Engaging Stakeholders in Effective Collaborative Action

This is part of a series of Guidance notes designed to assist users of the Effective Collaborative Action methodology. You can find the full methodology here.

This Guidance note provides advice on how important it is to make sure you have the right people in the room.

Introduction

UNDP’s Green Commodities Programme promotes systemic change in food and agricultural commodity sectors and productive landscapes from a belief that sustainable production and resilient landscapes require solutions that involve collaboration amongst stakeholders. This document provides guidance on how to analyze and prioritize stakeholders, and then how to strategize and create a stakeholder engagement plan for multi-stakeholder dialogue and joint action processes. The guidance is mainly focused on larger and more formal multi-stakeholder initiatives, but almost all of it can be adapted to apply to other Effective Collaborative Action models, such as more limited dialogue processes, or even participatory processes outside commodity sectors.

A key part of planning and designing multi-stakeholder collaboration is to understand who the stakeholders are and what motivates them, and then to define how to engage them so that they contribute positively to the process and build their commitment to co-creating and taking action to change things. The document, which is built on lessons learned from several countries, provides guidance for Backbone Support teams and consultant experts on the steps involved to formulate and implement a Stakeholder Engagement Plan.

Collaborative Action Stakeholders

What is a stakeholder?

For the purpose of this document, we define stakeholders as:

- Those who are affected by the issue; including those stakeholders affected who are marginalized
- Those whose activities strongly affect the issue;
- Those who possess resources of all kinds (financial, influence, expertise) needed to understand the root causes of unsustainable commodity production, and design and implement solutions;
Those who control implementation instruments (often the public sector), or
Any individual or group who have a particular interest or ‘stake’ in the issue, especially those who are marginalized.

**Stakeholder categories**

For simplicity stakeholders can be divided into these four broad categories:

- **Government**
  - Local
  - Regional
  - National
  - Inter Ministerial

- **Civil Society**
  - Indigenous / Original Peoples
  - Academia
  - Charities / NGOs
  - Standards
  - Other multi-stakeholder initiatives

- **Private Sector**
  - Smallholder producers
  - Farmers
  - Supply Chain Actors
  - Trade Associations
  - Banking / Finance
  - Technology

- **Development Partners**
  - Donors
  - Bilaterals
  - UN Agencies / Programmes

In addition, a collaborative action initiative may want to involve international stakeholders that are relevant for the dialogue process, such as:

- **International commodity buyers** whose market influence is an important driver or influencer of behavior in supply-chains;
- **International donors** abroad who may be able to fund action to promote sustainable commodity production;
- **Development agencies** and **international NGOs** who have expertise that can benefit the national commodity sector;
• Other UN agencies or UNDP programs who have expertise and funds that can benefit the sector

Analyzing and prioritizing stakeholders

All stakeholder categories must be included in the mapping: government, private sector (including both producers and buying companies, with special attention to smallholders where applicable), civil society organizations (including marginalized groups such as indigenous peoples, women, and youth) and development partners.

The stakeholder mapping exercise proposed here provides a step-by-step approach to identify interested/interesting parties and their role in the sector, analyze their interests and potential role in the collaborative initiative, prioritize the most important stakeholders, and determine how best to engage them.

Step 1: Identify and map your stakeholder universe

The first step of the process aims to understand who the stakeholders are; who is doing what; who is influential; who is knowledgeable; what motivates each stakeholder; what are stakeholders’ hidden needs, wishes, fears or struggles; what are their agendas and how stakeholders are getting along (or not). This is the stakeholder universe that the collaborative initiative must work with, so the backbone team must achieve a sophisticated understanding, both of formalities and behind-the-scenes politics in the sector.

In using the methodology, the stakeholder mapping is done during the Understand the System building block, sometimes before the full Backbone support team is recruited. In the case where the mapping has been done already, the backbone team can revise and adjust where needed. It involves five activities:
• **Internal dialogue** – conversations with the Country Office and global advisors where applicable to identify existing relationships with stakeholders, and brainstorm on others. Be sure to understand who these contacts have identified as marginalized communities.

