6 Establishing multi-stakeholder bodies

A multi-stakeholder body or structure is a formal or informal regular gathering of people representing various constituencies, interests and stakes. The purpose of a multi-stakeholder body is to ensure and enable the participation, contribution and influence of stakeholders towards a goal or strategy. Multi-stakeholder bodies provide a forum for dialogue and mutual learning to inform decision-making.

Multi-stakeholder bodies are an important element of effective stakeholder participation in the design, implementation and assessment of policies. They contribute to successful implementation of the stakeholder participation plan (see Chapter 4 for guidance on stakeholder participation plans). They are an important means for addressing the "how" of stakeholder participation.

Checklist of key recommendations

- Clearly define the mandate, objectives, role and scope of multi-stakeholder bodies
- Identify and strengthen existing multi-stakeholder bodies, or establish new ones where needed, that meet the needs and criteria for supporting effective stakeholder participation in the design, implementation and assessment of the policy
- Clearly define the composition of multi-stakeholder bodies to ensure equitable and balanced representation and participation of all stakeholder groups, with special attention to stakeholders who may be marginalized or directly affected
- Clearly define the procedures and decision-making processes of multi-stakeholder bodies

6.1 Importance of multi-stakeholder bodies

Multi-stakeholder bodies are important to:

- enable the organized and coordinated participation of various stakeholder groups in the design, implementation and assessment of policies

- make use of the expertise and perspectives of different stakeholders

- enable joint and collaborative efforts to address an issue of common or divergent interests and stakes, or an issue that crosses boundaries of expertise or sectors

- provide a mechanism for iterative exchange between stakeholders and input from stakeholders, facilitating reciprocal learning, feedback, communication and information sharing

- contribute to decision-making, through either an advisory or decision-making role, promoting broader understanding and ownership of decision-making, and enhancing the credibility and legitimacy of decision-making.

6.2 Characteristics of multi-stakeholder bodies

Multi-stakeholder bodies can be formal or informal, and institutionalized or ad hoc, as in the following examples:

- **Formal and institutionalized** – a structured platform, working group or commission that meets virtually and/or physically. For example, a government may establish a commission, a working group or a consultative group as a permanent body to address a critical public policy issue. The commission or group formulates recommendations or provides guidance for informed and evidence-based decision-making. Examples are the civil society platforms established in many countries where REDD+ activities are being implemented (e.g. Cameroon, Ghana, Guatemala, Mexico, Nepal), and Civil Society Networks on Adaptation, which are helping to shape the climate policy on adaptation in developing countries.

- **Informal and institutionalized** – a loose yet coordinated network of actors who have agreed to work together to exert influence or contribute to an agenda they have an interest in. For example, during the early stage of the REDD+ readiness process, the Government of Cameroon organized a series of multi-stakeholder meetings of the government, NGOs, research organizations, international organizations, donors and private sector organizations to generate a common understanding to shape the direction of REDD+ in the country. Participation in this meeting was voluntary.

- **Formal and ad hoc** – a body established to fulfil an objective for a limited period. For example, a government may establish a multi-stakeholder commission, working group or consultative group with a time-bound mandate to address a clearly identified set of issues that contributes to a broader public policy or climate agenda. Examples are ad hoc groups in charge of elaborating the methodology for monitoring, reporting and verification of a national REDD+ strategy, or formulating a proposal for legal and institutional frameworks for climate action.

- **Informal and ad hoc** – a group that emerges to discuss and influence a particular issue. For example, in advance of the UNFCCC Conference of Parties hosted by the Peruvian Government in 2014, national civil society actors formed a united platform – Grupo Peru COP20 – to develop common positions and coordinate collective advocacy around the negotiations. This loose civil society platform continues to collaborate and inform national climate policy today.

Multi-stakeholder bodies can have different advisory and decision-making roles, such as:

- providing expert advisory inputs

- making informed recommendations that integrate diverse stakeholder perspectives

- making decisions on behalf of, or in collaboration with, government.

Multi-stakeholder bodies can be structured in different ways to address multiple issues, including:

- a single body to cover the range of issues agreed, within which working groups or subcommittees are created to handle thematic issues that contribute to the overall agenda of the multi-stakeholder body

- different bodies to handle specific thematic issues separately.

