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Human Sciences Research Council

Impact Centre

Impact Training Guides and Workshop Series

Stakeholder Engagement: Principles and Practices Guide II

Dr Buhle Khanyile

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Introduction

This short Stakeholder Engagement Guide II is a supplement to the Impact Planning Guide I. It specifically extends and deepens the guidelines on stakeholder engagement focusing on principles and best practices for planning, facilitating and managing stakeholder engagements. The Guide draws its rationale from the salience placed on stakeholder engagement in Guide I through the 'relational approach to impact' (see p. 3-4) that argues that research uptake, use and consequently impact is a function of productive and long-lasting relationships with the would-be users of the research we undertake (i.e., stakeholders). In addition, there is now a growing body of research demonstrating not only the value of stakeholder engagement for creating societal impact. This multidisciplinary research has offered guiding principles, best practices, recommendations and frameworks for successful stakeholder engagement as the bridge between science and society and policy and society. Put differently, stakeholder engagement is a pathway to impact and as such it requires careful planning and skilful management.

The Impact Planning training workshop based on Guide I outlines several reasons that have made impact planning, including stakeholder engagement, a crucial practice and skill in the current juncture in the South African national science, and technology system, the internal reconfigurations of HSRC and changes in the international research funding landscape. It is for these reasons that this Guide aims to offer HSRC researchers advanced guidelines on the 'science and art' of stakeholder engagement as an increasingly indispensable research practice for societal impact.

Presently, there is no shortage of Handbooks, peer reviews research, blogs and organisations that offer skills, guidelines and training on stakeholder engagement. After studying a lot of these resources, I began to compile the recurring themes from various sources with the view to present them as a Guide for the HSRC. This resulted in a long document which I thought was too cumbersome for a simple and easy to understand Guide that I wanted to develop. I then decided to find either one or two documents or resources that contained the common themes across other resources. Such a resource was the BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook (2014) from which I borrowed in compiling this Guide. BiodivERsA is a network of national funding organisations promoting pan-European research that offers innovative opportunities for the conservation and sustainable management of biodiversity and ecosystem services.

For ease of reading, I have not referenced page numbers. Similarly, I have placed endnotes with references many of which are open source. These references are also intended to be a resource not only for those who wish to consult the original research that the Handbook draws from but also in the writing of grant proposals or any other research activities that require a justification for stakeholder engagement. I have also included additional references that are not included in the BiodivERsA Handbook. Even with all this, this Guide is by no means exhaustive as there are several other principles, practices and methods that it does not cover. For instance, Parts 4 and 5 of the BiodivERsA Handbook covers 'When to Engage Stakeholders' and 'Methods for Engagement' respectively.

Despite the rich knowledge fund on engagement, I have attempted to keep the Guide short as a way of regulating the amount of information presented here that may be new altogether or new to some degree. I adopted this approach because conducting the Impact Planning workshops, I came to appreciate that, at this early stage, the HRSC impact agenda is demanding significant mental bandwidth from all of us as we grapple with understanding how best to design, plan and co-create impact with your stakeholders. I, therefore, wanted this Guide to be useful in nudging us toward a better understanding of stakeholder engagement without being overwhelming. We can and will invariably supplement the information contained in this Guide as we gain confidence and mastery of the complexities of stakeholder engagement as research activity and a pathway to impact. Lastly, there are also several other links to various resources on stakeholder engagement that are worth your exploration. I hope you find this Guide helpful as you navigate the significant changes in the way we are being asked to conduct research brought about by the 'impact turn' generally and more immediately the HSRC's (re)commitment to relevant, visible and impactful Humanities and Social Science research.

1. Why is Stakeholder Engagement Beneficial?

There are several reasons for undertaking stakeholder engagement within research. These include: promoting links between science and society, gaining access to additional information or resources, and improving the relevance or utility of the research to users and beneficiaries. For example, by engaging with stakeholders, the research outcomes can become tailored more effectively to local contexts, increasing the likelihood that outcomes are adopted and applied, and leading to beneficial impacts for all[1].

