



"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 2.4



Module 2 - Topic 2.4

PRACTICALITIES of STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

2.4.1 Orientation - How to think about facilitation techniques

Now let us look at some of the practical considerations when engaging stakeholders. There are no secret techniques to master, that will always work. A skilled facilitator is not that person with a bag of tricks and activities that they whip out and apply no matter what the situation. A skilled facilitator is someone who carefully considers each context, each process and its purposes, and the ever-present principles, and works out the best way in which to facilitate the process in this particular context, with this particular purpose and these participants. That is, they are responsive to purpose and context including emergence (unforeseen outcomes, good or bad, that arise from the process). Facilitators often have to change the planned activities during a stakeholder engagement process, to respond to what is coming up in the process, or even happening outside of it. Having said that, there are some basics we must consider and we can always improve our ability to handle these practical considerations. For example, the facilitator has to know who the participants are, and must either find out beforehand, or use the first part of the event, to find out. Similarly, when the facilitator finds her or himself in the middle of an activity that is going horribly wrong, it helps to have some options to consider. This topic is about these options and considerations, not a bag of tricks.

BOX 2.4.1 A skilled facilitator is not a franchise cook

Some like Nando's, some like KFC. Have you ever watched the cooks at a grilled chicken outlet while you wait? Their skill in basting, turning and at exactly the right moment removing the chicken from the heat is so impressive. Their equipment, temperature and flavour mixes are always exactly the same, and so is their technique. They never veer off from the franchise's 'standard operating procedure' for getting that chicken cooked exactly the same way every time.

Compare that to the ladies who cook for family and community gatherings. They adjust their plans including recipes according to the ingredients and the utensils they have on the day, the number of people who will be eating (which can change at short notice), any special needs (Sister used to like spices, but now she is pregnant and queasy), whether a wedding feast is needed or a simple meal towards the end of the month when savings are important. They often use other people's stoves which have their own quirks and if they cook on an open fire, the weather becomes a consideration as well.

Real-life facilitation of stakeholder processes is more like the family cook, and less like a franchise employee with a standard recipe and techniques (see Box 2.4.1). But all cooks have some basics they must consider - like making sure everyone has enough to eat, for example - and so it is with the facilitator of stakeholder engagements. Below are some of the basics to consider no matter what process you have in mind.

2.4.2 The Basics

1. Understand your role and the purpose of the engagement
2. Get to know the context and participants
3. Anticipate and respond to group dynamics
4. Manage the physical set-up
5. Allow people to trust you, each other, and the process
6. Enable everyone's participation
7. Design activities that are fit for purpose
8. Keep up the energy levels
9. Provide a satisfying closing of the process.

1. Understand your role and the purpose of the engagement

Within the overall stakeholder engagement purpose, the purpose of facilitating group processes is to hold and steer a process such that the group produces an outcome (a decision, plan or new idea) that is better than anything that each individual could come up with. The underlying assumption of group work is that humans when considering something together, have a power to be creative, forward-thinking and (eventually, if not at first) solutions-oriented. The general point of facilitation is to encourage and enable this productive, generative and co-engaged emergence of group processes.

Importantly, it is not possible to determine the exact outcomes beforehand. If your role is to steer people towards a certain predetermined outcome, then the process is not facilitation, but something more like communications, lobbying or advocacy, and for such a purpose there will be other guidelines, different to the *facilitation* guidelines discussed here. *A key role of any facilitator, and one of the main reasons why there are facilitators in stakeholder engagements, is to allow everyone to participate and contribute optimally.* But contribute to what? The purpose of the engagement will guide your choice and design of activities. Be very clear on the purpose of the process, even if it has to be decided with participants at the start, or refined throughout. For different purposes, there are processes, and both process and purpose should be explained so people know or can decide how best to contribute. There must be some containment or structure; not too rigid, but also not so open that participants do not know from one moment to the next what is going on. When confused, people can no longer participate.

Clarify your own role too, bearing in mind you can play more than one role and your roles can change over time.

