

Title: “All relevant stakeholders”: a literature review of stakeholder analysis to support inclusivity of innovation processes in farming and food systems

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Abstract

Transdisciplinary research aims to be inclusive because it integrates the knowledge and perspectives of scientists and societal stakeholders in order to find solutions to complex real world problems, for example in food and farming systems. However, when designing transdisciplinary research, who should be included? In order to support inclusivity, the question of whom to work with must be addressed in a transparent manner. This literature review of stakeholder analysis traces the evolution of the concept including use of the terms, ‘actors’ and ‘stakeholders’. We find that who defines a problem has bearing on who is considered relevant in relation to that problem. Considering heterogeneity within stakeholder categories requires further decisions on who is considered to be representative. Likewise, the presence of marginalized groups further complicates the issue because their inclusion hinges on the ability of those involved to recognize inter-connections that tend otherwise to be neglected. To overcome the limitations of using only the relevance systems of researchers to make these decisions, the participation of potential stakeholders is necessary for making decisions on involvement that reflect “on-the-ground” realities. In conclusion, we propose that researchers share the tasks of problem definition and stakeholder identification with potential stakeholders using participatory methods.

1. Introduction

The aim of this literature review on stakeholder analysis is to support researchers who are seeking to design participation processes within transdisciplinary research. Transdisciplinary research can be applied to identify solutions and co-create innovations through an inclusive knowledge production process based on joint learning between academic and non-academic participants. This type of research requires that scientists include a wide range of people with different knowledge backgrounds in the “design, planning, development and delivery of research” making it both “more useful... [and] more salient (i.e. that it more broadly reflects the interests of those involved)” (Bracken et al, 2015: 4).

Transdisciplinarity is “based on the scientific understanding of knowledge generation and diffusion, i.e. learning, [and] it is vital that the main actors of a system are involved in a process that finally leads to new knowledge and changed practices” (Kaufmann et. al. 2013: 122). Therefore, stakeholder involvement in the research process, as active participants, is both a means of increasing the utility of research output and the likelihood that it will shape the decisions, actions and capacities of these individuals and groups, so that they will gain new action possibilities. The inclusion of multiple perspectives and knowledge are critical to transdisciplinary research in order to “a) grasp the

complexity of problems; b) take into account the diversity of life-world and scientific perceptions of problems; c) link abstract and case specific knowledge; and d) constitute knowledge and practices that promote what is perceived to be the common good” (Pohl and Hirsch Hadorn, 2007: 20).

Food and farming systems consist of human, technical and natural components and form part of ecosystems of specific locations. Hence, they are complex social-ecological systems that are shaped and maintained through farmers’ practices and deeply depend on human management (Norman 2000, Fairweather 2010). The complex interrelations and dynamics between the components and human actions tend to make their outcome uncertain; collective action at various scales may be required to facilitate changes or specific outcomes. Therefore, finding solutions to problems relating to food and farming systems are typical examples of complex systems to which transdisciplinary research involving stakeholders could be applied.

Although including “all relevant stakeholders” should be a goal, it might be unattainable. First of all, who decides which stakeholders are relevant¹ and who defines relevance in the context of stakeholder analysis? Furthermore, stakeholder involvement demands time, commitment and resources from all involved. When the term “all relevant stakeholders” is stated as a principle or an ideal, it pushes for greater inclusion, whereas efficiency considerations often tend to limit inclusion in practice.

In this literature review, we clarify concepts and terms related to ‘actors’ and ‘stakeholders’, and then discuss how stakeholders linked to a specific problem or issue can be identified out of a broader ‘actor landscape’. To do so, researchers must navigate a series of challenges related to a) diverse viewpoints on the problem situation; b) multiple actors from which to select stakeholders; c) how to account for heterogeneity within stakeholder categories; d) how to account for those who are marginalized and hard to reach; and e) to what extent can an individual’s participation be considered representative of their stakeholder category?

2. Theoretical underpinnings: from actors to stakeholders

Understanding the difference between ‘actors’ and ‘stakeholders’ is crucial for approaching the task of identifying with whom to work in transdisciplinary research and innovation processes.

