

Engaging stakeholders in biodiversity discussions: everything placed on the table



The Brief in brief

Although the aim of working with stakeholders varies greatly according to the issue or project and why stakeholders are being involved in the first place, the work floor may best be described as a construction site where work is in progress. Working with stakeholders in a formal situation implies placing all the different arguments on table, ensuring that the variety of their views is identified and also identifying and encouraging synergies. Within the dialogue process it is essential that all groups are listened to and that stakeholders are given sufficient time to construct their arguments and to build their cases. Construction sites tend to be there over a long time before being finished. This is also the case for working within stakeholder forums and events – the process demands time, management and follow-up.

Intended audience

This brief is aimed at a wide user audience including scientists, policy makers, environmental site managers and NGOs.

Topic

Formal, stakeholder engagement plans that include organised stakeholder “events” are often a requirement within not only EU funded and national funded research projects, but also within a wide variety of forum situations including, for example, public hearings or working with landscape planning. Different interest groups have a share and/or interests in the particular issues and need to be listened to. Because of the diversity of the stakeholder groups it is a challenge to identify, for each scale and decision context, what the different arguments are that are being used by the different groups. As a result of the experiences gained within the BESAFE project we suggest a list of prerequisites for success when organising a particular event or series of events to specifically engage stakeholders. These prerequisites are:

- Identify clearly what you want from your stakeholders, what is your aim. Your stakeholders should also be clearly identified – it is not a ‘wish list’ nor a ‘shopping list’ but rather a ‘must have’ list.
- Communicate clearly not only your aim to the stakeholders prior to the stakeholder event but also communicate clearly how you want to achieve your aim.
- Give stakeholders enough time prior to the stakeholder event to prepare themselves.
- Set up the stakeholder event in such way that all arguments and views are placed on the table and all stakeholders have the opportunity to be heard.
- Reserve a time at the start of the event to give an introduction that provides enough information about the issue/project. But avoid extending this information beyond the aims of the event. Keep in mind what the stakeholders need to know to reach the aim.

- Be aware of the total amount of time available and allow enough, but appropriate time for the different sessions. Also make sure that there is enough skill available to translate unclear statements/ views/arguments into clear ones (e.g. engage professional facilitators). Get a confirmation that all parties have understood what has been said. A summary of the results of a stakeholder event should become available shortly after the event and communicated back to the stakeholders.
- Make sure you communicate clearly what is expected of the stakeholders after the event, in the next stage(s).
- There should be an infrastructure available to include the views/arguments of stakeholders who are not able to participate but may want to provide input after the stakeholder event.

Usefulness

Just as effective communication and clear instructions are important for the work at a construction site to be efficient, using effective and clearly targeted arguments enables stakeholders to communicate their views and objectives efficiently. However, such dialogue exchange among stakeholders is only a useful process if all parties are heard and given enough time to reach a joint understanding of the issue(s) at hand, what each interest group stands for, and which position each one has. This joint understanding may then be used to identify areas of consensus, including policy decisions that all parties can respect.

Lessons learned

- It should be clear at all stages what is expected from the stakeholders and this needs to be communicated beforehand, giving stakeholders enough time to prepare.
- In case certain stakeholders or representatives from stakeholder groups are not able to attend physically at a stakeholder event, there should be an infrastructure or opportunity available to allow stakeholders to provide input after the stakeholder event.
- A summary of the results of a stakeholder event should become available shortly after the event and communicated back to the stakeholders. It should however be clarified beforehand what the next steps are going to be, if there is an intention to keep them involved in later stages or if you intend to keep them only informed about later stages.

Looking for more information on effective arguments for biodiversity?

For more BESAFE results, including separate briefs focusing on other case studies and various aspects of argumentation, see <http://www.besafe-project.net> and BESAFE toolkit <http://tool.besafe-project.net>.

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