Is your role to facilitate a process in which you yourself have no stake? What is your own interest in the outcome? How does that influence your role? It can be difficult to participate as a stakeholder contributing to the outcomes of a process, and at the same time you are *the facilitator who needs to hold and steer the process to allow everyone else to contribute*. If you have multiple roles, find one or more co-facilitators so you can take turns to hold the process, and to make inputs. A facilitator who dominates the group with their own opinions, information, or knowledge, will soon find that either people start to fight to have their own voices heard, or simply stop participating - leaving facilitators high and dry with nothing more than their own opinions. Of course, some 'facilitators' might prefer their own ideas, but such an unequal, one-way process is unlikely to create much support for those ideas, or to improve upon them.

2. Get to know the context and participants

Understanding the context will let the facilitator know how to show respect and reciprocate, those key principles of stakeholder engagement noted earlier, but also what individual group members may be concerned about, or have to offer to the process. The work of getting to know the context and participants should be done before engagements start, if possible. If you will be facilitating an event, find out beforehand what the venue and equipment if any will be like, what activities will be possible or not, how refreshments can be served, how far people will travel before they arrive, etc. Also, do your homework on the expected participants; which organisations are they from, how much do they already know about the NRM issue of the day, and to what extent have they already been engaged in it? Don't make any assumptions without checking: They might have been dwelling on this issue for many years and then your process will be very different to one in which participants are joining the conversation for the first time, and a mixed group requires special methods to bring everyone to a shared understanding of purpose. In what languages will they most comfortably participate? What social - institutional and cultural - norms will they have and how can your process respond to those?

Be prepared for surprises when you arrive at the venue and to adapt accordingly. Remember, you are not a franchise cook!

At the start of the engagement, make time to check who the participants present are, and if others arrive during the course of the engagement, create a suitable opportunity to find out who they are, as well.

3. Anticipate and respond to group dynamics

Doing your homework as outlined in (2) will help you anticipate dynamics and plan for them. One of the best things a facilitator can do to support a productive engagement process, is to carefully identify and invite relevant participants. Whom you invite and encourage to attend an event, is often one of the most important ways in which you can steer a process towards a worthwhile outcome, even if you cannot and would not want to predetermine that outcome. Avoid a situation where half-way through a meeting participants complain that key stakeholders are absent. Try to bring them to the event, and/or to arrange other events where they can participate, if this one is not suitable for them.

With many NRM issues, there will be a variety of stakeholders (refer back to Module 1) with different values and perspectives, and often they have a history with each other or with your organisation, that leads to animosity and fractious relationships. Histories of educational and economic inequalities that continue to today mean that in many groups some will feel they have the right to speak more and with more authority than others, whereas others (e.g. women, rural people or those not fluent in English), will feel more reluctant to speak. Even among equal peers, some are more inclined to contribute in big groups than others. *A key role of the facilitator, and one of the main reasons why there are facilitators during stakeholder engagements, is to allow everyone to participate and contribute optimally.*

Reduce the chance of conflict and exclusion e.g. by agreeing on a code of conduct beforehand and make the code visible for everyone to see throughout the process; give everyone time to speak, and manage the amount of time each speaker gets; agree that we would also listen to understand others, as much as we will endeavour to make our own constructive inputs. It can be counter-productive to call on quieter people to speak up in a big meeting, but small group discussions that are not dominated by strong voices, can give them the courage to later report their views. Do not overlook the setting up and managing of small groups which is also important; depending on their composition, small groups can replicate unequal power relations especially when they take place without a facilitator's support.

Group processes are also complicated in situations that have taboos that cannot be raised, e.g. corruption or other criminal activities, organisational undercurrents or disruptive roles played by certain personalities, racism or sexual harassment. Facilitators need to be or become aware of such dynamics that may prevent a good group process and interfere with reaching an outcome. At times group facilitation is not the answer, in which case it should be abandoned and other processes proposed. To persist with 'surface' group processes when there are underlying currents or issues that cannot be addressed in the group process, can be frustrating and a waste of time. The facilitator should signal that this may be what is going on, and contract with the group on what they want to do: just deal with superficial matters towards a limited outcome, or tackle the deeper issues? Neither the facilitator nor the group may be willing or able to deal with the deeper processes (or it may not be safe to do so) in which case the facilitator should suggest alternatives.

Watch as Professor Tally Palmer shares some facilitation experiences (The recording is housed on the Course Website).

