Explore, Synthesize, and Repeat: Improving process design for effective stakeholder engagement in water management

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In the complex world of water governance the importance of engagement with stakeholders is frequently discussed. However, there remains a deficit of methods to support engagement efforts. This is particularly true for engagement with expert stakeholders, who are important because they are essential to connecting natural resource science to decision makers. Expert engagement also is distinct because it is often used to improve understanding of a critical issue through social learning, whereas public engagement is used to vet new policies or gain social license. This talk presents and evaluates three separate engagement processes convened by the University of Arizona Water Resources Research Center. We have evaluated the effectiveness of these processes through an examination of their ability to increase inclusiveness, interactiveness, and flexibility in engagement. In each project, inclusiveness is shown by the engagement of at least one representative from all water interests. Interactiveness is demonstrated by the iterative engagement of 90% of the water interests. The projects demonstrated flexibility in approach through changes in engagement based on advice from steering committees and participant evaluations. Based on this evaluation and lessons learned within each project, we propose a framework to encourage social learning in expert engagement. Effective stakeholder engagement must be an iterative process, not just a series of activities to complete. Many engagement processes, however, fall short of this goal. The reasons for these shortcomings include a paucity of time, the complexity of water resources management, the difficulty of engaging diverse stakeholders, and a lack of methods for engagement that is centered on empowerment, equity, trust, and learning. Through three separate engagement efforts, we have encountered all four of these issues and have been able to address all of them except a lack of time through a thoughtful, iterative, and flexible approach to engagement. While further assessment is necessary, this framework appears general enough to be used across multiple geographic scales, yet detailed enough to provide a tangible approach that could aid other efforts where the goal is implementing and evaluating expert engagement to solve complex problems and promote social learning.