# 8. PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS | David Hawthorne and Anna Johnson

The research effort of the project is intended to address knowledge gaps and specific aspects of the socio-ecological system (SES) being studied. How well do you know the interests and needs of the people who you are hoping your research will serve? Maybe you have little contact with them, or maybe you've developed your project with their strong engagement. Either way, engaging stakeholders from the beginning to the end of a project will help improve the outcomes and make you and the project team more successful on this and future projects.

This section provides a variety of strategies for:
- Integrating stakeholder and partner relationships into your project
- How to identify stakeholders and solicit their input
- Things to remember when navigating stakeholder and partner relationships
- How to solicit involvement and input from stakeholders who have little experience in working with researchers
- How to do your part to build relationships that are mutually beneficial and rewarding

The individuals, organizations, or institutions that serve as partners and stakeholders in your project will be diverse. Businesses may be partners in the project or stakeholders in the problem and its outcomes. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are also potential partners and may have an interest in some aspect of the project scope or its outcomes, or they may serve affected communities. Partners and stakeholders can also include members of the affected communities, individual citizens, and governmental agencies (including those that have funded the project). The roles of these partners and stakeholders can vary widely. For example, they may serve as major suppliers of key research tools and services or knowledgeable sources of information about the project systems and the project's outcomes.

Effectively engaged stakeholders and partners will help with conceptualizing the project questions, framing the research, completing the work, and disseminating and implementing findings and products. Individual partners and stakeholders may not be involved at each of these stages, so it is important to match the partner or stakeholder with the roles that best suit and interest them. Therefore, stakeholder/partner contributions will differ across the timeline of the project. Clearly, partners and stakeholders who *fund and support* the project must be engaged at the earliest stages of proposal development. In addition, individuals, communities, and institutions *impacted by the project results* should be engaged throughout the project, to inform the project objectives and its scope and to inform the translation of project research objectives into actionable outcomes. Table 8.1 offers some general guidelines on when stakeholders/partners with various roles might best contribute to the project.

| TABLE 8.1 **CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING PARTNER AND STAKEHOLDER RELATIONSHIPS** | PHASE I PROPOSAL | PHASE II GETTING STARTED | PHASE III PERFORMING | PHASE IV FINISHING STRONG |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Identify potential partners and stakeholders and reach out to them | x | | | |
| Bring in possible partner and stakeholders for discussion of goals and objectives | x | x | | |
| Don't forget about Cooperative Extension! | x | x | x | x |
| Ongoing involvement of stakeholders | | x | x | |
| Balance competing priorities among stakeholders | x | x | x | x |
| Engagement during project delivery | | | | x |

# Identify and Reach Out to Potential Partners and Stakeholders

Whether the project research proposal aims to positively impact marginalized populations or whether it seeks to open up new markets for a major economic sector, the proposal will strengthened by information and perspectives of partners and stakeholders and its execution may be impossible without their involvement. Soliciting their involvement and building relationships with them can ensure that the project produces useful results. Building effective, long-term relationships with partners and stakeholders requires an investment of time and energy, from the resources needed to bring interested parties together, to ongoing communication and follow-up, to building a collaborative culture that involves your scientists and key stakeholders. Although the required investment is large, the returns are substantial, enabling better and more useful research outputs and outcomes.

### Identifying

Here are three questions to help you identify key stakeholders:

1. Who will be most impacted by the work of the project?

2. Who is most interested in being involved?

3. Who could provide valuable input?

You probably have some idea about these things already, but work with your team to identify additional individuals, organizations, and businesses that might have a stake in the outcomes of the project. Take advantage of the existing professional networks of your project's team leaders. As you build relationships with partners and stakeholders, ask them whether additional perspectives are needed and work to build relationships with those groups, too.

### Reaching out

Once potential partners and stakeholders have been identified, reach out to them through mutual contacts who can introduce you, or through your project's team leaders who already have relationships. Work with your team members to cultivate or build on existing relationships with stakeholders. Trusted connections can go far towards building your team's credibility and connections. On first contact, introduce yourself, explain why you are reaching out, and provide an overview of your project and how stakeholders can be involved. Structure substantive meetings to identify common interests and potential collaboration. Which brings us to…



Farmer attending a field day for a large agricultural project.
Credit: Anonymous



Meeting with stakeholders on a cooperator farm (USDA-NIFA sponsored REACCH project).
Credit: Sanford Eigenbrode

## Bring in Possible Partners and Stakeholders for Discussion

When engaging with potential partners and stakeholders, and before you get into the details of asking for their input on the proposal, be clear about the plans for the project, its status, and how you envision their involvement. When and where will you be meeting to make decisions on the project and how can you include partners and stakeholders in those discussions? How would you like to engage and communicate with them through the life of the project? Will you be soliciting their input, or will you also be sharing significant decision-making power on the project with them? Although you don't have to iron all of these details at your first meeting, it is important for each of you to establish levels of commitment and expectations of involvement early on. Going in, make sure that you have some idea about what kind of involvement and commitment from them would be ideal, but be ready to listen and compromise accordingly.

As part of this conversation, share with partners and stakeholders the key ideas of your science as well as the subject matter and anticipated goals of the project. Since stakeholders work from within different professional cultures than do academics, include time to discuss the timelines and incentive structures of academia and those of your stakeholders. Ask them to share their organization/institution's mission, goals, priorities, and limitations. Strong relationships require an understanding of and respect for differences in missions, goals, and strategies for accomplishing them. This sets the context for identifying where the project and their institution intersect and what activities could be successfully undertaken.