2.1 Actors

Literature from multiple disciplines and diverse theoretical orientations, use the term ‘actor’ to mean different things. In sociology, there are two influential theoretical approaches to studying actors, Actor-Network-Theory (ANT) (Latour, 2005) and Actor-Oriented approaches (Long, 1990; Long, 2001). Within ANT, Latour defines an actor as, “*anything* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor – or if it has no figuration yet, an actant” (Latour, 2005: 71). In this theoretical framework, actors can be human or non-human. In actor-oriented theory, Long differentiates actors as social actors saying that:

“‘social actor’ is a social construction rather than simply a synonym for the individual or a member of homo sapiens. One needs also to distinguish between two different kinds of social construction associated with the concept of social actor: first, that which is culturally endogenous in that it is based upon the kinds of representations characteristic of the culture in which the particular social actor is embedded; and second, that which arises from the researchers’ or analysts’ own categories and theoretical orientation” (Long, 1990: 9).

This differentiation whether actors are delineated from inside or outside ultimately has consequence for stakeholder analysis, as discussed in the next section. Among varied contributions of actor-oriented theory is the focus on diverse actors who use their knowledge and create strategies to navigate societal structures (both contributing to, and resisting), thus enacting their agency is

¹ According to the Merriam Webster online dictionary, the definition of relevant is: “having significant and demonstrable bearing on the matter at hand”.

simultaneously “composed of social relations and can only become effective through them” (Long, 23). Actors’ room for manoeuvre is a way to conceptualize the interrelationships between actor agency and relations to structures.

The type of actor-oriented approach that Long proposes differs from earlier ones by anthropologists in that it contextualizes, that the “individual choices were shaped by larger frames of meaning and action and by the distribution of power and resources in the wider arena” (Long, 1990: 7). Long’s critique of structures is based on this definition of actors as having the power to create change. For example, rather than orienting analysis on how structures of capitalism impact people, he seeks to see how people have power; how individual actors create power to resist, redefine, and act through their own agency in culturally and historically specific places. Long’s actor-oriented analysis is specifically part of sociologies of development, shifting analyses of changing political economies from structures to actors – internalizing views of social change through generative rather than distributive conceptualizations of power.

2.2 Stakeholders

Usage of the term ‘stakeholder’ has been traced to as early as 1708 to mean “a person entrusted with the stakes of bettors” (Bryson, 2003: 3). However, Freeman’s 1984 book, *Strategic Management: A Stakeholder Approach* popularized the term by challenging businesses to consider all stakeholders, rather than just shareholders. Freeman defines a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation’s objectives” (1984: 46). Although the roots of this concept are in business literature, the definitions have evolved due to its use in public administration and natural resource management. Now, the use of “the term ‘stakeholder’ emphasises the ‘stake’ or interests of the parties in a process” (Hermans, 2005: 20). A stakeholder can be defined as “any group of people organised, who share a common interest or stake in a particular issue or system” (Grimble and Wellard, 1997: 175).

Integrating stakeholders is a way of accommodating conflict points and claims. A classical criticism of a broad definition is that “virtually anyone and anything can ‘affect or be affected’ by the decisions and actions of a business enterprise” such that “expansive views of relevant ‘stakeholders’ tend easily to become so broad as to be meaningless” (Orts and Strudler, 2002: 218). However, when inclusivity is a goal, then a willingness to take an expansive view of stakeholders is required. As definitions of stakeholders specifically differ in how inclusive they are, Bryson asserts that in public management, the term must be used in a more inclusive way to enact more democratic principles (2004: 22).

In community development practice, stakeholders have been described as ‘victims’ or ‘gainers’ in relation to a project to reflect who might benefit or be at risk. Other terms that have developed common usage are ‘participant’, ‘involved party’, ‘recipient’ and ‘responsible party’.

In order to maintain conceptual clarity, we will focus on the differentiation of stakeholders as a subset of actors, whereby stakeholders are specifically related to an issue or problem that can be addressed in transdisciplinary research. Once a problem or issue is specified, then stakeholders can be identified out of the known actors.

