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Participatory decision-making: The core of multi-stakeholder collaboration

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The purpose of this brief is to provide insights and guiding principles that can inspire readers to conduct multi-stakeholder collaboration more effectively. The objectives are to demystify the process of collaboration, to make its assumptions more accessible, and especially to encourage readers to adapt participatory values and practices to their own settings. The brief describes several time-tested tools and procedures that can be implemented in a straightforward manner.

Introduction

Multi-stakeholder collaboration is integral to much of the work being undertaken by the CGIAR and others in agricultural research. In fact, some modern interpretations of the role of research in society require successful dialogue and cooperation between those who produce knowledge and those who use it (NAS, 2008). For example, programs that encourage local farmers to adopt worthwhile innovations would require effective collaboration among researchers, farmers and market sector actors. Even efforts to secure long-term funding can benefit from a collaborative approach to negotiating goals, resources and timelines.

In these contexts, the success of the endeavour is often tied to the effectiveness of the collaboration. Yet despite the familiarity of the concept to most managers and scientists, the practicalities – that is, the 'process-mechanics' – of multi-stakeholder collaboration are still largely a mystery to most people.

Basic rationale and essential characteristics of multi-stakeholder collaboration

The expectation of a multi-stakeholder process is that the convened group will bring its collective wisdom to bear on a truly difficult problem, with the intention of producing innovative or transformative solutions that genuinely reflect the varied needs and interests of the participating stakeholders. The expectation is that the group will produce ideas and agreements that are widely supportable, and therefore sustainable.

As such, the purpose is much more ambitious than merely obtaining *pro forma* endorsements of proposals crafted elsewhere. A multi-stakeholder collaboration is a creative process, often involving conflict, often involving entrenched positions, and often requiring perseverance and courage and the cultivation of lasting friendships. A multi-stakeholder collaboration is not a meeting, it is a substantial effort to tackle and solve a difficult problem. It's a process, not an event. It requires resources and time, and it demands much thought and hard work from its organizers. Normally, therefore, one would only convene such a process when the stakes are high: when cross-sector support is a critical success factor, and when the difference between success and failure warrants the investment.

This begs a question: Is it true, then, that a multi-stakeholder collaboration will produce better ideas and longer-lasting agreements? If so, why? Why can't a few subject-matter experts come up with ideas that are as bold and as viable as those that would be developed in a fully fledged multi-stakeholder collaboration?

The answer is rooted in the two innovative ideas that result in sustainable agreements. First, a multi-stakeholder collaboration, by definition, entails diversity. A multi-stakeholder collaboration involves a convening of participants who represent different interests and/or who come from different sectors or backgrounds. Second, these participants are brought together to think together. Whether their specific objective in any given case is to create a vision, or develop a strategy, or design a study, or establish an organizational structure, or formulate a policy, or plan the implementation of a project, the purpose in general of their collaboration is to discuss ideas and make decisions. *These two properties – the diversity of the membership, and the requirement that they come together to think and make decisions – are the defining characteristics of multi-stakeholder collaboration.*

Fundamental dilemma

Alas, these two characteristics do not easily co-exist! It's tough enough to get *anyone* to be genuinely thoughtful in a group setting. If the group is composed of people with diverging perspectives, it's even tougher. By definition, a diverse group consists of people who don't share the same frames of reference. *Ergo*, they won't have an easy time communicating. Not only do their goals and priorities differ, but so do their assumptions and their biases. Consequently, their struggle to communicate is often painful – rife with misunderstanding and frustration, and often ending in failure.

Sensing this dilemma, many meeting-planners design agendas that rely heavily on speakers who read papers or make PowerPoint presentations. These serve to minimize discord by limiting discussion. Another tactic is to allow broad discussion but to focus it on narrow, low-stake topics. For example, a diverse group can be guided to spend an inordinate percentage of its meeting time on detailed analyses of minor problems, or on tedious wordsmithing – sometimes, even, on documents that are still slated for further redrafting at a later time. Either of the above approaches can successfully mitigate the level of tension and misunderstanding in a diverse group...but to what end? The process has been made 'manageable' but the value of the group's product is negligible, and thus probably not worth the effort and expense.

On the other hand, meetings that authentically strive for broad participation from diverse stakeholders are often notoriously chaotic and non-productive. Participants can be dismissive of alternative perspectives; subgroups can become entrenched in polarized positions; and sometimes people express themselves in ways that are sarcastic or accusatory or just plain rude. Meetings like these usually go nowhere.

