ESCom Workshop 8 May 2015: **Stakeholder and community engagement in decision making**

**Purpose:** To draw on experience of ESCom members in stakeholder and community engagement in decision making in order to inform wider roll out of this approach as encouraged by the ecosystems approach.

**Discussion themes:**

1. Bringing people together
2. Asking the right questions
3. Science supporting decisions
4. Institutional mechanisms to getting decisions made
5. Resources and information
6. Role of ESCom
7. **Bringing people together**

**At start scoping stage:** Research to identify who to involve in the decision and who can represent them. Suggestion of a “Linked-in” type mechanism where people identify they have an interest in getting involved.

**During engagement**:

It is key for controversial issues that the lead agency is seen as being part of the community and this can be achieved through secondment.

The lead agency facilitating the process needs to be open and transparent about their role and make sure that they are open to views to “hear everyone”. They need to be clear about the goal their organisation is trying to achieve.

The process needs to help find out what people’s red lines are their non-negotiables and issues. Identify their goals. This puts the group in a better position to negotiate with each other.

The lead and the process they use needs to overcome any negative perceptions of previous experience of poor involvement in decisions.

It is essential to agree limits to empowerment. It is key to manage expectations of the role of different interests in the decision – Eleanor Ostrom is a good reference for this.

**At the end of process**: Stakeholders and agencies are able to agree where there are opportunities to work together and understand which areas they will never reach agreement on.

1. **Asking the right questions**

Two examples were discussed Pickering Slowing the Flow Project and National Ecosystem Assessment Follow-on project Work package 4 which has a good video. Both these facilitated sessions to explore the issues and questions of stakeholders and the community. This was then used to frame the goals and research questions. They helped to develop shared goals with statutory objectives. There was a discussion about how representative focus or discussion groups were of wider interests. Another example was provided of where a discussion group was used to identify and their issues for example about managing a particular river. This then identified questions for a questionnaire that went out much wider to collate views.

1. **Science supporting decisions**

There needs to be transparency of the role of science in supporting the decisions. An example was discussed where it was clear that there was pressure from a particular interests on the decision, and science was used selectively to support a particular position that was politically driven.

The process using ecosystem services should be used to ensure that there is a balance of power between interests. The process should recognise the pressure from specific interests, but this should not influence the use of science.

The process should not be used where a decision has already been taken and the scientific evidence base used only in support of that decision.

**4.0 Institutional mechanisms**

It is key that if stakeholders invest their time and energy in a process collating their views then it must be clear what ultimately will be done with that information and its role in informing a decision. Otherwise there will be rapid disillusionment and disempowerment.

There needs to be legitimacy to the representatives – how representative are their views of the wider community?

There needs to be mechanisms to support delivery of the decision. An example was discussed of what would happen of a jury taking a decision and then the outcome ignored by the judge.

A basic process was discussed that would help ensure that these issues were addressed and supported by institutional mechanisms:

A decision with involvement of focus group is then represented in an agency or authority plan where it receives wider consultation. This leads to an agreed action plan to deliver with those empowered to deliver (voluntary vs. mandatory involvement depending on drivers). There are agreed measures of success to monitor effectiveness of delivery.

**5.0 Resources and information**

There are already good sources of information on stakeholder engagement for example JNCC/Biodiverse guidance booklet with case studies.

However if there is wider role out of the approach as indicated by policy and guidance then then there is a need to collate experience on:

* Costs
* Time
* Resources
* Skills

This is needed for examples of different scales of delivery and complexity of decision making. The examples need to make it clear if there was current conflicts to be overcome and the nature of those conflicts. It needs to include information on stakeholder time resources as well as agency or authority time.

There was discussion about the long term commitment to using this type of process to genuinely empower others and build trust. 10-15 years was mentioned in case studies from other countries. This highlighted that it is in an investment in a different approach that needs to be long term and not just a series of individual projects with no long term commitment from agencies or authorities.

* 1. **Role of ESCom**

A role was identified for ESCom in making sure that the research gap in terms of understanding resource needs and providing some examples of effective long term delivery.

Also ESCom providing a place on its web site for further sharing of experience on stakeholder involvement. For example, a place where people could put good references that they found helpful when planning the process.

It would be good to know if there is any wider interest in this topic from other members of ESCom.