3. Stakeholder analysis

Recent decades have witnessed a growing application of different forms of stakeholder identification and analysis in research fields such as public policy, international development, agriculture and environmental sciences. Particularly with transdisciplinary research, stakeholder involvement is necessary for knowledge integration and innovation co-creation. A stakeholder analysis is a way of identifying who is a stakeholder related to a specific issue or problem situation, and serves at making their interests, objectives, power dynamics and relationships explicit.

Christopher Weible, working on marine resource management, emphasises that stakeholder analysis needs

“to address a set of questions: who are the stakeholders to include in the analysis; what are the stakeholders' interests and beliefs; who controls critical resources; with whom do stakeholders form coalitions; and what strategies and venues do stakeholders use to achieve their objectives” (2006: 96).

The first step of a stakeholder analysis is identification. However, stakeholder analysis must be done iteratively, in particular because the joint problem definition and the identification of stakeholders are circularly linked. This means the joint problem definition is influenced by the stakeholders contributing to it, and the way how the problematic situation is defined again influences which stakeholders are affected or can be affected by it. The emphasis on iterative stakeholder analysis is described by scholars from policy (Varvasovszky and Brugha, 2000) environmental sciences (Reed, 2009) and development (Zimmermann and Maennling, 2007).

3.1 Problem definition

In food and farming systems, those who describe a problem have bearing on what actors are regarded as within the system boundaries, and subsequently which of these actors will be thought to have a legitimate 'stake'.

Researchers typically describe a problem from the outset of research (usually during proposal writing); such problems may be deemed relevant in the scientific discourse of the researcher's discipline or stated as a priority area for interventions in donor policies. However, researchers from other disciplines, as well as non-academic actors working at different scales, may have different perspectives on the same problem or issue. This is why transdisciplinary research strives to address real world problems that are important in the societal discourse, and to take the integration of various perspectives of the problem or issue addressed as a starting point for the research.

In transdisciplinary research, the joint problem definition is, therefore, established as distinct phase in the research design and includes knowledge integration for problem identification and problem structuring (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008). Methods with which to achieve a common understanding of a problem can include creating system maps with stakeholders (Angelstam et al., 2013) and also problem and solution trees (Snowdon et al., 2008).

3.2 Identification of stakeholders from multiple actors

In transdisciplinary research multiple stakeholders belonging to a diverse set of actor categories need to be integrated, since their different perceptions, knowledge and relationships will contribute to finding solutions to the problem situation (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008). In such a situation, it is unlikely that there is one person who can oversee which actors need to be included (Müller et al., 2012). This is an additional reason why “identification of relevant stakeholders is not straightforward” (Cuppen 2009: 33). To overcome this difficulty, a stakeholder analysis can be done by a team because “a team can compensate for and neutralize individual biases and question untested assumptions” (Varvasovszky and Brugha, 2000: 340). In some cases these teams are composed of researchers or other related professionals. An example that initially used experts to generate a list, became participatory because each of the named stakeholders were contacted, “asking them for their opinion and allowing them to add or delete one or more stakeholders” (Stanghellini, 2010: 685).

To start a participatory identification process, first a group of potential stakeholders can be identified by researchers either from literature, media, explorative research or other sources depending on the context and focus. For example, individuals and organizations active in an area or on a topic might be identified in secondary literature including reports from other organizations. Meetings could then be set up with organizations that might have lists of individuals that are active in the issue or area of focus. Typically, agricultural extension officers and other non-profit staff are approached. However, this might run the risk of reproducing information from the same people who are frequently put forward because they are considered 'model' farmers and therefore often called upon to act as representatives.

Identification can also come from observation in places where people are active, such as in farmers' markets, auction houses, community meetings and other places. From these observations, researchers can identify some of the people who are active in relation to an issue. Once a few people are interviewed, then a snowball approach can be used to ask for recommendations of other people to approach.

