Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue

Felix Dodds[1] and Emily Benson[2]
Stakeholder Forum

Tool summary

A Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue (MSD) aims to bring relevant stakeholders or those who have a 'stake' in a given issue or decision, into contact with one another. The key objective of an MSD is to enhance levels of trust between the different actors, to share information and institutional knowledge, and to generate solutions and relevant good practices. The process takes the view that all stakeholders have relevant experience, knowledge and information that ultimately will inform and improve the quality of the decision-making process as well as any actions that (may) result. With sufficient time, resources and preparation, an MSD can be a very effective tool for bringing diverse constituencies together to build consensus around complex, multifaceted and in some cases, divisive issues.

What is it?

Stakeholders are those people who have an interest in a particular decision, either as individuals or representatives of a group. This includes people who can influence decisions, as well as those who become affected by the decisions. The Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue (MSD) is based on recognition of the importance of achieving equity and accountability in communication between stakeholders. An MSD is designed to enhance levels of trust, discussion and collective problem solving amongst different stakeholder groups or individuals.   It is a flexible tool and can be adapted to a number of different contexts. It can be used at local, national, regional or international level. It can involve a small group of individuals representing different experiences and areas of expertise, or can involve many different stakeholder groups representing global constituencies and communities such as for e.g. trade unions, women, businesses, governments, youth, NGOs etc. Similarly, an MSD can be used as a scoping exercise in which stakeholders come together to explore a given issue or topic; or they can be used to directly impact the shape or content of a policy document; or as an implementation tool after a policy has been decided in order to establish how each of the groups will be able to best put the outcome into practice.

Examples of high profile multi-stakeholder dialogues include the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the World Commission on Dams, and the Bonn Freshwater Dialogues. Major donor development agencies have embraced MSDs, while a wide range of businesses and even private

---

[1] Executive Director, Stakeholder Forum
[2] Programme Manager, Stakeholder Forum

companies such as Nike, have begun to experiment with MSDs as a mechanism for reaching out to their relevant stakeholders and improve their image as well as their bottom line.

MSDs take many different shapes and forms and can be adapted to a wide range of issues and circumstances. However, most MSDs share some common characteristics. An MSD will usually entail a lengthy period of preparation in which stakeholder groups can identify their positions on a given issue through consultations amongst their constituency. This will usually be followed by a meeting in person in which representatives from each stakeholder group come together to discuss and examine the topic from their respective perspectives. The recent years have witnessed a growing trend towards virtual and online dialogues. An experienced and professional facilitator will usually convene and guide the dialogue ensuring that different groups have equal speaking time. In most cases, the meeting is followed by a written summary or a set of key points agreed upon by all the participating stakeholder representatives that in turn stimulate wider policy discussion or decision-making process.

How is it done?

As with any multi-stakeholder process, there is no 'one-size fits all approach' to an MSD. The context, stakeholders, issues, participants and objectives will determine the design of the dialogue. The following provides a basic outline of the key steps and questions to consider when designing an MSD, particularly at an international level.

1. *Initiate the process*

   - An initial scoping exercise is required to ensure there is sufficient time, resources, and commitment to begin the process.
   - Work with stakeholders from the very initial stages in order to ensure equal levels of ownership over the process.
   - Identify a core coordinating group to manage the process. The coordinating group will need to have a good understanding of the issues under consideration, enjoy good contacts across a range of sectors and have a well-grounded understanding of multi-stakeholder processes at large.
   - Locate the issues to be addressed and approach the possible facilitators.
   - Identify a clear timeline and milestones ensuring adequate time for preparation.
   - Some key questions include:
     - Do we have sufficient time, resources and commitment to undertake this process?
     - Have we found appropriate people to design the process?
     - What are we seeking to achieve from the dialogue?

- o Is an MSD the most appropriate format?
- o How does the MSD link into the decision-making process?

2. *Map key issues and actors*

- Undertake a thorough mapping of the issues, the stakeholders and potential participants. Identify key partners in each potential stakeholder group and establish a system by which stakeholder groups can select or elect representatives who will ultimately lead on the issues and participate in the meeting.
- Think about the choice of language and terminology used for the dialogue in order to prevent miscommunications amongst different stakeholder groups.
- Some key questions:
  - o Who has a 'stake' in the decision?
  - o What are the potential challenges or confrontations that may arise in bringing together those groups?
  - o Have we ensured there is equitable gender, regional and sectoral representation?
  - o Do we need to consider translation services?
  - o Have we issued an open call for participation?
  - o Are stakeholder groups themselves selecting their representatives?
  - o Do participants have adequate funds, time and resources to attend a meeting in person?
  - o Should we consider a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for all stakeholders to sign before beginning the process?
  - o How are we reaching out to communities and groups that have not been engaged in the process beforehand?