Is there a solution to this dilemma?

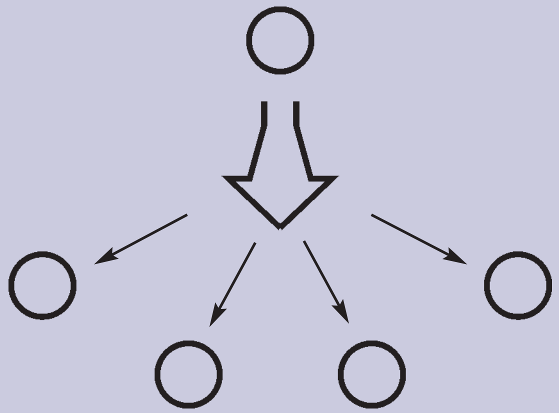
Three types of meetings

A work-related meeting can be designed to achieve three fundamentally different purposes:

- To dispense information to a group of people;
- To obtain input from a group on a proposal that will be decided elsewhere;
- To have group members collaboratively solve problems and make decisions together, during the meeting.

To be successful, a multi-stakeholder collaboration must be properly designed. Without understanding the requisite design principles, a planner can easily (though unintentionally) end up with a meeting design that stifles collaboration rather than enabling it.

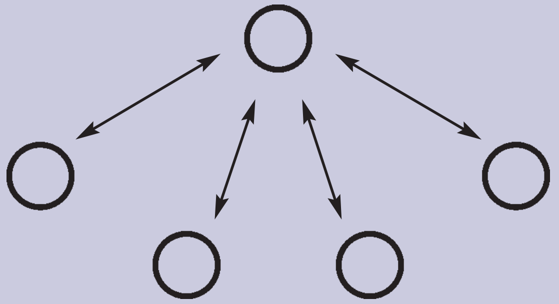
Figure 1. Type 1: Information-sharing



Many meetings consist of presentations and reports. As Figure 1 makes clear, the presenter does most of the work at this type of meeting. Participants recognize that the goal is informational, so they tend to refrain from involving themselves in lengthy discussion. They might ask questions here and there, or they might briefly express opinions or offer suggestions. But, for the most part, they just sit and listen.

Designing such a meeting is simple and straightforward: select topics that are relevant to the audience, and make sure that speakers are aptly prepared. Normally, no facilitation is needed for information-sharing meetings.

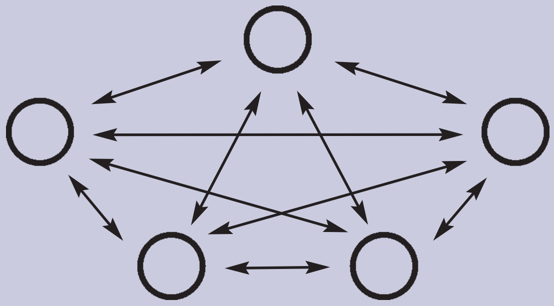
Figure 2. Type 2: Input-seeking



Many meetings are convened to obtain input on a proposed course of action, or to solicit feedback on a work-in-progress (Figure 2). At such meetings, participants are expected to provide their best thinking, but not to make final decisions. Recognizing this expectation, participants tend to focus on influencing the opinions of the person who is asking for input.

Designing this meeting requires more thought. The person seeking input must be clear about the level and focus of input s/he wishes to obtain. (If not, group members tend to veer off on tangents that do not advance the meeting's objectives.) Also, a lightly structured design – such as the use of small groups to help participants to sharpen their thoughts before expressing them in the large group – can aid the flow of participation, reducing the confusion and tediousness that may arise when people are asked to present 'first-draft thinking'. Facilitation can be helpful here, particularly when the topic is controversial, the group is large or time is limited.

Figure 3. Type 3: Group problem-solving/decision-making



In group problem-solving and decision-making meetings (Figure 3), participants are expected to influence *one another*, with the objective of co-creating solutions that are acceptable to all parties. Accordingly, participation at these meetings is typically quite high and rather more intense. Conflict and frustration are more in evidence, as participants work hard to make sure their own needs and views are taken into account.

To design this type of meeting requires serious planning. It takes a group more time and effort to solve problems than to express opinions and make suggestions – which in turn requires patience, and a strong commitment to persevere. When the stakes are high, competent facilitation is a necessity.

