



Stakeholder engagement

By Beth Brown and Morena Gaudino

Introduction

Stakeholder engagement is widely understood as an important part of research and is becoming more popular across academia as we see a drive to bridge the research-society gap, particularly when combating complex social-ecological issues. Hence, researchers are being tasked with additional responsibilities to ensure their research is having 'real-world impact' and is often used as a tool to assess project impact. 'Stakeholder engagement' has become a commonly used term, yet the actual definition remains ambiguous. This makes knowing how to conduct stakeholder engagement difficult for researchers, particularly novice researchers. A wealth of questions are posed within literature around defining stakeholder engagement: knowing when stakeholders have been engaged, are we engaging the right people, what does stakeholder engagement really mean, and when and how exactly do we do it?

Within the aquatic and wider environmental sector, stakeholder engagement is becoming increasingly important with calls for systemic, interdisciplinary, holistic, landscape-scale, community-led approaches to protecting and conserving the environment from further derogation and biodiversity loss. All of which require the involvement and participation of a wider range of actors to be successful and to even take place. Hence, protecting and conserving the environment requires collaboration across all sectors to achieve environmental targets, with research serving as a neutral bridge between society and academia.

Workshop evolution: How it started?

The idea for the workshop emerged from a conversation between Morena and Beth at the Environ 2025 conference. After learning about the available funding, they discussed the opportunity to run a joint workshop aimed at breaking down barriers between researchers and stakeholders in aquatic research.

A primary survey was conducted to identify the interest in a stakeholder engagement workshop before applying for funding. The survey was shared with fellow PhD students across the ATU Galway, Sligo and Donegal campuses. Most students who participated in the survey intended to engage with stakeholders as part of their research; however, they highlighted several challenges in the stakeholder engagement process, including identifying relevant stakeholders, communicating their ideas effectively, and obtaining feedback. These results helped shape the design of the workshop which explored practical approaches to stakeholder engagement, including identifying relevant stakeholders, communicating research effectively, and fostering opportunities for dialogue and feedback.

Workshop Aims

The workshop aimed to address three core themes:

1. Identify common challenges in stakeholder engagement and explore opportunities for improvement.
2. Promote knowledge exchange among policymakers, scientists, communities, and industry representatives.
3. Support the co-development of inclusive, ecosystem-based approaches to social and economic development in Ireland.

Workshop outline

The workshop took place on 13 February 2026 at the Yeats Society building in County Sligo with a total of 19 participants. The day was divided into three activities: a guest talk, a stakeholder panel Q&A, and an interactive group discussion. The day was kicked off with some refreshments and a keynote lecture on a 'Spotlight on stakeholder analysis' by Dr. Sinead Duane. The talk provided an informative overview of both formal stakeholder engagement methodologies and practical tips for engaging effectively with stakeholders in practice. To provide an opportunity to apply the skills discussed in the talk, a networking lunch was held to facilitate informal connections between researchers and stakeholders prior to the panel session. The panel comprised representatives from a range of water-related sectors, including industry, fisheries development, local government, and environmental management.



Pictured from left to right: Brendan Gordon Owner, Bio-Friendly Ltd., Sewage Treatment Systems; Leonora McConville, Planning Officer, Sligo County Council; Pete Murtagh, Climate Action Officer, Sligo County Council.



Pictured from left to right: Leonora McConville, Planning Officer, Sligo County Council; Pete Murtagh, Climate Action Officer, Sligo County Council; Owen Leonard, Founder and Owner, Ozone Water; Chantel Carr, Biosecurity Officer, National Biodiversity Data Centre; Michael Gallagher, Innovation Manager, Bord Iascaigh Mhara.

The panel were asked three key questions:

1. From your experience, can you give an example of good stakeholder engagement?
2. What do you think is the best way for a researcher to reach out to you? Do you have any specific examples that stood out?
3. What advice would you give researchers wanting to collaborate with stakeholders?