Multi-stakeholder bodies can be established at different levels or in different areas, including:

- at national, subnational and local levels, considering the scope of the policy

- in a project- or programme-specific area.

In terms of composition, multi-stakeholder bodies can aim to include:

- a balanced representation of all stakeholder groups

- only members from specific groups – for example, constituency-based stakeholder bodies in which stakeholders whose interests or actions overlap with that constituency are represented (e.g. a civil society platform).

6.3 Defining the mandate, objectives, role and scope of multi-stakeholder bodies

It is a *key recommendation* to clearly define the mandate, objectives, role and scope of multi-stakeholder bodies. These should be established by the user and agreed among stakeholder representatives. This involves determining:

- the need for a multi-stakeholder body and its mandate or authority to carry out its role

- whether the multi-stakeholder body will function as a technical body, and whether it will have an advisory or decision-making role

- the level of authority and autonomy of the multi-stakeholder body, and its level of independence from political and other influential parties – that is, whether the body will be attached to established institutional arrangements within the government or an agency created by the government, or will be an independent body that makes independent contributions

- whether there will be one or several multi-stakeholder bodies

- whether the multi-stakeholder body is an ad hoc body created to achieve a specific time-bound objective, or a body to function in the longer term

- the mechanisms through which the multi-stakeholder body will influence the policy.

Agreement among stakeholders on these key aspects could be sought through an appropriate existing multi-stakeholder body, through consultations with stakeholders or through establishment of a temporary advisory body (see Chapter 4 for guidance on planning), depending on the context.

It is a *key recommendation* to identify and strengthen existing multi-stakeholder bodies, or establish new ones where needed, that meet the needs and criteria for supporting effective stakeholder participation in the design, implementation and assessment of the policy. Creation of new multi-stakeholder bodies can lead to confusion and conflicts, as well as needing time commitment from members and ongoing resources. For these reasons, it may be preferable to adapt existing bodies if they can adequately meet the identified needs and criteria.

6.4 Defining the composition of the multi-stakeholder body, and ensuring balanced representation and participation

It is a *key recommendation* to clearly define the composition of multi-stakeholder bodies to ensure equitable and balanced representation and participation of all stakeholder groups, with special attention to stakeholders who may be marginalized or directly affected. Once the objectives, role and scope of the multi-stakeholder body are defined, the relevant stakeholders should be identified and the appropriate size of the group should be determined. For decision-making groups, a maximum of 15–25 people is recommended. Platforms and networks established to share information may be much larger, depending on logistics and available resources.

Identify criteria for mapping and selecting stakeholder groups that will be represented on the multi-stakeholder body, and the specific skill sets, attributes and qualifications to be demonstrated by those who will participate in the multi-stakeholder

body on behalf of their constituents. This should be done in agreement with an appropriate existing multi-stakeholder body or through consultations with stakeholders. The method adopted for identifying representatives is important because it affects their legitimacy, and the legitimacy of the multi-stakeholder body (see Chapter 5 for guidance on identifying legitimate representatives).

It is important to define the balance of the group, including the number of participants from different stakeholder groups and geographical regions. This should be done in agreement with an appropriate existing multi-stakeholder body or through consultations with stakeholders. When seeking balanced and equitable representation, ensure that all stakeholder groups that have been identified are represented (see Chapter 5 for guidance on identifying stakeholders), with special attention to ensuring equitable participation of groups that may be marginalized or directly affected.

Another measure to promote balanced and equitable representation and participation is to establish, as part of the overall stakeholder participation strategy, specific bodies to enable the engagement, participation and contribution of marginalized groups. Specific bodies may be established for women, indigenous peoples or local communities who might need to caucus separately to reflect and contribute on their own terms without being influenced by dominant stakeholders. Although these specific bodies could channel their contributions through a broader multi-stakeholder body, they should be provided with space and mechanisms to allow them to directly interact with key decision-making structures so that their concerns and contributions are delivered without filtration.

6.5 Defining procedures and decision-making processes

It is a *key recommendation* to clearly define the procedures and decision-making process of multi-stakeholder bodies. Since systematic disempowerment has often led to elites controlling multi-stakeholder bodies, it is important to ensure that the procedures and rules for participating in discussions and decision-making ensure that people from marginalized groups have equivalent voice to people from more powerful groups.