Professor Tally Palmer shares successful and challenging facilitation experiences



4. Manage the physical set-up

The choice of venue is important. Practically, can all the stakeholders easily reach it? Symbolically, what does it mean? Meeting in the company's board room can be uncomfortable and even dangerous for activists opposing the company's activities; meeting in the backyard of the poorest members of the group can put them on the spot but it can also affirm their importance to the group - depending on how the process is planned and executed.

The venue can be indoors or outdoors and need not have lots of furniture and equipment, but it must be comfortable enough for people to spend time there, and set up in such a way that participants can all see each other. Since the group process is important, the members should be able to interact with each other. If they face away from each other, all the time facing the facilitator, then it becomes a presentation. On the other hand, some short presentations may be necessary, and flexible seating arrangements are best, so people can move their chairs (or walk around) according to the particular activity. Walls are good for putting up the outcomes of sessions, or instructions and codes of conduct, while the outdoors is energising and encourages creativity provided the weather is fine. A mix of inside and outside can work well.



Activity: Study the photograph above (courtesy of the Tsitsa Project, Rhodes University). What does the set-up and equipment of this venue allow? Is there anything important that it does not allow?

5. Allow people to trust you, each other, and the process

Trust is an important basis for a good group process. Building trust usually takes time, but is likely to build naturally if you design and facilitate group processes in ways that embody the principles of *respect*, *reciprocity* and *transparency* discussed in Topic 2.3.

It is often important that everyone should know who else is in the room (whether this be a Zoom room (online) or a real room or a gathering under the trees). You should create spaces and take time for people to get to know you and one another.

Box 2.4.3 The Turkish Way

In Turkey, when people are convened to discuss a matter of concern, or start a new venture, and they are strangers who have not met before, there is a practice to begin by each person informally talking to the person sitting next to them and to not stop talking, until they have identified at least *one* person whom they both know! Then and only then will they proceed with the actual business of the meeting. This may prolong the start of the meeting considerably, as you can imagine, so why do it? The thinking underlying this cultural practice is that people find it easier to trust strangers when they have identified a connection between them, no matter how distant.

Activities can be used both as energisers and as ways for you and the participants to get to know one another. Showing a little vulnerability by sharing something personal about yourself can also help the trust-building process. Participants can see the real, authentic, you outside of your role as their facilitator.



Figure 9: The “Ball Game” was played in a capacity development process in the Tsitsa Project as a way for participants to get to know one another and share something personal about themselves. You would catch the ball, share your name and the story behind your name before passing the ball to someone else.

Key to building trust is being honest and transparent about: the intention of the process, your expectations and motivations behind it, your role and responsibilities as well as those envisioned for your participants. If participants understand how everyone fits into the process and what the collective goal is, they will be better placed to contribute meaningfully, adapt, enrich, own and see the process through.

Part of being an authentic facilitator is building your participants’ confidence in you - if participants know that you know what you about, have experience and are prepared they are more likely to trust you and the process. If you have little experience, being honest about this, asking for help and not claiming to know all the answers will bring your participants to your side.

