Stakeholder Analysis & Engagement: A Basic Guide

1. Introduction

A stakeholder is an 'individual or group that has an interest in any decision or activity of an organization'.[i] Stakeholder analysis is essential for strategic stakeholder engagement. In turn, successful stakeholder engagement is critical for impactful action research, communications and advocacy.

There are many approaches to stakeholder analysis. This document aims to provide a simple yet effective guide to analysing stakeholders. It also suggests some principles for engaging with stakeholders.

2. Stakeholder Analysis

There are three steps to undertaking stakeholder analysis:
   a) Initial mapping
   b) Understanding influence and interest
   c) Understanding alignment

To begin with, it is necessary to identify relevant stakeholders (initial mapping). Then it is necessary to prioritise these stakeholders (understanding influence and interest) and to assess their positions (understanding alignment).

a) Initial mapping

Brainstorming can help teams to identify stakeholders. Brainstorming is 'a group problem-solving technique that involves the spontaneous contribution of ideas from all members of the group'.[ii]

Think of all the people who are affected by our work, who have influence or power over it, and who have an interest in its success or failure. And then begin brainstorming while following Osborn's four rules:[iii]
   ✓ Focus on quantity not quality
   ✓ Withhold criticism
   ✓ Welcome wild ideas
   ✓ Combine and improve ideas

People can use other colleagues' suggestions of stakeholders as a springboard for their own. It is essential that someone is responsible for recording all suggestions, regardless of how 'irrelevant' or 'silly' these suggestions may seem to be.

Once the brainstorming exercise is over, it is important to come together and collectively discuss the results. In many cases, there will be consensus that suggested stakeholders should be retained or dropped. There may be a small number of suggested stakeholders where there is uncertainty or a lack of consensus. These would require further investigation and discussion.

b) Understanding influence and interest

Once we have a list of relevant stakeholders, it is necessary to prioritise them. This can be done by utilising the Influence-Interest Matrix first developed by Mendelow (see below).[iv] Stakeholders need to be placed in the most suitable area in one of the four boxes. If required, guidance on assessing the influence of stakeholders can be found in Appendix 1 (Influence Mapping). Similarly, guidance on assessing the interest of stakeholders, if required, can be found in Appendix 2 (Ladder of Engagement).
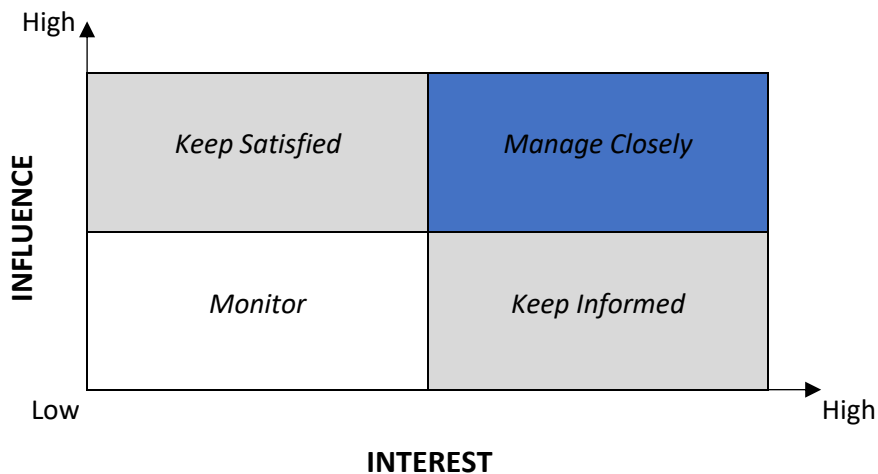
Those stakeholders with both high influence and high interest ('manage closely') in our area of work are probably the greatest priority for engagement. However, those with high influence yet low interest ('keep satisfied') need to be engaged with timely, useful information, with a view to increasing their interest.[v] Similarly, it is helpful to ensure that those with low influence yet high interest ('keep informed') are updated and, if possible, periodically enlisted, so that our collective efforts have greater influence.

Yet even if a stakeholder has high influence and high interest in our area of work, they may not agree with what we want them to do. This depends on their alignment, which is the third step of conducting stakeholder analysis.

c) Understanding alignment

Once we have prioritised our relevant stakeholders, we need to better understand their policies and practices in relation to our area of work (note that a stakeholder may have a particular policy yet its practice differs from this policy). This can be done by analysing the strategic positions of stakeholders. The strategic positioning table[vi] below – which is just an example – considers various bilateral and multilateral donors.

