



"Training of Trainers"



Introductory course to facilitating social learning and stakeholder engagement in natural resource management contexts



RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn



Module 2

Stakeholder Engagement

Purpose, Processes, Principles and Practicalities

Topic 2.3



Module 2 - Topic 2.3

PRINCIPLES of STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

Regardless of the process we undertake when we engage stakeholders, there are some key principles of stakeholder engagement that we should take into account, and that apply to all the processes introduced in Topic 2.2.

Principles of ethical stakeholder engagement include (you may want to add others):

- Respect
- Reciprocity
- Transparency
- Reflexivity

What do these principles involve?

Respect goes hand in hand with dignity and value. Respecting others means that we do not look down upon them, no matter what income, education or cultural background they have or how much their values differ from ours. *How* one shows respect for each other can differ between contexts and cultures. In some places, it is respectful to walk straight up to the leader of a group, look them in the eye and shake hands. In other cultures that may be regarded as highly disrespectful, as one might need to be invited and it might be considered rude to stare. In some contexts it is disrespectful to be even 15 minutes late for a meeting, while in other contexts, where distances are long and transport unreliable, arriving after a given time is seen as part of life rather than disrespectful. Starting a meeting with an “ice-breaker” in which participants dance the Jerusalema may work well for the product developers in a technology company, but a more respectful ‘tuning-in’ activity may be needed for a mixed rural group including traditional leaders.

University research ethics protocols sometimes require researchers to obtain informed consent from people they work with, to voluntarily participate, but the way the consent form is worded as “*optional* participation”, could give offence in contexts where invitations to an event or process should be unreserved: “We *really* want you to join us”. It is obviously important to know what rules apply in the context you plan to engage stakeholders. As Nosi Mtati of the Tsitsa Project says: “Context matters - make sure you know yours”.

In stakeholder engagement, respect also means that we value what all participants have to offer, and we go out of our way to make sure that everyone, no matter what their status or circumstances, have an opportunity to have their voice heard. This is of course not only a matter of courtesy; as we saw in Module 1, a range of knowledges and insights are in fact needed if we are to successfully address NRM matters - no one set of views is adequate on its own. But it is also a matter of respect, which in turn encourages people who experience that their views matter, to more fully participate in NRM processes. Paddy Gordon, former Park Manager at the Knysna National Park, said he respected the contributions of all the members of the Park Management Forum, from the wealthy retired residents to the poorer locals who collect bait for subsistence fishing. Paddy could not condone illegal bait collecting, but his respect for the poorer local's inputs motivated him to make sure that Park-stakeholder meetings were held in venues and at times that people who lived in the township and had to hustle for a livelihood during the day could attend as well - when the default was to hold consultations in the town centre during office hours because retirees could easily attend those. The Namaqua National Park staff made sure they arranged transport for those who can otherwise not attend meetings. Besides the choice of time and venue, another sign of respect for people is to conduct meetings in everyone's home languages.

Activity: Watch the video on Empatheatre. Listen to the description of the stakeholder engagement processes involved in researching, producing, performing and discussing the play. List all the ways in which the theatre company shows respect to stakeholders. Have you or how could you show respect in stakeholder engagements in which you are involved?

AND/OR

Read the short hand-out about stakeholder mapping (2.2.2). List all the ways in which the facilitator producing a stakeholder map would need to show respect, and how that could be done?

The next principle for stakeholder engagement we look at is reciprocity.

Reciprocity means treating each other fairly and not exploiting our stakeholders, similarly not allowing them to exploit us. When we engage stakeholders because we want something - say information or goodwill - from them, it is only fair to think about what they get out of the process. If they have to incur expenses to meet with us, like transport costs or a day's loss of income, it is fair to compensate them. But money is not the only way in which we can show gratitude and reciprocate. What are the local customs? If it is customary to bring a gift when we visit people, or offer people refreshments when they spend time with us, then that is a good way to reciprocate. When stakeholders engage with environmental scientists and university students, they value the opportunity to earn money, but also a range of other things, that we should consider in each context. Research in the Tsitsa Project (Mtati, 2020) showed that people also value respectful interactions, the opportunity to be part of a project that gives more meaning to their daily activity, and learning something stimulating and new. A profound way to give something in return to people who contribute information to research projects is to offer them an opportunity for formal studies and

accreditation, that could open career paths for them. Of course, when stakeholders actually initiated the engagement, because they themselves want something to be done about an NRM issue, then the facilitator and the group may share a common goal and reciprocity is easier to achieve.

Activity: Do you have some innovative examples of reciprocating the goodwill of stakeholders who offer their time and information? Do you know of cases where stakeholders were badly exploited? How could those cases have been avoided?

AND/OR

In the interview you conducted for assignment 1, how did you deal with the need to reciprocate? Did it come up? Should you have considered it? How could you have considered it, if you have not?

Now also consider, *how* did you introduce the interview to the person you approached? To what extent did you manage to convey the reason why you wanted the interview?

Transparency is the third principle to consider. This means being honest about our motives when we engage with stakeholders, being clear about *why* we are doing this (our purpose), and what stakeholders can expect from the process. If people are not going to benefit financially or get jobs from a process, it is best to be open and clear about that. Fortunately, as mentioned earlier, money is not the only motivator for people wanting to be part of well designed NRM processes, with the proviso that the processes should not financially exploit them either.

