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Designing for engagement

Insights for more equitable and resilient multi-stakeholder forums

Anne M. Larson and Juan Pablo Sarmiento Barletti

Key messages

- Multi-stakeholder forums (MSFs) are increasingly seen as essential for collaboration – across different levels of government and among multiple constituencies – due to the growing urgency to address climate change and transform development trajectories.
- A review of the scholarly literature reveals that more equitable and resilient MSFs require a shift in emphasis away from how to design *projects* toward designing *engagement* in a way that addresses a specific situation or context.
- *Designing for engagement* combines top-down with bottom-up approaches, starting with a period of research and meetings at upper levels to understand the potential challenges that local project implementers face within the broader context they are encountering.
- This process is engaged, committed and adaptive, supporting a spirit of co-learning among all actors, building mutual respect and trust over time.
- This approach has the best chance of resilience in the face of change or challenge, and of leading to equitable outcomes – and is not fostered by the increasingly short-term nature of donor funding and the emphasis on simple quantitative impact indicators.

Introduction

This Infobrief presents partial results from a review of academic literature on subnational multi-stakeholder¹ forums (MSFs) that were established to address the challenges of land use and land-use change. The study, known as a Realist Synthesis Review (RSR)², used systematic methods to select and analyze cases, examining how a specific situation or context (e.g. social and political processes and institutions, gender, history, resources) affects the outcomes of MSFs.³ However, the analysis led to findings on an equally important issue: how to engage stakeholders in a way that addresses such context and therefore produces better outcomes.

We define MSFs as purposely organized interactive processes that bring together a range of stakeholders to participate in

dialogue, decision making and/or implementation in order to address a land or resource problem or to achieve a common goal. These participatory platforms have received renewed attention from policy makers as well as development and conservation practitioners due to the growing urgency to address climate change and transform development trajectories. This summary aims to inform those who are designing and implementing MSFs, as well as the donors and organizations funding MSFs. As the review suggests, it is important to remember that participatory approaches to conservation and development are not new, and there is much to learn from past experience.

Although the emphasis in the review was on studying the effects of context on the outcomes of MSFs, the central lessons that emerged from the analysis are about the approach to context. The review revealed that the MSFs most likely to achieve their outcomes were those that were purposefully recognized as part of a wider process seeking to transform practices at multiple levels. They entailed a period of research and meetings at upper levels (e.g. decision makers in government or NGOs who can facilitate or block change) to identify potential roadblocks and existing capacities in cooperation with those who would implement the project

1 The meaning of the term stakeholder depends on who is counted as holding a stake, thus determining who is invited to the table. This can influence possible solutions. For our purposes, we try to use the term interchangeably with 'actors' and note that defining who is at the table is a central variable for analysis.

2 For other examples, see Nilsson et al. 2016 and McClain et al. 2018.

3 See Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020 (review), 2018 (protocol) and the companion brief (on context) Sarmiento Barletti and Larson 2020.

locally. These MSFs built consensus and commitment from higher levels (along with political will) and were designed as adaptive learning processes⁴.

While understanding context is essential to produce more resilient initiatives, the cases point to the need for a shift in focus away from project design toward *designing for engagement*. This means an emphasis not on how to work passively within or around context, but how to engage stakeholders in a way that actively addresses each distinct context, whatever its features, in the process of both project design and implementation. This Infobrief sets out the research and lessons that led to the *designing for engagement* proposition.

MSFs: Pluralism in action or 'box-ticking'?

The review focuses on forums established at the subnational level that include at least one governmental and one non-governmental participant. Subnational MSFs were chosen for three reasons. First, current analysis on MSFs and land use and land-use change centers on initiatives at the international level (e.g. the Roundtable on Responsible Soy and the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil). Second, subnational MSFs are closer to the geographical spaces and stakeholders involved in and affected by land-use change, planning and management. Third, the analysis contributes to a growing interest in scholarship and practice on jurisdictional approaches to tackle climate change and deforestation (Boyd et al. 2018; Stickler et al. 2018).