• **Desk research** – use of various resources, starting with the internet or informal calls with knowledgeable insiders to expand knowledge of the stakeholder universe.

• **External dialogue** – conversations with those stakeholders considered friendly and accessible, and who are centrally placed, to nuance and further expand the stakeholder list. It is wise to then share and discuss the full stakeholder list with the lead ministry and complement where necessary. It is important to have good representation from all stakeholder groups. At this point the team should have face-to-face / zoom conversations with about 20 stakeholders individually, depending on size and complexity of the sector or landscape. The conversations will help build trust and build engagement for future dialogue.

• **Marginalised people** – Put together a specific plan to ensure representation by indigenous peoples, smallholder famers, women, youth and other marginalized people in key stakeholder groups, and ensure there is budget to support this plan.

• **Primary research** – it may be necessary, especially if you are running sub-national platforms, to hold interviews with key stakeholders in the landscapes / areas.

Doing research and interviewing stakeholders may be easily done online. Utilizing video conferencing applications such as Zoom, Teams, and Webex with individual or even in small group interviews can build relationship with stakeholders differently than a phone call. And is especially effective, if you don’t live in the area. Online surveys, Whatsapp groups and google docs can be used to gather information and contribute to building knowledge virtually, if you are a team working in different parts of the world.

During the conversations with stakeholders the team could use questions like these:

• What are you hopes for the future of the sector / landscape?

• Which are the main problems you see in the sector?

• What are your organisations’ interests, needs, concerns and goals?

• Do you seek to influence the sector to create change? How, and have you been successful?

• Which relationships – good and difficult – do you have with other actors in the sector?
• Are you willing to participate in a collaborative effort?
• Who else do you think should participate?
• Who are we not thinking about who should participate? Who are the least likely to participate but are greatly impacted by the issues at hand?

By the end of this stage the team will have a long-list of stakeholders which will vary depending on the size and complexity of the sector or landscape, but often count between 50 in a local landscape or up to 200 stakeholders for a full national platform.

The information gathered during the stakeholder mapping process should be captured in a table, or information will inevitably be lost or forgotten. As the information is captured it will help the team continuously evaluate the development in stakeholders’ attitude and commitment to the dialogue process, and engagement in the action plan implementation.

The Green Commodity Community has developed a table in Excel-format for stakeholder mapping, analysis and engagement.

**Step 2: Prioritize stakeholders**

While the needs and concerns of all stakeholders are legitimate, and must be considered, not all stakeholders are equally important in terms of their influence on the collaborative action purpose, or in terms of their interest in the creating sustainable solutions. Considering who has a high level of interest in the sustainable solutions, and who has capacity to influence the issues and achieve shared objectives, will help to prioritize stakeholders and to plan appropriate methods to engage them.

**Segmenting stakeholders**

Evaluating each stakeholder along two axes as shown on the model below, will help segment the stakeholders and design the engagement methods. Using the segmentation tool on a flipchart or online using Google Docs / Mural, the team can place each
organization/person into a stakeholder type segment, based on the research and dialogue done in step 1.

When evaluating the **interest**, think about:

- **Motivation**: evaluate how important the issues are to the stakeholder.
- **Willingness to engage**: even stakeholders that are motivated might not be willing or able to engage, perhaps because of other priorities or lack of capacity.

Evaluate the stakeholders’ interest on a scale of three, from high (very motivated and engaged), medium (reluctant, indifferent, on-the-fence), and low (sceptical or hostile).

When evaluating the **influence**, think about:

- **Power and resources**: Are the stakeholders able to sway others and achieve their goals by using their prominent position in supply-chains, or strong position within a government, for example.
- **Knowledge and respect**: some stakeholders will have a higher status than others due to their knowledge of the issues or respect generated over time through seriousness and achievements. These stakeholders will often be very influential in multi-stakeholder dialogue. Conversely, stakeholders who are lacking information and knowledge will often be without influence.
- **Legitimacy**: Stakeholders directly affected by the problem will often be taken more seriously by other stakeholders.

