

Engaging with people affected by desertification: *a guide for decision-makers*



What are the benefits of working with affected communities? What are the challenges that I might face?

Drawing on evidence from drylands around the world, this brief will help you overcome these challenges to design participatory processes that can enable you to work more effectively with affected communities to combat desertification.

Background

To combat desertification, decision-makers from the policy, NGO and research communities are increasingly engaging with affected communities.

Working with the people who are affected by (or have a “stake” in) desertification (“stakeholders”) is often challenging. There seem to always be difficult characters to deal with, and you often end up working with people who are in conflict with one another – or worse – in conflict with you. But the promise of stakeholder participation is still alluring: democracy in action; smarter and more popular decisions, designed by and supported by the people who have to implement them.

This information brief provides evidence based on interviews with members of the EU-funded DESIRE project who ran a comparable participatory process with 14 communities affected by desertification around the world. This represents a unique opportunity to compare participatory decision making in a range of very different contexts. We analyse these experiences to suggest a number of essential ingredients for a successful participatory process.

Whether success is judged in the eyes of the participants or in terms of combating desertification, a few simple pointers can help you design participatory processes that meet your aims.

Through stakeholder participation DESIRE aims to:

- Combine local and scientific knowledge to select feasible, effective and socially accepted sustainable land management (SLM) options
- Facilitate mutual learning through dialogue between stakeholder groups to achieve awareness, understanding and ownership over land degradation problems and SLM solutions
- Implement, monitor and demonstrate the effectiveness and feasibility of SLM to strengthen social acceptance



DESIRE study sites threatened by desertification

Why engage stakeholders in decisions about combating desertification?

After all, it may be argued that such efforts will inevitably require additional time and money, which are often in short supply...



Experience from the DESIRE project suggests that by engaging affected communities, it is possible to derive a number of important benefits for the participants that could help combat desertification, which are well worth the extra effort...

5 reasons why its worth engaging with affected communities

1. Enhanced social networks, collaborations and trust
2. Make more robust & durable decisions by pooling knowledge
3. Better problem identification
4. Build ownership, consensus & implement tailor-made solutions
5. More confident and motivated stakeholders

1. Enhanced social networks, collaborations and trust: Participation strengthens relationships and trust, leading to more effective partnerships to tackle desertification

2. Make more robust & durable decisions by pooling knowledge: Participation enables stakeholders that otherwise may not meet or communicate to pool their knowledge with each other and researchers to find innovative, practical and robust solutions

3. Better problem identification: Consultation with all relevant stakeholders (or those that represent their interests) leads to a more holistic problem identification. The more different perspectives can be incorporated into the development of solutions, the more likely it is that the agreed outcome will be successfully implemented

4. Build ownership, consensus and implement tailor-made solutions: Participants are more likely to reach consensus over (or be willing to accept) a group decision if they deliberate together over its likely consequences. Land managers are ideally situated to evaluate the likely success of measures to combat desertification, both in terms of environmental and socio-economic benefits. Participants are more likely to implement solutions they develop themselves

5. More confident and motivated stakeholders: Participants gain in self-esteem if they are taken seriously and listened to, and perceive their involvement has made a difference. Local land users and groups that are otherwise often not heard can be given a voice

What challenges might I face?

Engaging people in participatory processes can be challenging – just getting people to attend can in some cases be tricky, but once they're in the room, there are even more challenges to deal with. You will probably never get everyone to fully agree with one another. Indeed, that's probably why you're designing a participatory process...



Designed and implemented well, your participatory process can harness those disagreements as part of a creative and interactive process. However, differences of opinion can easily escalate into conflict or distrust without effective facilitation.



Designed well, participation can harness disagreements as part of a creative process

The most important challenges you are likely to face are imbalances of power between different participants and communication between participants from different backgrounds (including different levels of education). Imbalance of power and communication problems can be avoided to a certain extent through your choice of participants and who you put together in meetings or small group work. But power imbalances are inevitable in any participatory process, and need to be addressed explicitly in your process design.

The first step is identifying who has greater and lesser power in the group and when power dynamics are at play. A good facilitator can prevent power dynamics from affecting the process through a combination of people management skills and the use of specific facilitation techniques (e.g. writing ideas anonymously on post-it notes, and then grouping and prioritising ideas using sticky dots). Getting an experienced and skilled facilitator is important, but if you are unable to do that, make sure you've had some training before you try and facilitate a process yourself.