The growth of MSFs reflects the awareness that environmental problems cannot be addressed without the effective engagement of the actors that determine land-use practices on the ground; nor can such problems be resolved within a conservation community when the drivers are located in other sectors. The most widespread approaches – often referred to as 'business as usual' – are commonly top-down, focused on a single sector, and expert-driven. Furthermore, research conducted by the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) on multilevel governance⁵ found a tendency, particularly among NGOs and donors, to see MSFs as a key part of the solution to problems such as land degradation (Ravikumar et al. 2018). New scholarly work supports the implementation of such approaches (Kusters et al. 2018). This renewed emphasis on participatory platforms calls for an assessment of lessons from decades of research and implementation experience (e.g. Chambers 1983; Cornwall 2004).

Analysts acknowledge the challenge to conservation and development posed by power inequalities between stakeholders but diverge on whether participatory processes, such as MSFs, can transform them. Some researchers see the potential of such platforms to promote 'horizontal' (e.g. cross-issue and cross-sectoral) decision making and greater equity for local populations. In this view, by bringing together the different stakeholders, these participatory processes can address power inequalities among participants. They also lead to solutions that are more acceptable to local actors than those that top-down decision making or bilateral negotiations offer. Furthermore, such processes allow decision makers and other participants to understand the perspectives of those most affected by land-use policy and decisions, while bringing on board those who can affect implementation and thus outcomes (Faysse et al. 2006). This optimism, not always supported by evidence, is also reflected in policy and practice as many donors and practitioners emphasize the importance of stakeholder participation in decision-making processes related to land use and land-use change. Local populations, especially indigenous organizations, are also demanding such participation; in fact, the internationally recognized right to 'Free, Prior and Informed Consent' requires it (Espinoza Llanos and Feather 2011).

Other analysts claim that mainstream participation is a shroud for technologies of governance that do not address – and may reinforce – structures of inequality among participants (Cornwall 2004). A critical awareness of power imbalances between participants is central to this side of the debate, not only in terms of access to economic and natural resources but also to technical knowledge and to being invited to participate in the first place (Young 2000). According to these scholars, the agreements or outcomes reached tend to rely on voluntary compliance, are not enforceable and carry no sanctions, which may create or exacerbate conflicts among participating stakeholders (Mena and Palazzo 2012). Other analysts say these platforms are rarely or inconsistently analyzed and require more nuanced monitoring methods that are developed in a participative way (Kusters et al. 2018).

Despite such analysis, the transformational potential of collaborative platforms is still seen as powerful. And although a transition toward a substantive multi-stakeholder model would be laudable, many participatory initiatives have at least partly been 'box-ticking exercises' to satisfy legal or donor demands, or to legitimate decisions that have already been made or have since lost relevance. Recognizing that 'context matters' in conservation and development initiatives, the review team sought to understand how this affects MSFs in order to derive lessons for forums that would be resilient.

4 Adaptive learning is reflexive, accepting that knowledge is incomplete and that our ideas may be wrong, and thus involves rethinking and renegotiating strategies, activities and the assumptions behind them.

5 See <https://www.cifor.org/gcs/modules/multilevel-governance/>

Method

The review was carried out in five phases that are explained in detail in the protocol (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2018). The first phase consisted of the initial systematic search, and the second narrowed down the set of articles (from 984 to 124) to those that fulfilled the criteria of subnational MSFs with at least one government and one non-government actor. The third phase synthesized extracted 'program theories'

(see below) from remaining articles by considering how each MSF 'should have' worked and with what mechanisms. During the fourth phase, research was carried out beyond the original articles to understand the main contextual factors that affected each case (42 articles). The fifth and final phase synthesized the remaining 16 articles and 19 case studies in total (with sufficient depth of information) into context, mechanism and outcome patterns based on the theory of participation used by each program (Table 1).

Table 1. Case studies (general summary)

