

# Guidelines and Issues to Consider in Planning a Collaborative Process

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## **Introduction**

Increased public interest in decisions affecting the environment and natural resource use, combined with recognition of the limitations of traditional top-down approaches, have led to the development of collaborative processes over the last two decades (e.g., Fisher and Ury, 1981; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987; Wondolleck, 1988; Gray, 1989; Crowfoot and Wondolleck, 1991; Cleary and Phillippi, 1993; Bush and Folger, 1994). Collaborative efforts in natural resource management and environmental dispute resolution continue to evolve, and there is need for periodic review and assessment of collaboration and the lessons that have been learned. This research project was designed to provide some general guidelines and principles of collaboration that reflect the experience gained over recent years. More specifically, the focus was on guidelines for those considering or planning a collaborative process to address natural resource and environmental issues in the Western U.S.

The report is based primarily on case studies of three on-going collaborative processes in rural Western communities and a mail survey of practitioners of collaboration, both conducted in 1997. None of the guidelines suggested is completely original, and several have been suggested in other publications. We weighed information and suggestions in the literature against the views of practitioners surveyed and our case studies. The written work which most influenced our thinking and ideas is cited in the bibliography.

In addition to general guidelines, our research also sheds light on some outstanding issues concerning collaborative processes. In particular, the role that collaboration should play in shifting or maintaining relative power is a fundamental issue that society has only begun to recognize and consider. The extent to which collaborative processes can or should replace more traditional forms of resource management and environmental decision-making is another unresolved question. Our assessment of these issues follows the presentation of guidelines.

## **Overview of the Survey of Practitioners**

A survey was developed to assess the reaction of practitioners with extensive experience in collaborative processes to various principles and guidelines that have been proposed in this field. Tentative guidelines were drawn from the literature and from telephone interviews of nine practitioners from various institutions in the West (see Appendix). Twenty-nine guidelines, principles and suggestions were included in the survey. Sixty surveys were sent to practitioners identified through telephone networking and from a list of participants in the conference on Environmental Conflict Resolution in the West at the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy in Tucson in April, 1997. Twenty-nine of the 60 surveys were completed and returned (a 48.3% return rate).<sup>1</sup>

The survey of practitioners revealed that the frameworks used to organize concepts in this complex field vary significantly among practitioners. The tentative guidelines and generalizations presented in the survey were ideas proposed by practitioners, either in written work or during preliminary telephone interviews with other practitioners. Yet, many respondents strongly rejected guidelines that did not fit their own framework and experience. Comments on the survey suggested that many practitioners worked from one established framework, and may have been unfamiliar with others. The survey revealed a variety of approaches and definitions for collaborative processes, rather than a single, widely used approach. We have not attempted to distinguish between different forms of collaboration, but have tried to be inclusive of all forms of voluntary, multi-party collaborative efforts involving the public in natural resource and environmental management issues.

## **Background of Case Studies**

Three case studies of community-based collaborative processes in the West are presented in detail in Kate Chamberlin's Master's thesis (University of Wyoming, May 1998). The cases are Owl Mountain Partnership based in North Park, Colorado, Muddy Creek Coordinated Resource Management located between Rawlins and Baggs, Wyoming, and Catron County Citizen's Group in New Mexico. Each case focuses on management of a mix of federal, state and private lands. Participants include various natural resource agency representatives, landowners, members of the public, and local government officials. Cases were chosen to represent a variety of contexts and approaches to natural resource management through collaboration.

Information from these cases was gathered mainly from interviews of 32 participants and key informants in the three case studies. Thus, participants' experiences and their perceptions of the successes and problems with their particular processes play a major role in our analysis. Other forms of information, such as participant observation of meetings and written documents, were also used to interpret the interview data.

## **General Guidelines for Planning a Collaborative Process**

**1. Each collaborative process should be designed to meet the specific needs and situation of the stakeholders. Process design should not be predetermined; all stakeholders who want to take part in process design should be given opportunity to meaningfully do so.**

There are few *specific* guidelines for collaborative processes that apply to the variety of purposes and situations for which collaboration can be used. By far the most common response of practitioners to questions about what works best in collaboration was "It depends." Only a few of the potential guidelines for process that we had gleaned from the literature and telephone interviews garnered overwhelming support from survey respondents. Because of the near impossibility of capturing the breadth of collaborative experience in one place, collaboration, like medicine, will probably remain as much art as it is science.

