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# Researching with stakeholders: Lessons from interdisciplinary climate change research

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## Introduction

This Briefing Note provides guidance for planning and conducting stakeholder engagement in climate change research. It was initially developed by Tyndall Centre researchers to support their future work. We hope that this Briefing Note is of wider interest to anyone designing interdisciplinary research that involves interacting with stakeholders. This interaction can include carrying out research in partnership with stakeholders, which is sometimes called “co-production of knowledge”. This guidance is grounded in Tyndall’s eight year diverse experience of inclusive research that recognises the expertise and value of stakeholders for stimulating better research that addresses socio-environmental questions. It supports the Tyndall Centre’s vision “to develop sustainable responses to climate change through trans-disciplinary research and dialogue on both a national and international level - not just within the research community, but also with business leaders, policy advisors, the media and the public in general”.

Research into the practice of stakeholder engagement suggests it can offer various benefits such as: (a) improving the relevance of the research for policy and practice; (b) incorporating diverse expertise and experience; (c) providing legitimacy and credibility for research within society as well as academia. In short, these guidelines are intended as a timely aid for using stakeholder engagement to improve the quality, relevance, and use of climate change research.

These guidelines are not intended to be prescriptive or constraining in any way. Rather, we hope they will assist researchers in transparently and meaningfully carrying out stakeholder engagement activities during the course of their research projects.

## The three features of this guidance

### A stakeholder engagement planner (page 2)

The ‘planner’ is essentially a flow-chart or decision-tree, which is intended to help you think through the various aspects involved in planning stakeholder engagement in a research process. When you read it, it may help to refer to the more detailed guidelines. Again, the planner is intended to be a supportive tool, providing ideas about working with stakeholders, rather than a linear or prescriptive scheme.

### Ten guidelines (pages 3-6)

These guidelines are presented as a set of ten considerations to have in mind when planning and conducting stakeholder engagement as part of any research project. They are based on a pool of experiences drawn from discussions with Tyndall researchers at a workshop and two Tyndall Researchers Network meetings. They also draw on two internal surveys about the nature of stakeholder engagement in Tyndall research, which were conducted by Lorraine Whitmarsh, Sophie Nicholson-Cole and Sebastian Carney in 2007.

It is up to you how you choose to use them. You may want to read them carefully and think through the implications that they have for your work, or simply scan them from time to time in the planning stages of a project or when managing a stakeholder engagement process as part of your research. They may not all be relevant in every case, and sometimes they overlap. At some point in the future, it may be necessary to review this guidance in light of ongoing experiences of stakeholder engagement. Please feed back to the authors any recommended revisions.

