



Stakeholder Engagement Playbook

A Guide to Successful Collaborations in WEF-Nexus projects



About this Guide



This playbook is designed to support researchers, policymakers, industry, and nonprofit professionals working on African sustainability initiatives, with a focus on the water, energy, and food (WEF) sectors. It offers practical tips, culturally informed strategies, and practice-based tricks for effective stakeholder engagement. The goal is to help project teams and practitioners build long-term ethical and equitable relationships with local stakeholders that promote shared ownership.



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AUTHOR



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CONTENT

- 00** Why Stakeholders Matter
- 01** Early and Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement
- 02** Align Goals, Local Needs and Power
- 03** Leverage Multi-sector Partnerships
- 04** Sustaining Engagement and Adaptability
- 05** Further Resources



Why Stakeholders Matter

The Water, Energy, and Food (WEF) Nexus is one of the defining challenges of our time. These three systems are inseparably linked, and decisions in one area ripple into the others. Expanding irrigation can boost food production, but it also requires energy to power pumps, while power generation itself often relies on large volumes of water.

Yet the Nexus is not only about infrastructure and resource flows. It is about people, their livelihoods, and balancing power to create just climate futures.

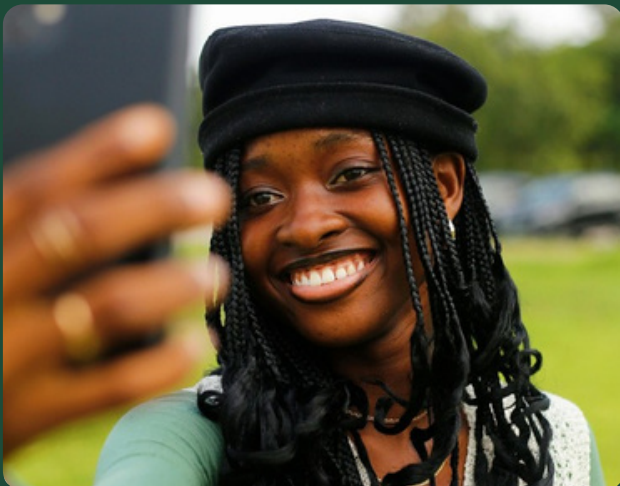
Farmers, local communities, industry, governments, and civil society all hold different perspectives on what is at stake, and their priorities often clash. Without their meaningful participation, solutions risk being imposed from above, ignoring lived realities and undermining long-term sustainability. Technical expertise can design efficient systems, but it is trust and collaboration among stakeholders that determine whether those systems will take root and last. By recognising that each actor carries knowledge, values, and interests that are vital to develop robust solutions, we can move from fragmented interventions toward inclusive strategies that reflect the complexity of the Nexus.

This guide offers a human-centred framework for locally implementing the Nexus, which emphasises trust, collaboration, and local ownership as the foundations of stakeholder engagement.

1

Early and Inclusive Stakeholder Engagement

A successful sustainability project begins with a clear understanding of who is involved and who is affected. Misjudging the stakeholder landscape is one of the most common reasons initiatives fail. Particularly, in international collaborations, it is often assumed who the local key players are, while overlooking informal power structures, sidelining women, local influencers and leaders and marginalised groups, or dismissing those who will ultimately make or break a project's success.



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In many African settings, power and influence do not reside solely in formal institutions. Traditional authorities, religious figures, elders, and respected community members often hold significant sway over public opinion and decision-making. Failing to acknowledge these actors can lead to resistance or mistrust. Understanding and inclusively engaging with the stakeholder base is, therefore, crucial.