Potential challenges for participation

1. Power imbalances
2. Lack of interest in combating desertification
3. Previous negative experience
4. Differences between stakeholders

1. Power imbalances: Power imbalances are one of the most common reasons for dysfunctional participation – use facilitation techniques that give everyone an equal opportunity to contribute and make people feel at ease. In particular, it may be necessary to pay attention that individuals or certain groups that lack power and influence are not prevented from expressing their opinions by more confident, powerful individuals or groups



2. Lack of interest in combating desertification: The issues that are most directly linked to people's livelihoods tend to take priority over environmental issues e.g. communities affected by desertification may only be prepared to spend time tackling land degradation after they have access to food, clean water and health facilities. Affected communities are likely to have less interest in desertification if they don't depend economically on the environmental resources in question (this is often so near cities). The benefits of tackling desertification are often medium or long term, so it is a challenge to provide some immediate benefits from participation

3. Previous negative experiences with participation are de-motivating and difficult to overcome ("stakeholder fatigue"), particularly when participants have limited time. It is often easier to motivate and engage participants who are organized in associations than individuals. Collaborative relationships with stakeholders often build on existing personal contacts, which take time and energy to maintain. When working in a new area where you have few or no contacts, establishing credibility and trust with potential participants can be challenging

4. Differences between stakeholders: Stakeholders may have opposing needs and priorities, which may arise from very different value systems that are unlikely to change. Differences in background, education and language can make it harder to facilitate trust, knowledge exchange and communication between participants – use facilitation techniques that are adapted to the background and education level of participants

Secrets of successful participation

Although the context in which you run a participatory process will affect your outcomes to an extent, **our analysis of engaging affected communities in very different contexts around the world suggests that the most important factors determining success are the way the process is designed, implemented and facilitated.**

With a bit of planning, it is possible to create participatory processes that achieve their goals, no matter how challenging your context. Here are some of the most important things you need to get right when designing your participatory process...



1. Select your participants carefully

- Perform a “stakeholder analysis” to identify opinion makers and the ones with actual decision making power and resources to implement decisions, as well as affected parties
- Policy makers with actual decision-making power need to be included in the process for short-term implementation. However, this can create a power imbalance that may limit active participation and the emergence of new ideas, unless power dynamics are carefully managed through facilitation.
- If policy makers with decision making power cannot actively participate themselves, they should at least be informed about the participatory process. In this case, their technical personnel can participate, but the outcomes of the process should still be respected by the ones with decision making power
- The group of participants needs to be representative of all interests in the community affected by the decision
- Innovators are needed within the group because they may be the first to actually test new solutions and serve as an example for others
- Working in small groups of 10 to 20 people proved effective – if you have a larger group, split into small groups for as many of the activities as possible

2. Make participation attractive and easy

- Process objectives must be presented in a way that enable people to easily identify with the problem and its possible solutions
- Directly link the objectives to an urgent public concern and/or ongoing policy process
- Highlight economic benefits of possible solutions and illustrate the link between environmental and socioeconomic benefits
- To be interested in engaging and to yield effective outcomes, it is crucial that participants feel their contributions will be acted upon. This is often related to availability of funding and the extent to which a process can feed directly into policy decisions. If there is no funding for implementation of solutions, or if it is merely a minor part of a research project, interest in participation is strongly reduced
- Continuous participation is more attractive than ad-hoc consultation of opinions. So, let people participate throughout and provide feedback on what is done with the results of participation. Regular contact between workshops or meetings is required to keep up the interest
- Put the land users central by having meetings in villages rather than cities and in accessible non-technical language
- Provide logistical support for participation where needed, for example transport to meetings



3. Negotiate ambitious but realistic objectives

- There must be realistic economic support for implementation of solutions
- Be ambitious but don't promise too much
- Take a holistic approach, including directly and indirectly affected parties
- Be prepared to negotiate the objectives of the participatory process with participants at the outset to ensure that the process meets the needs and priorities of all participants. This may improve the quality of the work that is done, and will increase the likelihood that participants will continue to engage actively throughout the process.

4. Foster trust

- Built on existing relationships between participants by using existing networks and contacts for communication. Communicate where possible through local leaders to increase trust and acceptance
- A minimum level of trust is required between local and regional participants already at the start of the process
- The process leaders should be familiar with the context and where possible with participants
- Ensure all decisions be group decisions and transparent

5. Get your timing right

- Respect the availability and time constraints of participants, but don't rush and take the time needed to built relationships and think possible solutions through
- Where possible, try to link the process to elections or other important happenings that can focus attention on your process



6. Think about how you implement your process

- Provide high-quality, easily accessible and un-biased background information so all participants are at a similar level to one another, with a common understanding of the issues being discussed
- Use a competent independent facilitator that can deal with power imbalances, stimulate active participation of all actors and push and maintain the process
- Work with your facilitator to design a clearly structured but flexible process, adapting your process design and methods to your goals and context
- Respect the knowledge of all participants, whether formally educated or not, treating researchers as equal stakeholders in the process, critically evaluating both scientific and local knowledge

Case study: Stakeholder participation to define effective and feasible Sustainable Land Management in Spain

To identify the most effective and feasible Sustainable Land Management (SLM) solutions to mitigate and prevent land degradation in the Guadalentín basin (SE-Spain), we established active collaboration with different stakeholder groups through the EU funded DESIRE project.