### Appendices (pages 7-9)

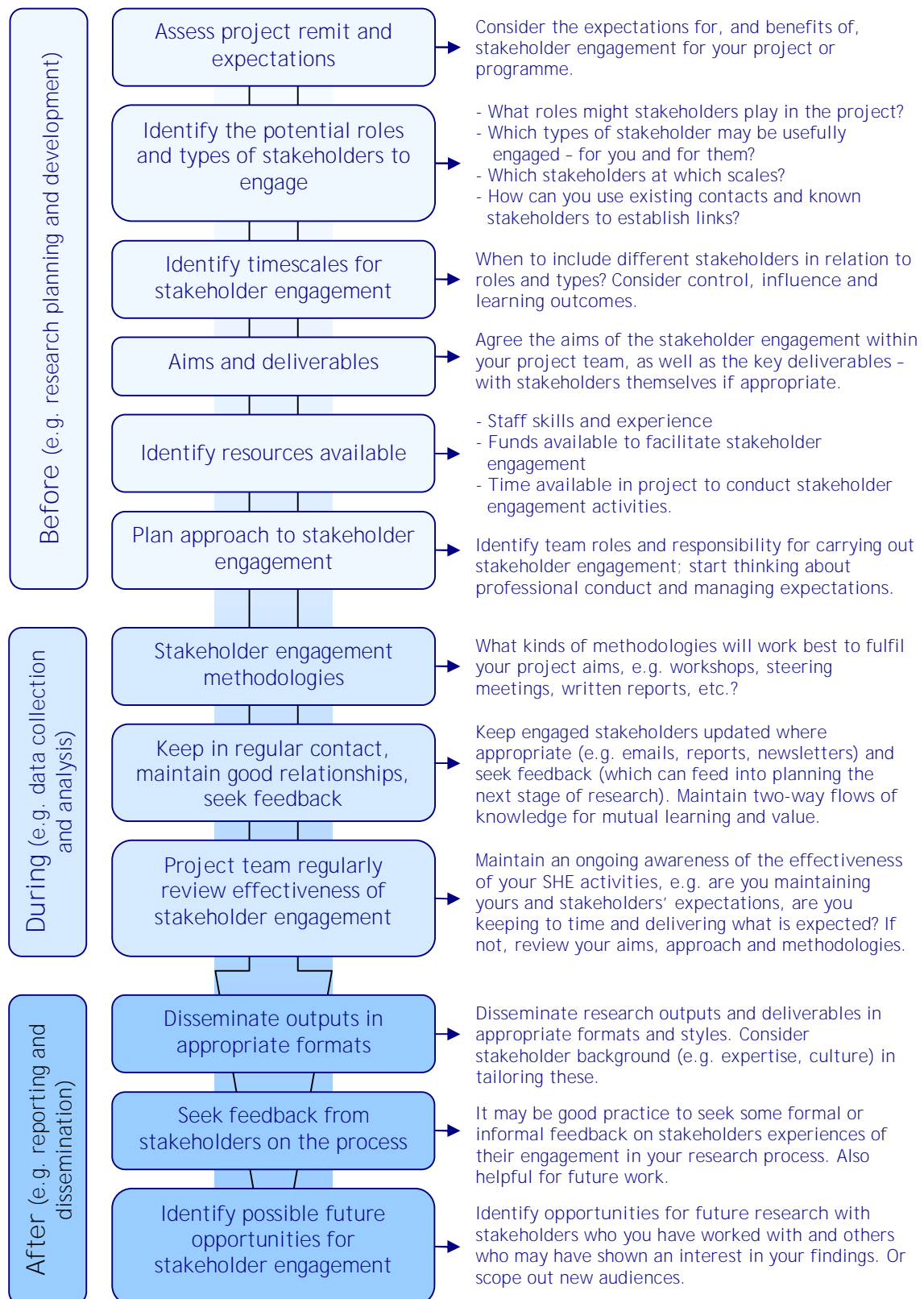
Two appendices are attached to this document. Appendix 1 summarises the outcomes of the two surveys conducted in 2007 to explore the nature of stakeholder engagement activity in Tyndall Centre research. Appendix 2 contains some links to other guidance on stakeholder engagement in different fields and some academic references.

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Supported by discussions with Sebastian Carney in the development of a paper, and input from Tyndall researchers via the Tyndall Researchers Network.

# A stakeholder engagement planner



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# Guidelines for stakeholder engagement

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Ten key considerations for planning and conducting stakeholder engagement in our research are summarised in the figure below. Each one is then outlined in more detail. The order in which they are presented is not important. Essentially, *planning*, *managing* and *delivering* are the three things that you should do in any stakeholder engagement process. The ten key considerations will help you put this into practice.

- ▶ Roles of stakeholders in research projects
- ▶ Specific types of stakeholder
- ▶ Institutional scales of stakeholder representation
- ▶ Timescales of stakeholder involvement
- ▶ Resources for stakeholder engagement
- ▶ Methods for engaging stakeholders
- ▶ Degrees of stakeholder control and influence
- ▶ Flows of knowledge and learning
- ▶ Managing expectations and valuing stakeholders
- ▶ Professional conduct