Project team members create a Youtube video with their phones for project stakeholders.  Credit: Lois Wright Morton

## Don't Forget about Cooperative Extension!

Especially, but not exclusively, for land-grant institutions, Cooperative Extension is valuable for linking researchers with stakeholders. The Cooperative Extension System in the U.S. is a nationwide network of outreach professionals who translate research findings into educational materials and programming for rural and urban populations. Many SES projects in the U.S. will naturally fit into the mission of Cooperative Extension. Engaging with your extension professionals at the beginning of your project will not only help them better understand the project and empower them to communicate about it effectively, but they will likely have valuable ideas around education and outreach on the project. This need not be restricted to projects funding by NIFA or other USDA programs. Land-grant universities will have a formal extension mission that can assist with reaching all of the citizens they serve.

*Case-study: Extension and the Sustainable Corn CAP*. Extension professionals were integral to several aspects of the USDA NIFA Sustainable Corn CAP and served as one of the project's six major sub-teams. The 10 land-grant universities participating in this project each identified one or more extension educator to work with the project and involved ~150 farmer cooperators (stakeholders) in both research and outreach aspects. Project researchers trained 18 extension professionals to conduct interviews with farmers in their areas. These interviews were recorded and transcribed and yielded a great deal of valuable information about the range of farmers' thoughts and concerns regarding climate change and their farm management decisions. This information was not only valuable to the research team but also increased the educators' understanding of their audience and how to better meet their information and technology needs. The extension team also took the lead on creating a variety of outreach materials, and given the diversity of research



Forest scientists from corporations and universities share ideas as they tour experimental sites of the USDA-NIFA sponsored PINEMAP. Credit: Brian Roth

produced under this project, this was no small feat. Not only did this partnership with extension yield valuable data, the extension professionals had the opportunity to build and strengthen relationships with their constituents.

Outside of the USA, structures similar to Cooperative Extension exist and can be engaged to facilitate stakeholder connections.

# Balance Competing Priorities among Stakeholders

Projects with diverse stakeholders will face the challenge of considering their diverse perspectives and needs. This can be an enormous challenge. A literature has evolved for structuring productive discussions that help incorporate stakeholder concerns and for identifying and clarifying conflicts (Cornwall & Jewkes 1995, Pound et al. 2003, Patterson et al. 2011). Disagreements with stakeholders and the emergence of conflicting priorities will likely come up from the first meetings involving diverse stakeholder groups, and throughout your project. These disagreements can impede progress but if properly addressed can greatly increase the impact of your project. A principal common to all these approaches is commitment to respectful and clear communication.

In addition to adopting established methods for engaging with stakeholders, there are some things

you can do to prepare for these situations when they arise – and these are things which you should already be doing because they're good management practices. First, work to build your own skills and capacities in resolving conflicts. It is particularly valuable to negotiate and resolve disagreement when the stakes are low, so when a bigger conflict comes your way you are more equipped to handle it. Second, identify trusted people you can go to for advice, both within your leadership team and outside of the project. Having people to lean on during high-pressure times can also help you avoid burnout throughout this rewarding yet challenging endeavor. Third, be open to having difficult conversations and anticipate making hard decisions that may affect the direction of your project. Fourth, view these difficulties

as inevitable but full of potential to increase the meaning and impact of the project's results.

As discussed above, different stakeholders will have different priorities and capacities. While each stakeholder relationship will be unique, an important consideration that must be mentioned here if your stakeholders and partners belong to or represent underserved populations. These populations often have little power and influence over your university or corporate partners and you must be cognizant of these relationships. Disagreements will arise with these partners just as with others, and sometimes these could even be about the basic premises of the project. If or when these situations arise, it is important to keep in mind and be respectful of any differences in expertise and influence that exist between your project team and partners.

# Involvement of Stakeholders during Project Execution and Beyond

A solid foundation of communicating clearly and working collaboratively with partners and stakeholders helps ensure continued substantive and meaningful involvement in the project. Attend to maintaining these relationships. Keep them informed regularly about project activities and milestones achieved. Ask for their input and welcome signs of interest. As project director, you must attend to this, but encourage engagement by all members of the team. The experience of working with partners and stakeholders can be highly educational and beneficial for the team and individual team members, leading to future opportunities for interaction, collaboration, and impactful endeavor.



Stakeholders and researchers from Woody Invasive Weeds Project framed by the leaves of invasive Prosopis trees in Baringo District, Kenya.  Credit: Theo Linders

## Take Away Messages:

- Engaging partners and stakeholders from the beginning to the end of a project will help improve the project's outcomes and increase success on current and future projects.
- Three guiding questions to help identify appropriate partners and stakeholders are: Who will be most impacted by the work of the project? Who is most interested in being involved? And who could provide valuable input if you can bring them in on the project? Utilize your existing network to gather further information on who potential stakeholders and partners might be.
- When engaging with partners and stakeholders, be clear about the project plans, its status, and how you envision their involvement and ask your partners and stakeholders about their ideas and capacities in these areas. It is also a good idea to have conversations with partners and stakeholders about the priorities of your different fields, and ask them to share their own pressures and priorities.

- In the USA, Cooperative Extension is a valuable resource for linking researchers with stakeholders. Engaging with your extension professionals at the beginning of your project will not only help them better understand your project and empower them to communicate about it effectively, but they will likely have valuable ideas around education and outreach for your project. Similar systems exist in many other countries.
- Ensure that the value of partners and stakeholders is made clear to the team in order to maintain strong, productive relationships.
- Disagreements with stakeholders and the emergence of conflicting priorities will come up during the course of your project. When they do, you are most likely to resolve them to everyone's satisfaction if you prioritize respectful and clear communication. Special care should be given when working with individuals from underrepresented groups.

- At the project's close, ensure that the project provides some level of show-and-tell to provide partners and stakeholders with a clear understanding of what has been accomplished.



A village leader meets with members of an interdisciplinary team from Woody Weeds project.  Credit: Sanford Eigenbrode

## References and Resources

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