



## How to dance? The tango of stakeholder involvement in marine governance research



Marloes Kraan<sup>a,1</sup>, Astrid Hendriksen<sup>b,\*,1</sup>, Luc van Hoof<sup>a</sup>, Judith van Leeuwen<sup>b</sup>,  
Charlène Jouanneau<sup>c</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Wageningen University Institute for Marine Resources and Ecosystem Studies, The Netherlands

<sup>b</sup> Wageningen University Environmental Policy Group, The Netherlands

<sup>c</sup> Innovative Fisheries Management (IFM) - Aalborg University Research Center, Aalborg, Denmark

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### ABSTRACT

The added value of involving stakeholders in research, especially related to marine governance, seems to be understood today by many researchers and policy makers. This is clearly reflected by the many (EU) research calls explicitly asking for stakeholder involvement. The way in which to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way is however not all that clearly defined. In the EU funded project Options for Delivering Ecosystem-Based Marine Management (ODEMM) an explicit question was the development of options for alternative governance settings, including stakeholder involvement, to implement the Marine Strategy Framework Directive in the EU. In order to arrive at these possible alternative governance set-ups the ODEMM project developed a layered methodology, including structured and unstructured interviews, a survey and roundtable discussions to develop diverse governance options for future ecosystem based models at the regional seas. This paper describes the methodologies used, compares them with best practice from literature, and finally classifies the approach as a joint knowledge production, a tango, in which scientists take the lead but need the stakeholders to come to a dance.

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### 1. Introduction

The need to involve stakeholders in marine management and related research, especially associated with ecosystem based management, and more in particular with marine governance, increasingly seems to get acclaimed: 'a common assumption is that stakeholder participation and Eco-system Based Approach are natural bedfellows and, indeed, the two appear together too often for the connection to be ignored' [1]. The EU Common Fisheries Policy had incorporated stakeholder participation more than ten years ago in its former reform (2002) by establishing the Regional Advisory Councils and by including stakeholders in the reform process itself [2]. Also the EU research funding system in fact has the view that stakeholder participation is a desirable component [1]; the EU capacities program of FP7 clearly establishes stakeholders as a specifically targeted group, as Small and Medium Enterprises or Civil Society Organisations have become research grant recipients, and their inclusion in research proposals has become a pre-condition.

The way in which to effectively include these stakeholder groups—the 'how to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way' is however not all that clearly defined yet. This lack of clarity on how to involve stakeholders has three possible, unwanted side-effects. Firstly, because actively and meaningfully involving stakeholders requires distinct skills and knowledge researchers do not always reach the full potential of stakeholder involvement. Secondly, as stakeholder involvement becomes an end in itself, there is a risk that all factors that hinder meaningful cooperation, such as a lack of time, difference in access to needed resources and the fact that power relations among the parties involved do play a role, lead to a process in which stakeholders are invited to the process but rather as a mere window-dressing exercise. And thirdly, prior negative experiences of stakeholder involvement often lead to 'stakeholder fatigue' [3–6].

Besides, stakeholder participation has a strong normative stance to it; considering major marine management propositions without stakeholder involvement is nowadays not looked favourably upon. The influential article of Arnstein [7], portraying participation by using the image of a ladder, has had the connotation of 'the more the participation the better' resonating the 'political correctness' of stakeholder participation [8,9]. Seminal work of Raakjær et al. [10,11] already portrayed a more distinct system of levels of stakeholder participation in fisheries management, not necessarily portraying a normative view but a more

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [astrid.hendriksen@wur.nl](mailto:astrid.hendriksen@wur.nl) (A. Hendriksen).

<sup>1</sup> Both Marloes Kraan and Astrid Hendriksen are first authors of this paper.

analytical perception of degrees of stakeholder participation. Noting possible different levels of stakeholder participation is much more useful to align the level of participation with the specific process in hand.

While a lot has been written and discussed about stakeholder involvement and participation in policy making, amongst others resulting in theory on interactive governance [12,13], there has been much less reflection yet on the process of stakeholder participation in (marine governance) research. This paper describes the way in which stakeholders were involved in the EU FP7 funded ODEMM project (Options for Delivering Ecosystem Based Marine Management) and aims to contribute to the emerging field of joint knowledge production. The main objective of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) is to achieve environmentally healthy marine waters by 2020 [14]. The research project ODEMM dealt with the question: 'what are the governance options for implementing the MSFD?'. The MSFD poses a challenge to EU marine governance, with multiple governing actors at multiple levels being involved, as well as to multiple sectors throughout the European countries and the non-European neighbouring states. Governance options for ecosystem based management, what the MSFD is all about, ask for participatory governance. The next section shows best practices of stakeholder involvement after which the methodology that was followed in the ODEMM project to include stakeholders in discussing the options for governance implementing the MSFD is explained. This paper will close with the lessons learnt from the ODEMM methodological approach.

