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# TRANSPARENCY OF STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT & DECISION MAKING IN THE MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL

## Concerns & Recommendations

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“Virtually all research reviewed has suggested that citizens are more likely to contribute if they perceive that their input will have an influence on the outcome.”

– Shipley & Utz<sup>1</sup>

Transparency is fundamental to good stakeholder engagement and partnership building. Good transparency provides the foundations for ensuring that stakeholders feel valued and treated fairly. The credibility of eco-certification programs is fostered through transparent decision making.

Inadequate transparency is a commonly cited concern by stakeholders in a wide range of consultation and partnership processes. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) programme is not immune to this challenge. Increasingly, stakeholders cite fatigue and frustration with the MSC consultation process and opaque decision making.

As the MSC embarks on its 2020 Standard Review process, it is crucial for the programme to address these concerns and adopt best practices in transparent consultation and decision-making processes. It will be vital that stakeholders understand the process – who is invited to engage and why, how to engage, and how input sought is used. Full information about how and why decisions are made each step of the way will help ensure a credible process of standard review and revision.

“Transparency is a cornerstone of a credible sustainability standards system. Fundamentally, it builds trust in the process by allowing stakeholders to understand how decisions are made or how content is determined. This allows stakeholders to then make their own decisions about the validity or legitimacy of the process, or to submit additional or corrective information.”

– ISEAL<sup>2</sup>

## The importance of transparency in stakeholder consultation & partnerships

For policy makers and standard setters, like the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), good stakeholder engagement brings a range of benefits: information, ideas, solutions to problems, collaboration, conflict resolution, and support for policies and programmes. High on the list of benefits for stakeholders is evidence that they have the power to influence the process and outcomes – that they feel they have been adequately engaged in the processes, have the information they need to do this, and are content with the extent to which their contributions are appreciated.<sup>3,4,5</sup> There is also the added benefit that decisions resulting from transparent and open processes are less likely to be challenged.<sup>6</sup>

### **Transparency is the key element described throughout the literature for good stakeholder engagement and partnership building.**

Transparency is highlighted within the UN’s Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16<sup>7</sup> and for four indicators of SDG 14 (Life Below Water), while the FAO has established a quality assurance framework that aims to ensure “full traceability of decisions made and relevant supporting metadata to ensure transparency”.<sup>8</sup> The ISEAL Alliance, the global membership association for credible sustainability standards, lists transparency as one of its 10 Credibility Principles.<sup>9</sup>

Sadly, transparency is commonly cited as being inadequate by stakeholders in a wide range of consultation and partnership processes, from those run by the petroleum industry<sup>10</sup> to those of local governments.<sup>11</sup> **For many, a lack of transparency and the resulting frustration and lack of trust has now become a point of crisis in stakeholder engagement with the MSC programme.**<sup>12 13 14 15 16 17</sup>

# The role of stakeholders in the MSC programme

The MSC has relied considerably on stakeholder input for the development and revision of its standards and processes, as well as for reviewing the assessments of fishing entities seeking certification, and their annual audits following certification. Stakeholders also give the programme legitimacy and promote the programme to fisheries and fish buyers.

**MSC stakeholders hold a vast body of knowledge and experience in a wide range of relevant specialties from ocean law to marine ecology to human rights. They represent a range of interest groups and institutions, from government policy makers and fisheries managers, through all levels of the seafood industry and supply chain, to academics and NGOs.**

Stakeholders clearly have different motivations for participating in the MSC programme, as well as different roles to play, such as being key information providers for specific fisheries or broader management best practices, strategists with an interest in driving seafood sustainability, and quality controllers playing a watchdog role on the programme.

Stakeholders also have vastly different resources and capacity to engage. Engaging with MSC can require a significant range of knowledge and experience of fisheries management, seafood markets, and the marine environment, as well as an understanding of MSC complex processes and standards.

There will always be a tension between the goals of the MSC programme and the expectations of the wide range of stakeholders involved in using, managing, monitoring and advocating for the marine environment. However, considering their importance to the programme, it should be of great concern to the MSC that many of its stakeholders have become increasingly disillusioned and disengaged. Public criticism of the MSC decision making process is coming from multiple stakeholder groups – indeed some groups previously at odds with each other have united in expressing their concerns.<sup>18</sup>

Stakeholders need to assess where and when their input will be most valuable based on their available resources and time, who else is involved (e.g. to avoid duplication of effort and information), and the likely outcomes, especially where there are multiple ongoing MSC consultations on process and standards, as well as an increasing number of fisheries assessments underway.

**As the literature notes, time and again, “Individual stakeholders will adjust the quantity and quality of their participation depending on how they perceive their actions can influence the decision.”<sup>19</sup> Without changes to improve the transparency in its decision making and consultation processes, the MSC risks losing valuable stakeholder input and support altogether.**



# Recommendations

Here we offer a range of solutions for the MSC to improve transparency and trust, drawing from the leading literature on consultation and partnerships as well as past experiences of engagement with MSC by groups across our coalition and other stakeholders we engage with. When implementing solutions, the MSC should consider that the goal is to both engage and retain stakeholders, and also re-engage disenchanted stakeholders.