Evaluate stakeholders’ influence as either high (powerful and/or knowledgeable and respected) or low (marginalized, unaware, low resources).

**Stakeholder Archetypes**

When plotting the stakeholders into the matrix according to their score on the two axes, five different archetypes will emerge:

**The Champion**: These are stakeholders that score high on both influence and positive interest in sustainable solutions. These are the major players that are likely to be strong allies. They are the stakeholders who typically should be members of a collaborative governing body, moderators of working groups, and key ambassadors.

**The Reluctant**: Stakeholders that are influential but indifferent towards the initiative or not particularly committed to change. Perhaps they don’t feel the problems affect them and consider it the problem of others, or they are not aware of the problems. Sometimes they will be weary due to earlier unsuccessful processes, tired of seemingly unproductive meetings or they don’t have the time capacity to engage.
The Unsupportive: These are influential and powerful stakeholders who are sceptical or even hostile to the initiative and changes in the sector. They might believe they will lose influence, prestige, power or money with proposed changes. These could involve producers, processors, traders and buyers who are afraid of increased costs or strong legal restrictions, or public officials who believe they will lose influence or benefits by opening a transparent multi-stakeholder dialogue.

The Supportive: Stakeholders that are highly engaged and committed to sustainable solutions but have little influence on the sector. They could be local communities directly affected by negative effects of production, for example, or conservationists concerned about environmental impact. These stakeholders are often weak on capacity and marginalized in terms of access to decision-making.

The Marginal: These are the stakeholders who are neither particularly committed to sustainable solutions or influential in creating change. Most stakeholders are likely to fall into this category. This is different from the marginalized communities’ stakeholders who may fall in to any of these archetypes.

Shifting stakeholder attitudes over time

The segmentation of the stakeholders into archetypes is not static. A stakeholder can shift to a more supportive or more influential archetype over time through active engagement by the team, thereby strengthening overall stakeholder support to the work. Typically, the goal for each stakeholder segment is:

The Champion: Turn the high motivation and influence into leadership to become change agents in the sector or landscape, for example by motivating their peers and establishing collaboration to build momentum. Forge strong teamwork by developing group empathy and loyalty.

The Reluctant: The team will seek to shift these influential stakeholders by building their understanding and awareness of problems and solutions, listen to their
concerns and point out win-win outcomes, and inspire them to reach for a higher purpose. The longer-term goal is to turn the reluctant stakeholders into champions.

The Unsupportive: This stakeholder group can be a major risk to success and needs to be carefully managed. The team needs to defend the process and neutralize these stakeholders to eliminate the threat they pose, such as by openly challenging their positions or data, by working to mount pressure on them by increasing public awareness about problems and who is causing them, or by pointing out to them that participation is better than non-cooperation, which could be met with government sanctions. The Unsupportive stakeholders could then decide that it is better to go along and find a mutually acceptable working relationship.

The Supportive: Some of the non-influential but Supportive stakeholders could be very useful if they are empowered to increase their voice and capacity – and thereby influence. Some of these stakeholders could become potential Champions over time.

The Marginal: The large majority of stakeholders, which are neither particularly influential, nor particularly committed to change, nevertheless constitutes an important segment, which could be called the “general mood” of the sector or landscape. The team cannot maintain a close relationship with each of these stakeholders but can ensure that the general mood is positive and supportive of the collaborative efforts. This can be achieved by awareness raising, by keeping stakeholders informed of what is going on, and by ensuring transparency in decision-making.

Selecting priority stakeholders

As the team has now determined the archetype of each stakeholder, and the potential to shift them to more supportive and influential segments over time, now is the time to select the priority stakeholders which the team will invest most of their time with. They will include most of the Champion stakeholders, and select stakeholders from the Supportive stakeholders (those who stand the best chance of becoming influential Champions), the Reluctants (those who are most likely to become committed Champions) and Unsupportive (those whose hostility is most important to neutralize). It is important not only to work with “friendly” stakeholders, but also to engage the disempowered, sceptical and even unsupportive, and build more support over time. There should be good representation from all four stakeholder categories: government, private sector, civil society and development partners.