## 1. Roles of stakeholders in research projects

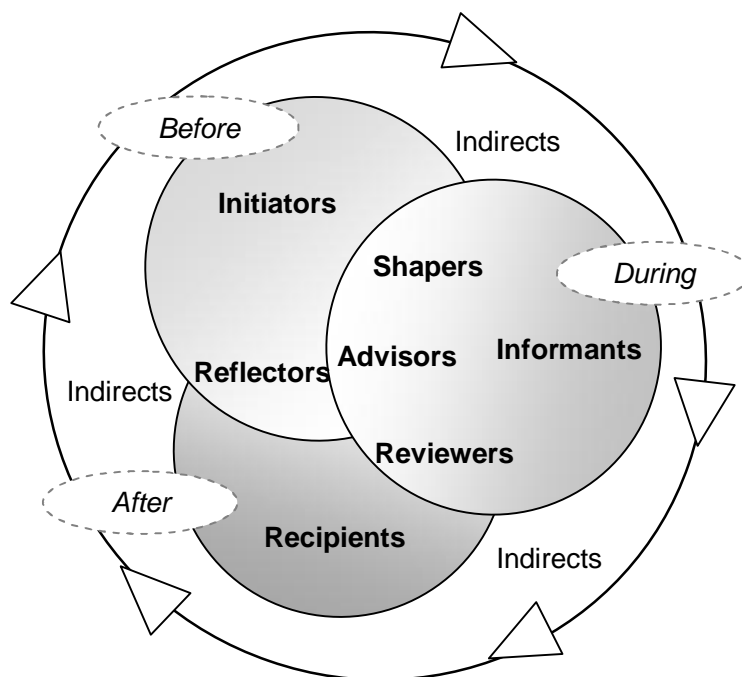
Stakeholders can engage in a variety of ways throughout the course of any research project, as well as engaging at different times. Figure 1 helps to illustrate this. They may be a *funding* body, maintaining a backseat interest and benefiting from the findings (though still requiring some form of stakeholder engagement), or more active players who help to refine the research agenda ('shapers'), contribute data or advice ('informants'), review the process or outputs ('reviewers'), play a role in developing research recommendations ('reflectors') and ultimately use a final report or research outputs ('recipients'). Some stakeholders may fulfil multiple roles and effectively be 'advisors' or co-researchers throughout the research process. And there may be *indirect* recipients of the findings, with whom you may never have direct contact. It is worth sketching out the different roles that stakeholders may play in your research in order to help plan how you effectively engage with each group. (Carney et al, 2008)

## 2. Specific types of stakeholder

Additionally, there are many different 'types' of stakeholder. There are public, private and civic sector stakeholders to consider, e.g., Government, non-governmental, academic, businesses, media, members of the public, business and industry, and so on. Particular examples of stakeholders in Tyndall research can be found in Appendix 1. You may benefit from brainstorming a master list of all the potential stakeholders who you want to engage with in your work. A further key consideration when thinking through the different types of stakeholder and their potential engagement with your work is: *who might influence your research, and who might be influenced by it?* Also ask yourself, *how important are they in influencing others and how interested are they in your research?*

In some cases you may find that you think in terms of a particular organisation as a stakeholder, or one individual *representing* that organisation as the stakeholder. This distinction may matter in some cases and not in others. For example, do you want the representation and buy-in of the whole organisation, or simply to better understand the views and research needs of someone from that organisation? Different stakeholders will have *different backgrounds and levels of expertise*; these should be considered when deciding on methods for stakeholder engagement. Be clear on whether stakeholders are being asked as an *expert* for their professional assessment or for their *personal opinion* or value judgement.

Figure 1. A typology of the different roles of stakeholders mapped onto three stages of the research process: before, during and after (Carney et al, 2008)



| A typology of stakeholder engagement in climate change research |   |
|---|---|
| Role played in the research process                             | Description   |
| Initiators  | Stakeholders involved in developing, driving or instigating a piece of research, e.g. funders.  |
| Shapers   | Stakeholders who have a role in consolidating a research plan, supporting it or directing it at an early stage. This may include an expansion in the scope of the research to gain buy-in and provide the research with legitimacy. |
| Informants  | Those stakeholders who directly inform a research study, e.g. data providers.   |
| Advisors  | These stakeholders tend to have an input throughout the research process; they play a focal role, perhaps acting in advisory groups in some capacity throughout the process.  |
| Reviewers   | Before completion, stakeholders who have a role in reviewing research, responding to it and developing/ contributing to aspects the final output  |
| Recipients  | Stakeholders who may not have been directly involved with the research but who are deemed to have a specific interest in its findings.  |
| Reflectors  | These stakeholders reflect on the research findings and/or the process, providing feedback for development of the research, the methods and providing ideas for further research.   |
| In-directs  | This group represent wider stakeholder interests which are external to the research process, but may be unknowingly or unconsciously contributing to it.  |