Case	Short title	Reference	Model(s)	Initiator	Participating Stakeholders
1 Joint Forest Management in Gadabanikilo, India	1/Gadabanikilo JFM	Nayak and Berkes 2008	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government	Community, government
2 Joint Forest Management in Uttaranchal, India	2/Uttaranchal JFM	Mohanty 2004	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government	Community, government
3 Joint Forest Planning Management in Karnataka, India	3/Karnataka JFPM	Martin and Lemon 2001	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government & donor	Community, government, NGO
4 Joint Forest Management in Karnataka, India	4/Karnataka JFM	Martin and Lemon 2001	Sustainability & Livelihoods (development)	Government	Community, government, NGO
5 Community Forest Program, Nepal	5/Nepal CFP	McDougall et al. 2013	Sustainability & Participation	Government	Community, government, NGO
6 Bangkok Urban Green Space, Thailand	6/Bangkok Green	Stringer et al. 2006	Sustainability & Participation	NGO	Community, government, NGO
7 Campo-Ma'an Model Forest, Cameroon	7/Campo-Ma'an MF	Jum et al. 2007	Sustainability & Participation	NGO	Community, government, NGO
8 Dja et Mpomo Model Forest, Cameroon	8/Dja et Mpomo MF	Jum et al. 2007	Sustainability & Participation	NGO	Community, government, NGO
9 Juma Sustainable Development Reserve Project, Brazil	9/Juma REDD+	Gebara 2013	Livelihoods (development) & Multilevel Coordination	NGO & private	Community, government, NGO, private
10 Oddar Meanchey REDD+ Project, Cambodia	10/Oddar Meanchey REDD+	Pasgaard 2015	Livelihoods (development) & Multilevel Coordination	NGO & donor	Community, government, NGO, private
11 Finger Lakes National Forest, United States	11/Finger Lakes	Twarkins et al. 2001	Participation	Government	Community, government
12 District Forest Coordination Committees, Nepal	12/Nepal DFCC	Rana et al. 2009	Participation	Government	Community, government
13 Hin Nam No Protected Area, Lao PDR	13/Hin Nam No	de Koning et al. 2017	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	Government & donor	Community, government
14 Vilhelmina Model Forest, Sweden	14/Vilhelmina MF	Klenk et al. 2013	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO, private

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Table 1. Continue

Case	Short title	Reference	Model(s)	Initiator	Participating Stakeholders
15 Nusa Tenggara Barat, Indonesia	15/Nusa Tenggara Barat	Butler et al. 2016	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO
16 Cardoso Island State Park, Brazil	16/Cardoso Island	Sessin-Dilascio et al., 2015	Livelihoods (development) & Participation	Government	Community, government
17 Prince Albert Model Forest, Canada	17/Prince Albert MF	Klenk et al. 2013	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO, private
18 Monarch Butterfly Regional Forum, Mexico	18/Monarch Butterfly	Brenner and Job 2012	Livelihoods (development) & Multilevel Coordination	Government	Community, government, NGO, private
19 Manitoba Model Forest, Canada	19/Manitoba MF	Parkins et al. 2016	Participation & Multilevel Coordination	NGO	Community, government, NGO

Why people organize MSFs

'Program theories' represent different – albeit overlapping – models, based on various priorities and assumptions, to foster sustainable land use through participatory engagement (Table 2). In each approach, the intended role of the MSF varies, but all aim to obtain local 'buy-in' using different primary mechanisms: sustainability, livelihoods, participation and multilevel coordination.

Sustainability

The approach to these MSFs proposes to increase both sustainability and social inclusion by engaging local peoples in decision-making processes or management bodies seeking more sustainable land use. These initiatives view sustainability as a positive concept that local communities will buy into once they understand this through their participation, which is otherwise somewhat limited. Eight cases followed this approach.⁶

Livelihoods (i.e. development)

Under this model, MSF organizers understand that conservation – or more sustainable practices – will likely incur livelihood losses that need to be offset by new economic opportunities. The eight cases following this approach included a mechanism that aims to generate new income or benefits from more sustainable land use, which will outweigh the incurred losses of local people if they change their

practices.⁷ Furthermore, this model proposes that participating in relevant decision making will motivate stakeholders to follow this path.

Participation

The proponents of these MSFs believe that more sustainable land use is possible if communities are given greater control over natural resources through the integration and formalization of local institutions. These are likely to involve some kind of co-management or co-learning arrangement. This is expected to lead to more sustainable land use that is economically beneficial to local populations and will reduce vulnerabilities. The 11 cases under this model applied a mechanism that involves granting local communities more control over their resources through co-management and co-learning and/or capacity-building efforts.⁸

Multilevel coordination

These MSFs seek to create more sustainable land use by setting up initiatives that bring together different stakeholders – including government agencies – from different levels. The six cases under this model applied a mechanism through which multilevel coordination and collaborative decision making are expected to lead to more sustainable land use.⁹

6 1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM, 4/Karnataka JFM, 5/Nepal CFP, 6/Bangkok Green, 7/Campo-Ma'an MF, 8/Dja et Mpomo MF.