The team must both consider how many stakeholders are really a priority, and what is the team’s capacity to engage stakeholders effectively. Depending on the size and complexity of the country, sector or landscape, and depending on team capacity,
the number of priority stakeholders might range from a few dozen to around 40. More than that will be increasingly difficult to handle and spread the team’s attention too thinly. Note that this list can be delicate and should be managed as an internal, confidential document as the frank analysis of stakeholders might offend some.

Regular revision of priority stakeholders list

The prioritization of the stakeholders should regularly be revised, for several reasons: stakeholders can move to a different stakeholder category because of the team’s successful work, and this could cause the team to adjust their engagement strategy accordingly. Also, some stakeholders (such as experts) may be more active during the dialogue phase, whereas – inevitably – the stakeholders who must implement most of the action in the action plan will gain additional prominence during the implementation phase. It is recommended that the team formally review their stakeholder priority list every six months.

Step 3: Determine engagement strategies

At this point the team will have understood:

- Who the stakeholders are, which role they play in the sector, and their motivation;
- The degree of influence and positive interest of each stakeholder, which allows the team to segment stakeholders according to archetypes;
- Which stakeholders they will seek to shift to different archetypes;
- Who is in the group of priority stakeholders;
- Level of engagement.

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<tr>
<th>LEVEL</th>
<th>EXAMPLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Inform</td>
<td>One-way communication</td>
<td>Shared emergencies</td>
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<td>2. Consult</td>
<td>Someone else deciding</td>
<td>Shared problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Involve</td>
<td>Mediation/negotiation</td>
<td>Shared analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Collaborate</td>
<td>Interest-based design/negotiations</td>
<td>Shared solutions</td>
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</table>
5. Co-create

| Sharing power/innovating | Shared future |

All five levels of engagement add value. Understanding the situation and getting clear on the outcome you are seeking can help you decide which form of engagement is the best fit.

For example, in a collaborative initiative on coffee in Peru there will be stakeholders who have low influence and low interest, such as other commodity initiatives, who will not be involved in “Co-creating” joint commitments. They will however want to be “Informed” about progress.

That said, we believe that shifting complex systems requires a sustained commitment to Level 5 “Co-create” engagement with key stakeholders over time.

The next step in the Stakeholder Engagement planning is to define the appropriate engagement strategy for each priority stakeholder, to get each to play the best possible role in the dialogue process. It is recommended to hold face to face meetings either virtually or in person with all the priority stakeholders to discuss and define how each of them is going to participate.

This does not mean they all have to be in the room or virtual meeting at the same time. It may be necessary or beneficial to engage stakeholders in different constellations to serve time zones, specific interest groups or as a way to work through conflict and with power.

Engaging stakeholders may be done virtually using video conferencing applications such as Zoom, Teams, or Webex. Online surveys, whatsapp groups and google docs can be used to gather needed feedback or contribute to the development of documents virtually. Additionally, there are several good applications that can be used to create content collectively while engaging face to face online. Be creative in use of technology in reaching and engaging stakeholders.

How can stakeholders get value?

Setting the engagement strategy must be based on a good understanding of how stakeholders can get value from the collaborative action process. The initiative will be most successful if stakeholders are very clear what value they can get from participating. The value proposition will be different from stakeholder to stakeholder.
| **Government** | • Strengthen policies, legislation and regulation  
• Improve governance of productive sectors  
• Improve collaboration between ministries and with programs (such as REDD+)  
• Support to achievement of national development goals (job creation, poverty alleviation, rural development, climate change adaptation, biodiversity conservation etc.)  
• Increased national income from commodity-export  
• Improved recognition and prestige for government and lead ministry |
| **Private Sector** | • Influence policy agenda to strengthen sector  
• Legislation and enforcement to ensure level playing field  
• Scale-up of company efforts to sector-level, including support to farmers  
• Access to sustainably sourced commodities |
| **Civil Society** | • Transparency in decision-making  
• Influence agenda-setting and access to decision-making  
• Improve legislation and enforcement in priority areas  
• Scale-up of pilot efforts, including funding for NGO work  
• Partnerships with government and private sector to enhance civil society relevance |
| **Development partners** | • Implementation of development and sustainability priorities  
• Productive sectors as drivers of positive development processes  
• Enhanced relations with country government ministries or local governments  
• Co-funding for project implementation |