Principles for designing a participatory decision-making meeting

Given the difficulty inherent in requiring diverse stakeholders to think together on substantive issues, what does it take to design a process that taps the talents, and intelligence, and wisdom and commitment of its participants, rather than one that devolves into hollow rituals of pseudo-collaboration?

Principle #1: Take advantage of the diversity of the group. Rather than attempt to minimize the impact of divergent perspectives, treat it as a source of constructive tension. In other words, make a determined effort to *fortify the effectiveness of the communication* among the participants.

There are several good strategies for improving communication in a diverse group:

1. *A role-based strategy* is one in which someone is assigned to perform the role of ensuring that participants communicate adequately. A neutral, support-oriented facilitator is often recruited to play this role. In a complex, multi-stakeholder collaboration, the facilitator stays out of the content and focuses on supporting and encouraging everyone else to do their best thinking.

2. *A values-based strategy* is one that aims to help participants understand the importance of utilizing the group's diversity to their advantage. The typical approach is to engage participants periodically in discussions about the benefits and challenges of building mutual understanding in an environment of diversity.
3. *A training-based strategy* seeks to build the participants' technical skills in collaboration. Participants may learn specific communication skills (such as asking questions effectively, or giving feedback); they may also learn group problem-solving skills (such as categorizing, analyzing, prioritizing, and evaluating). Another typical way to build participants' collaboration skills is through team-building activities.
4. *A procedures-based strategy* strengthens group communication by enacting a range of explicit, step-by-step procedures that move a group through any given phase of its deliberations. (See below, principles #3 and #4; see also our subsequent discussion of decision-making procedure.)

Typically, successful multi-stakeholder collaborations employ most or all of these strategies, in various combinations, as the process unfolds. (See below for a case example from Bioversity International.)

Principle #2: Make a commitment to effective listening. The purpose of improving communication is to *build shared understandings* among participants who are not familiar or comfortable with each other's perspectives. Nothing advances this goal as reliably as persistent active listening. Acquiring shared understanding is a digestive process; when someone with impeccable listening skills facilitates the discussion, participants feel listened to and understood, and in turn they become more able to listen to one another.

Principle #3: Manage the group's energy by providing a mixture of structured activities. Many people are anxious about speaking in a group setting; others don't mind speaking but they find it hard to listen to differing views without wanting to argue or compete. All in all, prolonged discussion in a multi-stakeholder group can be taxing and draining. The utilization of structured activities can be an antidote. For example, working in small groups is invigorating; it affords each individual better opportunities to think out loud and develop his/her ideas. Other stimulating activities that replenish group energy include brainstorming without discussion; individual writing; round robins; individual reading; and many more (Kaner et al., 2007). Even a 5–10 minute break is an effective structure for managing group energy.

Principle #4: Use a decision-making method that expressly supports the group to reach agreement. Multi-stakeholder collaborations occasionally exist without formal leadership. Such cases require additional planning beyond the scope of this paper. Typically, however, collaborations include a final decision-maker. Whether it is the Director General who plays this role, or whether it is a lead scientist, a funder or a government official – whoever has convened the group – it is entirely normal for a multi-stakeholder collaboration to be grounded in the final authority of one or two final decision-makers. Nonetheless, the artistry of building sustainable agreements resides in balancing the reality of hierarchical authority with the requirement that a critical mass of participants authentically concur with the decision being made. This requirement for meaningful endorsement by every individual stakeholder is the essence of group decision-making, even when power differentials mean that final authority is not formally held by everyone.

Reaching group agreement in groups with a final decision-maker

In almost every discussion, a time arrives when the person-in-charge has to assess whether to end the discussion and make a decision, or whether to keep the discussion going (Figure 4).

Figure 4. A key process-decision for a person-in-charge to make: bring closure, or resume discussion

The Discussion Reaches a Stopping Point

OPTION A	**OPTION B**
The person-in-charge decides that the discussion has been adequate. S/he feels ready to bring the issue to closure by making a final decision.	The person-in-charge decides that important issues still need to be thought through. S/he wants the group to continue the discussion.