## 2. Best practice of stakeholder involvement in scientific research

Reed [8] identifies eight features of best practices of stakeholder participation (see Box 1) thereby emphasizing the need to replace the 'tool-kit' approach with a participation-as-process approach.

Participation of stakeholders in management or research is not all that straightforward; in fact Reed comments on his list of 'best practices of stakeholder participation' as having emerged out of "'post-participation' disillusionment" [15]. In the EU research context one can recognise the image that scientists are increasingly 'forced' to include stakeholder participation in their research, resulting in them seeking ways to deal with the requirement in such a way that not a lot of resources need to be used, wishing to save that for 'real' research, delivering 'hard data'. Others will be

looking for 'tool kits' in order to be able to take care of the job. However useful guides, kits and toolboxes are (they will most likely be less optimal) both for the participating stakeholders as well as for the researchers because these tools are never tailor made for a specific case. What is rather needed is the composition of multidisciplinary research teams working with stakeholders; teams with boundary-crossing skills, to be able to synthesise knowledge of different fields of expertise in a critical and creative way [16,17]. Methods are not simply neutral tools [18]. According to Reed [8], 'A theme running through this literature is the need to replace the "tool-kit" approach to participation, which emphasises selecting the relevant tools for the job, with an approach that views participation as a process'.

In the next paragraph the governance and stakeholder participation approach taken in the ODEMM project is described.

## 3. The ODEMM tango of stakeholder involvement

The ODEMM project sought to support the EU and its Member States with the implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive. The MSFD explicitly calls for an implementation of reaching Good Environmental Status in a structure of cooperation between the riparian states, be it EU Member States or other states. The challenge of the implementation in governance terms is that such a structure for cooperation is lacking at the regional seas level, resulting in institutional ambiguity [19]. Within the ODEMM project this issue was addressed by developing possible scenarios' and governance options for the implementation of the MSFD.

Developing a governance structure at the regional sea level automatically requires involvement of stakeholder groups, not only as marine governance impacts on a multitude of marine users and uses, and as explicitly mentioned in the MSFD policy 'public consultation and information', but also to develop an institution that is perceived as being legitimate, especially in the sense of being accepted by the stakeholders, policy makers and marine managers alike. Hence involving stakeholders in the ODEMM research was a *sine qua non*.

Previous work in the ODEMM project had already identified different stakeholder groups working in or for the marine environment: fisheries, offshore oil and gas, offshore renewable energy, coastal tourism, transport and shipping industries, environmental agencies, scientists, environmental 'NGOs and policy decision makers' [20]. It had also become clear that a number of marine sectors in European regional seas are on unequal footing in policy decision-making processes, whilst a range of stakeholders and sector representatives have provided input and expertise into the policy implementation process for the MSFD; equal inclusion in the process across stakeholder groups has not been achieved [20]. In addition designing a stakeholder participation process across four regional seas, at different organisational levels and through-out sectors, would be quite a challenge.

### 3.1. Step by step layered approach

Subsequently a step by step methodology was designed, tailored to the decision-making context, considering the objectives, type of participation and appropriate level of engagement (see Fig. 1).

Starting with a review of the current institutional setting of the MSFD framework different stakeholder groups involved in the MSFD process were identified [20]. However it can be difficult to involve stakeholders in a meaningful way due to differences in strategies and the (political) traditions member states use for participation, knowledge environments, priorities of interests and beliefs, differences in challenges they face or the formation

### Box 1—Best practice of stakeholder participation

Source: Reed 2008.

1. Stakeholder participation needs to be underpinned by a philosophy that emphasises empowerment, equity, trust and learning.
2. Where relevant, stakeholder participation should be considered as early as possible and throughout the process.
3. Relevant stakeholders need to be analysed and represented systematically.
4. Clear objectives for the participatory process need to be agreed among stakeholders on the outset.
5. Methods should be selected and tailored to the decision-making context, considering the objectives, type of participants and appropriate level of engagement.
6. Highly skilled facilitation is essential.
7. Local and scientific knowledge should be integrated.
8. Participation needs to be institutionalised.

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