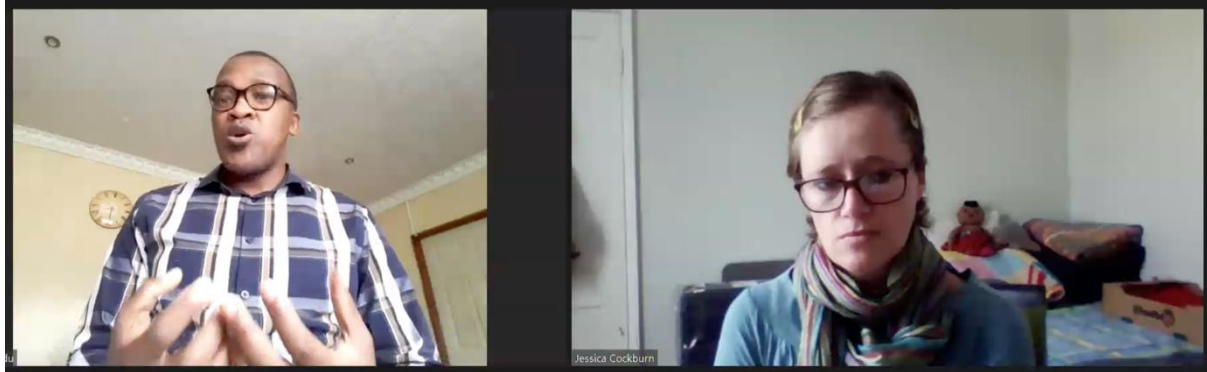
6. Enable everyone’s participation

There has already been some suggestions on how we can enable everyone to participate. Firstly, we should respect all contributions; not only will it enrich and strengthen the process and outcomes, but because the experience of being properly heard is valued by all people and is likely to strengthen their commitment to the process, both now and in future. Respecting contributions means listening carefully and actively; clarifying and capturing contributions as they are offered (check before you rephrase them that the contributor is happy with the re-phrasing); and ensuring that these contributions all help to shape the eventual outcomes of the process.

Of course, not every contribution is useful right there and then, and some inputs can be very disruptive - too long, off the point, harmful to others or the process. These need to be managed accordingly. When people constantly disrupt a process, they often have an underlying issue or agenda which must be surfaced, if things are to move forward. When the underlying issue is identified, it might mean that this participant is best dealt with in

another process, outside this event, or it might mean that the group should deal with the issue (the proverbial “elephant in the room”).

We have considered some suggestions for working with group dynamics earlier. One aspect not yet addressed, is how to work with multiple languages, and how a facilitator can engage with people without (fully) being able to follow their language. This may require interpretation and translation, which is discussed in the interview by Dr Jessica Cockburn, with Mr Monde Ntshudu (This interview will be made available on the Course Website).



7. Design activities that are fit for purpose

Two of the many reasons for group processes are idea generation and decision-making. These two are described here to demonstrate how *purpose determines process*.

For idea generation, a common activity is brainstorming. A group of stakeholders in a co-management project might want to generate ideas for how to develop a new eco-tourism resort. Explain to participants that brainstorming is about identifying as many ideas as possible and especially to encourage new possibilities that the group might not have thought of before. A simple brainstorming exercise is just to give everyone an opportunity to say what their idea is, then to encourage them to come up with more and more ideas until there are a lot of ideas on table, or on the flip chart or chalkboard, whatever space there is to record these ideas as they are being put forward. Continuing past the point where the common ideas dry up, can lead to some very interesting contributions. What is not so simple, is to refrain from judging ideas as they are being put forward, no matter how silly they may seem. *Brainstorming is not about judging the quality or suitability of the idea, that comes later* (in decision-making). Criticism is the enemy of creativity, and as soon as judgements are introduced, ideas quickly run out.

Sometimes ideas are not forthcoming from the start, and then ice-breakers or encouragements for creative thinking could be used. For example, facilitators like to encourage unusual comparisons, such as: “If our eco-tourism resort is like a famous person, what famous person would it be?” For one person the resort should be like Trevor Noah - fun; for another it should be like Ronaldo: serious about excellence. Helping participants to feel free to venture off the usual paths of thinking, making new associations, and in the process coming up with a new idea, is the purpose here.

Decision-making (e.g., choosing one of the eco-tourism resort ideas for further development) is a different process, which usually follows on from the ideation (brainstorming). Start by reminding or telling participants what the options are. Allow them to discuss the pros and cons of each option. Participants will need to generate or be given criteria for deciding on pros and cons. For example, is cost important, should environmental

sustainability be a consideration? Facilitators can use rating or voting systems. E.g. every person gets three votes which they can allocate to the options/proposals as they see fit. You may need to assist participants to apply the agreed-upon criteria in the decision-making, if they are inclined to just go through the motions, or if they struggle to decide. E.g. allocate a person to be the 'advocate' for a proposal (not their own), and allow all the advocates to defend the various proposals, while the rest try to point out weaknesses. When a proposal has been thoroughly judged, allow for another brainstorming process to see how those weaknesses could be addressed (see e.g. the Ritual Dissent activity). A proposal that has gone through such a thorough process is often not only strong, but also strongly supported, even by those who were at first against it.