Additionally, engagement can lead to learning and empowerment. By engaging with researchers, stakeholders can learn and assist in the generation of new knowledge (e.g., social learning, knowledge exchange)[2], and maybe empowered to become involved in future research[3]. Furthermore, by considering local knowledge in the research process, it becomes possible to anticipate and improve unexpected negative outcomes before they occur[4]. Well managed engagement can also facilitate learning and trust between participants, and help mediate conflicts[5]. Establishing the reason(s) for engagement is a critical first step before any engagement is undertaken. Existing literature suggests that the benefits of engagement can far outweigh the risks, including those risks posed by lack of engagement[6]. If well planned, and adequately resourced successful engagement can enrich research and deliver better knowledge, and thus better outcomes for society.

2. Challenges and Limitations to Engagement

Although there is strong evidence that effective engagement can bring many benefits to the research process, it is important to approach engagement critically and to be aware of some of the challenges and limitations that may be faced. For example, engagement increases the costs to both the research project and

the stakeholders in the short term. They might also make the undertaking of the project more complicated; whereas the useful outcomes can be long term or seem intangible and remote. Some scientists may see the involvement of stakeholders as a constraint instead of an opportunity[7], and some stakeholders may lack the time to engage, or experience 'stakeholder fatigue': that is, they begin to feel overloaded with engagement activities, which negatively affects willingness to participate and lessens the quality of their input.

In addition, unbalanced engagement can lead to perverse or poor decisions if it inadvertently reinforces existing privileges, or where group dynamics discourage minority perspectives[8]. Ethical considerations include intellectual property rights (IPR), which need to be discussed and agreed upon to ensure stakeholders are clear about the implications of their involvement, especially if they are data suppliers. The majority of barriers to engagement can be overcome with effective design and good facilitation.[9] Table 1 provides an overview of key challenges and limitations associated with stakeholder engagement, with a brief list of ways these could be avoided or overcome.