OPPOSE	CYNICAL	NEUTRAL	POSITIVE	PARTNER
→ US Government	← UK Government Australian Government	→ Canadian Government ← European Union World Bank	IOM → UNDP	UNHCR

Stakeholders are placed in one of five categories, from opposing our work to partnering with us on our work. Arrows represent the direction in which it is considered that organisations may shift; no arrow means that an organisation is unlikely to shift from its current position.

It is possible to consider alignment at the same time as influence and interest. However, in this case these steps have been separated, as it will take time to clarify our precise policy/practice change objectives, and thus what it is that we call on stakeholders to do. This is particularly relevant for action research projects, where those who are normally mere subjects of research and/or recipients of interventions are central in defining problems and shaping solutions.[vii]

A stakeholder may have high levels of influence and/or interest yet not be aligned with our positions. If such a stakeholder is considered important enough for us to dedicate resources in order to persuade them to shift their positions, then they become an advocacy target.
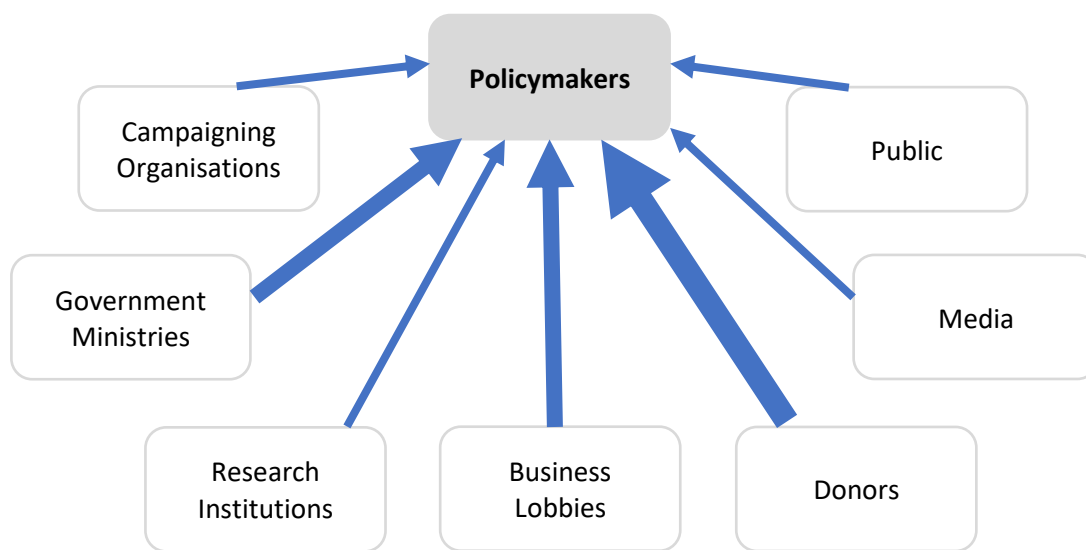
3. Stakeholder Engagement

The following principles[viii] may be useful when it comes to engaging with stakeholders, particularly priority ones.

- ➢ Build relationships based on the stakeholder analysis; while it is important to be practical, do not just engage with those with whom we have existing relationships.
- ➢ Aim to involve stakeholders throughout our project – but do not overwhelm them with information, requests, etc.
- ➢ Understand stakeholders (beyond influence, interest and alignment): what motivates them, what incentives do they have and what are their constraints?
- ➢ Ensure that communications are tailored to a particular stakeholder audience and are well-timed (e.g. provide politicians with succinct, accessible and actionable information before a legislative debate).
- ➢ Follow stakeholder engagement plans and also be prepared to exploit opportunities that suddenly present themselves (e.g. practice an elevator pitch,[ix] always have research/policy briefs to hand and think of ways to link what is in the news to our work).
- ➢ Provide adequate resources for stakeholder engagement and monitor, adapt and evaluate engagement activities.
- ➢ Always think about how unequal power relations affect stakeholders and beware of co-option by powerful stakeholders![x]

Appendix 1

Influence Mapping

Influence mapping 'is a tool to examine and visually display the relative influence that different individuals and groups have over decision-making'.[xi] As illustrated in the example below,[xii] the policymaker is at the top, and is influenced by different stakeholders. The thicker the arrow, the more influence a particular stakeholder has over the policymaker. In this example, the country may be highly aid dependent, and thus donors have great influence. Similarly, perhaps the government of this country has little respect for civil and political rights, and thus the media and campaigning organisations have weak influence.