### 3. Institutional scales of stakeholder representation

Stakeholders engaged in climate change research represent an extremely broad range of scales - from global institutions to small, locally based organisations. Once again, this depends on the project in question. In any case, it is useful to be clear about the remit and scale of stakeholder organisations and make sure that the right scales of stakeholder are represented. This is an especially important consideration when single organisations are cross-cutting (e.g., the Environment Agency works across flooding, waste, farming, etc.; and in different geographical regions); it may be useful to engage with both a national representative and a regional/local one for example. Be clear whether they represent the views of their organisation or are giving their expert professional opinion (or indeed a personal view). The scale at which your research is focussed may also influence your choice of methods for stakeholder engagement (see below); for example, a survey or newsletter may be appropriate for broad based stakeholder engagement activities, while workshops, steering meetings, one-to-one interviews or focus groups may be more suitable for working with high level stakeholders.

#### 4. Timescales of stakeholder involvement

The nature of stakeholder engagement in a research project can evolve over the course of the study. For example, different stakeholders may have different degrees of involvement at different times in the research process (i.e., in development and planning stages, data collection and analysis, reporting and dissemination). For example, there may be some stakeholders who play a key role in advising the direction of research, others may be more active in providing data or acting as research participants, and still others who may be less involved in the activity of research but very interested in your findings. In some cases, stakeholders may be involved throughout the entire research process.

Involving stakeholders earlier in the process means they sometimes have more influence over the focus and design of the research. There are both benefits and challenges associated with stakeholders having greater influence. Figure 1 also helps to illustrate the different timescales of stakeholder involvement.

#### 5. Resources for stakeholder engagement

Along with other considerations mentioned here - such as scale, type and role of stakeholders, knowledge flows - available resources (including skills, time and funds) are a central determinant for how you plan and carry out stakeholder engagement. Ideally, resources for stakeholder engagement should be planned for at the research design stage. Some stakeholder engagement methods (e.g., workshops) are more dependent on your experience and skills, and more costly and time-intensive than others (e.g., email bulletins). If you do not have stakeholder engagement experience within the research team, think about linking with others in your organisation who do have this experience. You may also want consider bringing in external expertise or undergoing training in engagement methods (depending on the type of engagement you are planning).

#### 6. Methods for engaging stakeholders

Depending on the type of project and the factors outlined here, there is a wide range of stakeholder engagement methods you could choose. These could include one or several of the following:

- Print or email bulletins / newsletters / brochures / website and other kinds of updates
- Informal contact (e.g., phone calls, ad hoc meetings)
- Setting up a steering group and having regular meetings
- Conferences / workshops
- Academic publications
- Secondary data collection (e.g., purchasing datasets); Questionnaires / interviews / focus groups
- Other social research data collection methods (e.g., participant observation)

Links to advice on these methods can be found in Appendix 2.

Where the aim of engagement is to gather information about stakeholders' views or decisions, an important factor to consider is the (artificial) context in which engagement tends to take place. Workshops, surveys, interviews and similar methods may provide valuable indications of stakeholders' knowledge or values; but (even assuming the data collection instruments used are well-tested and validated) the responses given by stakeholders in social research may not always reflect the decisions they make in a naturalistic (i.e., real world) setting. Remember that people do not always do what they say in research they do, or act consistently with what they believe (the so-called 'value-action' or 'attitude-behaviour' gap), and often this is because of changing contextual factors and pressures.

#### 7. Degrees of stakeholder control and influence

Depending on their role, stakeholders involved in any research project can have different degrees of control and influence over the project in question, and at different times during the research. For example if their engagement is in an information or data provision capacity then their influence over the direction of the research may be limited, and focussed at certain times in the research process. Other types of stakeholder engagement such as consultation or partnership, for example, may involve more influence.

Therefore, stakeholder engagement in research inevitably means that there are issues to consider around balancing their control or influence over the research. As mentioned, Tyndall researchers have observed that stakeholders have greater control when they are involved earlier on in the process; in the design phase, there is greater scope to involve stakeholders as partners in defining the scope and nature of the research. This can be a valuable learning opportunity for researchers, and will help ensure the research is addressing socially relevant issues. However, there are challenges and pitfalls associated with this co-production model of research. In some cases, researchers may find their independence and credibility is questioned by other groups if they are believed to be overly influenced by certain a stakeholder's agenda; in part, this risk can be addressed by managing expectations (see below) and ensuring the robustness of research is not compromised by stakeholder interests.

