



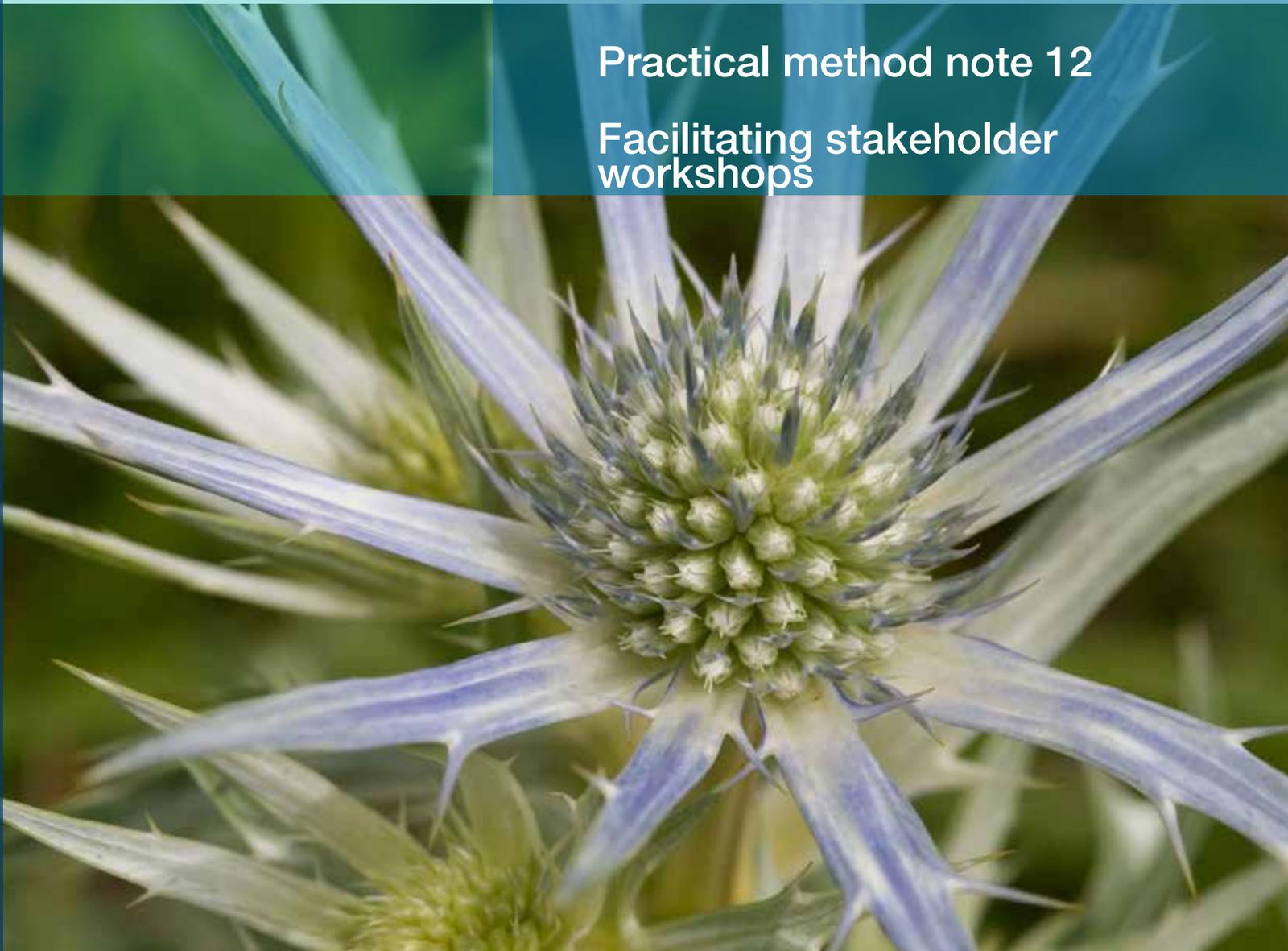
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The ERA-NET promoting European research on biodiversity

Annex 1

Practical method note 12

Facilitating stakeholder
workshops





FACILITATING STAKEHOLDER WORKSHOPS

Stakeholder workshops are increasingly used in research projects, yet despite planning and preparation an event can falter due to poor facilitation, leading to confusion and disengagement of stakeholders. Many researchers mistakenly think that because they are good at chairing meetings with academics, they can facilitate a stakeholder

workshop.

Having a good facilitator takes the pressure off the research team and invariably leads to better workshop outputs and happier participants.

IS A FACILITATOR REQUIRED AND ARE THEY AFFORDABLE?

There are a number of reasons why hiring a professional facilitator (or investing in learning facilitation skills) can be particularly useful when engaging with stakeholders and likely users of research during workshops, for example:

- * Efficiency: more can be discussed in less time, and the event runs to time.
- * Impartiality: a facilitator remains neutral and can be critical of the research if necessary.
- * A good facilitator can create a friendly, unthreatening and helpful atmosphere in which people feel comfortable talking.

Professional facilitation can ensure that workshops run smoothly and may be especially important in areas of conflict. However, facilitators can be expensive and prices vary with the expertise and reputation of the facilitator and the amount of time necessary to prepare for the event. Unless their role is little more than a chairperson to help the researchers steer through a simple agenda on time, it

- * No one particular organisation or individual is in control or has the power of veto.
- * The outcome is open and more likely to be considered fair by all those involved.
- * A good facilitator will use appropriate techniques to keep people engaged and get the most out of everyone.
- * More people have a say.

is likely that a number of days will be needed to discuss the project aims and come up with draft facilitation plans that use different techniques to reach these aims. If the facilitator is to be responsible for writing up the outputs from the event, then this will cost more. It is therefore advisable to build facilitation costs into the research proposal from the outset.