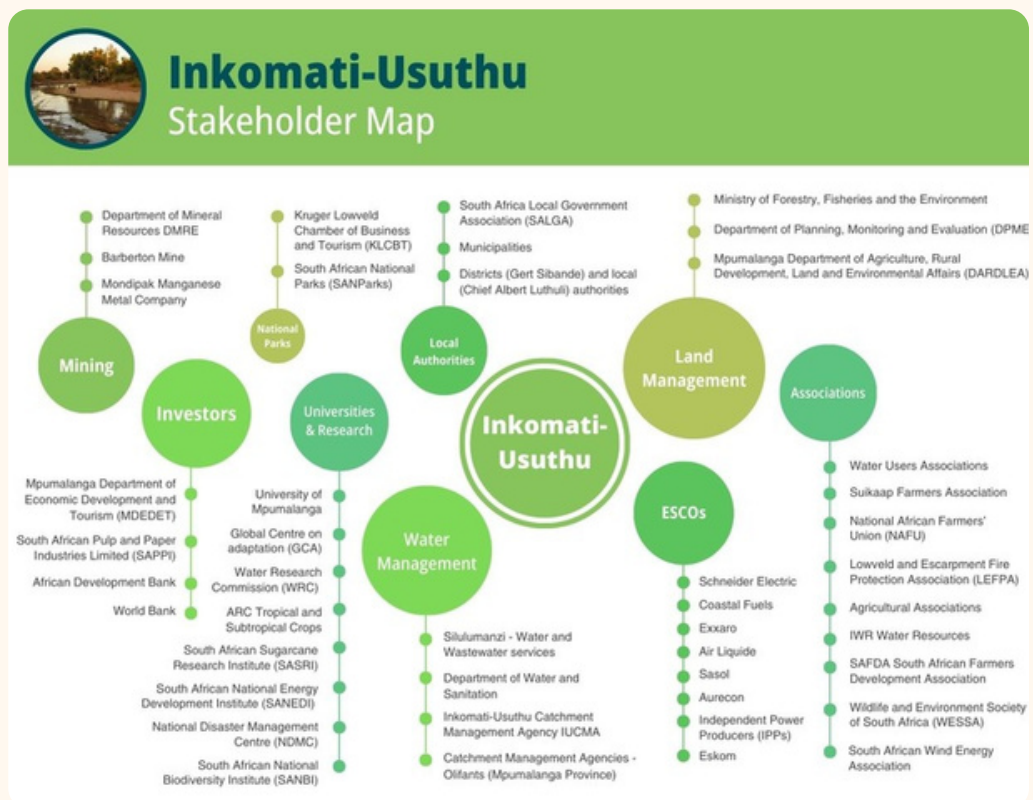
This section explains from mapping stakeholders to how to increase equal stakeholder participation and employ participatory methods in your project.

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STEP 1: MAP ALL STAKEHOLDERS EARLY AND RECOGNISE DIVERSITY

Conducting a comprehensive stakeholder mapping exercise at the earliest stage of project design ensures a full picture of actors beyond the usual suspects like government ministries and donors. Early identification helps ensure that all relevant voices are heard from the start, and that no key players are left out of critical conversations. Stakeholders are not a homogeneous group. Each one brings different perspectives, priorities, levels of influence, and vulnerabilities to the table. For example, government officials may focus on policy compliance, while local farmers are more concerned with practical implementation and outcomes.



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STEP 2: BE TRANSPARENT AND COMMUNICATE CONSISTENTLY

Transparency is the foundation of trust. Clearly communicate the project's goals, limitations, and potential impacts—including timelines and financial constraints, so stakeholders can engage honestly. But transparency isn't a one-time event; it's an ongoing commitment. Communicate early and continuously with regular updates to keep stakeholders informed and valued. This prevents speculation and mistrust, ensuring people feel their voices are heard as the project evolves.

To ensure everyone understands, tailor your communication to the audience's cultural, educational, and linguistic background. This may involve simplifying complex ideas, using local analogies, or translating important concepts into local languages. Instead of using technical jargon, translate project goals into tangible, everyday benefits that resonate with the community. For example, frame a project around clean water for health, reliable energy for livelihoods, or food security for dignity.

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STEP 3: ENSURE EQUAL PARTICIPATION

Sustainability projects must deliberately create space for those whose voices are often overlooked. Women, youth, people with disabilities, and other marginalised groups experience resource systems differently. At the same time, they often have insights rooted in lived experiences that are vital to understanding local systems of water use, food production, or energy access. Their insights are crucial for designing solutions that are not only technically sound but also socially workable. True inclusion requires addressing barriers like time, language, or social stigma that might prevent some individuals from participating fully. Inclusion must be intentional, not accidental.

Stakeholders must feel confident that their contribution, especially criticism, will not lead to punishment or exclusion. This is particularly crucial in settings with stark power imbalances, hierarchical norms, historical tensions between communities, and sensitive political climates. Creating these safe spaces requires careful facilitation and neutrality. It may also involve working with local mediators and anonymising contributions in later project outputs.

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STEP 4: EMPLOY PARTICIPATORY METHODS

To engage meaningfully with diverse stakeholders, use methods that are accessible, interactive, and grounded in local realities. These approaches not only generate more accurate information but also foster a sense of shared ownership.