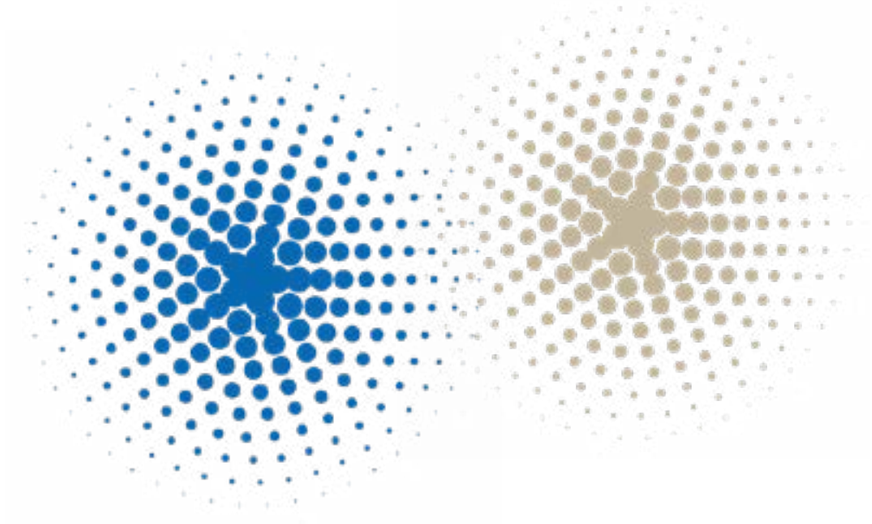

Table 1: Ways of overcoming challenges and limitations to stakeholder engagement

	Challenges and Limitations	Ways to avoid or overcome
1	**Stakeholder Fatigue**[10]: may occur where many stakeholder engagement initiatives have taken place in the past, especially in circumstances where they did not lead to tangible outcomes for stakeholders. This may result in limited engagement with research.	Where possible, avoid working with communities suffering from stakeholder fatigue. Where this is not possible, ensure there will be tangible benefits for stakeholders from engaging with your research and work with opinion leaders (who you may identify using stakeholder analysis) to persuade others that it is important to engage with the project.
2	**Biased Representation of Stakeholders or Stakeholders missing**[11]: this may lead to some stakeholders raising questions over the legitimacy of outcomes by some stakeholders.	Conduct a systematic stakeholder analysis to identify and prioritise those who should be engaged. Consider who might have the most influence, but do not neglect those stakeholders with significant interest in your research, who may be powerless or marginalised.
3	**Power Imbalances with Stakeholder Engagement Activities**[12]: may lead to dominance by particular individuals and agendas, at the expense of others, whose ideas are not heard, making them feel marginalised, and potentially leading to or exacerbating conflict.	Carefully design stakeholder engagement activities with a professional facilitator, considering: parallel activities for groups in conflict or with significant differences in power; and facilitation methods that enable all participants to provide and comment on ideas (possibly anonymously). If there is no facilitation budget, undertake basic facilitation training for a member of the research team.
4	**Short-term Engagement**[13]: stakeholder engagement often lasts only for the duration of funded projects, making it difficult to achieve impacts and deliver benefits expected by stakeholders.	Identify local organisations that might have a long-term presence in your study area and plan the legacy of your research with them from the outset, giving them sufficient ownership of the research to continue investing in outcomes long after the research has ended. Find ways to fund ongoing engagement, even if very limited, to maintain relationships, and lay foundations for future research that could be funded.
5	**Unrealistic High Expectations**[14]: engagement can sometimes create unrealistically high expectations among stakeholders who engage early in the research process and discover their suggestions are not compatible with the scope of the research or are not funded.	Manage expectations carefully from the outset. If engaging with stakeholders during project development, make it clear if funding is uncertain; ensure you are engaging with those who have a strong interest in your research; identify which ideas the project team may be able to work with immediately, and update stakeholders as soon as possible with research plans to show which of their ideas have been integrated and why it was not possible to integrate all ideas.

3. Credible, Relevant and Legitimate Stakeholder Engagement

For research to be considered valid and valuable, it has been recognised that it should be undertaken with credibility, relevance and legitimacy (referred to as 'CRELE')[15]. These three factors can be strengthened by appropriate engagement with stakeholders[16]. However, the same principles can be applied to the stakeholder engagement undertaken within that research – engagement that incorporates credibility, relevance and legitimacy is likely to have greater validity and impact. There are examples of research projects in which stakeholder engagement failed to deliver intended outcomes, or led to unanticipated negative consequences, but benefits were still accrued. In certain circumstances, stakeholder engagement can occur in a situation of conflict, which must be handled carefully and sensitively. Many scientists are [not used] to working in situations where conflicts between individuals and goals are present and may prefer to avoid it. However, in some [instances] conflict is to be expected and should be planned for in a positive, constructive way.

Table 2: Making Stakeholder Engagement Credible, Relevant and Legitimate

CREDIBILITY	is the perceived quality and validity of the stakeholder engagement process and the people involved in the engagement[17]. To improve credibility, a stakeholder engagement process should have clear objectives, use the most appropriate people and methods, but avoid exclusion of those with opposing views, and be transparent; the view that others have of the process is also important. Some continuity of those involved in stakeholder engagement exercises is also considered important to ensure that knowledge and skills are built upon and to maintain relationships and build trust.
RELEVANCE	refers to the usefulness of the engagement process and its outcomes – how closely it relates to stakeholders and researchers needs, and how responsive the process is to changing needs Research teams can enhance relevance by adapting language for different stakeholder groups, ensuring appropriate timing and outcomes of the engagement, and being adaptable to changing circumstances. Relevance can also be improved by identifying of key stakeholders in the planning stages of the process, and ensuring effective engagement and communication with them throughout. Relevance is key to motivating participation and ultimately having a real impact.
LEGITIMACY	is the perceived fairness and balance of the stakeholder engagement process, and is particularly important in cases where conflict may occur? A clearly stated, appropriate and agreed stakeholder engagement process, along with appropriate methods, can help manage conflict and dissent, and therefore enhance legitimacy[18]. In addition, stakeholders need to feel satisfied that their interests have been taken into account appropriately. The inclusion of a balanced group of multiple stakeholders can improve legitimacy, although care must be taken to ensure this legitimacy is not threatened if some of the stakeholders are viewed to be inappropriate by others in the group. Employing unbiased facilitators to help run engagement activities can also help.
GETTING THE BALANCE	Building these three factors into the stakeholder engagement process takes time, effort and resources, and it may not always be possible to enhance all aspects of CRELE. For example, linking with policymakers improves the relevance of the engagement process and its desired outcomes for some stakeholders, but may be perceived by others as affecting the legitimacy of the process[19]. The most appropriate approach will be dependent on the individual project, and the desired outcomes of the engagement. However, early engagement is likely to make the engagement process more credible and relevant; and finding the right mix of participants and ensuring no groups have been excluded will enhance legitimacy and credibility.