3. *Prepare the dialogue*

- A key aspect of any dialogue is the preparation prior to the dialogue itself.
- Experience suggests that producing written position papers based on the inputs of all the stakeholders is a useful mechanism for generating dialogue. Final position papers should be distributed to all stakeholder groups well before the actual meeting so they can develop an understanding of different perspectives. In some cases, a matrix identifying the various positions can also help prepare stakeholder groups for the process.
- It is also useful at this stage to consider laying down ground rules for sharing information, stakeholder communication and preparation.
- As the role of the facilitator is critical, it is important to have a set of pre-agreed principles to guide the facilitator's work such as for example facilitators should: be involved in the design of the MSD; ensure equity

in discussions and be sensitive to the different cultural backgrounds of participants.

- Some key questions:
    - What are the stakeholder key priorities and positions?
    - How can we ensure that stakeholders are adequately prepared? What are the key informational sources for stakeholders and do they have equal access to information?
    - Is there sufficient time for consultation?
    - What are the ground rules for the meeting itself?

4. Conduct the dialogue

- An MSD can be held via conference call or in a virtual format. But, experience shows that face-to-face contact is most effective.
- Ensure a comfortable room–setting and a seating arrangement that is conducive to group discussion.
- Experienced rapporteurs need to be assigned to document the session.
- Participants need to agree at the beginning of the process on what kind of decision-making process will be used to conclude the dialogue. Consensus is the preferred method because it will generate better solutions and commitment by all.
- Key questions:
    - How will the meeting be designed to meet the final objectives of the MSD?
    - Have we addressed practical details such as seating arrangements, or using lights to indicate, when a speaker must finish? Have we selected an appropriate facilitator?
    - What kind of documentation will we have of the meeting such as for e.g. rapporteur's notes, video or audio files, newsletter articles etc.?
    - Will the meeting room accommodate observers?

5. Follow-up

- The specific expected outputs from the MSD should be established at the very outset. These might include a facilitator's summary, an agreement text or a set of recommendations.
- It is important that the final document be accepted by all stakeholders and communicated to their constituency groups.
- Undertake necessary follow-up processes such as workshops, briefing sessions, regional consultations or media interviews.
- Outreach strategies and media coverage are important to ensure the findings and outcomes of the dialogue are disseminated to the general public.

- Key questions:
    - What follow-up processes are necessary in order to achieve the objectives of the MSD?
    - How can we ensure maximum media coverage?
    - Have we established communication mechanisms for including non-participating stakeholders?
    - Have we the capacity to conduct a post-process evaluation?

Benefits

- Prompts discussion and collaboration among stakeholder groups.
- Ensures stakeholder groups identify their priorities and their positions on key issues.
- Generates enhanced understanding of different positions and perspectives.
- Builds trust and relationships between stakeholder groups, and between stakeholders and decision-makers
- Helps decision-makers to understand what stakeholders want and why
- Generates ownership of a given process and its outcome
- Can be effective in profiling and addressing the specific needs and issues of socially marginalised groups, including women and poor people.
- Increases the likelihood of the implementation of the final outcome by all the stakeholder groups.
- Provides a unique space for problem solving, knowledge sharing and presenting examples of good practice.
- Often generates a number of positive and often unexpected outcomes, like for e.g. partnerships, funding opportunities, contacts etc.
- In many cases, MSDs can directly impact government decision-making processes. For example, in a number of intergovernmental meetings, official decision documents have included word-for-word statements from MSD outcome reports.

Challenges and lessons

- Stakeholder representation can be hugely problematic and political. The issues must be addressed as early as possible in the process. Wherever possible, stakeholder representatives should be elected, or at least selected, by their wider constituency and this process should be as transparent as possible. Furthermore, it is crucial for the stakeholder representatives to remain in regular contact with their wider constituency throughout the process.
- MSDs can be a cumbersome tool. They require time, resources and commitment. The most successful ones have taken at least six months of preparation followed by a meeting and then a follow-up process. Organisers, stakeholder groups and governments must be prepared in advance for the level of commitment required. The issue of costs can also

be an obstacle since the longer a process is, the greater the cost would be while diminishing the participation of those without access to financial resources.