7 1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM, 4/Karnataka JFM, 9/Juma REDD+, 10/Oddar Meanchey REDD+, 16/Cardoso Island, 18/Monarch Butterfly.

8 5/Nepal CFP, 6/Bangkok Green, 7/Campo-Ma'an MF, 11/Finger Lakes, 12/Nepal DFCC, 13/Hin Nam No, 14/Vilhelmina MF, 15/Nusa Tenggara Barat, 16/Cardoso Island, 17/Prince Albert MF, 19/Manitoba MF.

9 10/Oddar Meanchey REDD+, 13/Hin Nam No, 14/Vilhelmina MF, 15/Nusa Tenggara Barat, 17/Prince Albert MF, 18/Monarch Butterfly.

Table 2. Models for participation

Model	Mechanism	Intended outcome
Sustainability – seeks to integrate sustainable land-use change, livelihood, and social inclusion goals.	Include local people in sustainability initiatives to motivate them to adopt the proposed practices.	Improved sustainable land use, reducing the vulnerability of local people, and enhancing their participation in decision making
Livelihood (development) – seeks change by integrating sustainable land-use and development goals.	Create economic output through protecting and/or regenerating forests, and distribute output among local stakeholders to provide development benefits.	The income or benefits of the new land use outweighs the income losses incurred by local stakeholders from prior practices. This motivates them to implement the initiative.
Participation – seeks change by providing communities with greater control over natural resources through local institutions, which are integrated with government and formalized.	Grant local communities more control over their resources through co-management and co-learning and/or capacity-building effort.	More sustainable land use that is economically beneficial to local populations, and will reduce vulnerabilities.
Multilevel – seeks change through cross-scale initiatives that involve different stakeholders and government agencies, from different sectors and levels.	Enhance social capital through collaborative decision making and multilevel coordination.	More transparent and legitimate participatory process with increased local ownership of initiative.

This will also bring about a more transparent and legitimate participatory process, increasing local participation and thus local ownership of the initiative.

Lessons toward more responsive MSFs

Four interlinked factors were identified as key features of the cases demonstrating at least some success in promoting meaningful participation of more marginalized actors and addressing inequality.

Commitment to the people, the process and the goals, demonstrated by time, resources and follow-through that ensures policy and law is practiced, and participation goals are met.

Among the cases, 13/Hin Nam No demonstrates the government’s political will to put collaborative management of an important Protected Area into practice, a change that was brought about by its interest in bringing tourism into the area. In several cases (e.g. 1/Gadabanikilo JFM, 2/ Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM, 4/Karnataka JFM), there is evidence of a disconnect between law and practice, when local people technically had the right to participate but government officials and/or elites prevented this from occurring effectively, or when there was insufficient investment in time and resources to allow for the implementation of the MSFs. Of course in other cases the law is not on the side of participation at all.

The cases also reveal the importance of the link between the MSF’s durability and changes in commitment (at times unpredictable), as the development and conservation

priorities of different stakeholders transformed over time. The review shows that government commitment and openness are needed to establish legal frameworks for decentralization and the inclusion of local people in decision-making processes, and to ensure that this is implemented. This leads to the second factor.

Engagement with the implementers – including key brokers and mid-level government officials – who determine what actually happens on the ground.

In some cases (e.g. 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM), initiatives were unsuccessful because there was a disconnect between the project’s apparent goals and the way these were implemented by facilitators who were not as committed or had a different understanding of the project goals than those who developed them. Conversely, 6/Bangkok Green shows the benefit of actively engaging local government planners who might otherwise have been reluctant to participate. This was central to its sustainability as it built trust between communities and government, which resulted in a plan for maintaining the project into the future. This highlights the importance of aligning commitments and agendas while ensuring that those who can effect change are truly participating (or are effectively represented) in the MSF. Over time, such an approach may be more enduring as political regimes change.

Learning from and listening to stakeholders, especially those with traditionally weaker positions.

There is evidence across the cases that framing projects to address gender inequalities without strong commitment of time, resources and sound methods may not lead to the intended outcome. Using women’s attendance at meetings as evidence

of participation may exacerbate problems, as it might legitimize a deeply unequal decision-making system (1/Gadabanihilo JFM, 2/Uttaranchal JFM, 3/Karnataka JFPM). By comparison, 7/Campo-Ma'an MF and 8/Dja et Mpomo MF demonstrate the productive results of a willingness to listen, whereby the mobilization of women claiming access rights to forests led to changes in some governance practices in two Model Forests.