For the process to be perceived as fair (see guideline #4), all stakeholders must be given an opportunity for meaningful involvement in designing the process (Montana Consensus Council, 1995). Trust in the process must be built from its inception. If certain stakeholders feel excluded from process design, the process will start with a major trust and credibility deficit.

**2. All stakeholders who can affect the outcome or its implementation, or who could be impacted by the outcomes, should be involved in the process from the design of process phase.**

While our survey respondents and most of the literature support this guideline, in practice identifying and including all stakeholders is a problem for many collaborative groups. Many survey respondents noted that while it is important and desirable to have all stakeholders involved, they often find this impossible, and proceed anyway, as illustrated by the following quotes::

*I consider this crucial since in the work I do single parties with legal standing can disrupt implementation of agreed upon outcomes if not parties to the agreement. However, that does not mean I wouldn't proceed without a stakeholder. It is possible to pull a party in due to progress made in the process and it depends on the goals for the collaboration. If the main goal is improved communication, for example, it is not crucial to have all stakeholders there from the start.*

*When it's not possible to bring in all key stakeholders, I think it's important to (1) develop a proxy system to represent missing perspectives, and/or (2) consider "2nd best" outcomes that can be successfully implemented with/by those who do participate.*

While it is widely recognized that collaboration is likely to be more successful if all stakeholders are involved, whether a collaborative process should go forward without all stakeholders is an unresolved issue which we discuss later under Fundamental and Unresolved Issues.

**3. Inclusion of all interested parties and stakeholders should take precedence over concerns about manageable group size. Large groups can be managed through formation of subcommittees, election of spokespersons for like interests, and different levels of involvement.**

A commonly seen guideline, that group size should be limited, was not supported by either our survey respondents or our case studies. Most survey respondents emphasized the importance of inclusiveness and suggested ways to accommodate large groups. Many practitioners had successfully worked with groups of 30-50, and some with groups of more than 200. Some practitioners pointed out that the size of group that could be accommodated depended on the type and purpose of the collaborative process.

**4. Anyone can initiate a process, but any perceived bias introduced by stakeholder initiation must be overcome during organization and design of the process, so that all stakeholders consider it fair and inclusive.**

Some collaborative programs have set forth guidelines about the importance of who initiates and organizes collaborative efforts. The Wyoming Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) program, for example, considers one of the keys to its success to be its guideline that only landowners (not including federal agencies) should initiate CRM processes. At the Governor's Forum on CRM held in January 1998, a suggestion that the guideline be reconsidered drew an audible murmur from the crowd of over 100 participants (pers. observation). Similarly, a practitioner during the initial telephone interviews suggested that federal agencies should *not* initiate processes. While most survey respondents agreed that who initiates and organizes a collaborative effort has a strong influence on the success of the process, most rejected any general guidelines about who should or should not initiate a process. Rather it is argued that anyone can initiate a process if they do so in good faith and the subsequent process is inclusive, fair, and empowering of all participants. There was more support for the statement that "Collaboration works best when convened by a neutral organization whose mission is conflict resolution." Many respondents were careful to point out that initiating a process is different than convening one, and that while use of a neutral organization may be the ideal, it is not always possible or necessary.

We believe, as some practitioners suggested, that the real issue is control of the process. If one interest group (and we would include both government agencies and landowners as interest groups) is seen to be controlling the process, it will not be perceived as fair by all stakeholders. However, fears of bias based on who initiates the process can be overcome with good facilitation and process design.