Participatory stakeholder analysis can include sharing of decision-making regarding identification of actors, determination which of them are stakeholders, and selection of individuals to participate. Participatory actor maps can be used to facilitate identification using Venn diagrams or other communication tools (Lelea et al., 2014).

3.3 Diversity of actors

The multiple and diverse entry points described above can generate a more complete identification of who has a 'stake' and hence should be involved. In some cases, there are many individuals identified which can be grouped to create actor categories (and later stakeholder categories). However, it is more common that researchers or others doing a stakeholder analysis will start with an actor category such as 'farmers' or 'traders' and look for individuals that belong to this category. This bears the risk that one is not accounting for internal heterogeneity. Forming categories is used to reduce complexity. However, the criteria with which grouping is organized will have consequence on who is ultimately involved. For example, to what extent might the category of 'farmer' need to be broken down into sub-categories to offer the needed diversity of perspectives? Determining the criteria for categorization should become an issue of discussion with stakeholders. Applying methods to critically analyze internal heterogeneity within actor categories lends itself towards crafting greater inclusivity by recognizing important differences. When regarding the social landscape, what is the "difference which makes a difference" (Bateson, 1972: 459) in a given context? Rather than assuming what differences matter based on pre-determined categories, create spaces in which participants can draw their own conclusions about which differences matter most in a particular time and place. As Sara Ahmed has written, we must "trace how the differences that matter between us, matter in some places more than [in] others" (1998: 197).

Information about actor heterogeneity can be obtained through both individual interviews and group discussions. The transcribed text can later be coded for themes about important differences in the 'actor landscape'. An important contribution regarding recognition of stakeholder heterogeneity has come from an example with biomass in the Netherlands where Q methodology was applied (Cuppen, 2010).

In a stakeholder analysis, heterogeneity within a group needs to be acknowledged until the point at which differentiation no longer brings new perspectives. The questions are: To what extent is this heterogeneity important for the objective? What will be the implication of ignoring this aspect? For the sake of stakeholder analysis which enables inclusive innovation processes to move forward, there must be a willingness to reflect on this complexity and to make adjustments as feasible.

3.4 Marginalized groups

Marginalized groups are often understood as communities in society to whom full access to certain rights, opportunities or resources is systematically denied by members of other groups (e.g. Silver, 1994). In a broader sense, marginalization may also include that the contributions and needs of certain groups in relation to a problem or issue addressed are less visible compared to those of others. In agriculture, this might manifest as invisibility of marginalized groups who perform labor, such as in the case of migrant workers picking strawberries in California (Mitchell, 2003). Inclusion of marginalized groups can be difficult because their identification hinges on the ability of those involved to recognize inter-connections and on their efforts to intentionally seek out marginalized groups (Table1).

Table 1: Quotations from stakeholder literature of various scientific disciplines regarding the challenge of including marginalized groups

Quotation	Discipline
“It is important to try to include all relevant stakeholders, and those who often get omitted are the hard to reach groups. Extra effort and innovation will be needed to contact and engage with these groups or individuals, who do not generally come forward by their own volition” (Gray, 2007: 20).	Human ecology
“Selecting relevant stakeholders for participatory processes is challenging. For example: certain stakeholder groups may be historically marginalized from management decisions, and may therefore be difficult to identify or involve...” (Prell et al., 2007: 5).	Sociology and environmental sciences
“It depends on the local situation who the relevant stakeholders are. According to Paul Engel (pers. comm.), relevant actors are those that 'just won't go away'. That is a very pragmatic understanding of 'relevant' but, as we shall see, it obscures at least two categories: the dominant ones, who may feel they have nothing to gain from participation, and unaware actors, who do not know what there is to gain” (Warner, 2005: 5).	Environmental sciences
“There is a risk that some stakeholders may be accidentally omitted and as a consequence not all relevant stakeholders of the phenomenon may be identified” (Clarkson, 1995 cited in Reed, 2009: 1937).	Natural resource management
“In the low density network areas more work is required to get aboard the relevant stakeholders to address the existing or emergent challenges” (Tenywa et al., 2010: 125).	Agricultural sciences
“It is important to ensure that weaker stakeholders are not marginalized or discriminated against. Also, stakeholders who are potentially concerned by the project should be identified and integrated into the process” (Luyet, 2012: 217).	Environmental sciences

There is convergence among these authors that seeking inclusion of marginalised and hard to reach stakeholders is both necessary and challenging. However, the necessity of including marginalized groups as stakeholders in research projects depends mainly on the project goals.