Adaptability to the lessons learned.

Adaptability goes hand in hand with learning. The latter is of little help if the process is not designed to adapt to the needs of those with weaker positions in decision making, or even to change the project's priorities in order to challenge institutions reinforcing inequality. The openness to learn and adapt is especially important when considering how MSFs may impact (positively or not) standing local institutions. In some cases (e.g. 3/Karnataka JFPM, 17/Prince Albert MF, 19/Manitoba MF), ignoring unofficial/informal systems of forest and resource management, and the historical and changing nature of relationships (including power imbalances), undermined some of the vulnerable groups that the MSFs sought to support. Exchanging these informal mechanisms with formal regulations and stricter enforcement can lead to greater vulnerability even when 'participation' is mandated. This attention to institutions – including institutions of representation (Ribot 2007) – requires an understanding that may only be available to MSF organizers and/or proponents after a period of research, reflection and co-learning.

These four factors work together. The cases that applied this kind of attention to learning (e.g. 5/Nepal CFP, 6/Bangkok Green, 15/Nusa Tenggara Barat) were able to do so because they had funding and time. This allowed these MSFs to have an intentionally adaptive design, with a focus on learning (including research), recognition of power differentials between stakeholders (including knowledge disparities) and preparing local people for participation. It allowed forum organizers and participants to build trust and political will for the initiative, and in doing so enabled stakeholders to understand the consequences and opportunities of change.

Designing for engagement: Guidelines for a shift in approach for MSFs

The kind of design implied here is neither strictly top-down nor bottom-up. Rather, designing for engagement, or engaging for design, is an adaptive process with feedback loops from top to bottom to top. This includes a period of research and meetings at multiple levels to understand the potential challenges that local project implementers will face within the broader context with which they are engaging. It involves taking the time to research and map local stakeholders and institutions; power relationships between stakeholders; and ways of knowing – which are

fundamental to designing projects that have the potential to address underlying inequities. The process allows for the building of consensus and commitment at different levels, resulting in greater political will. It also helps to build capacity and empower local people to be more effective in decision-making processes and to fight for their rights.

The approach is also designed for social learning, which is central to adaptive management and committed to reflection (Berkes 2009). When feedback from the process leads actors to reflect on and change their initial assumptions, this is referred to as 'double-loop learning' (Maarleveld and Dabgbégnon 1999). 'Triple-loop' learning (Romm and Flood 1996) leads to a shift in the frame of reference, where the observer steps out of his or her experience into another's (Peschl 2007; Evans et al. In press). Such learning demands humility on the part of organizers and implementers and sees local people as partners in finding solutions rather than as project beneficiaries.

We are not suggesting that the combination of these four factors provides a magic bullet for addressing inequality. Power imbalances may be such that local people cannot insist on their own positions. Commitment, engagement, listening and the will to change are characteristics of a *process* that the cases suggest should be part of MSFs that aim to promote change through any of the four models for fostering sustainable land use through participatory engagement. Challenging the institutions upholding discrimination and inequality may take much more than this (e.g. rebalancing the distribution of material resources, Larson and Ribot 2007), but understanding the playing field and building more equitable processes would be a big step in the right direction. MSFs will not solve everything but rather should be part of a larger strategy.

Our concerns arise from practices we see commonly in the field, as well as some current tendencies that could drive in the opposite direction. One of those is the increasingly short-term nature of donor funding and, at the same time, the tying of funding to simple, quantifiable impact indicators. The former runs counter to the findings of this study, while the latter, in the interest of numbers, fails to capture meaningful changes. Another concern is the increasing urgency to address climate change, as calls for immediate action can reinforce top-down tendencies over engagement, listening and learning (Hulme 2011).

Donors should be pressured to support longer-term investments and flexible funding that encourage the widespread adoption of such engagement approaches and that can adapt to negotiated, emerging priorities. Practitioners should adopt the level of humility implicit in adaptive learning, and be open to triple-loop learning. Projects should work with local people to actively map and analyze institutional and power relationships, as well as other contextual factors. Through engaged analysis, the groundwork is laid to challenge the power relations that often hamper multi-stakeholder processes.

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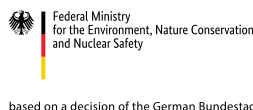
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