**5. In situations of high conflict or stakes, a highly-skilled facilitator who is viewed by all interests as fair and competent will greatly improve the chances of success of most collaborative processes.**

Our case studies suggest that, in practice, achieving a fair process where all participants feel comfortable and able to defend their core values and interests can be difficult. For this reason, facilitation is commonly needed in collaborative processes. Survey respondents - not surprising given that many are facilitators- tended to agree that outside facilitation improves the process and its chance for success. Yet, several pointed out that when the level of strife or conflict is low or when a grassroots group works well together, facilitators may not be necessary or helpful. Funding for professional facilitation is not available for all the situations that could benefit from collaboration and conflict resolution processes. Some respondents argued that as agencies move toward more collaborative approaches they need to build their own internal expertise in collaboration. The problem is that such agencies are usually themselves stakeholders (Crowfoot and Wondolleck, 1991), and thus may not be in a good position to facilitate, especially where the interest groups are polarized. More important than being outside the

situation, however, is that the facilitator be acceptable to all stakeholders. In order to address the need for expertise in conflict resolution, budgets may need to be reorganized to provide professional facilitation for conflict resolution, whereas, in situations of low-conflict, groups may be able to create their own framework and ground rules with minimal help from professional facilitators.

Consider the following services that a facilitator can provide in determining whether a process can proceed successfully without a facilitator (Carl Moore, pers. comm.):

- prevent pre-determined approaches to collaboration through efforts to make the process reflective of the specific needs of the participants,
- identify and insure inclusion of all stakeholders,
- remind and nudge the group to work on important issues,
- provide ideas and outside wisdom for problem resolution, and
- improve validity of the process by making it credible to all stakeholders.

**6. Groups searching for a facilitator should recognize that the role and style of facilitators vary greatly. After determining what type of facilitation is most appropriate or preferred, the group should select a facilitator with successful experience in that type of facilitation. Both the facilitator and the collaborative group should clearly understand the purpose and role of the facilitator from the outset.**

The role of the facilitator varies depending on the situation and the purpose of the collaborative effort, as well as the philosophy of the facilitator. A broad distinction can be drawn between problem-solving or pragmatic mediation, and transformative mediation (Bush and Folger, 1994; Kolb et al., 1994). In problem-solving mediation the primary goal of the facilitator is to achieve a resolution of a problem or an agreement to a plan of action. Many facilitators take a very strong directive role in order to achieve success in this goal. The goal of transformative mediation, on the other hand, is to (1) empower the participants to pursue their individual interests *constructively*, and (2) enable parties to see and understand each other's viewpoints (Burgess and Burgess, 1997). Transformative facilitators usually take a less directive role in developing the process and formulating agreements.

Responses to our survey statement "The process should be defined and designed by the stakeholders/actors as a group" suggest a wide range of views about the appropriate role of facilitators in process design:

*Agree [that process should be defined and designed by stakeholders/actors as a group]. This is essential.*

*Agree. Procedural processes are very important and generally work best when parties participate in defining them - usually a mediator has to suggest design for the process so parties have something to build upon.*

*Only in general terms; then, they have to trust the neutral to design it.*

*Disagree. In formal EDR mediation: The facilitators should do the design. They should use a formal 3-part process (ala Suskind, et al.) and parties must agree to this process in order for the mediation to take place....I also think that part of the facilitator's job is to use his/her expertise to design the appropriate process for the participants. Why have a facilitator/mediator otherwise?*

While the approach and practices of facilitators are likely to influence the success of facilitation, our research did not assess the outcomes of different types of facilitation. New collaborative groups should discuss their needs with potential facilitators and inquire about the facilitator's approach and philosophy. Groups should also be concerned about the qualification of facilitators. Our observations of facilitators suggest that success in facilitating a collaborative process requires certain personal qualities, as well as a period of apprenticeship or direct experience. Groups should assess the both the experience and outcomes achieved by facilitators whom they are considering.

**7. At least for active or problem-solving facilitation, facilitators should have enough substantive knowledge to understand the language and basic concepts of the issues so that education of the facilitator does not slow down the process. Facilitators should have enough knowledge of the political and social situation to understand whether proposed options will withstand the political and social realities.**

In addition to experience, a facilitator may need knowledge of the technical issues and the social and political situation. The purpose of the collaborative process to a large extent determines the knowledge requirements of the facilitator. Generally, we believe the more knowledge the facilitator has about both the substantive issues and the social and political situation the better he or she will be able to facilitate the group. This may be less important in non-polarized situations where the purpose of the collaborative effort is primarily to improve communication or cooperation.

