

Multistakeholder Processes: Making Public Involvement Work

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Those engaged in multi-stakeholder consultations are faced with a plethora of potentially useful techniques to promote public involvement through: information sharing, communications, planning, negotiating, consensus building and conflict resolution. Methods continue to proliferate as successive authors invent new language for or fine-tune classical techniques. The consulting fraternity frequently appropriates well-known techniques as proprietary versions with accompanying claims of uniqueness and applicability. The sheer volume of methodological advice provides a practitioner with adequate options to select a suite of practices they believe will apply to a particular situation. Because so much public involvement advisory literature and case histories of successes emphasize the methods employed it is easy to miss the fundamental and underlying principles of effective public involvement. There are a number of engagement principles that are critical, which, if not present, limit the usefulness and potential for successful outcomes, regardless of the methods used. These principles are presented in **Box One**.

Box One: Important Principles for Public Engagement in Multistakeholder Processes

1. The decision making process that is in place for making a land or resource use decision is explicit, including the statutory requirements, the timing of events, the parties with actual power of decision and the steps in the process which are open to external influence
2. Stakeholder involvement opportunities are constructed to fit the formal planning process, making inputs at the step in which they can be effectively absorbed
3. Stakeholder involvement is at a scale, intensity and duration that fits the level of potential distributed impacts that could affect the interests of external parties
4. Information and resources are provided to participants that are commensurate with the level of engagement that is offered
5. Methods of engagement are variable and they are best discussed with potential participants before they are adopted or fixed to ensure that there is confidence that they are adequate to the situation. Methods are also adaptable as a process proceeds and unforeseen issues arise. Methods employed ensure inclusiveness, balance and lack of dominance by special or disproportionately powerful interests.
6. Stakeholder inputs are solicited early enough in the process to ensure that there is still room for them to influence fundamental decisions and designs rather than just to comment on decisions or designs already made or sufficiently hardened so that only minor adjustments are actually possible or when proponents of a plan have

- invested so much in their ideas or they have made significant financial commitments that are so costly to reverse that they are reluctant to respond.
7. Stakeholder inputs are clearly acknowledged, clearly factored into decision making, and clearly influential in the outcomes – with the proviso that where inputs are not feasible to adopt, there are credible reasons given, better ideas advanced or statutory, economic, or physical limitations involved.
 8. Those who provide an involvement opportunity are sincere in seeking input, diligent in factoring it into their planning, design and decision making, and communicate this sincerity and diligence actively to those engaged
 9. The roles of lay public participants and scientific or technical professionals and their status are clearly differentiated
 10. Historical circumstances, previous events in the area and their outcomes, experiences of key parties, political ideologies, family associations, established enmities, lobby successes in the past – each or all such elements may be potent factors in sizing up the context of a publicly transparent process and must be adequately researched and understood.
 11. The process does not stop at the input stages but provides for monitoring of results, continued engagement in plan revisions and adjustments and involvement in any evaluations

A problem for decision makers is that well established and elaborate methods may well fail, while very limited methods often succeed. Commitment is more important than methodology. Participants very quickly estimate the value of an involvement process on the basis of the underlying principles at play, rather than the specific methods used to engage them. They can tell a “path clearing” agenda from real involvement. **Box 2** sets out some key questions which allow the underlying commitments to be put to the test, before specific methodologies are considered.

It has become fashionable to engage professional facilitators in public multi-stakeholder processes. This is a fashion, though arguably not a necessity. People normally want to deal with parties that actually have decision making authority and who can make binding commitments. If a facilitator is used, participants have to have confidence that the facilitator is respected by the authority, will be listened to in the end and can ensure that commitments are binding, especially those achieved by consensus. Participants need to have confidence that the facilitator is not just a useful manipulator engaged to make people feel good. Ultimately, nothing substitutes for a real opportunity for influence and sincerity on the part of the practitioner.