The panel discussion highlighted several practical considerations for engaging stakeholders in research. To engage effectively with stakeholders, it's important to:

- Understand stakeholder priorities, recognising that these may differ from research priorities.
- Build relationships with stakeholders and communicate clearly, using accessible language and fostering open dialogue.
- Ensure engagement provides value and maintains connections beyond the project, supporting longer-term collaboration and knowledge exchange.

Workshop Outline

The workshop was closed off with a world café style discussion; three tables were put together mixed of stakeholders and researchers to engage in.



What is stakeholder engagement?

This is a question one of the stakeholders asked jokingly as the workshop began, which Beth responded, ‘that’s something we’ll try and answer today!’ Half because we didn’t have an answer but half because there is not one definition – a problem widely referenced in literature. As one definition does not exist and are usually context specific, we designed our own definition:

Stakeholder engagement is the process of actively collaborating, communicating, and building relationships with individuals, communities, organisations, and authorities who are connected to or affected by a project or research. By engaging groups such as legislators, educators, communities, and the wider public, stakeholder engagement ensures that research and its outcomes are informed, relevant, and responsive, while also creating opportunities for shared goals and meaningful participation.

Conclusion

Stakeholder engagement is a really important part of research, which is becoming a requirement of research and wider practitioner protocols. Overall, the workshop was successful in joining together people from diverse backgrounds, which can add unique insight into research. The session highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement and is more than a tick-box exercise for research. It emphasised that building lasting relationships with stakeholders and allowing them to see the project through to completion is essential.

Feedback form

Most feedback was extremely positive, some suggestions in the form were to have a hybrid option for the workshop, provide a little more direction in the breakout groups and more coffee! The highlights were the informal open discussion, learning from each other’s experience, particular the diverse perspectives from the stakeholder panel, learning practical stakeholder engagement strategies. Overall, feedback was incredibly positive and highlighted enthusiasm for stakeholder engagement and more events that get diverse actors together for open and informal discussions.

This workshop was funded under the EPA and ESAI Grassroots workshop support scheme. For further information: <https://www.esaiweb.org/funding---awards/grassroots-funding/>

WHAT IS STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT?

Stakeholder engagement is the process of **actively collaborating, communicating, and building relationships** with individuals, communities, organisations, and authorities who are connected to or affected by a project or research.



Know Your Audience
Identify your target audience and understand their values



Spot the Gatekeepers
Map who controls access and influence



Find the Key
Who unlocks the access to the opportunity?



Communicate Clearly
Plan ahead, listen and tailor your message



Do Your Homework
Know your stakeholder, show interest and build connections



ENGAGEMENT VALUES

Organised - 'a plan'

Be clear on the long-term goals and give time and thought to the stakeholder engagement – create and communicate a clear plan.

Tailored communication

Effective engagement means recognising that different stakeholders have different needs, priorities, and levels of understanding.

Transparent + honesty

Be transparent, honest and realistic about what you can and can't do on both sides through facilitating open two-way conversations, ensuring that both sides understand the specific aims of the engagement.

Not a one-size-fits-all approach

Understand the stakeholder's context and their capacity - what resource do they have, what are their remits, what's their network, what is of value to them.

Widening the net

'Widen the net', 'move out of your immediate circle', 'move out of your comfort zone', move away from what you think you should be doing.

CHALLENGES & BARRIERS

Existing Conflicts

Past relationships and perceptions can shape trust and may lead to misplaced blame.

Lack of Shared Goals

Differing priorities can make it difficult to align on a common outcome.

Unclear Roles

Stakeholders may not fully understand your remit or capacity—clarity is essential.

Inconsistent Communication

Strong relationships require regular, ongoing engagement—not one-off interactions.

Limited Resources

Time and capacity constraints can restrict meaningful engagement.

Misunderstandings

Gaps between expectations, data, and reality can create confusion.

Access Barriers

Reaching a diverse range of stakeholders can be challenging.

Low Motivation or Incentives

Stakeholders need clear benefits and value to stay engaged.