Participant selection

To make this participatory process successful, we first made an assessment of who was directly affected by desertification and who could reduce land degradation by making or influencing land use decisions. We used existing contacts with people in the study area that participated in previous stakeholder workshops on desertification. Through them we contacted other people to represent all relevant stakeholder groups.

The purpose of this diverse group of stakeholders was to make informed decisions by bringing together local experience, ecological and technical expertise as well as knowledge on socioeconomic, legal and institutional conditions. Individual farmers, Civil Society Organisations (like farmers organisations), governmental institutions, private companies, and scientists were represented.

A range of methods was used to invite stakeholders e.g. telephone calls, postal mail and email, and by visiting key players personally. Moreover, one of the farmer organizations sent out an invitation to their members to participate in the first stakeholder workshop. However, it is extremely difficult to anticipate how many people will respond to an invitation, and individual farmers are particularly difficult to engage in participation. In our experience, about 20% of invited people actually attended, and we found that a group between 10-20 participants was most productive during workshops.



Process design and implementation

Participants were involved in all stages of decision making: from problem identification, to design, selection, implementation and evaluation of SLM options. The decision making process was divided into four phases, all of which aimed at mutual learning, trust building and participatory decision making. Three workshops, organised in a centrally located village, and a field demonstration day were at the core of the decision making process. To make informed decisions, participants were provided with detailed documentation of the multiple impacts and effectiveness of SLM options in non-technical language, and based on consultation with a wide range of stakeholders, experts and existing literature.

All three stakeholder workshops consisted of a series of moderated interactive exercises to guide the discussion, learning and decision making. Group interaction and discussion were highly valued by participants. A combination of plenary group discussions, smaller working groups with 4-5 people, and individual voting about options was used to deal with possible power imbalances. For the same reason, being the smallest group of participants, farmers were often asked first for their opinion in group discussions. In some cases, working groups were deliberately split according to stakeholder type (farmers separate from policy makers, CSO's and scientists) to remove possible barriers for participants to express their opinion in front of a diverse group of stakeholders.

During two of the three workshops participants were asked to perform a Multi-Criteria Analysis by evaluating the impact of each SLM option against self-defined criteria. Participants demonstrated distrust and unfamiliarity with the computer that was used for this analysis. Therefore, the computer output was used to initiate discussion on the multiple impacts of each SLM measure, resulting in group agreement over the optimal combination of SLM options to be implemented in the field.

Field demonstration and village meetings are much more effective ways of communication than websites and leaflets



Workshops were programmed around the crop calendar and summer months and lasted no more than one day



Right after the second workshop, the selected SLM measures were implemented and their economic, ecological and socio-cultural impact was monitored. The aim of monitoring was to analyse the effectiveness of the selected options under the local conditions of the study site and to demonstrate this to stakeholders. Where field trials were successful, this was expected to strengthen social acceptance. The selected SLM options were implemented on the land of one of the farmers that participated in the workshops.

Most active participation was achieved during the field demonstration day where a total of 27 persons participated, of which 40% were farmers, 20% governmental, 33% scientists and 7% representatives from CSOs. The day was evaluated very positively by participants who highly valued the continued information supply, and the direct contact between stakeholder groups. They also expressed high satisfaction at seeing their joint decisions reflected in the field experiments.

After two years of field monitoring, in a last workshop, the results of the field trials were presented and discussed with the participants. Based on these new insights, participants were allowed to reconsider their previous evaluation of SLM options. This resulted in an important change in the order of preferred SLM measures. Participants further insisted and committed themselves to communicate and recommend the project outputs to relevant policy makers.

The challenge is to explain in easily understandable terms 'what is in it for them' and connect a complex concept such as 'desertification' to its practical implications for daily life

Key Messages

- To combat desertification effectively, decision-makers from the policy, NGO and research communities need to work at the local level with affected communities
- Collaboration with affected communities leads to better understanding of desertification problems and tailored solutions that will meet their needs and empower them to deal more effectively with present and future desertification problems
- Trust and collaboration from affected communities is more likely from well-designed and implemented participatory processes, leading to knowledge exchange and learning between all parties
- There are many challenges to effective participation: motivating engagement, negotiating different priorities and opinions, and managing power dynamics
- The most important factors that determine the success of a participatory process are the way it is designed and carried out. Although you need to be flexible and adapt your participatory process to the local context, there are a number of design principles that will ensure your process is successful, no matter how challenging your context. These include:
 - ✓ **Select your participants carefully** (representative, include innovators)
 - ✓ **Make participation attractive and easy** (participation must make a difference)
 - ✓ **Negotiate ambitious but realistic objectives** (ensure you have the means to implement ideas)
 - ✓ **Foster trust** (build on existing networks & contacts)
 - ✓ **Get your timing right** (respect participants' availability)
 - ✓ **Think about how you implement your process** (get a good facilitator)

How can you design participatory processes that can effectively engage stakeholders in decisions about desertification?



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