Procedures, including housekeeping rules, for the functioning of the multi-stakeholder body should be

designed and agreed by the members. They should include the following topics, if relevant:

- virtual or physical meetings, or both

- venues, frequency and timing of meetings

- procedures by which notes and outcomes of meetings will be captured, consolidated, stored and communicated through appropriate channels

- procedures to ensure that every member speaks, and that the contribution of everyone is registered and considered

- the governance structure of the body, and appointment of key positions such as chairperson and secretariat, preferably through elections or self-selection

- a procedure for decision-making to meet the objectives and mandate of the body

- conflict management mechanisms to handle disputes, conflict of interest and conflicts relating to the body.

Rules and procedures should take into account budgetary constraints, and the policies and procedures of the entity responsible for the policy. They should be made available to the public.

The decision-making mechanism should be fair, so that no single stakeholder group can dominate and no stakeholder group can be marginalized. Options include the following:

- **Consensus.** A decision is reached when no member has a sustained objection (i.e. all members are willing to "live with" the decision), provided the right conditions have been created for people to express themselves without fear and to register their objections. This approach takes into account the views of all members but may lead to less ambitious solutions. It may also take time or may even be impossible to achieve. Where bodies aim to make decisions based on consensus, they should define and agree on an alternative decision-making mechanism at the start of the process, in case consensus cannot be achieved.

- **Majority voting.** A decision is reached when a predefined proportion (e.g. 50% or 70%) of the members are in favour. This approach may

ignore the views of minority and marginalized groups, leading to frustration among these groups.

- **Voting by sectors or constituencies.** The members are organized by sector or constituency into chambers or other groupings. For a decision to be approved, a defined proportion (e.g. 60% or 75%) of all chambers must be in favour plus a defined threshold (e.g. 51%) of the members within each chamber. This approach ensures that decisions cannot be made unless a majority in each sector agrees. It can be effective in building trust by reassuring stakeholder groups that their voices will be heard or, in the case of government, that they will not lose complete control.

6.6 Setting a plan and agenda for the multi-stakeholder body

The multi-stakeholder body should agree on the expected results, outputs or deliverables, and the plans for achieving them, with clearly agreed milestones. The plan should clarify roles and responsibilities, the frequency and purpose of meetings, and any preparatory work. Without a clear plan and agendas for each meeting, the multi-stakeholder body may be prone to free riding, power games, and manipulation by more powerful members.

6.7 Supporting the function of the multi-stakeholder body

Procedures need to be established and followed to ensure that the body functions effectively. These include:

- **transparency measures** – ensuring that plans for, and reports of, meetings and other activities of the body are disclosed publicly

- **communication mechanisms** – ensuring effective and timely communication with and among members, and between members and their constituents, using appropriate channels and forms of communication

- **facilitation** – ensuring balanced and inclusive participation, a focus on meeting objectives and good time management

- **documentation and reporting** – ensuring that key points, recommendations and decisions are accurately and impartially recorded and reported.

Depending on the defined mandate of the multi-stakeholder body – which may be advisory or deliberative – it is essential to clearly establish and agree on mechanisms by which the outputs and decisions of the multi-stakeholder body will be communicated to other bodies responsible for decision-making relating to the policy. Failure to have well-established and functioning outreach and communications pathways may prevent the multi-stakeholder body influencing the design, implementation or assessment of the policy.

It is critical to identify and ensure availability of ongoing resources – financial and otherwise – that are needed for the functioning of multi-stakeholder bodies. This may include providing support to members who find it difficult to participate because of financial or logistical problems (e.g. transportation from and back to remote areas, translation to languages that are the most understood by stakeholder groups, accommodation support during meeting periods for participants coming from distant areas).

6.7.1 Further references

For guidance on creating an effective multi-stakeholder body, see the following reference:

- AccountAbility and Utopies' *Critical Friends: the Emerging Role of Stakeholder Panels in Corporate Governance, Reporting and Assurance*.[37]

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[37] Available at: https://www.accountability.org/publication/critical-friends-emerging-role-stakeholder-panels-corporate-governance-reporting-assurance/.