BOX 2.4.2: Ritual Dissent - How it works

Ritual Dissent is a workshop technique designed by Dave Snowden (the systems theorist who owns the company *Cognitive Edge*) to test and enhance proposals or ideas by subjecting them to ritualised dissent (challenges) or assent (positive alternatives). It is designed to overcome taboos against publicly critiquing ideas so that one can hear candid, useful feedback and strengthen an idea; in the process it can also expand support for the idea. During the workshop, the presenter shares the idea with a group that listens silently throughout the presentation; no dialogue or questions are allowed at this point. This process of intensive, uninterrupted listening is a very important practice to allow the idea to be presented in full. Knowing that they won't be interrupted, the presenter is able to fully share what they have - but also to hear some of the weaknesses themselves. Then, the presenter turns their back to the listeners, symbolizing having "left the room" and listens in while the group discusses either what they didn't like (ritual dissent) or what they liked (ritual assent) about the idea. Still in the workshop, the proposer goes back to the drawing board (often to their group who helped develop the proposal in the first place) to figure out how to address the criticisms and build on the strengths. The presenter (or another member of their group) then goes back into the room and presents an improved version of the proposal. The process is repeated until the number of positives raised start to outweigh the negatives; at this point the idea is strong and many if not all participants actually support it.

8. *Keep up the energy levels*

Learn to judge the energy in the group. When there is a lot of chatting, shrieks of laughter and fights about to break out, it is time to bring people's attention to one point, help them to focus and settle down. Turn off the music, dim the lights, tap a glass and start speaking in a quiet voice. After some solid focussed work, energy levels will start dropping, and it is time for a break - usually every 45-90 minutes, depending on the group and the kind of activity you are busy with. Keep energy levels up with light in the room, comfort breaks and suitable refreshments. Heavy starchy meals create the so-called "graveyard shift" after lunch. Lots of PowerPoint presentations in darkened rooms can have a similar effect. Mix sessions in which people have to listen and absorb, with opportunities for them to engage and interact.

9. *Enable a satisfying closing to the process, including next steps.*

At the end of every group process there should be time for people to debrief, reflect on what they have achieved as a group, and what should happen next. A single meeting or workshop is usually part of a longer process, and participants should be clear on what comes next, and if and how they can participate in the next steps.

Keeping registers of events is important for process and participation purposes: Invite people to add their names and contact details to the registers and to indicate whether they would like to be invited again, to be part of further processes. Registers can also be used for

auditing and reporting purposes (to prove that money spent on an event was actually used for the event) and to obtain consent if you wish to use photographs from the meeting in your reports, or to use data for research purposes. This latter use of meeting outcomes and processes should also be discussed with the group participants.

Reporting is a valuable part of stakeholder engagement processes, provided it is done meaningfully and not just to satisfy auditors! This usually means reporting as soon as possible after the stakeholder engagement event, documenting what happened, who participated and how, what the outcomes were, and what the agreed-upon next steps are. Sharing this report with the participants can be a useful way to keep them engaged and to keep up the momentum on decisions taken; reporting can also be shared among stakeholders.

Box: Back-to-Office Reports

AWARD, the Association for Water and Rural Development, hosted a programme for building resilience in the Limpopo-Olifants Basin (RESILIM-O) that involved many field activities. AWARD had to report to its funder, USAID, but programme staff also wanted to report internally to each other, so that everyone could know what was happening in the field, to guide the next engagements with stakeholders, and to know whether programme activities were starting to bear fruit (evaluation purposes). A simple template was used to document the purpose and nature of the event, the register of participants and any photographs taken, the outcomes and planned next steps, but also any interesting insights and questions that came up, that might potentially affect how the programme should be proceeding. These are reflections of a deeper nature, which start to encourage learning beyond the practicalities of stakeholder engagement, towards improving our NRM processes themselves. Such reflections can be done by one person, or in groups. AWARD staff found it was valuable for those who facilitated the field engagement to discuss the event in the car, and then to sit down together at a restaurant on their way back, to quickly write up their report and reflections. These ‘back-to-office’ or field reports were then used when they compiled their monthly reports, and the insights were shared in quarterly ‘learning events’, where a day was set aside to look back on these reflections and plan the way forward with the benefit of deeper insights.