4. Key Points to Consider for Effective Stakeholder Engagement

4.1. *Why?*
- Have clear aims for stakeholder engagement in your project, and set these aims from the outset.
- Identify the benefits for stakeholders who engage with you.
- Determine and understand the motivations of stakeholders to be involved in the research process.

4.2. *How?*
- Every engagement process is different and needs to be properly funded and managed by those with understanding (and ideally training) in stakeholder engagement.
- Adapt the process to suit the needs of both the researchers and stakeholders alike.
- Plan your engagement and make sure you engage early in the research process (as early as possible); include scoping studies where appropriate.
- Think about the timing of your research and its outputs, and consider whether it can inform any relevant external or policy processes.

4.3. *Who?*
- Systematically identify those who are likely to hold an interest in the research, including those who have the power to influence the uptake of the research findings.
- Be inclusive – do not exclude groups that are difficult to reach and ensure rebalanced participation of all relevant demographic groups.

4.4. *Ways to Successful Engagement*
- Engage in dialogue with stakeholders as equals and value their knowledge.
- Allow stakeholders to help plan their engagement.
- Remember that not all stakeholders will have the same role or desire to be involved; not every stakeholder needs to be involved all of the time.
- Where it is considered appropriate to give stakeholders power to influence the course of the research project; do so where it is suitable in the project team (e.g., via stakeholder advisory panels).
- Use 'knowledge brokers' (who are connected to, and trusted by, different stakeholder groups) and experts in stakeholder engagement (including professional facilitators or science advocates) if project teams do not have the expertise or experience.
- Address ethical issues, including intellectual property rights (IPR).
- Manage expectations by being clear on what can or cannot change.
- Be prepared to be flexible and adaptable, tailoring research activities and communication of findings (e.g., policy processes or topical issues) as required.
- Ensure communications can be easily understood by all stakeholders – do not use complex or technical language unless this is asked for by the stakeholder.
- Tailor engagement to the practical and cultural needs of stakeholders, bringing the project to where they are, at times of the day and year that are suitable for them; where deemed appropriate, consider selecting or splitting groups according to gender or age.
- Do not forget to provide feedback to stakeholders as soon as possible/promptly.

4.5. *Beyond the Project's Life*
- Think about the long-term impacts of the project and the potential legacy.
- Assess the success of engagement throughout the research process, share good practice with peers, reflect on whether certain approaches need to be adapted, and assess the implications of any future practice.

5. Planning the Details of the Engagement

At this stage it is important to consider the following:

- Target your activities – it may be better to do less, but to do it more effectively.
- Estimate likely costs (time and money) accurately, and be realistic (don't underestimate).
- Think about what expertise you have and plan accordingly. Do you need to involve/employ external experts, and if so, do you have the funds?
- Where choices have to be made, use high impact/low-cost methods and activities, and if necessary, concentrate on the most important and influential stakeholders.
- Try to make use of other pre-existing approaches or activities where available and appropriate.
- Take into account possible unexpected outcomes (positive or negative).
- Time your research, or some of its outputs, where appropriate, to enable it to inform any relevant external or policy process.