## 8. Flows of knowledge and learning

Knowledge exchange patterns (amount, type, direction) between a research team and members of a stakeholder community will possibly evolve over time as a project moves forward. In general, a consistent 2-way exchange of expertise will tend to maximise mutual benefits in relation to learning and will signal that you value (non-academic) stakeholder knowledge and experience, as well as academic input. Tyndall researchers have indicated they find stakeholder engagement particularly beneficial during the main data collection and analysis phase of the research; while they feel the benefit to stakeholders of engagement in research increases over the course of the project (see Appendix 1). On the other hand, involving stakeholders early on in the design of the research can help researchers gain a different perspective on the priority issues to be addressed. Ideally, the whole process of stakeholder engagement from project inception to completion should be actively managed, and appropriately resourced.

## 9. Managing expectations and valuing stakeholders

As with other types of project, managing expectations - of both stakeholders and researchers - is crucial for a successful research project which involves stakeholders. At the outset, you should establish the interests and expectations of each group and be clear about what the project can reasonably deliver within the timeframe and with the available resources. Within the planning stage, you should openly agree boundaries and be transparent about the role of stakeholders: are they going to be full partners, or have a more restricted role (e.g., data providers); how often, and in what form, will you communicate with them? Maintaining regular communication with stakeholders throughout the project is important - not only to inform and seek feedback on the research direction and findings - but also to ensure stakeholders feel valued in the research process. It is important to tailor this communication to the audience; for instance, policy and industry stakeholders are unlikely to want to read a 100-page academic report. Maintaining good working relationships in this way can also lead to future productive collaborations with stakeholders: most Tyndall researchers say they have been approached by stakeholders they have worked with to do further work with or for them.

In order to maintain effective relationships with stakeholders, it is also vital to understand the distinct cultures, styles, languages, and interests of different stakeholder groups, and to be aware of any difficult relationships between stakeholders. Skilled stakeholder facilitators can help to manage conflict and deal with controlling stakeholders within the stakeholder engagement process.

## 10. Professional conduct

Maintaining professional conduct - which includes avoiding bias, upholding research ethics (e.g., confidentiality, data protection), and respecting different stakeholder cultures - is key to maintaining the respect and trust of stakeholders, as well as producing robust research. Your actions may also affect your (or your colleagues') prospects for future engagement with particular stakeholders. Basic issues such as dressing appropriately for meetings, preparing professional written communications, being on time, and so on, should not be taken for granted. For specific information about ethics and professional codes, see Appendix 2.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1 – Tyndall survey results

Summary of the outcomes of two surveys conducted in 2007 to explore the nature of stakeholder engagement activity in Tyndall Centre research.

Table 1: Stakeholder groups and experience of stakeholder engagement (from a qualitative survey of Tyndall researchers; N=16)