There are many ways the team can engage with stakeholders, and the team should be clear where to invest their time. Without a clear engagement strategy to help prioritize this work the team can easily be overwhelmed and miss objectives for specific stakeholders. In the following are some of the formal and informal ways to engage and build commitment to the processes:

**Formal engagement**

**Governance:** This role is champion stakeholders who are committed for the long term.
Co-creator: This role is for people who are interested in specific topics and bring experience, knowledge, or ideas to the collective intelligence working on it. E.g. supply-chain actors who know the issues from the inside, local indigenous or community leaders who know how the ecosystem and human relationships work, etc. It is useful to have both technical specialists and decision-makers represented in collaboration – via working groups or task forces. All co-creation sessions should be recorded – written / video.

Pilot partner: Motivated and knowledgeable stakeholders can take the lead by prototyping approaches and solutions, which is a great way to convince more sceptical stakeholders that things can be done differently. It also builds the commitment among participating partners.

Advisor: Gather particularly knowledgeable individuals or politically influential but time poor individuals in groups to tackle tough problems and provide technical inputs for decision-making.

Targeted Codesign: This can help stakeholders that are less influential and perhaps geographically removed from decision-makers to be part of the collaboration. Periodical involvement can help give voice to affected groups and provide a counterweight to influence from powerful insiders.

Consultation: Holding an online consultation or an in-person event (or both) is particularly good for stakeholders who are not particularly influential, as this provides a space to interact and speak up. It can accommodate several hundred people – it is an important instrument for mass engagement.

Keep Informed: While every stakeholder should be on the mailing list, a newsletter or e-update is a cheap and effective tool for mass communication, which makes every stakeholder feel part of the process and informed about what is going on.

Informal engagement

Formal methods of engagement are important, and many informal ways to engage are just as important:

Group dinners: Arranging periodical group events such as dinners for champion stakeholders is an effective way to build trust and cohesion towards a shared direction/vision. Creating exclusive events can also help engage the support of decision-makers (like company CEO’s and ministers) who can otherwise be difficult to get to participate in the more technical meetings.

Individual Breakfast or lunch meetings: This helps the backbone support team to understand where needs, opinions, ideas exist in the collaboration but are not being
expressed. And to understand what is getting in the way for specific people from sharing what they know and think.

**Personal phone calls or chat at events:** The team can build rapport with important stakeholders by periodic phone calls or by chatting at events. The stakeholders will remember the personalized attention and feel appreciated. These conversations can be consultative, to request their advice on something e.g. a proposal or future process, or a friendly catch up, or to see how if they have any feedback or thoughts on how the collaborative effort is going, etc.

**Honorary positions and public recognition:** Honorary positions can be given to stakeholders rewarding efforts to further objectives of the collaborative effort, and to deepen the commitment to action. Likewise, providing public recognition to stakeholders is often effective to encourage further action, and the public eye on the stakeholder’s work can increase the accountability to stated goals while it also helps incentivize others to act as well.

**Enlist to influence peers:** Asking stakeholder to influence their peers can deepen stakeholders' feeling of responsibility and commitment to the cause, while it also expands the outreach of the team. Besides, some stakeholders will be better influenced by a peer than by the Backbone support team. One variant of this engagement tool is to ask commodity buying companies to influence other actors within their supply chain.