**8. The organizer of a potential collaborative process should undertake a thorough assessment to determine whether the situation can be significantly improved through collaboration and, if so, the most appropriate form of collaboration.**

Both case study results and comments of practitioners indicate that no amount of facilitation can bring about success if the participants are not ready and able to participate in good faith in the process. Several practitioners mentioned the importance of an assessment of each situation for "ripeness," or the potential for successful collaboration. If some participants are likely to achieve a better outcome for themselves outside the collaborative process, they are not likely to participate in good faith (Fisher and Ury, 1981). Participants do not always understand their best alternatives or how collaboration fits into their strategy or options, and they may need help in assessing their situation (Suskind and Cruikshank, 1987).

Because collaborative processes are often expensive in terms of time and other resources, it should be determined during the assessment the types of benefits that stakeholders would consider adequate to warrant their participation. The success of a collaborative process is subjective, and includes both tangible and intangible benefits. Propst, for example, includes improved civility and dialogue as some of the intangible measures of success (Chronicle of Community, 1997). More concrete benefits would include resolution of complex problems or

issues and improved access to or management of resources. Before a collaborative process proceeds, the assessment should evaluate whether there is a good chance for achieving the minimal benefits desired. Skilled assessment could prevent much frustration and disillusionment with unproductive collaborative processes.

The results of the mail survey suggest that some practitioners may not apply the critical analysis of situations that we recommend. Although the literature and our preliminary interviews suggested several conditions under which collaborative processes are generally inappropriate, many of our survey respondents found few of these conditions to be sufficiently negative to recommend against the use of collaboration. We must consider that most of our respondents are in the business of collaboration and, thus, potentially biased toward the use of collaboration.

Specifically, we feel there are valid arguments against use of typical problem-solving collaboration in at least 2 types of situations: (1) disagreements over values or morals, and (2) disagreements over rights (Gray, 1989). Although many survey respondents argued that collaborative processes could still be appropriate in such situations, we would caution that collaboration cannot *resolve* the first two types of disagreements, and therefore resolution of conflict should not be the goal in these cases (see Burgess and Burgess, 1997 for discussion of ways to make intractable conflicts more constructive). Another type of conflict that does not lend itself to resolution by collaboration is "pecking order" conflict (Burgess and Burgess, 1997). The conflict between county authorities and collaborative groups in two of the case studies appeared to have elements of this type of conflict, which the collaborative efforts themselves had not yet overcome.

**9. Collaborative solutions and agreements concerning specific resource management issues are likely to be more successful over the long term if they are addressed with awareness and understanding of the larger contexts of space and time in which the issues are imbedded.**

During our initial telephone survey of practitioners it was suggested by some that collaborative processes are more effective when they adopt a long-term management outlook rather than a short-term problem-solving agenda. There is a lack of direct evidence on the relative success of long-term management versus short-term problem-solving. However, evidence from the case studies and the responses of practitioners support the widespread observation that most people will not commit themselves to the demands of collaboration without a pressing problem or need motivating them. Thus, most collaborative processes will probably be initiated to address relatively immediate problems. The limitations of trying to solve short-term problems without a broader framework and longer vision are obvious, however.

Many practitioners pointed out that solving short-term problems can build trust and confidence that enables groups to eventually work through longer-term issues, but expanding the scope of a collaborative process can also stimulate resistance. An interesting observation from our case studies is that while all three groups had completed localized projects without arousing many objections, most attempts to address broader issues, such as road closures and water quality assessment, were less successful. Community assessments and ecosystem planning were perceived by local governments and other skeptics as threatening to local control and private property rights. Again, this relates to issues of power which will be discussed below. In spite of this difficulty, we feel that one of the strengths of collaborative processes in community-building and natural resource management should be to help groups understand and address short-term problems within a broader context and time frame.

