



Consensus building

Consensus building is a collaborative approach in which the main aim is to reach a result that benefits all of the participating groups. People with different views of the issues at hand work interactively towards agreeing a sensible solution or a way forward. In this approach, the knowledge and information held by the public is treated in the same way to that of the experts and, ideally, there is a real dialogue between all viewpoints. Consensus building comprises many techniques, e.g. **Delphi surveys**, **Workshops**, **Nominal group technique** and others. Many of these techniques can be used when making decisions in co-operation with stakeholders, such as agreeing criteria and alternative selection. Neutral and independent third party facilitators and mediators are usually needed to carefully manage and structure the process. The desired levels of consensus are defined according to the situation at hand; the group does not necessarily have to agree entirely upon a decision if they reach enough consensus to move forward.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- Knowledge is required on how to use different Consensus building methods.
- External personnel such as mediators or facilitators are needed.

Equipment

- Good meeting facilities are a basic requirement.

Time

- Plenty of time is normally required to build consensus.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Good practice in rural development, No. 5, Consensus building. R. Sidaway (1998). Scottish National Rural Partnership, The Scottish Office, Edinburgh.
- The guide to effective participation. D. Wilcox (1994). Partnerships Books, London.
- Participation works! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21st century. New Economics Foundation (1998). CD-Rom edition 1999. Available from: www.neweconomics.org

Level of engagement

INFORMING:

CONSULTING: ★

INVOLVING: ★★

PARTNERSHIP: ★★★

Strengths

- Consensus building is an interactive mode of participation.
- The approach provides a structured and tractable way for decision-making.
- It helps participants to understand each other's viewpoints.
- Stakeholders are involved throughout the process which can enhance the levels of trust and reciprocity.

Weaknesses

- There is a risk that consensus may not be reached on the issues.
- Consensus building techniques are not appropriate for groups that have no interest in compromise.
- Time requirements are usually extensive.
- Professional, neutral facilitators are normally required.

Web

- The guide to effective participation by David Wilcox: www.partnerships.org.uk
- The International Association for Public Participation: www.iap2.org

Training

- The Environment Council provides facilitation courses in 'Stakeholder Dialogue':
tel. 020 7632 0103 or www.the-environment-council.org.uk

This toolbox is designed to assist Forestry Commission staff when they are considering which tools they could use to involve the public in the forest and woodland planning process. For more information please visit the website at: www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox