How can we enhance collaboration and multi-stakeholder engagement?

Key insights from research on landscape governance and management in Africa

Photo: Salma Hegga

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NOVEMBER 2020

Build on what already exists

Before beginning a new engagement process it is important to fully understand the multiple dimensions of the landscape in question, including its governance, actors, uses and history. Then build on existing systems, platforms and networks of collaboration to enhance local involvement and ownership.

Find a neutral convener

By balancing power dynamics between stakeholders, academics and civil society organisations can play important and neutral intermediary roles as knowledge brokers, guiding aggregation of information, supporting collaboration and facilitating wider participation. In all instances, it's important that conveners remain as value neutral as possible.

Use emerging tools and approaches

Creative tools and approaches are emerging to help navigate the complexities of multi-scale and multi-actor stakeholder engagements. Some can help stakeholders to share their perspectives and perceptions, and to signify what's most important to them. Others can help to reveal boundaries to multi-actor collaboration that may not be immediately clear. And even others can help to uncover aspirational differences and increase the broader understanding of contextual challenges, while simultaneously developing a sense of community and trust.

Widen the net of participants

Stakeholder engagements that are inclusive can have multiple benefits, including aligning a diversity of needs, stimulating mutual learning and openness to alternative perspectives and worldviews, and promoting the participation of all social groups, particularly those that are typically marginalised and excluded. It's equally important that stakeholder groups have a balance of voices, including those from different levels of seniority, different sectors and administrative divisions, and different geographic scales.

Acknowledge the role of history and context

History can create deep differences and shape relations and power dynamics among landscape actors, determining who gets to participate, who gets to speak, and whose knowledge is used. History can also lead to differences in wellbeing, with some stakeholder groups benefiting from past policy decisions, while others suffer the damage of displacement or are criminalised for their continued livelihood practices. Acknowledging these differences and the role that history and context have played, can enhance understanding and empathy, and can support the development of policies that better align with local needs and strategies.

Develop agency, capacity and trust

Enhanced agency, capacity and trust can support meaningful stakeholder engagement in the long term and increase the willingness of diverse stakeholders to interact, share knowledge and cooperate towards a joint purpose. Trust in particular takes time to develop and tensions might persist even under ideal circumstances. So it is important to create opportunities - both formal and informal - to build the kind of relationships that can support sustained and productive engagement. At the same time it's necessary to build the capacity and social capital of less powerful actors to ensure they can organise themselves, access relevant information, learn about their rights, and develop negotiation skills.

Be transparent and open

Encourage transparency and openness in all stakeholder interactions and across all decision-making processes and governance structures. Create a space where participants - conveners included - are comfortable being transparent about the interests and values they hold. Throughout the engagement process, set clear and realistic expectations, ensuring all participants are aware of the potential benefits and trade offs of different decisions.

Build common and inclusive knowledge

Bring in all sources of knowledge across science, practice and local-level realities, including Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) such as indigenous and other traditional local knowledge. Foster an environment where these different sources of knowledge are considered equal, and where stakeholders are able to expand their shared understanding, learn from each other and build common knowledge.

Co-design and co-produce

Inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement together with sustained and systemic knowledge exchange can support the co-design and co-production of integrated and sustainable policies and management plans that align the objectives of multiple landscape actors.

For more information

Read the original research papers in the special edition of Land

Shackleton, S., Favretto, N., Gordon, C., *et al.* (Eds). 2020. Collaboration and Multi-Stakeholder Engagement in Landscape Governance and Management in Africa: Lessons from Practice (Special issue). *Land*. ISSN 2073-445X.

This work is part of the Climate-Resilient African Landscapes (CRAL) project, a research consortium within the World Universities Network. Focusing on climate change responses CRAL is establishing landscape-level 'living labs' in South Africa, Kenya and Ghana to build a holistic, comparative and in-depth understanding of multiple components of each landscape. Researchers also interact with communities and other stakeholders to identify problems and explore solutions to climate change and other systemic pressures. Consortium members include the Universities of Cape Town, Alberta, Leeds, Nairobi and Ghana.

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