## CLARITY OF PROCESSES AND ACCESSIBILITY

**Stakeholders find MSC processes complex and difficult to navigate.**

**OUTLINE EACH PROCESS AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE WITH CLEAR TIMELINES, AND SHOW HOW RELATED PROCESSES ARE LINKED.** A flow chart of the process from the start is invaluable to show where different information gathering processes (e.g. workshops, focus groups, online surveys, etc.) feed into the development of strategies, procedures, policies, and standards, as well as the decision-making bodies and processes that go with them. Flexibility is important, and procedures for changing plans where necessary should be included, but an overview of intention also allows stakeholders more opportunity to plan and engage. Include a calendar showing various parallel and interlinked processes requiring stakeholder input so that stakeholders can prioritize and plan for MSC engagement within their work programmes.

**DEMONSTRATE THE STRATEGY OF STAKEHOLDER SELECTION.** Clarify which processes are open to all and which are limited to specialist groups of stakeholders. Be clear about who has been invited and why. Allow stakeholders to input into this process to ensure their abilities and preferences for engaging are taken into account, and to help identify gaps or recommend alternatives or more suitable participants for your list.

**GIVE STAKEHOLDERS MULTIPLE ENTRY POINTS FOR ENGAGEMENT.** Early engagement usually means that there is more room to take stakeholder views into account, but don't block engagement at a later date. Forms of engagement other than formal written consultation may be better suited to engaging with some stakeholders, especially early in the process.<sup>20</sup>

**ALLOW STAKEHOLDERS TO ASSIST WITH DESIGNING THE PROCESS.** This is more likely to create a space that allows stakeholders to make a difference. Stakeholders often feel 'railroaded' through the provision of too few options or options that exclude them.<sup>21</sup> At the very least, explain the process that led to the identification of those options available for engagement and be clear about the opportunity to make a difference.



## INFORMATION TRANSPARENCY

**Stakeholders are often left feeling like there is a black box where information goes in, but what happens to it and what comes out is a mystery with no clear explanation.**

**BE CLEAR ABOUT THE GOALS OF THE PROCESS FROM THE START, AND THE ROLES FOR STAKEHOLDERS AT EACH STEP.** Is this just an information gathering process? Does this involve creating a set of possible solutions? Do stakeholders have an opportunity to make decisions on a final solution? Who is making the final decisions? (see section below).

**DEMONSTRATE THE CURRENT STAGE OF THE PROCESS OF CONSULTATION, AND THE DECISIONS THAT LED TO IT.** The background information provided at each step in the process of consultation must include a clear trail of how this stage was reached and the way forward. Key questions to answer are:

- How have the aims of the consultation been informed by science and other forms of evidence?
- What was the nature of previous stakeholder engagement and who was part of this? Include a summary of responses to any earlier linked consultation and the response to these contributions.
- What are the next steps, including proposed timings?

**ALLOW FULL ACCESS TO ALL THE INFORMATION PROVIDED DURING THE PROCESS.** This includes MSC briefings, stakeholder presentations, and reports on meeting outcomes. This will allow stakeholders at each step to see what came out, to see where there might be gaps, and determine if there is value joining in. Ensure there are adequate translation services provided for non-English speaking stakeholders – an important element in ensuring adequate developing world consultation.