- Focus groups can facilitate targeted conversations with specific demographic groups.
- Participatory rural appraisal techniques allow communities to map resources and solutions using their own terms—often through drawings or storytelling.
- Use participatory workshops that directly address lived experiences and WEF-solutions, e.g., user journeys, in-person user testing, and co-designing of proposed WEF-solutions



Tricks

- Use participatory mapping tools to represent stakeholder influence and interests visually. Engage local research assistants or trusted community members to identify hidden stakeholders. Their understanding of local actors is invaluable.
 - Conduct gender-specific sessions if needed to encourage open discussion.
 - Use visual tools (maps, drawings) to help low-literacy participants contribute.
 - Share results and lessons learned openly, even if they include challenges.
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Align Goals, Local Needs and Power

Even the most technically sound project will falter if it does not reflect the lived realities of the people it seeks to serve. Local communities often have priorities and traditions that differ from those of external funders or policy agendas. At the same time, access to resources like land, water, or energy is rarely neutral. Power is distributed unevenly, shaped by history, identity, and politics.



“**When local aspirations guide the process and power is more fairly balanced, projects gain both legitimacy and resilience.**”

To succeed, projects must align community needs with the power structures that shape decision-making. This means framing sustainability in everyday terms, valuing local knowledge alongside scientific expertise, and addressing inequities that silence vulnerable groups. When local aspirations guide the process and power is more fairly balanced, projects gain both legitimacy and resilience.

This section provides practical approaches for framing goals in locally meaningful terms, integrating traditional knowledge, and working with—rather than against—existing power dynamics to create fairer, more sustainable outcomes.

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STEP 1: RESPECT LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND PRACTICES

Do not dismiss traditional knowledge in favor of imported models. Across Africa, communities have long-standing, often highly effective, systems for managing resources. Taking the time to understand these practices shows respect and can lead to more effective and legitimate solutions. Integrating local knowledge with new interventions strengthens the project's foundation and ensures it is both relevant and sustainable in the long run.



STEP 2: BE SENSITIVE TO CONFLICTS OVER RESOURCES

Water, land, and energy access are not just technical issues—they are deeply political and often contested. In many African contexts, these resources are tied to identity, livelihood, and historical injustice. Sustainability projects that shift access, ownership, or control—however unintentionally—can ignite or deepen conflict. Being conflict-sensitive means taking the time to understand local histories, existing tensions, and potential flashpoints. It requires consultation not only with community leaders, but also with those whose voices are less visible yet more vulnerable. Proactive awareness allows for project designs that avoid escalation and instead promote dialogue and cooperation.



STEP 3: ESTABLISH CLEAR GRIEVANCE MECHANISMS

No matter how well designed, every project will face concerns, complaints, or misunderstandings at some point. What matters is how those concerns are addressed. A clear, transparent grievance mechanism gives stakeholders a safe and structured way to raise issues, seek redress, or express dissatisfaction without fear of retaliation. Effective mechanisms are accessible, locally appropriate, and responsive—offering timely resolution and feedback. By institutionalizing accountability, grievance systems build trust, reduce resentment, and provide critical insights into how the project is perceived. They demonstrate that the project values integrity and is committed to learning and improvement.



Tricks

- Facilitate conflict resolution sessions with neutral mediators.
 - Use anonymous feedback tools if direct confrontation is risky.
 - Conduct baseline studies with community participation to identify actual needs.
 - Frame sustainability issues in local terms
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3

Leverage Multi-sector Partnerships

Water, energy, and food systems are deeply interconnected, and so are the stakeholders that influence them. Government agencies, NGOs, private sector players, local communities, businesses and academic institutions all hold pieces of the puzzle. Yet siloed efforts remain common, resulting in duplication, inefficiencies, or even conflict.



“**Collaboration is not just about bringing people together; it's about making sure their diverse efforts work in harmony toward a shared goal.**”

Effective projects align interests across sectors, clarify roles, and create spaces for coordinated action. This section outlines how to build synergy and manage multi-stakeholder collaboration to strengthen impact and avoid friction. Collaboration is not just about bringing people together; it's about making sure their diverse efforts work in harmony toward a shared goal. This shared understanding is the key to building collective power and ensuring a project's long-term success.

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STEP 1: ENGAGE DIVERSE ACTORS

Sustainability challenges, whether related to water, energy, or food, are rarely solved by a single actor. They require collaboration across a wide range of stakeholders, each bringing unique expertise, influence, and resources to the table. For instance, government agencies provide policy frameworks, while NGOs offer grassroots access and community trust. The private sector drives innovation and investment, academic institutions bring research and data, and community groups hold critical local knowledge. Engaging this diverse ecosystem ensures your project is not only technically sound but also socially and politically viable, creating a foundation for more resilient and adaptive solutions.



STEP 2: IDENTIFY COMPLEMENTARY ROLES

To avoid confusion and inefficiency, define clear roles and responsibilities from the start. Effective collaboration means identifying which partners are best positioned to lead, support, or monitor different parts of the project. When roles are complementary rather than competitive, partnerships can achieve far greater impact than any single organization could alone.

