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**SURVEY OF GOOD PRACTICE  
IN PUBLIC-PRIVATE SECTOR  
DIALOGUE**



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# CONTENTS

<b>Note .....</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Preface .....</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>I. Background.....</b>	<b>1</b>
Validity of dialogue as a research tool.....	2
The survey approach.....	3
<b>II. Survey report.....</b>	<b>4</b>
Representation.....	11
Coordinating bodies for representation.....	16
Reconnecting with reality .....	17
Training for dialogue .....	19
Preparation for dialogue.....	20
<b>III. Summary of findings.....</b>	<b>21</b>
Principles of effective dialogue.....	22
Effective mechanisms for promoting dialogue.....	24
Bibliography .....	28
Annex A .....	30
Large Group Intervention (LGI) methods.....	30
Annex B .....	36
Creating the right environment .....	36
Annex C .....	37
Key elements to record from a discussion .....	37

## Note

This publication is part of the Enterprise Development Series issued by the Technology and Enterprise Branch of the Division on Investment, Technology and Enterprise Development. The Series has been initiated as one of the vehicles for the exchange of information and experiences in respect of key issues pertaining to the central role of enterprise development in the development process in an increasingly private-sector-driven global economy.

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## Preface

An effective policy framework for the development of small and medium-sized enterprises needs to focus on identifying real constraints and determine how these could be realistically addressed. The most productive and reliable way of identifying such constraints and possible solutions is through public–private sector interaction and dialogue, thus creating an enabling environment and fostering policy coherence. The quality of such a working relationship between the public and private sector might be a competitive advantage for a country in its own right. In fact, it has been suggested that, in an increasingly interdependent world, competition among enterprises is often competition among different systems of government–private sector relationships.

The Midrand Declaration called upon UNCTAD to examine successful experiences in public–private sector dialogue and cooperation with a view to facilitating the exchange of such experiences regarding the formulation and implementation of enterprise development strategies by developing countries. In seeking to meet that request, the UNCTAD secretariat commissioned a survey of good practice in public–private sector dialogue and set up a project entitled “Enhancing public–private sector dialogue in LDCs”. The survey aims to distil from cross-country experiences key principles of effective dialogue that will serve as benchmarks for evaluating the practice of public–private sector dialogue and interaction in LDCs.

This survey presents best practices in public–private sector dialogue distilled from cross-country experiences. It focuses on public–private sector dialogue in general with a special emphasis on dialogue for enterprise development. The issues considered include the following: the background to the notion of dialogue as a platform for interaction to inform policy development, and its validity as a research method; the organizational culture necessary for enabling dialogue; representative organizations, and their governance and representation; an enabling environment for representation; the processes of dialogue and its promotion, and the conditions needed to enable individuals to facilitate dialogue.

## **Acknowledgements**

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## I. Background

The word *dialogue* comes from two Greek roots — *dia* (meaning “through” or “with each other”) and *logos* (meaning “word”). It has been suggested that it conveys a sense of “meaning flowing through”.

Dialogue in this context can be defined as a sustained collective inquiry into everyday experience — the goal being to open up new ground by establishing a “container” or “field” for inquiry.

The word *discussion*, by contrast, is derived from the Latin verb *discutere*, which means “to smash to pieces”! Discussion is therefore a conversational format which encourages disaggregation and fragmentation. *Skilful* discussion, as described by the organization development consultant Rick Ross, differs from unproductive discussion because the participants are not merely engaged in battles to enforce their opinions. They develop a repertoire of techniques, such as collaborative reflection and inquiry skills, to identify how to reconcile the elements of a challenging situation and develop a more profound understanding of their own and others’ positions.

“Dialogue is not merely a set of techniques for improving organizations, enhancing communications, building consensus or solving problems. It is based on the principle that conception and implementation are intimately linked.”

(William Isaacs, Sloane School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

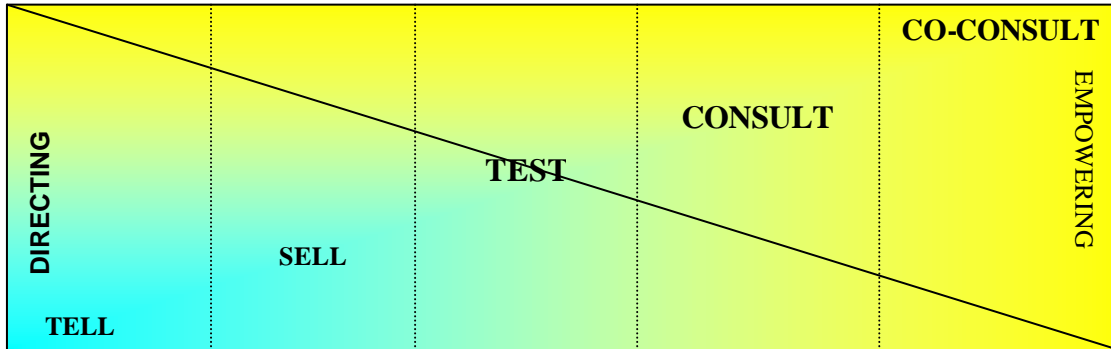
These perspectives on dialogue may seem a million miles away from the prosaic process of policy development and the needs of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) for representation. However, it is clear from the examples of practice in the survey, and from the very nature of the political context in which policy development operates, that dialogue is and should be a distinct and higher goal than conversation, discussion and consultation. Consultation is a particularly generic term (which may include dialogue) and too often *precedes* policy announcements but *follows* policy decisions.