**10. Groups, especially those with polarized interests and potentially high levels of conflict, should secure adequate funding to support the process.**

Process costs may include the services of a facilitator or advisor on collaborative process, copying and mailing, staff time, and travel expenses for any key stakeholders who need them to be able to participate. Government agencies often provide the bulk of funding and resources for the process. Where agencies are not centrally involved, participants will need to provide the funds themselves or seek funding from foundations that support collaborative efforts. Funds for specific projects can be sought after the process begins, but those projects too will require staff time, and costs should be considered from the outset. It should be recognized that securing funds for projects can in itself require considerable time and energy.

**11. Groups operating in a community setting or with potential impacts on communities should develop good lines of communication with both the public and community leaders of all types.**

Difficulties in communication between the collaborative group and the community surfaced in all three case studies. Misunderstandings about the collaborative group and its actions were not uncommon. A lack of awareness and understanding of the collaborative group by the community at large contributes to a noncommittal or negative attitude toward the groups. It should be noted that all three groups are open to the public, and two have published numerous pamphlets and other materials on their purpose, goals and activities. The experience in these cases only highlights the need for a very proactive communication and outreach program.

***Some Fundamental and Unresolved Issues***

Although the literature has numerous discussions of power and its role and influence in collaborative processes, collaborative groups, and even some practitioners often do not acknowledge, recognize or deal with this unavoidable issue. Issues of power take several forms in the collaborative context.

**The existence of a collaborative group in itself impacts power dynamics.**

Initiation of a collaborative group creates a new entity, in a local place, that is given legitimacy by decision-making authorities. In two of our three case studies, there were significant domain issues between a local governing body and the collaborative group. Collaborative groups were perceived by some local officials to be given more credence than local government by important non-local policy-makers. There was a perception among several local officials that many of the issues dealt with in the collaborative context were redundant or the responsibility of the local governing body. Conversely, some participants felt that the collaborative setting was more receptive to the concerns and desires of local residents than was the local government. Thus, collaborative groups can be a challenge to the local power structure. Also, because of the political power inherent in a collaborative group, some stakeholders may feel compelled to participate, thus making what is nominally a

voluntary process almost obligatory (KenCairn, 1997; Wondolleck et al., 1996).

### **Power dynamics are influenced by the membership of a collaborative group (Gray, 1989).**

While representation can actually be improved over traditional processes, it is extremely difficult to enable all interests to participate. There is disagreement among participants in our case studies about who are legitimate stakeholders and whether all stakeholders should have equal weight. Public apathy toward involvement in collaborative processes and the high demands on members' time means that there is a potential for domination by prominent interest groups. It is logistically difficult or impossible for more distant interest groups to participate in the frequent meetings typical of collaborative groups. Some stakeholders may believe their interests are better served outside the collaborative process. If power imbalances exist between parties, the informal setting can deny weaker parties the system of checks and balances offered by more traditional decision-making (Pinzon, 1996). For any of these reasons, participation may not be inclusive of all interests. Many survey respondents felt it was sometimes appropriate to proceed without all stakeholders. While this may be necessary in some cases, the lack of representation of interests should be carefully mitigated. Preventing those who are willing to participate in good faith from doing so violates the ideals of collaboration as an inclusive and fair process.

### **Power dynamics come into the decision-making process within a collaborative group (Gray, 1989).**

Peer-pressure is an element of human dynamics that can negatively influence consensus and other collaborative decision-making. Power imbalances or cultural differences can make it difficult for some participants to defend their core interests in a group (Kochery, 1993; Wondolleck et al., 1996). Several potential participants in our case studies did not feel they had the skills or ability to promote their interests in a consensus process. One of the facilitator's roles is to overcome such problems. The unresolved issue is to what extent can or should a facilitator try to reduce power imbalances among stakeholders? The perceived fairness of the facilitator could be jeopardized in the exercise of influence over participants' relative power. Each group must decide what the facilitator's role should be in maintaining a power balance. Some practitioners recommend against the use of collaboration in situations of highly uneven power, unless the more powerful are willing to enable the less powerful to defend their interests in the process.

### **Determining the proper role of collaborative groups in natural resource management and environmental decision-making.**

Some survey respondents argued that unless collaborative groups are empowered to make decisions and implement actions, there will be little motivation to participate in collaborative groups. Others argue that groups need not have final decision-making authority to have power; there is much political power in the ideas and proposals suggested by an inclusive multi-interest group working cooperatively.