If an organization or individual engaging stakeholders already has a proposal or plan for which they ideally want the stakeholders' support, it is best to be transparent about this proposal or plan, but also to indicate to what degree there is room for stakeholders to reject or modify the plan. There can then be a thorough engagement around the details of the plan and often large parts of the original plan are kept intact, or improved, and then supported by the stakeholders, because they had the chance to do such a robust engagement. It is dishonest to make people go through so-called consultations as if their opinions matter, and at the end of the day, pull out the original plan and present it as an improvement on what was discussed, without having even mentioned it before. It is not always possible to make changes to plans and in such cases, and if the engagement is simply a presentation to gather support for the given plan, this should be made clear upfront to stakeholders.

Often it is also difficult to say whether a stakeholder engagement process will eventually be of benefit to people, because the processes can be very drawn out, and the outcomes are always uncertain. However, if one is open and honest about the possibilities and the uncertainties, when there is a relationship of trust, stakeholders are often willing to take the chance. The kind of trust required, however, can take a long time to develop, and quick "fly-in-fly-out" engagements usually come with too little trust and understanding both ways. *Trust is earned, and we earn it by being honest.* This can be very hard when we facilitate

processes on behalf of third parties who do hide or require us to hide some of their motives or information that should actually have been made known to the stakeholders.

Activity: What are some of the challenges you have encountered with regards to honest and transparent engagements with stakeholders? Do you have examples of such challenges being successfully addressed?

AND/OR

In the interview you conducted for assignment 1, how did you deal with the need to be honest and transparent? How did you describe the purpose of the interview? How will you describe it for assignment 2, if you want to change your approach?

Reflexivity is about being able to step back from the nitty-gritty, day-to-day of our stakeholder engagement work to reflect carefully and critically on what is going on, and consider adapting the way we do things to be responsive to the ever-changing context. The idea of reflexivity builds on reflection (reflective practice was briefly introduced in Module 1). (See Bolton (2010) as a key reading on reflection and reflexivity). Reflexivity is an important principle in stakeholder engagement as it ensures that we are open-minded, able to question what we are doing and how we are doing it, and able to responsively adjust and adapt as we go, i.e. it helps us take a ‘learning-by-doing’ approach.

We can think about **reflection as looking into a mirror**: we can hold up a mirror to look at what we are doing, what is going on in the context, how things are going, what is working, what is not working, and so on (Figure 8) The mirror helps us to step back, pause, and get a ‘birds’ eye view’ of the work we are doing, to describe what happened, and to evaluate this critically. We can then think about **reflexivity as looking through the mirror**: we see what is reflected back from the mirror, but we also look at what is going on beyond or behind the mirror. What are the underlying values and assumptions that are driving how we are doing our work? What are the underlying societal structures (e.g. economic and political drivers) that are influencing what is going on? How should we adapt the way we are doing things based on these underlying issues? Reflexivity, therefore, builds on reflection, and is about being able to act on what we see when we reflect, that is: to respond and adapt the way we do things.

For example, if you were in a stakeholder engagement event where a disagreement arose and one of the participants unexpectedly left the meeting. You and your team might reflect on the experience, and practice the principle of reflexivity, as follows: Reflection - look into the mirror: What happened? (describe the event) Why did this participant leave the meeting? Was there a conflict that caused this? Reflexivity - looking through the mirror: What underlying assumptions did we have about stakeholders that might explain what happened? What underlying structures or patterns in society might explain why the participants felt uncomfortable and had to leave?

reflexivity

looking through the mirror

reflection

looking into the mirror

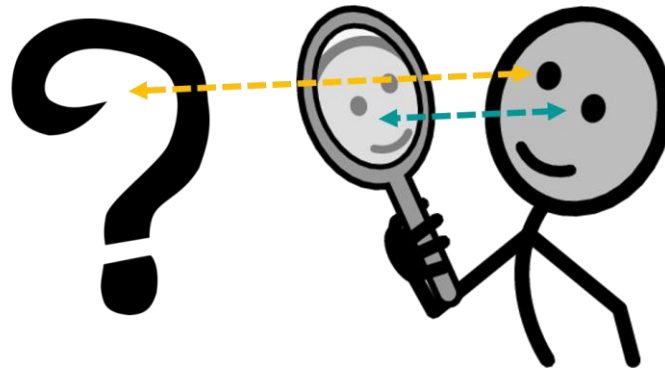


Figure 8. Reflection and reflexivity: looking into and through the mirror (after Bolton (2010))

Activity: Think about a specific, memorable stakeholder engagement experience you have had, e.g. where a significant moment happened that seemed to have an impact on the project as a whole.

1. Start with a reflection on the event, using these questions as a guide: *What happened (describe)? Who did what, when, where and how? Why did things happen the way they did?*
2. Then, ask yourself a more reflexive set of questions: *What underlying assumptions did we have about stakeholders that might explain what happened? What underlying structures or patterns in society might explain why this happened? What should we do differently in future? e.g. How should we engage differently in future? How might we in general relate differently to stakeholders?*

Suggested additional resources and readings - Please note these are not compulsory readings. They are just provided in case you would like to read more widely about the topic covered.

Bolton, G., 2010. Reflection and reflexivity: What and why. Reflective practice: Writing and professional development, pp.1-24. SAGE Publications, London.