World Café

World Café is a participatory method that encourages the open exchange of knowledge, experiences, and ideas. Participants discuss prepared questions in small groups at several tables. By regularly moving between tables, new conversation groups are formed, allowing ideas to evolve, different perspectives to be connected, and shared insights to emerge.
The atmosphere is intentionally designed to resemble a café—open, informal, and welcoming. This makes the method particularly effective for engaging large numbers of people in accessible dialogue and encouraging collaborative thinking.
A World Café can be held as a standalone event or as part of a larger participation process.

Participation Depth	Participate
Project Phase	Onboarding
Goals	Exchange & Discourse
Format	Analogue
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public
Group Size	Medium Group up to 30, Large Group from 30
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of a World Café is to create an open and creative dialogue among many participants. Through changing discussion groups, ideas are continuously developed, different perspectives are connected, and shared themes or potential solutions become visible.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the topic and guiding questions
Begin by considering:

- What should be discussed?
- Which questions should participants explore?
- What type of outcomes are expected?

The guiding questions should be:

- open-ended
- easy to understand
- designed to stimulate discussion

Examples include:

- "How should our neighbourhood develop in the future?"
- "What is missing from our public spaces?"
- "Which mobility services are needed?"

Important:

The questions should be connected and build upon one another throughout the event.

2. Prepare the venue
Arrange:

- several small discussion tables
- sufficient space for participants to move between tables
- an open and welcoming atmosphere

Each table should provide:

- large sheets of paper for note-taking
- pens or markers
- facilitation materials if required

3. Assign table hosts
Each table should have a table host who:

- remains at the same table throughout the event
- summarises previous discussions
- welcomes new participants
- supports the flow of conversation

The table host's role is primarily to provide continuity rather than actively facilitate the discussion.

4. Promote the event
Use communication channels such as:

- social media

- newsletters
- local organisations
- community groups

Clearly communicate:

- the topic
- the objectives
- the duration of the event

Execution

1. Welcome and introduction
At the beginning of the event, the facilitation team explains:

- the purpose of the World Café
- the overall process
- the schedule
- the discussion guidelines
- how table rotations will work

Helpful discussion guidelines include:

- communicate respectfully
- keep contributions concise
- listen actively
- write down ideas so they remain visible

2. First discussion round
Participants choose a table and begin discussing the assigned guiding question.

Each group explores:

- initial ideas
- experiences

- different perspectives

Ideas are recorded directly on:

- paper tablecloths
- flipchart paper
- cards

Important:

Encourage participants to capture not only conclusions but also spontaneous thoughts and emerging ideas.

3. Table rotation
After approximately 20–30 minutes, participants move to a different table.

The table host remains and:

- briefly presents the previous discussion
- summarises key ideas
- introduces the new group to the topic

This allows each discussion to build upon earlier conversations.

4. Additional discussion rounds
The new groups then:

- add further ideas
- develop existing thoughts
- ask new questions
- connect different perspectives

Through successive table rotations, participants create:

- new connections
- shared themes
- creative solutions

Most World Café events include three to four discussion rounds.

5. Closing plenary session
At the end of the event, the key insights from each table are presented to the entire group.

These presentations are often given by the table hosts.

The plenary session may highlight:

- frequently mentioned themes
- areas of disagreement
- shared aspirations
- opportunities for future action

The facilitation team concludes by summarising the overall findings.

Evaluation

1. Document the results
Document:

- paper tablecloths
- cards
- flipcharts
- sketches

In addition, prepare written summaries of:

- key statements
- thematic clusters
- main findings

2. Organise the findings
Group the collected material according to:

- similar themes
- recurring ideas
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priorities

- open questions

This helps identify patterns and common areas of interest.

3. Share the results
The documentation should be made available to:

- participants
- the public administration
- policymakers
- the wider public

Important:

Clearly communicate how the findings will be used in the next stages of the process.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- bringing together a wide range of perspectives
- generating new ideas
- exploring open-ended questions
- introducing a participation process
- encouraging networking and collaborative thinking
- creating opportunities for quieter participants to contribute

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- formal decisions need to be made
- dealing with highly escalated conflicts
- there is insufficient time for meaningful discussion

TIPS

- Small discussion groups encourage open and inclusive conversations.

- Clear, open-ended questions are essential for productive discussions.
- The café atmosphere should feel relaxed, informal, and welcoming.
- Short discussion rounds help maintain energy and momentum.
- Visual documentation makes ideas easier to understand and revisit.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- formal voting or binding decision-making
- highly escalated conflicts
- highly technical planning discussions
- very small groups

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/world-caf