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| Which stakeholders and stakeholder groups did you work with?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Environment Agency x2</li> <li>§ Defra x3</li> <li>§ Natural England</li> <li>§ North Norfolk District Council x2</li> <li>§ Great Yarmouth Borough Council</li> <li>§ Government/policy-makers (unspecified) x4</li> <li>§ Green Party MEP</li> <li>§ 'High level' stakeholders</li> <li>§ General public/ local people x2</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ NGOs; e.g. FoE, WWF, local community action groups x2</li> <li>§ Cp.net members</li> <li>§ Energy specialists/ climate scientists/ Philosophers x3</li> <li>§ Communication/ IT/ Finance experts x3</li> <li>§ Royal Society of Arts</li> <li>§ Aviation industry reps</li> <li>§ Chelsea flower show</li> <li>§ Media x3</li> </ul> |
| What role(s) did the stakeholders play in your research (e.g. funder, advisor, reviewer, providing data)?  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Provided data/ interviewee/ participant x11</li> <li>§ Workshops/ focus groups x3</li> <li>§ Advisor/advisory role/ reviewing x4</li> <li>§ Input on participatory methods</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Funder</li> <li>§ Consultancy</li> <li>§ Media – wanting information</li> <li>§ Knowledge transfer</li> <li>§ Building contacts for future work</li> </ul>   |
| Were these expert stakeholders?  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Yes x7</li> <li>§ No x2</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Combined responses x7</li> </ul>   |
| If yes, were they in a different field from you?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Yes x5</li> <li>§ No x2</li> </ul>   |   |
| When in the research process did you engage with stakeholders?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ During research, at the beginning, not always early enough</li> <li>§ On and off throughout in planning and doing the research</li> <li>§ As and when an intellectual problem arose</li> <li>§ Beginning, towards the end, all the way through</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ So far, before and during the research process</li> <li>§ At all stages, but esp. when designing methodology &amp; data collection</li> <li>§ Data collection stage; and also feedback of research findings to them</li> </ul>   |
| How (if at all) did the degree of involvement change over the course of the engagement process?            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Most groups were keen to maintain high level of involvement</li> <li>§ Only short interactive sessions – didn't return to participants or consultants though both will receive report of results of the research</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Fluctuated, highest during planning stage &amp; parts of research process From my experience it is too early to see the change at this stage</li> <li>§ Did not change x3</li> </ul>   |
| How much control did stakeholders have over the research (design of project, methods used, outputs, etc.)? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Variable</li> <li>§ Significant control over how the research is applied</li> <li>§ Outputs – government ones doctored bits &amp; tried to influence outcome</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Advise and review, methodology and approaches</li> <li>§ Very little</li> <li>§ None x3</li> </ul>   |
| Why do you believe stakeholders participate in academic exercises?   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ To learn/ receive information from researchers x5</li> <li>§ To influence (e.g., policy agenda) x3</li> <li>§ Beneficial/useful to their work x4</li> <li>§ Personal interest / gain x5</li> <li>§ To raise their profile x1</li> <li>§ To contribute to an issue they see as important x1</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>§ Because expected by funders x1</li> <li>§ They feel it is right thing to do (e.g., public bodies) x1</li> <li>§ For the sake of their egos x1</li> <li>§ Because the information is free x1</li> <li>§ To forge links/build networks x2</li> </ul>   |

Table 2. Summary - internet questionnaire survey to all Tyndall staff (N=26)

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Q  | Brief overview of responses   |
| Have you ever engaged with stakeholders during your time in Tyndall?   | The majority of respondents (96%) had engaged with stakeholders   |
| To what extent was stakeholder involvement in your project planned?  | Most (69%) said stakeholder involvement in their project was planned 'a lot'; and 27% said it was planned 'a little'.   |
| Did you engage with more stakeholders than you expected to during the course of the project?   | Despite this, just over half the participants (52%) said they'd engaged with more stakeholders than they expected to during the course of their project.  |
| What stakeholder involvement methods did you use, and when in the research process did you use them?   | Meetings - especially before (22%) and during (46%) the project, informal contact - throughout (21% before, 40% during, 30% after), and academic publications (especially after the project; 53%) were the most commonly-applied methods. Interviews (44% during) and workshops (48% during) were also popular during the project.  |
| Which stakeholders, and stakeholder groups, did you work with and what role did they play in your research?  | Stakeholders were most likely to be data/information providers or recipients. Local policy, Regional policy, National policy, Government agency, and International policy groups were all most likely to be recipients of findings (24%, 22%, 30%, 26% and 19%, respectively). Service sector was most commonly a data provider (15%), energy and other industries were mostly recipients (13% and 17%, respectively). NGOs were mostly data providers (22%); while the general public were mostly recipients (27%). Academics were mostly data providers (25%) or reviewers (25%). |
| When in the research have they been involved?  | Most common group engaged with at every stage of the research was 'Research/academia' (28% before, 25% during, 32% after); 'NGOs' (11% before, 39% during, 25% after), 'National policy' (14% before, 36% during, 31% after) and 'Government agencies' (19% before, 31% during, 33% after) were the next most popular groups engaged with. 'Utilities' and 'Energy producers' were least engaged with (61% and 64% did not engage with them, respectively).   |
| How beneficial was stakeholder involvement to the project?   | The highest proportion of respondents identified stakeholder involvement as beneficial during the project (81%; compared to 59% before the project, and 62% afterwards).  |
| To what extent do you feel that stakeholders' involvement in your project was beneficial for the stakeholders?   | Most participants felt stakeholders' involvement in their project was beneficial for the stakeholders; although the benefit to stakeholders was felt to increase over the course of research (44% said it was beneficial before the project, 67% during, and 81% after)   |
| How important is it to you that stakeholders benefit from being involved in your research?   | All participants felt it was either very important (69%) or quite important (41%) that stakeholders benefit from being involved in research   |
| Overall, how much control did stakeholders have over the research?   | Stakeholders have greater control earlier on in the research process: 33% said stakeholders had 'a lot' of control before the project started, dropping to 11% saying this after the process. Those saying stakeholders had no control ranged from 26% (before), through 30% (during), to 37% (after).  |
| Did you change your research design during the research process as a result of stakeholder interaction?  | Evidently, stakeholders were influential in a number of ways: most (59%) said they had changed their research design during the research process as a result of stakeholder interaction.  |
| Over the course of your research career (not only in Tyndall), has your approach to stakeholder engagement changed in any way?   | There is also evidence of learning amongst the researchers surveyed: most (63%) said that over the course of their research career (not only in Tyndall) their approach to stakeholder engagement has changed.  |
| Have you ever experienced difficulties in managing stakeholder expectations?   | Despite feeling stakeholder engagement is valuable, many stated it could be also challenging: a significant minority (44%) said they had experienced difficulties in managing stakeholder expectations.   |
| Have you engaged with any of the stakeholders you've mentioned here in any other projects? Have you been approached by stakeholders you've worked with to do further work with/for them? | Stakeholder engagement is often based on (or develops into) a longer-term relationship, beyond the scope of a particular research project: over half the participants (59%) have been approached by the stakeholders they've worked with to do further work with/for them, and a similar proportion (58%) have engaged with stakeholders they mentioned here in any other projects.   |