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STEP 3: COORDINATE WITH EXISTING PROGRAMS

Too many projects operate in isolation, unaware of other ongoing efforts in the same area. This leads to duplication, inconsistent messaging, and missed opportunities for collaboration. Before launching a new initiative, it's crucial to scan the landscape for existing programs—such as government plans, donor-funded projects, or community-led efforts—and identify points of alignment. By coordinating with and building on what's already there, your project is more likely to find local acceptance, avoid redundancy, and contribute to broader, long-term development goals. This strategic alignment also increases the chance of sustainability after external funding ends.

Tricks

- Create a stakeholder coordination forum or platform for regular dialogue and updates.
 - Use Memorandums of Understanding (MoUs) to formalize partnerships and clarify roles.
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4

Sustaining Engagement and Adaptability

Many sustainability projects in Africa collapse once donor funding ends—not because the ideas were flawed, but because the systems built were too dependent on external expertise or resources. True sustainability begins when communities can continue, adapt, and manage initiatives on their own terms.



This requires more than just handing over infrastructure or technical manuals. It requires a deliberate, long-term investment in people. Adaptability and responsiveness are not signs of poor planning, but strategic strengths that allow a project to evolve with changing conditions.

“... it's vital to conduct a thorough analysis of local power dynamics to understand who controls resources and who holds influence.”

This section explores how to embed capacity-building at every project stage—from design through implementation to handover—ensuring that what you leave behind is not just infrastructure, but leadership, ownership, and resilience.

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STEP 1: CONTINUOUSLY MONITOR FEEDBACK AND REMAIN FLEXIBLE

Effective projects are responsive to the evolving needs of the people they serve. Create systems to regularly gather stakeholder feedback throughout the project lifecycle. When suggestions and criticisms visibly inform adjustments, stakeholders feel heard and respected. This ongoing dialogue builds trust and allows the project to adapt to changing social, political, or environmental conditions.



STEP 2: TRAIN LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS IN TECHNICAL AND GOVERNANCE ASPECTS OF THE PROJECT

For sustainability projects to succeed beyond their initial funding cycle, local stakeholders need the skills and knowledge to keep systems running effectively. This includes technical training—such as maintaining water pumps, managing energy systems, or monitoring crop cycles—but also governance training. Stakeholders should understand how to make decisions transparently, manage budgets, resolve disputes, and ensure fair access to resources. Training should be adapted to the local context and delivered in accessible formats, ensuring it builds confidence as well as competence. When capacity is developed across both technical and institutional levels, it creates a solid foundation for long-term success.

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STEP 3: EMPOWER COMMUNITIES TO MANAGE RESOURCES POST-PROJECT FOR SUSTAINABILITY

True sustainability means communities can manage, adapt, and even expand a project without ongoing external support. This requires more than handovers—it requires a shift in power. Community members must be seen and supported as resource managers, not just beneficiaries. This empowerment involves clear roles, legal or institutional recognition, and the necessary tools to govern shared resources. Projects should aim to create structures—like cooperatives, user committees, or local boards—that can function independently, drawing on community leadership and collective decision-making. When people feel that the resources are theirs to protect and manage, long-term stewardship becomes possible.



STEP 4: PUBLICLY ACKNOWLEDGE CONTRIBUTIONS

Recognition is a powerful tool for building trust and reinforcing commitment. When a project publicly acknowledges the time, knowledge, and effort contributed by individuals and groups, it validates their importance and reinforces a sense of shared ownership. This is especially true in contexts where recognition carries profound cultural weight.

Tricks

- Set up rapid feedback loops through simple, accessible channels like WhatsApp groups or community focal points.
- Organise exchange visits to successful projects.
- Develop simple tools (checklists, guides) for community use.

Further Resources



LEARN MORE ABOUT STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

[“Stakeholder Management In The Sustainability Of Corporate Social Responsibility Projects – A Systematic Literature Review.”](#) (2024), Fynn, E.M., Owusu-Manu, D., Adesi, M., & Duodu, B.

[“Stakeholder Participation and the Sustainability of Community-Based Water Borehole Projects in Mavoko Constituency, Machakos County, Kenya”](#) (2024), Machuma, R.S., Odek, A., & Vundi, N.



LEARN MORE ABOUT CO-CREATION AND PARTICIPATION

[Coproducting water-energy-food Nexus actionable knowledge: Lessons from a multi-actor collaborative learning school in Uganda, East Africa.](#) (2025)

By ONEPLANET partner Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).



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Funded by
the European Union