There are two overriding problems with empowering collaborative groups over traditional decision-making processes. One is that such bodies are not representative bodies, and are not formally accountable to a broader public (KenCairn, 1996). A second problem is that it is the traditional decision-making processes (legislation, regulations, courts, de facto economic and political power) which undergird collaboration. As Don Snow of the Northern Lights Institute explains it, "People who purport to be fostering consensus should be among the last to malign old-fashioned forms of political conflict. It was conflict that got us here in the first place, and it will be conflict, or at least the threat of it, that will keep many people 'at the table' in years to come" (Snow, 1996, 40). If decision-making power is moved too strongly to the collaborative groups, we believe power struggles for control of the those groups and their outcomes will likely escalate, undermining the trust and cooperation necessary to achieve the main benefits of collaboration.

Collaborative processes add a new dimension to natural resource management, and, when properly used, should transform and improve traditional management. Our own philosophical position is that most natural resource and environmental issues involve and should include multiple local stakeholders with various interests, as well as multiple non-local stakeholders and interests (Whitesell, 1996). Given this premise, in cases of public lands and other issues of national or regional concern, collaboration should seek to foster meaningful interaction of local people, local government, representatives of non-local interests, and management and regulatory agencies.

At this point, our society lacks experience in and a legal framework for more participatory forms of decision-making (Moote and McClaran, 1997). It is often stated, and our case studies support, that successful collaboration requires that all parties, including traditional decision-makers, "let go" of the outcomes of collaboration, i.e., no party can control the process or its outcome. The need to allow the process to find new and creative outcomes must be balanced against the responsibilities of land management and regulatory agencies to the broader public. Where that balance is to be struck is one of the outstanding unresolved issues in collaboration.

Long-standing mistrust of federal agencies in the West, mistrust of both local resource users and federal agencies by national environmental groups, and cumbersome and rigid agency structures and policies are all obstacles to successful use of collaboration. We suggest that these obstacles will be overcome only if collaboration is used carefully and in a way perceived as fair by all interest groups.

### **NOTES**

<sup>1</sup> The 29 respondents represent long and diverse experience in collaborative processes. Twenty-eight of the 29 respondents provided most of the requested information on their background and experience. Most respondents had been working with collaboration for 10 to 20 years. Most had facilitated over 10 collaborative processes, and eight respondents reported working on over 50 collaborative processes. Most respondents had worked on issues related to land and water resources, federal land management, endangered species and community development or planning. A few had instead or also worked on siting issues or EPA regulations and policy. Most have worked on the state, regional and local levels, while 13 have also worked on national-level issues. Twenty have done most of their work in the Western U.S., but 15 have worked outside the West, and 2 reported international experience.

Comments on the surveys indicate that many practitioners had more to say than they had time to devote to answering the questions. There were over 400 written responses to the 25 statements provided with preset answers. Written responses ranged in length from short phrases to paragraphs. Many respondents made comments indicating they were frustrated or irritated by the simplification of complex issues implied by the statements and the discrete answer categories provided. In many cases, the written answers seemed to contradict the pre-set category chosen, indicating the inadequacy of the answer format. Therefore, we focused our analysis on the written as opposed to preset answers, though we did take tallies of preset answers and noted where response was very strong in one direction and there were few

qualifying comments.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **Sources of Potential Guidelines and Principles Used in Survey and Case Study Design**

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#### *Telephone or personal Interviews with:*

Guy Burgess, Conflict Research Consortium, Boulder, CO

Todd Barker, Keystone Center, Keystone, CO

Bob Dettman, USFS Regional Office, Denver, CO

Brett KenCairn, Rogue Institute and Applegate Partnership, Ashland, OR

Miles Keogh, Keogh and Associates, Grand Junction, CO

Matt McKinney, Montana Consensus Council, Helena, MT

Lucy Moore, Western Network, Santa Fe, NM

Gerald Mueller, Northern Lights Institute, Missoula, MT

Don Snow, Northern Lights Institute, Missoula, MT

Larry Spears, The Transboundary Initiative and North Dakota Consensus Council, Bismarck, ND

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