## Appendix 2 - Links to other guidance on stakeholder engagement

### Advice on social research and engagement methods:

- surveys and questionnaire design [[tinyurl.com/4axmhr](http://tinyurl.com/4axmhr)]
- interviews [[tinyurl.com/494glq](http://tinyurl.com/494glq)]
- meetings and workshops [[tinyurl.com/4pyngb](http://tinyurl.com/4pyngb)]
- newsletters and leaflets [[tinyurl.com/47qtwe](http://tinyurl.com/47qtwe)]
- online surveys and discussion fora [[tinyurl.com/5qydr8](http://tinyurl.com/5qydr8)]
- participatory methods [[www.viwta.be/files/30890\\_ToolkitENGdef.pdf](http://www.viwta.be/files/30890_ToolkitENGdef.pdf)]

### General advice and guidelines on stakeholder engagement:

- Project Sigma guidelines: [[www.eauc.org.uk/sorted/files/sigmastakeholderengagement.pdf](http://www.eauc.org.uk/sorted/files/sigmastakeholderengagement.pdf)]
- AA1000 Stakeholder engagement Standard: [[www.accountability21.net/uploadedFiles/publications/SES%20Exposure%20Draft%20-%20FullPDF.pdf](http://www.accountability21.net/uploadedFiles/publications/SES%20Exposure%20Draft%20-%20FullPDF.pdf)]
- Multi-stakeholder process: resource portal [[portals.wi.wur.nl/msp/?Articles\\_%26\\_Books](http://portals.wi.wur.nl/msp/?Articles_%26_Books)]
- Citizen science for sustainability: [[www.suscit.org.uk/resources/documents/Methodsfinal140706.pdf](http://www.suscit.org.uk/resources/documents/Methodsfinal140706.pdf)]
- Connecting Science: what we know and what we don't know about science in society. [[www.the-ba.net/NR/rdonlyres/CE852B1D-7699-43A1-91C4-382DB5877D45/0/ConnectingScience\\_review.pdf](http://www.the-ba.net/NR/rdonlyres/CE852B1D-7699-43A1-91C4-382DB5877D45/0/ConnectingScience_review.pdf)]

### Ethical / professional codes:

- British Psychological Society (BPS) Ethical Guidelines: [[www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/DeafStudiesTeaching/dissert/BPS%20Ethical%20Guidelines.htm](http://www.bris.ac.uk/Depts/DeafStudiesTeaching/dissert/BPS%20Ethical%20Guidelines.htm)]
- Market Research Society (MRS) Code of Conduct: [[www.mrs.org.uk/standards/downloads/code2005.pdf](http://www.mrs.org.uk/standards/downloads/code2005.pdf)]

### Some more in-depth academic references:

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