For issues of low importance, the person-in-charge will normally end the discussion after a reasonably brief conversation, and make the decision. When the issue has greater importance, however, the question of whether to continue the discussion becomes more consequential. Now, not only must the person-in-charge answer the question, 'Has an adequate solution to this problem been found?' But also, because the stakes are higher, a second question arises: 'To what extent do participants support the solution being proposed?' If key participants don't support it, a logically adequate solution may not be fully implemented. Therefore, as part of assessing whether to end discussion and make a decision, the person-in-charge may find it useful to poll the group and find out explicitly how much they support the proposal at hand. The *Gradients of Agreement* scale (Kaner et al., 2007; Figure 5) can be used to do this.

Figure 5. Gradients of agreement (Kaner et al., 2007)

GRADIENTS OF AGREEMENT: BETTER VOCABULARY

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Whole-hearted Endorsement	**Agreement with a Minor Point of Contention**	**Support with Reservations**	**Abstain**	**More Discussion Needed**	**Don't Like But Will Support**	**Serious Disagreement**	**Veto**
"I really like it."	"Not perfect, but it's good enough."	"I can live with it."	"This issue does not affect me."	"I don't understand the issues well enough yet."	"It's not great but I don't want to hold up the group."	"I am not on board with this - don't count on me."	"I block this proposal."

This *Gradients of Agreement* scale enables the members of a group to express their support for a proposal in degrees, along a continuum. When the time comes for a person-in-charge to assess whether to end discussion, s/he asks the group, 'How much do you support this proposal?' When everyone has spoken, the range of responses will indicate the group's cumulative degree of support.

When the *Gradients of Agreement* scale is used as part of the decision-making procedure, many participants behave as illustrated by the 'Type 3 meeting' diagram (Figure 3). Recognizing that an idea will probably live or die on the basis of their collective support for it, most group members engage with one another in earnest – debating, analyzing, generating new ideas, and in general, attempting to influence one another – more so than when they perceive that the person-in-charge, as sole decision-maker, is the only person worth influencing.

Box 1. Case example: The priorities and strategies committee process at Bioversity International

In 2006, Bioversity International created a committee composed of all Directors, Unit Heads, and Assistant and Deputy Directors General. This Priorities and Strategies Committee (PSC) is chaired by the Director General and exemplifies a Type 3 meeting. As a result of previous positive experiences with professional facilitation to support management, Bioversity International's Director General decided to engage a skilled facilitator – fortunately available from within Bioversity International's own staff – to assist the PSC. Many of the PSC members had attended the ILAC-sponsored training session on facilitating participatory decision-making.

The development of the PSC, as an effective multi-stakeholder collaboration for undertaking high-stakes decisions, is a work in progress, but some key lessons have already been learned. Early on, PSC members agreed that they would focus on strategic decision-making rather than information sharing. The development of the agenda and pre-meeting preparation is critical to success, and the facilitator actively challenges proponents of agenda topics to articulate the decision required, and plan and organize the information needed in order to inform the decision. A template for designing sessions is used to help session managers design their sessions. Further work is needed to ensure that session managers understand the decision to be taken, and then analyse the implications of the decision, including costs, staffing and presentation of alternative scenarios so that an informed discussion can take place during the meeting. As the PSC meetings become more routine, care needs to be taken to ensure that adequate time and attention is devoted to pre-meeting agenda and session development.

The *Gradients of Agreement* polling procedure is used, as follows: before the Director General (DG) finalizes a decision, each PSC member expresses his or her level of agreement on a 7-point scale. A simple but effective Excel spreadsheet records and graphically displays the poll results. Once all PSC members have been polled, each in turn

Box 1. continued...

explains why he or she agreed or disagreed with the proposed course of action. Based on the reasons given, the DG may make modifications to the proposal. Members are then given the opportunity to alter their position. Again, results are recorded and displayed. The DG then announces his or her decision to go ahead, drop the issue, or discuss it further at the next meeting, depending on the level of agreement overall, and especially in the case of persons key to decision implementation.

Conclusions

This brief has identified two essential requirements for multi-stakeholder collaboration: the diversity of the group, and the expectation that group members will think together and make shared decisions. The brief has also shown how the guiding principles of participatory decision-making provide a useful framework for undertaking such endeavours. The case example illustrates how some of the principles have been implemented within a management committee of a CGIAR centre. Further questions may be addressed to the authors.

Further reading

Kaner, S. with Lind, L., Toldi, C., Fisk, S. and Berger, D. 2007, Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making, 2nd Edition. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

NAS (National Academy of Sciences). 2008. Linking Knowledge with Action for Sustainable Development. http://sustainability.nationalacademies.org/Linking_Knowledge.shtml

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