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                          Policymakers


   Campaigning                                      Public
   Organisations


   Government                                       Media
   Ministries


         Research          Business
         Institutions      Lobbies        Donors
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It is also useful to think about who influences the influencers. For example, the donor community in the country in this example may favour a particular think tank or newspaper. Thus the mapping exercise may be repeated, with the donor on top, and the influence that different research institutions, media, etc. possess in relation to the donor analysed using arrows of varying thickness.

Appendix 2

Ladder of Engagement

The ladder of engagement[xiii] is a useful tool to analyse the level of interest that stakeholders have in relation to our area of work. Their level of interest can range from being unaware of key issues (and thus, by definition, uninterested in them) to being advocates (and thus possessing high interest in the field). Therefore, the more interested that stakeholders are in our area of work, the higher up the ladder of engagement they may be placed. It is important to remember that stakeholders' level of interest can fall as well as rise (something that early incarnations of the ladder of engagement appeared to ignore).[xiv] Of course, as discussed above, interest is not the same as alignment.
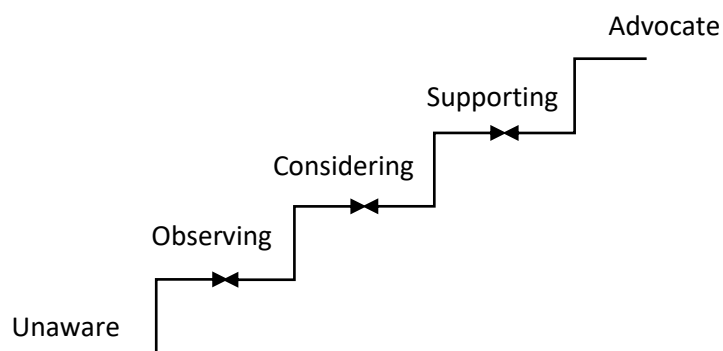
[i] ISO (2010) *ISO 26000:2010 Guidance on social responsibility*, https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:26000:ed-1:v1:en, para 2.20.

[ii] Merriam-Webster (2020) 'brainstorming', https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/brainstorming.

[iii] Osborn, A F (1963) *Applied imagination: Principles and procedures of creative problem solving*, 3rd edition, New York: Scribner.

[iv] Mendelow, A L (1981) 'Environmental scanning - The impact of the stakeholder concept', *ICIS 1981 Proceedings*, 20.

[v] Elsbree, A & Peake, A (2020) 'Developing an audience outreach strategy', in Schwabish, J A (ed) *Elevate the debate: A multi-layered approach to communicating your research*, New Jersey: Wiley, pp 15-36.

[vi] Adapted from Bruce, I (2011) *Charity marketing: Delivering income, services and campaigns*, 4th edition, London: ICSA Publishing.

[vii] Reason, P & Bradbury-Huang H (2008) 'Introduction' in Reason, P & Bradbury-Huang H (eds) *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*, London: SAGE, pp 1-10.

[viii] Informed by Dempster, D et al (2019) *MIGNEX handbook chapter 5: Communications and Impact*, https://www.mignex.org/publications/5-communications-and-impact; ESRC (2020) *Impact toolkit*, https://esrc.ukri.org/research/impact-toolkit/; IDS Knowledge Services (2013) *Introduction to.... Stakeholder engagement*, https://www.researchtoaction.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Introduction-to-Stakeholder-Engagement.pdf.

[ix] In this context an elevator pitch is a very short explanation that aims to persuade someone of the importance of the project's key ideas.

[x] A useful resource is Christian Aid (2016) *Power analysis - Programme practice*, https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2016-03/power-analysis-programme-practice-paper-jan-2016.pdf.

[xi] Mayers, J & Vermeulen, S (2005) *Stakeholder influence mapping*, https://policy-powertools.org/Tools/Understanding/docs/stakeholder_influence_mapping_tool_english.pdf, p. 2.

[xii] Adapted from Tiberghien, J-E (2012) *Power analysis briefing: Review of tools and methods*, https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/Tiberghien%2C%202012.pdf.

[xiii] Adapted from Durham, S (2019) *The nonprofit communications engine*, New York: Big Duck Studio.

[xiv] Dixon J & Keyes D (2013) *The permanent disruption of social media,* https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_permanent_disruption_of_social_media.