



STAKEHOLDER DIALOGUES: A WAY TO ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS FOR SUSTAINABILITY

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Understanding how to engage stakeholders for sustainability boils down to the question: ***Why should we or others care about sustainability?*** The abstract concept only becomes real and personal when it affects something of interest to us. Such interests vary from trivial to profound. My neighbour, for instance, just gave birth to her first-born and is concerned about how to raise him in a sustainable future. A friend in New York has started to fight climate change because she suffered from the abnormal, brutally cold weather at the beginning of this year. One of my work colleagues developed a new concept for work-life balance for her team in order to decrease staff turnover and contribute to the social sustainability of her organisation. They all have a very tangible stake in a sustainability issue. In other words, they are stakeholders of sustainability. And in some way or another, we all are. But when do we choose to act on our stake?

Stakeholder participation is a buzzword in different kinds of governance: corporate, good and environmental. The idea is that people become passionate about issues to which they feel personally connected – when they have a stake. Involving those who are passionate about a particular issue has the potential to make a project more efficient and long-lasting. Why is that so? First, harnessing collective intelligence leads to more informed decision-making. Secondly, risks are decreased by diversifying the knowledge base. And, when those who will implement are involved in decision-making, not only does ownership of the process increase, but with it also the likelihood of successful realisation. When the people who are directly affected participate in building a project, the risk of a backlash decreases. In short, quality collaboration leads to better results: sustainability can greatly benefit from stakeholder participation.

By involving people who are immediately affected by a development of any kind – be it a strategy, a project or a policy decision – they are given the opportunity and the space to be active citizens, and by participating, individuals exercise their citizenship actively. Professor Andrew Dobson of Keele University considers “environmental citizenship” a possible way of linking individuals to the common good. In that sense, we see our personal contribution in a wider context and in connection to others and their issues. Participation thus links the individual to something larger, something they have a personal stake in, something that is collective.

What we learn is that participation and sustainability go hand-in-hand. Active participation is the fundamental first step, but not the silver bullet that can solve sustainability challenges. For example, a car manufacturer takes the decision to send out a questionnaire to its

stakeholders asking them for their opinion on the factory's carbon emission goals. While this may give the strategic managers impetus to act, it has not solved the sustainability issue itself, which is reducing CO₂ emissions to slow down global warming. The question remains: How many people respond to the questionnaire and how are their responses used? The missing key element here is **dialogue**, an essential in stakeholder participation for sustainability.

The question of how to make dialogue successful and fruitful is as old as humankind. Dialogue is an art of talking together that enables a flow of meaning among people. It is, then, the "art of thinking together" in a way that leads to progress through understanding differences, enacting respect and contributing. People who have experienced dialogue often feel that they have rediscovered a part that seemed lost in their day-to-day conversations, a part that is absent from most of conversations during meetings, conferences, and workshops. Ideally, dialogue enables people to bring out differences and to fill them with both meaning and purpose. Dialogue thus fosters a way of thinking and reflecting together that allows inquiry in a setting where tension and conflict can be explored.

Dialogue is a stance. It is a different way of bringing oneself into the world. At the core of it is the quality of presence, a way of being in the world that helps others to bring out their best. As a practice amongst a group of people, it is also the cornerstone for an approach to significant systems change. The purpose of negotiation is to reach a compromise between parties who differ. The intention of dialogue, however, is to reach a new level of understanding and, in doing so, to form a new basis from which to think and act collectively. Dialogue is, therefore, the basis for participation in order to build a sustainable world.

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What are the requirements for dialogue? Since dialogue implies that no position is final and that new and unthought-of possibilities or solutions might arise from a conversation, it requires us to suspend our habitual ways of talking with each other. It requires the capacity to listen to the wholeness which already exists, to respect the integrity

of another person in reaching out in order to understand, to observe, and to speak with an authentic voice, suspending one's own assumptions. Dialogue means respecting the other point of view and welcoming diversity as value. It requires awareness about oneself, one's own habitual way of bringing one's personality into a conversation and the potential pitfalls arising from this. Dialogue invites the person to engage, to contribute and to find a purpose in shared meaning.

We can only co-create a sustainable way of life by working collectively towards common goals. Implementing Stakeholder Dialogues means attending to a series of success factors. The first set revolves around "Exploring and Engaging". A small case study best illustrates these principles. The organisation of UN Women in Georgia initiated the appointment of advisory positions for gender equality and women's rights by the Georgian Prime Minister through Stakeholder Dialogues. They first made sure to "Understand the Context", conducting a stakeholder analysis and holding informal conversations to understand the situation. Next, they got the relevant stakeholders interested in their cause, thereby "Building Resonance". It was also vital to build an alliance from the stakeholder landscape, a small group of people who were engaged and dedicated to the cause and would carry momentum. This "Container for Change", included reps of USAid, SIDA along with UNDP, UNFPA and civil society organisations, among others. Before even launching the initiative, the foundation for a sound Stakeholder Dialogue was in place, upon which the project built and formalised their case. It is important for this phase to "Identify the Common Goals of the Stakeholders", those that they can all move towards despite their diverse interests. In December 2012, the Gender Theme Group chaired by UN Women organised the stakeholder meeting to discuss the importance and role of "gender equality" and "women's rights"; at this event the prime minister announced the establishment of a respective advisory position within the executive branch. UN Women and other non-governmental actors were asked to nominate candidates for the position. This represented an interim success for the initiative. It is important to "Celebrate Successes" to keep stakeholders engaged and make the fruits of their labour visible. Furthermore, "Transparency in Communication" needs to be upheld religiously to foster inclusiveness and ownership for the stakeholders involved. Tolerance, mutual respect, overcoming stereotyping, and a "Willingness to Reach Consensus" are indispensable in this process, which allows the voices of those who may be weakly represented in existing position-finding and decision-making procedures to be heard.

The case example shows the Stakeholder Dialogues principles that foster the development of partnerships between stakeholders. They increase fruitful exchange, collective action, mechanisms for shared power and collective responsibility. In the case of UN Women in Georgia, the joint capacities helped to mobilise the “Gender Equality Council” to stress the importance of “gender equality” from inside the governmental institutions. The principles of Stakeholder Dialogue contributed to fresh dynamics and effective relationship building, cumulating in the creation of formal structures and alliances with the goal of improving gender equality in Georgia.

Our future requires the participation and contribution of all relevant actors in order to ensure the progress of the system as a whole. After all, we all have a personal stake in sustainability.

Promoting stakeholder dialogue is part of the answer to our modern challenges of complexity, uncertainty and sustainability, and the method of Stakeholder Dialogues is one way to address this. By framing sustainability processes as a matter of participation and dialogue between stakeholders, the link between the individual and the common good becomes clearer. Our future requires the participation and contribution of all relevant actors in order to ensure the progress of the system as a whole. After all, we all have a personal stake in sustainability. It is through this stake – our interest – that we are motivated to participate, to get active and involved. My friend who lives in New York understood her stake in the greater challenge of global warming and extreme weather when the issue became personal. My colleague understood that having a healthy and energetic team would also lead to her own success at work and thus she worked towards improving the situation in her team. As for my neighbour, well, what can be a greater motivation to care for the future than giving birth to a member of the next generation – a human being whose future will be affected by our actions of today?

If you would like to find out more about Stakeholder Dialogues, I invite you to interact with me on the learning platform www.StakeholderDialogues.net, to read our best-practice stories, theory, blog posts, and to use our practical tools for your own project.