RESEARCHERS AS FACILITATORS

In many projects there are insufficient funds to hire a professional facilitator, so researchers end up fulfilling this role. Apart from getting training (which is always recommended), there are a number of things researchers can do to make facilitation easier:

- * Getting practice: although it may not be possible to practice working with stakeholders, there may be other contexts in which facilitation tools and skills can be tried, for example by adapting teaching with students to incorporate methods that can be used later with stakeholders.



- * Getting to the venue early so that any practical issues can be resolved in good time before participants arrive.
- * Meeting the facilitation team the day before or in good time before the event to go through the facilitation plan and make sure everyone is clear on their role.
- * Having an alternative plan for high-risk activities that haven't been tried before can help ensure the smooth running of an event. If a technique isn't working, it can be changed. There are also a number of practical pointers that can be used to keep control of dominating individuals and get the most out of more reticent members of the group (see below).
- * Building in 'buffer time' to the facilitation plan (e.g. identifying sessions of lesser importance that can be dropped, or where food and drink breaks can be shortened). Ensuring that expectations of the event are realistic can help reduce nerves on the day.
- * Getting feedback from colleagues on the facilitation plan to make sure it is realistic and achievable.
- * If a certain individual is known to be particularly problematic (e.g. argumentative, confrontational), consider having a one-to-one meeting with them separately, rather than inviting them to the event.

PRACTICAL FACILITATION SKILLS

- * The following points provide examples of skills and actions that constitute good practice when acting as a facilitator:
- * Active listening, for example giving non-verbal feedback (like maintaining frequent eye contact, nodding, focussed attention, remaining undistracted, positive body language).
- * Valuing silence as group thinking time and not being intimidated by it.
- * Verbal feedback (e.g. sounds, phrases, probing (open) questions).
- * Giving people time and space to clarify and unpack their thoughts.
- * Letting people know their opinions are valued.
- * Ensuring everyone has their say.
- * Summarising key points back to the group to check they have been understood correctly, or bringing a particular line of discussion to a close to help keep the process on track.
- * Helping people to 'own' the issues they talk about, rather than couching it in terms of 'us' and 'them', so they can take responsibility and think of solutions.
- * Reframing points where necessary to help people move from a highly critical or negative stance to be able to discuss a more positive way forward with the group.
- * Giving momentum and energy.
- * Impartially recording the discussion.
- * Writing clearly and managing paperwork (ideally with the help of an assistant so the facilitator can focus on group dynamics).

Listed below are some further ideas that can be used to get the most out of facilitating events with stakeholders:

- * Agree some ground rules: refer back to them if need be (e.g. people are not to talk over one another, everyone's views should be equally respected, no use of offensive language etc.). It may be useful to write these down and place them on the wall for everyone to see. It is typically easy to agree such rules as a group at the outset. They can be particularly useful if someone becomes obstructive or abusive later in the event. Given that they were part of the group that agreed these rules, it is socially quite difficult for them to ignore the rules, and if they do continue to ignore these rules, there is a clear basis upon which they may be asked to leave.

- * Parking space: if there is a participant who finds it hard to be concise and in particular if contributions are off-topic, it is possible to create a 'parking space' where these ideas can be written up and 'parked' for later discussion. This technique only works if the group has jointly agreed to the aims of the event at the outset, and if there is the flexibility to create a 15-20 minute session at the end to deal with the 'parked' points. Parking less-relevant ideas for later helps keep the discussion focussed and on time. By the end of the event, it will have become clear to all participants whether the points that were parked are relevant or not. Where points are deemed worth covering, extra time may be created to deal with them, which prevents these points taking up a valuable part of the main discussion. Also, because the 'parked' points are discussed at the end of the meeting, participants are usually keen to finish and have an incentive to be more concise.

- * Open space: if it transpires that the aims of the researchers do not match the aims of some of the participants, it can be challenging to keep everyone present and engaged in the process. A simple technique is to use some of the buffer time in the facilitation plan (e.g. dropping a session or curtailing a break) to create an 'open space' discussion. Using this approach, the additional topics that participants want to cover are collected (and grouped if there are many points). Participants then have the option to sign up to topics of particular interest to them over the next break and then small group discussions can be facilitated, with discussions being recorded and fed back to the wider group. At this point it will become apparent if some of the topics were just the interest of one vocal proponent if others don't sign-up for that group. If there are too few facilitators to do this, the person who proposed each topic can be asked to facilitate their group.

- * Get an opinion leader to introduce the event: by getting someone who plays a key role in the community to introduce the event the group may be more likely to trust the researchers.

- * Empathise with the group: get a sense for how the group is feeling (e.g. bored, tired or angry) and adapt the approach to their needs. Empathy is about putting yourself in the place of another, so as to connect with their feelings, identifying with them in some way, such as by voicing it or mimicking them via body language (or both). This makes it possible to counter feelings that may negatively affect group dynamics, gradually changing body language, tone of voice and language to become increasingly open, upbeat and interested. Although this can take significant effort, it can be surprising how many participants start to mirror types of behaviour and begin feeling and acting in more positive ways.

- * Make the effort to consciously keep smiling, and maintain a positive and energised tone of voice, pace, with open and friendly body language throughout the whole event.

Annex 1 of “The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook. BiodivERsA, Paris (108 pp). © BiodivERsA, Paris, 2014”

The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook is available online at <http://www.biodiversa.org/577>



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