

7

Encourage Group Participation



Sometimes climate change communicators need to go beyond presenting to a general audience to brokering an environmental decision within a group setting. Many environmental decisions are group decisions, so it is vitally important for communicators to understand how people participate in group settings, whether public or

“closed door.” Some of the variables include: the relationships that exist among the individuals and groups involved; the participants’ individual and group goals; the different ways people participate in groups; and norms concerning how the meeting should be run.

EXAMPLE

Ugandan Farmers' Wives and Nonverbal Group Participation



Carla Roncoli

CRED research on farmer's decisions in the face of climate uncertainty in Uganda highlights that non-verbal behaviors during discussions are also forms of participation. Spatial arrangements reflect differences in social roles or power, which in turn affect how people participate. Ugandan men often sit close to the speakers, while the women sit on the margins of the group, tending

children and other tasks. Although some women may directly address the group (particularly if called upon), they more often talk among themselves or communicate through non-verbal means, such as glances, clapping, or laughter. Gender and social position are important for how one participates and how others regard one's contributions.⁶¹

UNDERSTANDING THE MANY WAYS PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN GROUPS

Norms about what happens in meetings are important because they determine who speaks when, how information is presented, and how people should disagree. Some people are more comfortable presenting from their experience, and this information should not be devalued because it is not "factual." There are also norms concerning language use: for instance, using technical language may seem rude when it makes the information being conveyed inaccessible to less-educated participants, essentially limiting their involvement in the discussion and, ultimately, the decision(s). There are similar norms concerning the meeting's end goal—in

some cultural contexts, reaching group consensus may have a higher value than representing differences and allowing everyone to express their opinion.⁶²

Eliciting participation from all of the various stakeholders is extremely important when trying to broker environmental decisions. Stakeholders who feel like they were part of the decision-making process are more likely to support the outcome. Early participation in the decision-making process is also a vital step in identifying the key problems that require solutions.

The example above indicates how understanding each audience member's particular form of participation can help communicators better judge if all members of the audience are taking part (in some form) in the discussion.

HOW TO SET THE STAGE FOR EFFECTIVE GROUP DISCUSSIONS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

Presentations on climate change are often filled with dense information that may leave group members with numerous questions and concerns. When organizing

meetings with a diverse group of stakeholders, the most vital thing to remember is to allow ample time for discussion. Anecdotal evidence suggests that breaking large groups into smaller groups can help initiate discussion.

The example below shows the successful application of participatory processes to natural resource management in Florida. The box on page 36 provides tips for encouraging group participation.

EXAMPLE

Lobster Fishing in the Florida Keys

The management of the spiny lobster fishery in the Florida Keys provides a great example of how to resolve a potential “tragedy of the commons” by encouraging the participation of all the various stakeholders. Social scientists Michael Orbach and Jeffrey Johnson worked with the commercial fishing industry, recreational fishermen, environmentalists, and others to solve the problem of having too many traps in the water.

With the input of fishermen and other stakeholder representatives, they gathered a wide range of opinions about the issue through participatory observation, mail surveys, and personal interviews. The researchers then held three series of workshops, each drawing up to 200 stakeholders and other interested members of the community.

The first series of workshops discussed whether there was a problem in the fishery and presented general information about limited entry systems (i.e., how many traps can be placed in the water), with specific examples. In the second series of workshops, participants developed a ranking system that they then applied to several possible alternatives to solve the problem according to specific criteria, which they also developed. In the third series the participants summed up the relative



Hartmut Inerle, commons.wikimedia.org

effects of their alternatives. The outcome of the third series of workshops was a recommendation to go with a transferable trap certificate program.

The program, which required Florida to implement new legislation, was actually lobbied for by the stakeholders—commercial and recreational fishermen and environmentalists! Through a participatory process, the group reached its main goals: to reduce the number of traps by over half while keeping the catch relatively constant. This successful shift increased the overall profitability of the fishery, reduced conflict, and made the fishery easier to manage.⁶³

Ways To Encourage Group Participation

- Know your audience. Be aware of differences among participants (i.e., education, wealth, occupation, ethnicity, religious motivations, understanding of participation norms). Consider who has authority and who does not.
.....
- Clarify expectations for the meeting and the role of the group in the decision(s) to be made. Will the group make the final decision, or are members only advising a decision-making body elsewhere? How will the final decision be made?
.....
- Try to involve as many people, or representatives of as many groups, as possible. Be aware of how people were invited to attend and if anyone was overlooked.
.....
- Think about how the group processes information. Will the individuals meet for the first time in a large group setting or will they meet ahead of time on a more informal basis to discuss issues? If so, communicators may want to distribute information ahead of time to give them time to review and prepare for the formal meeting.
.....
- Recognize different forms of participating. Work to include all voices—give everyone a chance to speak, and respect different methods for making an argument.
.....
- Make sure all viewpoints are represented. Solicit ideas from the different individuals involved in the discussion.
- Utilize pre-existing relationships within the group to communicate information since information passed through familiar channels is often most effective.
.....
- Be conscious of verbal and non-verbal means of participation. Appreciate non-linguistic means of communication such as disruptive behavior, nods of approval, or applause.
.....
- Acknowledge that participants will have other goals. Meetings are often a place for people to socialize, meet new people, and advance their own personal or political goals. These “social goals” are a necessary part of participation.
.....
- Be aware that members of a group will interact outside of meetings. A meeting is only one part of the whole decision process.
.....
- Use group discussion to generate solutions. People may be more willing to acknowledge a problem if they feel there are solutions to dealing with the problem. This can help keep messages positive, encourage optimism, and demonstrate how groups can be a powerful force in tackling the climate change challenges ahead.