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CASE STUDIES

CASE STUDY

ALLOW TIME FOR SCOPING AND PILOT STUDIES

Good planning is fundamental to the success of stakeholder engagement activities and maintaining the positive perceptions of the engagement experience for stakeholders. Researchers of the BiodivERsA project committed considerable resources to scoping activities within focal Caribbean communities that depend on the health of coral reefs for their livelihoods, before beginning stakeholder engagement. The subsequent stakeholder activities were perceived to be successful and this is partly attributable to the investment in the scoping work. The following measures were taken:

- Avoiding potential stakeholder fatigue: stakeholders were informed of projects aims and asked if similar research has been conducted to avoid replication.
- Refining methodologies: a pilot project was run in one area to ensure approaches and questions were well received and understood by stakeholders.
- Raising awareness: community meetings were widely published using flyers and spreading the word verbally to ensure that the communities were well informed of the aims of the research project.
- Developing local contacts: researchers recruited local assistants who has a good knowledge of the local communities and local issues to assist with stakeholder engagement. Researchers who are viewed as 'outsiders' from another country may be viewed with distrust; developing relationships with local contact who are known and trusted can be a good way of overcoming this. Some of the details of local case studies (e.g., study sites) were jointly decided with stakeholders to ensure the research was of interest and relevant to them.

CASE STUDY

PLAN HOW THE STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT FITS WITHIN EXTERNAL AGENDAS AND POLICY

To increase the relevance of engagement activities for stakeholders and the likelihood of the results having an impact, it is necessary to understand the wider context in which the project fits. Understanding, for example, the current policy context and how the results will contribute to an evidence base that informs decision making will increase the interest of stakeholders in the project.

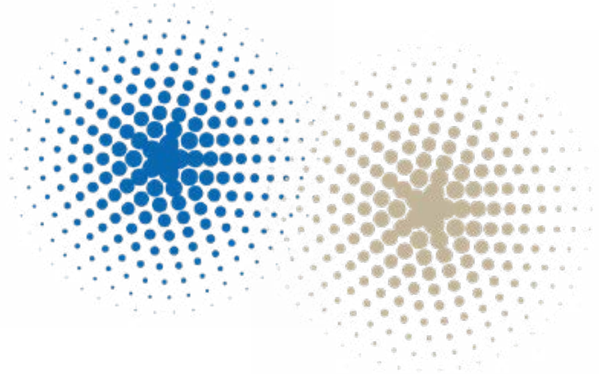
Results from a Dutch case study – part of the BiodivERsA CONNECT project – provided an analysis of the social values held by the general public for changes in and around a freshwater lake. A government-agent partner in the project communicated the findings for inclusion in a public consultation about local planning and also used them to inform larger government programmes about water resources and ecosystem services.

CASE STUDY

THINK ABOUT THE EXPERTISE WITHIN THE RESEARCH TEAM AND PLAN ACCORDINGLY

Projects that have interdisciplinary research teams including social scientists are often better equipped to design effective stakeholder engagement processes. Depending on the extent and nature of the stakeholder engagement to be done, it may be worthwhile including people with good facilitation experience on the research team to oversee the engagement process. For example, if there is a high level of conflict to be negotiated during engagement, a professional facilitator may help achieve the best results and avoid negative outcomes.

Researchers on the FP7 MOTIVE project successfully engaged stake- holders in the production of models for adaptive forest management by working from stakeholder engagement guidelines produced by an experienced social scientist as part of a dedicated work package on 'stakeholder interactions and decision making'. Each of the ten partner countries carried out stakeholder analyses and wrote engagement plans based on the guidelines, without necessarily having a great deal of prior experience in stakeholder engagement. The engagement aspects of the project were monitored by the social scientist, who ensured that a broadly consistent approach was maintained across countries.



5.1. The Engagement Planning Template

Table 3 is designed to enable researchers to bring together information on the role(s) the stakeholder will play, the timing of engagement activities, the method of engagement, and the level of engagement to be adopted. Note that stakeholders may, and often will, have multiple roles to play throughout a project.

It is important to recognise that the level of engagement depends partly on the chosen method of engagement and the stakeholder involved. Not every engagement activity needs to be at the level of engagement identified for a particular stakeholder. In some instances, engagement may be more frequent and conducted at a different level, particularly as the role a stakeholder may play can vary throughout the lifetime of the project. For example, a stakeholder may fall into the 'involve' category, but this level of engagement may only be necessary for the early stages of the projects, whereas later on the same stakeholder may only need to be involved with activities that 'inform'.

