Introduction

Multi-stakeholder platforms (MSPs) are participatory processes that include a wide range of actors in a topic or a landscape, to engage in dialogue, decision making, and/or the implementation of activities for common (landscape) goals.

MSPs – also known as multi-stakeholder forums, processes, and initiatives – have received a lot of attention recently as a way for diverse groups and organizations to come together to address landscape challenges. It makes sense: why wouldn’t we try to bring people together to collaborate, negotiate through our differences, and agree on goals and actions for change?

MSPs are an attractive – if somewhat romanticized – idea for problem solving. If done well, these platforms offer potential for truly transformational change in the ways that actors interact with each other and make decisions about the future of landscapes and territories.

But if they’re not designed and implemented carefully, MSPs can easily miss the mark, and end up entrenching existing inequalities and/or becoming irrelevant to local priorities and decision-making processes.
So you want to host a multi-stakeholder platform?

**Box 1. What is a stakeholder?**

In this context, stakeholders can broadly be defined as actors (individuals, organizations) who are impacted by and/or can impact decisions made over the land/resource use practices in the landscape of action. However, not all stakeholders have the same interests, concerns, needs, and privileges, so it’s important to think contextually about how you will approach and address issues such as:

- stakeholders vs rights-holders (such as Indigenous Peoples) in the landscape
- stakeholders that sit at different levels – e.g. local, regional, and national
- differing impacts from what is being discussed.

A rights-based approach can help to tease out these challenges, by repositioning participants as rights-holders and duty-bearers (see Evans et al., 2021).

That’s why – based on a [global comparative research project](#) that started in 2017, which has led us to collaborate with a wide range of policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and community and civil society organization representatives – we’ve put together six ‘how-to’ guides on different elements of MSP design and implementation, complete with case studies. These include:

- How to: design for context
- How to: design for inclusion
- How to: manage the room
- How to: expand your MSP’s influence over time
- How to: design to include women
- How to: design to include Indigenous Peoples and local communities
Box 2. What do we mean by transformational change?

The concept of ‘transformational change’ is subject to multiple interpretations but is a central goal in the global climate, development, and environmental governance arenas. Compiling a variety of definitions in these arenas (see Larson et al., 2021), it is referred to as “fundamental, strategic, disruptive, catalytic and complex change that promotes large-scale and sustainable shifts in systems, institutions, markets (and power relations) towards a carbon-neutral, climate resilient… future”; notably, “just and equitable” is not always included (see also Atmadja et al., 2021).

Our understanding, however, puts the commitment to equality and justice at the center, drawing from definitions of gender transformative approaches (GTAs). Hence, transformation seeks to “actively examine, challenge, and transform the underlying causes of (...) inequalities rooted in discriminatory social structures and institutions,” including unequal power relations, “discriminatory norms, attitudes, behaviours and practices, [and] discriminatory laws and policies that create and perpetuate [inequalities]” (FAO et al., 2022)

Members of the Alto Mayo Protected Forest MSP (San Martin, Peru) at the first implementation of How are we doing? Photo by Marlon del Aguila/CIFOR
Together, these guides will provide you with evidence-based tools to bring together an MSP that makes sense in the local context, is genuinely inclusive, and expands its impact over time and beyond the meeting table. These guides are not comprehensive or exhaustive but are the result of many interactions – with people and publications – and represent our contribution to supporting the transformative potential of MSPs. Please contact us if you find them useful, want suggestions on more resources, or have any ideas that we may have missed.

Box 3. But wait! Do you even need a (new) MSP?

There is a chance that creating a new MSP is not going to be the most effective and efficient way to meet your goals. To make sure you don’t waste time and energy, it’s critical to first look hard at what’s already going on – and what has gone on in the past – in the landscape in question. The following questions may be helpful:

- Are there other platforms that are trying to address similar goals?
- Are there gaps that a new platform can usefully fill?
- Have there been past attempts to create MSPs, and how have these fared?
- Is there potential to build trust and mitigate power relations sufficiently for an MSP to be productive?
- What might this new MSP accomplish, through what mechanism(s)?
- How does it fit into your theory of change?
- Do you have enough funds to organize and facilitate an inclusive MSP that will lead to meaningful and effective participation?