‘Inclusive innovation’ refers to the development of innovations for and by those who tend to be excluded by the general ‘mainstream’ of business or development initiatives (Heeks et al., 2013). These authors identify two key aspects in defining inclusive innovation: (1) A clarification as to which marginalized, excluded group is to be the focus of attention for an innovation; and (2) which aspect of innovation must the excluded group be included in (and in order to achieve what).

The second aspect refers to the fact that an inclusive innovation may refer to the marginalized group as being innovator or as being ‘impacted’ by innovation; in other words, an innovation can be inclusive with regard to the process, or the outcomes, or both. Furthermore, the desired outcomes can be defined in many different ways. Inclusive innovation can mean that a marginalized group has participated in a project and benefited from it, for example, with regard to networks, capacity building and new insights. On the other hand, it could also mean that previously existing inequalities have been reduced as a result of the project, e.g. that the income of poor people has increased and inequality has been reduced (Johnson & Anderson, 2012). The latter would require a more systematic way of addressing inequalities beyond just ensuring participation. Richard Heeks and co-authors

(2013), therefore, suggest a range of different levels of inclusion, each of which requires different steps to be taken in the course of the innovation process.

3.5 Who represents?

The concept of 'representation' arises because stakeholder categorization is used to create smaller groups for participatory processes. As discussed above, stakeholder categories such as 'farmer', 'trader', or 'retailer' cannot be assumed to have internal homogeneity. Furthermore, such categories do not immediately translate into people to collaborate with in transdisciplinary agricultural research.

From operations and systems management, Matthias Müller and co-authors write, "in the context of collaborative research into societal problem situations, this difference [between abstract categories and individuals] is crucial, as the purpose of collaboration is to enlarge the epistemic base by using real persons...to represent the perspectives of abstract categories of actors" (Müller et al, 2012: 496).

For this reason, we suggest acknowledgement of the implications of individuals' positionality within the recognized internal heterogeneity of an actor category. As is emphasised in literature on situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988), relevance systems (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973), and emphasised in transdisciplinary approaches (Hirsch Hadorn et al., 2008), all individuals only every have a partial view.

4. Conclusion

When projects claim to have successfully included "all relevant stakeholders", the validity of the claim must be questioned. This term usually obfuscates the complexity that is involved regarding who makes the choice about who is considered a stakeholder in relation to a particular problem situation, and further, who decides which of them is relevant.

Critical reflection on how identification is conducted within stakeholder analysis is key for designing inclusive transdisciplinary agricultural innovation research. After reviewing the literature, the main challenges to consider are a) complex problem situations require diverse perspectives, b) multiple actors from which those who have a 'stake' have to be identified c) internal diversity which might necessitate stakeholder sub-categories d) marginalized groups which by definition are at the boundaries of what is 'visible', e) 'representation' of a stakeholder category, and f) who makes decisions about stakeholder identification.

An iterative process including critical reflection by the researchers, dialogue with participants and shared decision-making on stakeholder inclusion enables more context-specific inclusive innovation processes to be achieved. The aim is to make the process of making a choice more transparent and to expand decision-making power with stakeholders to make research on complex problem situations in agricultural research more meaningful

In sum, all of these issues of defining a problem situation, identifying actors and weighing their 'stakes' coalesce to reveal that identification is always only partial. Scientists seek to use stakeholder analysis to systematically order a dynamically shifting 'actor landscape' in order to identify real people with whom to work with in transdisciplinary research. They can improve conditions for inclusivity by sharing decision-making and by systematically addressing the specific situation and needs of marginalized groups in the research.

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