It is important to ensure that the methods being adopted are realistic and appropriate for delivering the desired outcomes and that the proposed timing has been accepted by those who are planned to be involved. It should also be remembered that the location, timing, number of meetings, and methods employed can all have a great impact on the overall results and outcomes.

Table 3: Stakeholder Engagement Planning Template

Project Timescale →	Before	During				During / After		After			
Roles of Stakeholders/ Areas of and level of influence/ How stakeholders are engaged a	Research strategy/ Research questions/ Project design	Networking	Advice/ Recommendations/ Project Revision	Prediction/ Modelling	Monitoring	Resource provision by stakeholder (equipment, data, money, contacts	Training	Data user/ Recipient/ Beneficiary	Feedback	Communication and dissemination of results to stakeholders	Identify future research questions
Stakeholders ↓	**Specific stakeholder activities**										
Government policymakers or advisors											
National/international policy makers/groups											
Non-government organisations											
Business/Private Sector											
General Public											
Local Community											
Users (e.g., practitioners, data users)											
Students											
Interpreters (e.g., science communicators, mediators, facilitators)											
Media											
Others											

Notes: Project timescale (top row) indicates the most likely stage at which each method would be applied. However, this is only a guide, as the timing may vary depending on the project. The methods can be colour-coded according to the 'level' of engagement (**Inform** – the most basic level of engagement; **Consult** – specific questions are asked but not full discussion or interaction; **Involve** – more opportunity for discussion; **Collaborate** – involved to some extent in full decision making). The table can be found here.

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6. Practicalities, Feasibility and Implementation

Before developing the matrix/template further, or sharing it with stakeholders, it is important to consider the practicalities of the engagement being proposed to establish if the plan is feasible. This should also involve consideration of the costs of the engagement, in terms of both time and money, as this will allow the researcher to identify any constraints.

The following question can help with considering practicalities:

- Are the timeframes for each activity realistic, including preparation, reviewing and analysis?
- Who will be responsible for the engagement – are different people to be responsible for different parts of it?
- How much staff time will be required? Is this time available? What will it cost?
- What are the costs of using external expertise (if desired/required)? What are the administrative costs, including hiring venues, making phone calls, provision of documents, etc.?
- Are stakeholders to be reimbursed for their time? Are their expenses to be covered? Are there other costs associated with communication and publishing information, including recording and providing feedback to stakeholders?
- How might the local culture/customs affect or restrict the engagement process? What contingencies need to be included in case the engagement needs to change the process, and what might different options mean to overall time scales and costs?

Responses to these questions may result in the need to update the engagement template.

6.1. Update, Adapt and Share

Once the practicalities have been considered, and the matrix has been revised where appropriate, it should be shared with stakeholders and funders, provide them with some clarity over what will be undertaken and when. Stakeholders may also have different views on their availability or have particular demands and constraints. For example, stakeholders may:

- Request that the engagement they undertake is on a one-to-one basis rather than in a group.
- Prefer to not interact with other particular stakeholders.
- Be unable to engage at the proposed time.
- Suggest that a different level, or method, of engagement, is more appropriate.

The template should remain a flexible and adaptable document, which can be amended and updated as and when required.

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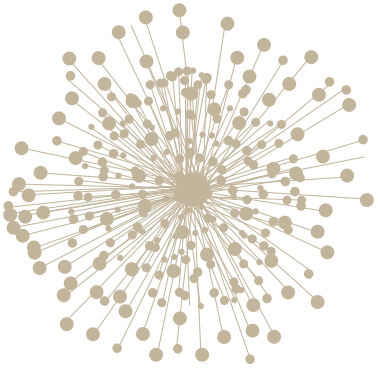
More Resources

- Biodiversa Stakeholder Engagement Handbook
- Association for Project Management - stakeholder engagement resources
- Simply Stakeholders – stakeholder engagement (best practice guide)
- Stakeholder Mapping – stakeholder management
- Society of Practitioners of Health Impact Assessment - stakeholder engagement tools and materials
- Bigger Investing – 15 books on stakeholder management



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