break). Emotional moments are okay; they often reveal deeply held values – which are important data for the group.
- **Hijacking Agenda:** If a participant derails the meeting to push their own topic, the facilitator should gently park that topic. *“That’s an important issue, but let’s note it and come back later if time allows – we need to finish our current agenda point first.”* Keep a visible “Parking Lot” list. This shows you are not dismissing them but keeping the meeting on track. Follow up on parked items either at end or afterwards.
- **Language or Cultural Barriers:** In diverse stakeholder groups, not everyone may be equally fluent in the meeting’s language. Suggest strategies like providing materials in advance, speaking slowly and avoiding jargon, or buddying people up for translation help if needed. Also be aware of cultural norms about communication (some cultures are more confrontational, others more deferential; adjust your facilitation style to encourage input accordingly).

Throughout this session, reinforce that **self-awareness and self-control** are the facilitator’s allies in conflict. If you feel yourself becoming stressed, take a deep breath or suggest a short break. It is acceptable to call a pause: *“Let’s take 5 minutes, everyone. We’ll return with fresh minds.”* Sometimes that break diffuses tension.

**Methods Used:** Role-play with group observation, interactive mini lecture on steps, group discussion. The role-play is key for experiential learning here. Make sure to maintain a supportive environment – intervene if the role-play conflict gets too heated or if the volunteer facilitator is floundering badly, by pausing and discussing tactics with the group (this models that even in real situations, one might ask a co-facilitator or take a time-out to think).

Wrap up Session 5 by reassuring participants that they now have a framework to approach conflict. They practiced it and hopefully realized that while conflict situations are challenging, having a neutral facilitator greatly helps transform them into progress. Encourage them to not shy away from tough topics in their groups—often those are exactly the issues that need addressing for the group to move forward. After a short break, expand out to talk about facilitating broader collaboration across multiple stakeholders and sustaining networks.



**Tip for Success:** Emphasize your own learning curve with conflict if applicable. For example- *“The first time I had to mediate a heated argument in a meeting, I was quite nervous. But I found that by staying calm and letting each person talk it out, they eventually found a solution. Now I see conflict as something I can help navigate, rather than something to fear.”*