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<th>Formal</th>
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<td><strong>Priority stakeholders</strong></td>
<td>• Governance – Steering Group, Coordination Committee</td>
<td>• Group dinners</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Co-creator – workshops, task groups, etc.</td>
<td>• Breakfast and lunch meetings</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Targeted co-design – special interest sessions, workshops</td>
<td>• Personal phone calls and chats at events</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Pilot partner</td>
<td>• Honor posts</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Advisor</td>
<td>• Public recognition</td>
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<td>• Enlist to influence peers</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>General stakeholders</strong></td>
<td>• Consultations</td>
<td>• Peer influence</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Keep Informed</td>
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**Examples**
UNDP’s Green Commodities Community members have generated many examples of successful stakeholder engagement. A few examples:

- One platform in Latin America was experiencing less-than-desired involvement by the Ministry of Agriculture’s designated commodity department due to frequent turnover at director and vice-minister levels. The UNDP Deputy Resident Representative devoted time to frequent personal lunch-meetings between an incoming ministry Director and the Executive Director of the national commodity organization. The high-level personal attention in informal settings helped build a much stronger government buy-in and better coordination between the ministry and the commodity organization.

- A National Commodity Platform in Asia secured good government stakeholder involvement at a technical level, but found it challenging to access political decision-makers. The team retained an influential former vice-minister of agriculture as a part-time consultant. The addition of an insider with access to high-level government officials allowed the team to take the dialogue from a technical to a political level, and secure high level government leadership in a Platform Steering Committee.

**Stakeholder Engagement Plan**

The team now has enough information and analysis to write the stakeholder engagement plan. Included in the plan, along with the identification, prioritization and analysis of stakeholders, which is covered in sections above, is the need to give careful attention to:

- how the team presents itself to stakeholders
- how to listen, how to manage expectations
- how transparent to be
- what tone should come through in materials and presentations
- how to consider specific group needs.

The team should agree on all of the above before meeting stakeholders one to one, and ensure the stakeholder engagement plan and communications strategy mutually support each other.

The engagement plan will change during journey, as different stakeholders assume different roles at different times. The team should therefore periodically revisit the plan, to:
• Evaluate how stakeholders’ attitudes are changing because of the engagement activities/levels
• Rethink engagement activities/levels if something is not working properly.
• Consider changes in stakeholder roles over time. For example, a Reluctant stakeholder who is becoming a Champion can now be part of the governance; or, as the dialogue transitions to taking action the organisations most active will need more attention than before.

Ensure you incorporate into your plan, and utilize while engaging, these basic principles of effective stakeholder management:

Principle 1: **Acknowledge** and actively monitor the concerns of all legitimate stakeholders and take their interests appropriately into account in decision-making and operations.

Principle 2: **Listen** to and openly **communicate with stakeholders** about their respective concerns and contributions, and about the risks that they assume because of their involvement.

Principle 3: **Adopt processes** and **modes of behavior** that are sensitive to the concerns and capabilities of each stakeholder constituency.

Principle 4: **Recognize the interdependence** of efforts and rewards among stakeholders and attempt to achieve a fair distribution of benefits and burdens among them, considering their respective risks and vulnerabilities.

Principle 5: **Acknowledge** the potential conflicts between a) their own role as stakeholders in the collaboration, and b) their legal and moral responsibility to the interests of their organization.

**Know your stakeholders as a team**

It is important to identify who on the Initiative’s backbone team will lead on engagement with each stakeholder (it can be by category, or by existing relationships, or by knowledge matches). The team needs to keep each other up to date on the feedback received, especially from one-to-one conversations. During regular meetings, the team can discuss each stakeholder in relation to:

• Reviewing progress in establishing relationship with key people in target organizations.
• Identifying influences and mapping relationships (e.g. stakeholders having particularly strong influence on a Minister of Environment).
• Identifying stakeholders for specific tasks (e.g. leading on inviting additional participants from the private sector).
• Understanding how to engage each stakeholder based on their interest (e.g. only interested in advisory role or wants to sponsor a meeting).

Special Attention is required

**Producer engagement:** plan to hold focus group consultation with smallholders in rural areas, otherwise it can be difficult for them to make their voice heard.

**Gender sensitive engagement approaches:** the team should actively seek out the voice of women and ensure their involvement.

**Additional marginalized groups:** actively seek out the voices of key marginalized groups such as Indigenous people, youth, smallholder to ensure their perspectives are a part of what is discussed.

**Private sector:** presentations, pitches and materials should be tailored to speak to the private sector. Avoid UNDP jargon and development project speak, which can seem off-putting for company employees.