Engaging in public–private sector dialogue represents a move towards a collective process which recognizes that policymakers and their professional advisers do *not* have a monopoly on perspective, understanding, knowledge and wisdom. However, they still have to retain the responsibility for the resulting policy and its implementation, and they will still be judged by their electorate. The will to engage in dialogue also reflects a continuing global move towards democratization and the changing nature and level of most states’ intervention in private sector development. In order to create “the level playing field” so often referred to by small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and their representative organizations, policymakers need to truly understand the potential impact of their actions on all types of business.

Dialogue is also beginning to make an impact as a platform for organizational development within the large multinational corporation. As the complexities and ambiguities of globalized markets and empowered consumers impact on organizations the latter have begun to practise more progressive methods of decision-making. There is an increasing recognition that “top-down” approaches neither utilize nor engage the abilities

of employees and that approaches which move to the right along the Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum (see figure 1) are more appropriate in certain circumstances.

**Figure 1. Tannenbaum and Schmidt Continuum**



### **Validity of dialogue as a research tool**

Dialogue as a method for policy development is in contrast with the more common positivist research paradigm and should not therefore be judged by its measures of reliability. The positivist research approach can be summarized as “determining the scientific status of a statement through formal theory or hypothesis capable of empirical verification” (Johnson et al. 1976).

Within this paradigm, a conventional approach would be to select a statistically valid sample of a population and subject it to a survey whose results would then be deemed to be applicable to the population as a whole. The underlying assumption is that behaviour can be measured, modelled and predicted according to statistical measures of reliability and robustness. As a result, these conventional methods are linear and “closed” to influence.

Dialogue and similar models fall into the set of “post-positivist” or “constructivist” approaches. These are iterative, interactive, hermeneutic, intuitive and “open” and bring an explanatory dimension to research. It is argued, as discussed above, that constructivist approaches do not meet the robustness tests of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity. Promoters of dialogue argue that these should be judged according to their own criteria, and not the criteria of a different research tradition. Lincoln and Guba propose “alternative trustworthiness criteria” to judge constructivist research and therefore to judge the validity of dialogue.

1. Credibility — this is enhanced by:
  - peer debriefing to disinterested peers in order to probe biases and explore meaning;
  - prolonged engagement for learning about causality, trust and culture. Etc.;
  - member checks, i.e. testing interpretations and conclusions with members of the original stakeholder groups.
  
2. Dependability — this is enhanced by:
  - overlapping methods (triangulation);

- stepwise replication (parallel investigation by research teams).
3. Confirmability — this is enhanced by:
- keeping of diaries (by researchers);
  - triangulation;
  - confirmability audit (a record of the process of inquiry and the end product).

It would not be sensible to try to position dialogue as equivalent to a statistical method when intending to influence policy decisions. Dialogue, as described above, is most powerful when combined with other methods in a more pluralistic approach to policy development. It can complement and accommodate the broader geographical and statistical approaches of quantitative methods. The use of dialogue can influence the change in policy makers' and researchers' mindsets from data rational and extractive to participative.

### **The survey approach**

A review of a number of works on the subject of various types of public-private sector projects has been undertaken. There appears to be scant literature that specifically considers dialogue for SME development and rather more that relates to the relationship between business associations, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government (at various levels). Much of this literature looks at the experiences of collaborative inquiry processes, e.g. participative assessment, considers the necessary national support for encouraging constructive advocacy (or “lobbying”) or considers the cultural differences between the public and private sectors and the implications of these differences for their interaction.

In view of this lack of SME-specific data, pertinent cases and lessons from the literature were extracted and experiences from SME policy development projects in over 20 countries were drawn upon. Many of these projects have specifically involved building partnerships between public and private sector organizations and have spanned advanced economies, transition economies and developing countries. “Good practice”, in the context of this survey, is the collection of proven *effective* individual approaches, methods, frameworks, guidelines etc. In many instances, good practice is the *removal of barriers* to effective dialogue and as such is also defined by identifying what has been *learned from unsuccessful experiences*.

This survey attempts to balance more detailed examples of specific case

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