- The links between an MSD and the decision-making process are most often insufficient resulting in little concrete progress.
- Stakeholders, organisers and participants often come with over-ambitious expectations.
- Whilst there are many examples and initiatives of engaging stakeholders in 'dialogues', the good practice benchmarks or standards relating to the quality of the processes are far and few.
- Limited understanding of the meaning, objectives or potential benefits of a multi-stakeholder dialogue.

Key resources

Brown, R. *"Group Processes: Dynamics Within and Between Groups"*
Blackwell Oxford (2000).
http://as.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0631184961.html

☞   This offline publication introduces readers to the major developments in
      the field of group processes in a clear and compelling way with many
      supporting illustrations from contemporary life. The book can be
      ordered from the above link.

Canadian Round Tables (1993). *Building Consensus for a Sustainable Future:
Guiding Principles*
http://trnee-nrtee.com/eng/publications/consensus-guiding-principles/NRTEE-
consensus-guiding-principles.PDF

☞   These Guidelines, bringing together the experiences of Canadians
      from all regions and sectors of Canada, emphasize the importance of
      dialogue processes in achieving the goals of sustainable development

Division for Sustainable Development: UN Department of Economic & Social
Affairs
http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/csd/csd_aboucsd.html

☞   The Division for Sustainable Development promotes sustainable
      development as the substantive secretariat to the UN Commission on
      Sustainable Development (CSD) and through technical cooperation
      and capacity-building at the international, regional and national levels.
      The several World Summits on Sustainable Development that have
      been organized till date are examples of MSD at the highest
      international level. The html link provides numerous links to these
      processes

Hemmati, M et al. *Multi-Stakeholder Processes - A Methodological
Framework: A UNED Forum (Draft) Report.* London, UNED (2001)
http://www.earthsummit2002.org/msp/MSP%20Report%20Exec%20Summary
%20April%202001.pdf

☞   A very useful step-by-Guide for conducting multi-stakeholder dialogues
      particularly in the context of sustainable development

Hemmati, M et al. *Multi-Stakeholder Processes for Governance and
Sustainability - Beyond Deadlock and Conflict.* London Earth Scan (2002*)*
http://www.minuhemmati.net/eng/msp/msp_book.htm

☞   This 300 plus page document is probably the most comprehensive
      publication on multi-stakeholder processes and methodology replete
      with practical examples

Multi Stakeholder Process Resource Portal

http://portals.wi.wur.nl/msp/?Links

☞ On this portal one can find practical information on how to facilitate participatory learning processes with various stakeholders. It provides theoretical foundations, methods and tools to create learning processes, facilitation tips, examples, literature and links.

Stakeholder Forum
www.stakeholderforum.org

☞ Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future is an international multi-stakeholder organisation working on sustainable development; supporting the increased involvement of stakeholders in international and national governance processes. The organisation played a key role in the preparations for and follow-up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development. Their website contains all that one needs to know about stakeholder dialogue processes.

Svendsen, A.C,& Laberge,M. *Convening Stakeholder Networks*
A New Way of Thinking, Being and Engaging. Centre for Sustainable Community Development, Canada (2005).
http://www.sfu.ca/cscd/cli/jcc19svendsen.pdf

☞ This thought provoking paper describes how three companies established successful multi-stakeholder networks and explores the mind-set, skill-sets and engagement processes that are required to build and sustain multi-stakeholder networks. The article draws on theory and research related to complex adaptive systems, collective learning and whole system change.

The Bonn International Fresh Water Conference in 2001
http://www.water-2001.de/msd/discussion.asp

☞ The Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue constituted a major element of the International Conference on Freshwater. It was the principal means to integrate broad parts of Civil Society, Business and others into the Conference preparations and the Conference itself. The MSD comprised both, an exchange of views and ideas as well as open discussions.

The Commission on Global Governance. *Our Global Neighbourhood-The Report of the Commission on Global Governance*. Oxford University Press (1995)
http://www.amazon.com/Our-Global-Neighbourhood-Commission-Governance/dp/0198279981

☞ This work suggests approaches to the governance of our increasingly interdependent human society. It makes recommendations to promote the security of people, manage economic interdependence, strenghten international law, and reform the United Nations and other institutions. The report can be ordered from amazon.com link

CIVICUS
World Alliance for Citizen Participation

pg
pgl
exchange

The World Business Council for Sustainable Development: *Stakeholder Dialogue – The WBCSD's Approach to Engagement*
http://www.wbcsd.org/DocRoot/xxBp16bdV46Ui2JpR1CC/stakeholder.pdf

☞ The World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) is a CEO-led, global association of some 200 companies dealing exclusively with business and sustainable development. WBCSD is one of the leading organizations in he use of multi-stakeholder Dialogue. This document gives an overview of their MSD approach.

