**swiss academies
of arts and sciences**

**td-net toolbox
profiles**

transdisciplinarity.ch/toolbox

Multi-stakeholder discussion group

An approach to involve stakeholders in accompanying a (research) project.

What is a «multi-stakeholder discussion group»?	The multi-stakeholder discussion group brings together representatives of science, civil society, the private and the public sector to work on the development and implementation of a (research) project. The group meets several times for a facilitated exchange process on an equal footing.
Why should it be applied?	Even before the project starts, spaces where researchers and actors from civil society, as well as the private and the public sector can meet and exchange experiences on an equal footing are crucial for successfully co-producing knowledge. Such spaces allow trust to be built, a common understanding of different perspectives (thought styles) to be reached, and the expression and sharing of tacit knowledge (Schneider et al. 2009, p. 477). A facilitated multi-stakeholder discussion group, running in parallel to an on-going research project, provides such a space.
When should it be applied?	The multi-stakeholder discussion group should be applied when it is obvious that specific societal actors are relevant for the project, but not yet involved enough in the project. It is also helpful when tacit knowledge, values and practices might be key for co-producing knowledge. See experience report on www.transdisciplinarity.ch/toolbox (bit.ly/32cpv8z).
How does it work?	1) The project leader identifies the societal groups relevant for the project. He or she may conduct a stakeholder analysis (e.g. Bryson et al. 2006) – or an actor constellation – and make use of the networks of project collaborators. He or she selects about **10 representatives.** It is advisable to choose representatives from the most relevant institutions, associations and networks related to the societal problem addressed in the project. Key well networked people will be helpful. In order to support the bridging of thought styles and gaps within the group, it is helpful if some of them are intermediaries between science and practice or between different disciplines. Besides having a deep knowledge of the topic, the selected representatives should be good communicators. 2) Choose an appropriate **title** for the project with positive connotations, as a bridging concept that speaks to all actor groups. 3) Select a skilled and credible **moderator** to facilitate social interactions between participants. He or she should help to create an appropriate setting and encourage exchange on an equal footing, the appreciation of various thought styles and mutual learning. 4) The project leader **invites** the members to join the multi-stakeholder discussion group. The expectations towards the group and its members are made explicit. 5) Before the project starts, the project leader organises a **first workshop** in collaboration with the moderator. The first meeting serves to get to know each other, and to experience the different views and thought styles from the various participants. Also, the project aims and the roles of the participants are clarified.

In order to express and share different perspectives, the meeting may be started with a round of personal introductions. Members are asked to describe their experiences and explain their views on the topic. Travelling, coffee breaks, lunch and apéros enable social interaction - a core element to build bridges between the thought collectives. Questions that should be discussed are:
– Goals: What are the aims of the project and why did the project leader build the group?
– Priorities and contributions: What are the views of the participants from science and practice with respect to the project topic and which expertise can they contribute? Depending on the outcomes, rephrase the research questions and project plan.
– Meeting schedule: How often and at what stages of the project does it make sense for the group to meet?
– Meeting places: Where and how does the group meet? To promote mutual under-standing and exchange on equal footing, every stakeholder could host a meeting (e.g. according to project phases).
In order to allow tacit knowledge to emerge, the working context of the stakeholders may be used as meeting places and informal activities such as walks, excursions and demonstrations may be scheduled.
– Responsibilities: What are the rights and duties of the group members? Is the task of the group to exchange knowledge and/or to make decisions?
– Rules for knowledge co-production: What rules of confidentiality and decision-making apply?
6) The group then meets regularly according to the decided plan.
7) Organise a **final meeting**, e.g. an opening reception preferably connected to a stakehold-er event to show the project's achievements as well as the multi-stakeholder discussion group's contribution to it.

How are thought-styles bridged?	Thought styles are bridged by the repeated personal exchange on an equal footing. In particular social interactions within the multi-stakeholder discussion group, as well as an openly designed exchange process which regards all stakeholders as experts will help. Participants will learn about knowledge demands, interests and context conditions, but also about the concerns, values, emotions, and daily routines of the others. This mutual learning provides a sound basis to align the project plan in a way that it is beneficial to all.
What's the output/outcome?	The output is a research question and research plan adapted to the perspectives of the stakeholders. The outcome is a better understanding of the different interests, expecta-tions and positions as well as an appreciation of system, target and transformation knowl-edge, and different skills as well as experiential knowledge (Fry/Thieme 2019). Participants gain trust and respect for different perspectives. They may develop ownership for the project's main topic.
Who participates in what role?	The participants represent a specific group of stakeholders from science and practice. The project leader initiates the process and participates as a stakeholder (of academia). The moderator acts as facilitator of the process and not as an expert on the research topic.
What do I need to prepare?	The project leader identifies a facilitator who has the skills to act as an intermediary between the different stakeholders. Together they choose a suitable meeting place for the first meeting. It should be related to the topic and meaningful to all stakeholders. Visualis-ation of the inputs and outputs may be planned in advance.
When not to use this method?	It does not make sense to use this method when the research question addresses system knowledge only, the issues are not contested, the level of actor diversity is low and actors' interests and existing collaborations between actors are small (see Schneider and Buser 2018).

Where can I learn more?

Selected references:

Bryson M, Barbara C C, Middleton Stone M 2006. The Design and Implementation of Cross-Sector Collaborations: Propositions from the Literature. Propositions from the literature. Public administration review 66, 44-55.

Fry P, Thieme S 2019. A social learning video method: Identifying and sharing successful transformation knowledge for sustainable soil management in Switzerland. Soil Use and Management 35/1, 185-194.

Schneider, F, Buser, T 2018. Promising degrees of stakeholder interaction in research for sustainable development. Sustainability science 13, 129–142.

Schneider F, Fry P, Ledermann T, Rist S 2009. Social Learning Processes in Swiss Soil Protection – The 'From Farmer – To Farmer' Project. Human Ecology, 37: 475-489.

Check the online profile on www.transdisciplinarity.ch/toolbox for updated and commented resources (e.g. most recent publications, experience reports, videos, links).

SDGs: The International Sustainable Development Goals of the UN

In this publication, the Swiss Academies of Arts and Sciences make most notably a contribution to SDGs 4, 16, 17:

> sustainabledevelopment.un.org
> eda.admin.ch/agenda2030/en/home/agenda-2030/die-17-ziele-fuer-eine-nachhaltige-entwicklung.html