Running an inclusive, engaging, and successful MSP is not as simple as inviting everyone around the table (Sarmiento Barletti et al., 2021). The way that you set up and run your meetings – and who you choose to facilitate them (Tamara et al., 2021) – will have major impacts on the breadth and quality of participation, particularly for historically under-represented groups like women, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) and local communities (LCs).

**Planning**

It’s important to include clear mechanisms within an MSP to ensure that less-powerful groups have time and space to discuss and assert their priorities and be heard (Gonzales Tovar et al., 2021a and 2021b). In some cases, this might take the form of a private, separate forum for these groups where they can meet with powerful actors like the government - a meeting that is expressly devoted to their concerns. When planning other MSP processes, organizers can set quorums that ensure the numerical representation of less-powerful groups (Ratner et al., 2022) though it’s crucial that this is understood as a starting-point rather than a stand-alone measure to create inclusivity. Providing seats for underrepresented groups in leadership and on executive committees, and representation among speakers, panels, experts, and moderators, is also important (Evans et al., 2021).
The choice of facilitator can be crucial, and there is no one correct answer—it depends on the context, including the history of relationships among stakeholders. Whatever the case, facilitators must be well-trained (including in conflict management strategies), equity-sensitive, and culturally aware, and perceived as unbiased, legitimate, and trustworthy by local actors (Tamara et al., 2021).

Other practical elements to enable participation can include:
- the opportunity to be involved in setting the agenda
- advance notification of agenda items
- workshops or other forms of targeted support to build participants’ technical knowledge and capacity
- providing sufficient money for attendees to travel safely and in a culturally appropriate way
- offering culturally appropriate accommodations for childcare
- offering culturally appropriate food
- making the meeting space safe and secure
- running events at times that are amenable to under-represented/disadvantaged groups
- conducting proceedings in local language(s), and providing translators when diverse languages are spoken amongst stakeholders
- addressing the constraining social norms that often keep people from participating, such as prohibitions against speaking, traveling, or joining mixed gender groups (Evans et al., 2021).

### During the meeting

Are new people showing up each time you hold a meeting? Don’t assume they are all up to date on the purpose or goals of the MSP. Consider starting each session with a short recap and Q&A to get everyone on the same page.

### Case study in Ghana: managing the room through targeted preparation and capacity development

In Ghana, there are district-level Forest Forums in 35 of the country’s forest districts, supported by government and civil society. These forums bring together various stakeholders, including timber companies, local government representatives, chiefs, and community members. “Before we bring communities into these forums, we identify various community-based organizations at the community level and build their capacity, to create awareness on the rights of communities and also the rights and responsibilities of other interest groups in natural resources,” said Albert Katako of Civic Response Ghana, a natural resource and environmental governance policy advocacy organisation that is involved in convening the forums. “This is important, because you are bringing them to face more elite people. They need to know the issues that they will be presenting in the forum, such as on law enforcement and reporting, so that they have confidence” (Evans et al., 2021).

### Case study in Uttaranchal, India: missing the mark on room management for inclusion

In the late 1990s, a Joint Forest Management MSP was introduced in Uttaranchal, India. The MSP stemmed from national policies designed to increase the participation of under-represented groups and devolve decision-making—but a study of the platform (Mohanty, 2004) suggests that it failed to do so. Department officials controlled specific projects, funding and decision-making, while community members participated largely as laborers rather than decision-makers, and there was very limited participation from women, lower castes, and the poor. During meetings, some women were afraid to speak, because they believed their ability to attend would be restricted or banned if they did so. However, the MSP did allow underrepresented groups to increase their understandings of the ‘language’ of the state and of its rules and regulations (Mohanty, 2004).
During an MSP session, measures to enable inclusive participation might include:

- designing your schedule to be flexible, both in terms of time and facilitation method
- agreeing on a set of behavioral expectations at the beginning of the meeting
- explicitly asking those who are more comfortable speaking to be self-reflective and make space for others
- choosing specific spatial arrangements – like seating everyone on the floor or in a circle – to mitigate power asymmetries
- careful mediation of the dialogue – with attention to the cultural and gendered power dynamics in the room – to ensure all participants get opportunities to contribute and influence the discussion
- offering guaranteed speaking time to under-represented groups
- debating issues in pairs, or in smaller working groups or subcommittees that can then provide recommendations to the larger group, to create more opportunities for participation and build leadership capacity (Gonzales Tovar et al., 2021b)
- providing culturally appropriate explanations for technical terms and being open to include and explain local concepts in discussions
- explicitly addressing the cultural and gender biases of the particular meeting format that you have chosen, and being open to the possibility of more equitable alternatives
- implementing self-monitoring to make sure that people are being meaningfully included and reflexive learning is being promoted (Evans et al., 2021).

References


Further tools


CIFOR-ICRAF’s research on MSPs
https://www.cifor-icraf.org/research/topic/multi-stakeholder-platforms/

More tools for inclusive MSPs
https://www.cifor.org/toolboxes/tools-for-managing-landscapes-inclusively/

Get in touch
Anne M. Larson – a.larson@cifor-icraf.org & Juan Pablo Sarmiento Barletti – j.sarmiento@cifor-icraf.org

CIFOR-ICRAF’s tools for inclusive MSPs
How are we doing?
https://www.cifor.org/knowledge/publication/7796/

Getting it right
https://www.cifor.org/knowledge/publication/7973/