Of course, implementation of what would otherwise be an effective public process can be badly handled. Methods can be inappropriate to the occasion, poorly applied or mistakenly rendered. Input can be misconstrued or badly recorded. Session chairs can have a deaf ear for nuance. Information can be tardy, frustratingly incomplete or too technical to understand. Communications can be garbled. Insensitive or biased facilitation can be provided. Professionals can be poor communicators or fail to give

adequate responses. Critical players can be inadvertently left out. The lessons of history risk being ignored. Lobbying can also overcome legitimate process. Individuals or groups can act as effective spoilers of meetings or processes. Monitoring implementation can be left out because it is too much trouble. There are lots of delivery pitfalls, but they are less likely to be fatal if the engagement principles are clearly respected.

Box 2: How to assess the underlying commitments

At minimum, what would I want to know about a stakeholder involvement opportunity in which I was potentially engaged? Six qualities seem critical:

1. Real

Is this a real opportunity to influence plans, designs, and decisions or is it tokenism or an obligatory step in an approval process to which lip service or minimal real effort is being applied?

2. Timely

Am I invited into the process in time to make a difference?

3. Proportional

Is the opportunity for engagement and resource support at a scale and level equal to the potential impact of the outcomes on my interests?

4. Influential

Is my participation likely to have a material influence on the outcomes, or is the decision already made by a higher authority or an influential proponent? (Are they asking me or telling me?)

5. Sincere

What is the track record of the proponent in making adjustments to reflect public participation? Are they sincere in their efforts to incorporate my views? How will I know?

6. Delivered

Is there a process established to inform me how well implementation of plans and agreements has been accomplished and to involve me in monitoring progress along with the inevitable revisions that can be expected from issues that arise after the initial consultations have ended?

In the multi-stakeholder public land use planning era in British Columbia, it became fashionable to declare that the public planning exercise was to be “shared decision-making”, usually conducted at planning tables that included both members of the public and working professionals. Not unexpectedly, real decision making was not actually delegated to such procedures, but remained with corporations, government agencies and the elected Cabinet members who bore legal or statutory accountability. One of the ongoing side effects of this approach was that often the opinions, desires or committed

views of lay public or corporate participants could, through negotiation, promulgate ideas that became equivalent in validity or influence to the insights and judgments of trained professionals. It precipitated such absurdities as bargaining and manipulation of technical or scientific indicators, or bending science to fit social preferences or strident special interests.

It is important to recognize the difference between the expressed interests and preferences of stakeholders and the objectives and strategies for resource management that are consistent with science and professional experience. A constructive process of dialogue between stakeholder participants and technical professionals needs to take place to differentiate among the desirable ends and the feasible means and to detect expressed goals that may be fundamentally incompatible or scientifically unsound.

Well expressed goals that incorporate stakeholder interests and preferences are essential to effective public involvement, but these must be matched by scientifically correct objectives and technically feasible means if durable results are to be achieved. Both components are necessary, but they are not equivalent. Blending the two can lead to:

- Agreements or plans that look plausible but cannot be technically implemented,
- Plans that are too general to be related to real circumstances,
- Unilateral post-plan-completion tinkering
- Public expectations that cannot be met in practice.

One consequence is that, when professionals try to implement such plans, the outcome tends to be seen by the public participants as a default on commitments, rather than necessary adjustments to scientific reality.

It is likely to be more constructive to differentiate the public discussion of interests and preferences from the technical means of reflecting them. An iterative process of consultation on public concerns, matched by successively refined professional responses can help to generate planning commitments that can be understood in advance, can balance preference with feasibility and can be implemented faithfully. This approach could, if unbounded, go on for a long time without reaching a conclusion or respecting cost limitations. The same can be said for approaches which purport to be seeking consensus. There is no hard and fast rule for ending a planning process that engages stakeholders. It is useful to set time and cost boundaries in advance, but often necessary to adjust both to ensure that useful results emerge. The best general guideline is for the engagement to respect the formal decision-making process as noted in the first principle in Box One, recognizing that in the end an accountable decision-maker will enter the picture.

Some case studies from Canada are provided in a separate information note. See VERIFOR information note [on Independence](#)