The World Commission on Dams (WCD)
http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/way-forward/world-commission-dams

☞ The WCD was a global multi-stakeholder body initiated in 1997 by the World Bank and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) in response to growing opposition to large dam projects. The WCD established the most comprehensive guidelines for dam building. The WCD's final report describes an innovative framework for planning water and energy projects that is intended to protect dam-affected people and the environment, and ensure that the benefits from dams are more equitably distributed.

United Nations (2007). *Participatory Dialogue: A Stable, Safe and Just Society for All*
http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/publications/prtcptry_dlg%28full_version%29.pdf

☞ The publication offers an overview of social integration and related concepts, explores the role and principles of participatory dialogue in creating more socially cohesive societies, and provides practical examples of dialogue use and dialogic tools including multi-stakeholder processes

UNDP (2008): *Learning Journey- Political Parties and Public Policymaking Processes:* The Role of Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue
http://www.democraticdialoguenetwork.org/documents/view.pl?s=1;ss=11;t=;f_id=1109

☞ This note gathers the main reflections built at the Learning Journey on public policymaking and the role of multi-stakeholder dialogue in this arena, jointly organized by the United Nations Development Programme and the Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy in Antigua Guatemala on November 2007. The dialogue involved a group of 30 participants included political leaders, researchers and analysts, academics, former government officials, and donors with relevant experience, interest and knowledge on political parties and policymaking.

CIVICUS
World Alliance for Citizen Participation

pg pgl exchange

Case studies

Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue Explores Options for Sustainable Forest Management among Private Smallholders

The Forest Dialogues, a multi-stakeholder initiative whose objective is to improve the sustainable management of forests, organized a scoping dialogue in Brussels at the end of June 2007. The Dialogue brought together 35 leading players from the forestry sector in a discussion aimed at exploring how to improve the sustainable management of European forests. Participants were drawn from governments, forest products companies, environmental NGOs, forest owners and cooperatives, academics and customers. The dialogue identified some key challenges facing forest owners as they attempt to manage their resource in a sustainable way. These include a gap in knowledge about sustainable schemes such as certification, for example. Similarly, many forest owners lack the resources to pursue and implement certification schemes or third party verification. Finally, weak government support and legislation were also highlighted. This challenge is especially pertinent in parts of Eastern Europe where private forest ownership is growing but where governmental support and a strong forest tradition are weak or absent. Based on the challenges identified, the Dialogue organized its work around three key themes: understanding, motivating and organizing landowners; verification and certification; and framework conditions and the role of governments. Following lively discussion, participants identified some key issues that stakeholders need to address to move forward with the sustainable management of private forests.

 Source: [Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue Explores Options for Sustainable Forest Management among Private Smallholders in Europe](#)

Promoting a Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue on New Strategies and Actions for Reducing Hunger and Poverty with a Focus on Agriculture and Rural Development in Asia, International Food Policy Research Institute

Funded by the Asian Development Bank, The multi-stakeholder dialogue project implemented during 2007 and 2008 has contributed to improved policymaker and public awareness of appropriate strategies and actions to reduce extreme rural poverty and hunger in Asia and thereby contribute to achieving the hunger and poverty Millennium Development Goal (MDG), which seeks to halve the proportion of poor and hungry people by 2015. Project stakeholders include policymakers and decision-makers in public sector, civil society, and private sector at national, regional, and global levels; development partners; and institutions for and with the poorest and hungry people.

Source:http://www.adb.org/Documents/Produced-Under-TA/38525/38525-REG-DPTA.pdf

Starting-up an MSP for improved education in Bolivia

At the end of 2006 the Dutch development organizations ICCO & KerkinActie decided to start a MSP towards improved education for indigenous peoples in Bolivia. Apart from ICCO and KerkinActie, and the local CSO partners, other stakeholders involved in the MPS were NGO's, social organizations, Indian (indigenous) organizations, governmental organizations such as the Ministry of Education, university and international donor organizations and Department of the La Paz region. The process was successful in that there was a concrete plan of action after the Dialogue in which further steps for programme development were included. This follow-up process is in hands of the local partners who also develop the education programme. There is an emergence of a 'joint identity' of the stakeholders due to the collaborative activities and learning from each other. There is an improved interest from very diverse actors within the education sector to cooperate and coordinate, thus creating a multilevel programme characterized by a group of intra-sectoral stakeholders acting on (inter)national, regional and local level, all with different identities.

Source: http://portals.wi.wur.nl/msp/?page=1257