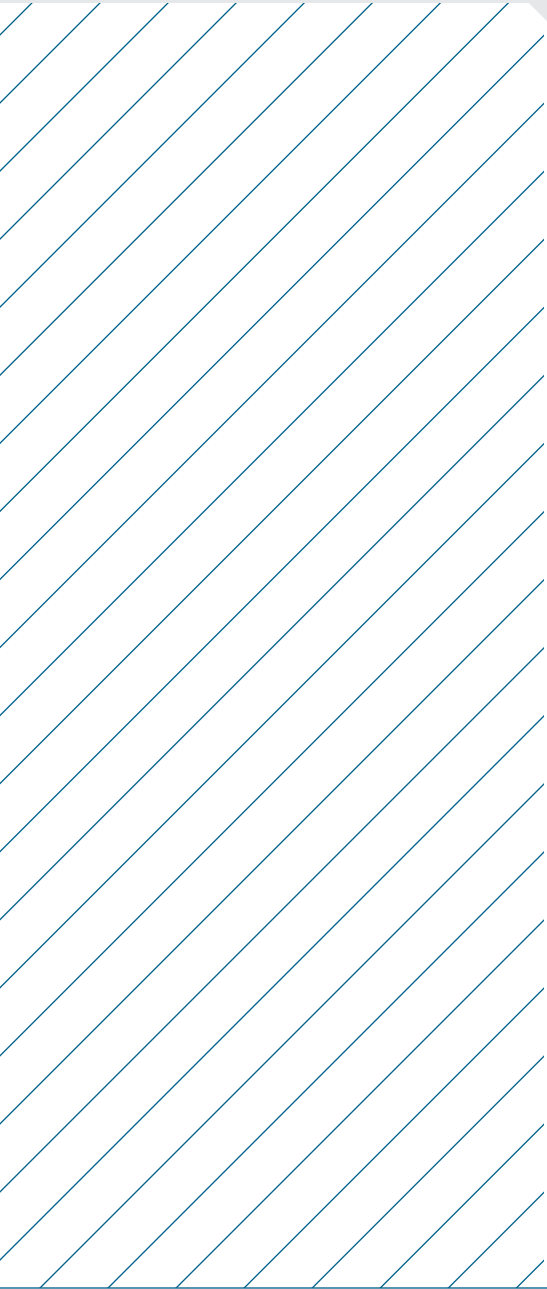
**ALLOW STAKEHOLDERS TO SHARE INFORMATION AND ADDRESS GAPS BY BEING OPEN ABOUT WHO WILL BE, OR WAS, INVOLVED IN THE PROCESS.** Stakeholder attribution is required on information submitted to CABs during certification and audit processes and should also be the case for all MSC policy consultations. When stakeholder anonymity is required or requested, explain why and consider providing a description of the stakeholder interest group along with their input to enable better understanding of stakeholder motivations and concerns.



## TRANSPARENT DECISION MAKING

This is of vital importance for the MSC to address. Opaque decision making is consistently cited by MSC stakeholders as a source of frustration and risk to the programme's credibility.

**When stakeholders do not understand the decision-making processes or rationale it leads to lack of trust and reduced credibility.**



### SHARE THE DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK AND RATIONALE FOR EACH STEP OF THE PROCESS.

Demonstrate how particular ideas and information are, *or are not*, considered during policy or standard revision decisions. Be honest in reporting on the process and final outcomes. Transparent decision making with rationale made publicly available is crucial. If stakeholders feel they have been treated fairly, and the decision making process and result is communicated honestly, there can be more shared understanding of outcomes and improved credibility in MSC review processes – even in the event that stakeholders are not happy with the decision's outcome. This includes how the MSC communicates what its programme and logo represents. MSC public information on decisions made should answer these fundamental questions:<sup>22 23 24</sup>

- Who is involved in decision-making, at which level and who leads the process?
- What criteria are used to make decisions and how are they ranked? (e.g. are you seeking the most important solution or the most feasible one given a particular timeframe or cost?)
- Which issues (if any) are brought up for collective decision-making?
- What decisions rules are used to finalize the decision? (e.g. majority vote, consensus, person-in-charge)
- What are you attempting to maximize and minimize with your decision?
- Who is impacted?





## REVIEW THE PROCESS AND IMPROVE IT

**The stakeholder engagement process needs to be adaptable as stakeholder groups and their needs will change as new fisheries join the programme.**

### REGULARLY REVIEW STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT PROCESSES.

Those impacted by decisions are often the best to determine whether those decisions were effective. Common criteria<sup>25</sup> used for reviews are:

- Are stakeholders better informed about projects and their impacts as a result of their participation?
- Were all major interest groups adequately represented and did their ideas and opinions make any difference on project outcomes?
- Were traditionally underrepresented groups brought into the process and did their opinions matter?
- Did the leadership respond to the input received from the public and did it make a difference in their decision-making?
- Was an acceptable compromise reached among competing interest groups leading to broad support for the final decisions?
- How can the decision-making process be improved in the future?

Key indicators that the process is adequately transparent are that stakeholders are content with the extent to which their contributions are appreciated and their role in decision-making, and external parties are satisfied with the level of communication that they receive of the progress of the consultations.<sup>26</sup>

# Conclusion

We acknowledge the potential mismatch that is almost bound to occur between the needs of the MSC planners in initiating consultation processes and the aspirations of stakeholders who participate. However, the adoption of best practices in transparency is key to alleviating stakeholder frustrations, while fostering trust and positive engagement. Whatever formats and processes MSC follows for engaging with stakeholders in the future, particularly for the upcoming Fishery Standard Review, clarity of the processes, expected outcomes, the decision making process and the rationales for the selected outcomes will significantly improve engagement quality for all involved.



[www.make-stewardship-count.org](http://www.make-stewardship-count.org)

The Make Stewardship Count Coalition is an international coalition of more than 90 NGOs and experts that aim to drive urgently needed improvements to the MSC standard and certification process. It is important that consumers can trust the MSC label and be confident that it represents seafood products that are sourced sustainably and responsibly, and are not associated with destructive or wasteful fishing practices.

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