

U.S ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION VIDEO
TRAINING PROGRAM**

PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

MODULE 2.
**SITUATION ASSESSMENTS
FOR PUBLIC PARTICIPATION**



**PUBLIC
PARTICIPATION**

GUIDE

Engage the public. Preserve the planet.

Introduction

*Greatness depends on the quality of the culture,
which depends on the quality of the relationships,
which depends on the quality of the conversations.
Everything happens through conversations!*
—Judith E. Glaser

Before you begin any public participation project, it is essential that you understand the conditions your team will be facing as you proceed. This includes both the opportunities and constraints within your agency and within the larger legal and political environment, as well as the conditions on the ground in the communities you hope to engage.

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SECTION 2.1:

Introduction to Situation Assessments

A situation assessment is about listening to your stakeholders to understand the conditions, challenges, and needs of your project and the stakeholder community. This understanding helps us to design a more effective public participation process by designing a process and selecting the tools that are most appropriate for the nature of our project, the communities we will serve, and the resources at our disposal.

Situation Assessments are Fundamentally Conversations with Our Stakeholders.

Situation assessments are conducted by talking to a wide range of stakeholders. These conversations, or interviews, are designed to help us gather initial knowledge of a project and its stakeholders.

Situation Assessments are Often the First and Most Important Step in Building Relationships. Situation assessments provide us an excellent opportunity to establish early relationships with the key people we will be working with over time. They create an opportunity for us to learn about stakeholders and for them to learn about us and our project. It is a critical activity in establishing a foundation of trust and demonstrating to our stakeholders that we are indeed committed to listening.

Not all situation assessments are the same. They can range from a limited and informal scan of the community and current conditions, to an intensive and time-consuming investigation of community needs, cultures, and knowledge. Typically, more formal situation assessments result in more detailed recommendations for the public participation process.

At the conclusion of a situation assessment, you should have enough information to determine the level of public participation for your project or decision and to design the public participation process.

SECTION 2.2:

What is a Stakeholder?

Before we begin any public participation project, we need to understand our community. We often use the term stakeholder to refer to those we wish to engage. Stakeholder is a generic term that can mean virtually anybody. Quite simply, a stakeholder is any person or group who has, or perceives they have, a stake in the outcome of a decision or project.

When we conduct public participation, the identification of our stakeholder community should represent the full range of interests and voices that could be engaged in our project. In addition to the NGOs and members of the public, this may also include other government agencies, media, and other formal groups. On the public side, stakeholders can be classified in two major groups: organized and grassroots.

- **Organized stakeholders** generally have formed an organization with some level of staffing (paid or volunteer) and resources. Organized stakeholders generally have a higher capacity for tracking and engaging in a project than grassroots stakeholders. Organized stakeholders are generally well aware of projects and are often proactive in seeking access and influence.
- **Grassroots stakeholders**, on the other hand, often have limited time to engage in a project. While the project may present a major impact on their lives, it is not necessarily a major focus of their time and energy as they go about their daily lives. They are often not even aware of the project or their need to engage until the project is quite advanced. In order for grass roots stakeholders to engage in a project, sponsoring agencies often have to be highly proactive in reaching out to and engaging them.

To ensure inclusive public participation, **agencies need to design programs that actively engage both organized and grassroots stakeholders**. It is important to identify and seek out the full range of interests and perspectives that are potentially affected by a project and ensure that their voices are heard.

SECTION 2.3:

Stages and Outcomes of Situation Assessments

The information obtained through a situation assessment will help you to design a public participation process that responds to the needs and interests of both the agency and external stakeholders.

Situation assessments contribute to a public participation process that is based on a shared understanding of the decision to be made, the issues to be addressed, and the role of the public in the decision process.

There are two stages to the situation assessment:

- ***The Stage 1. Internal Assessment*** is conducted within the agency to define the information needed to communicate the project and to identify the goals and process for participation.
- ***The Stage 2. External Assessment*** is conducted in the community to identify stakeholder knowledge, concerns, and needs.

The first internal stage informs the second, external stage, and both components involve directly reaching out to stakeholders.

SECTION 2.4:

Stage 1. Internal Situation Assessment

Before engaging in public participation, it is important to carefully assess what you hope to accomplish as an agency.

Only when you are clear on the purpose of the public participation process should you identify and design the appropriate approach and select the right tools. If you are not clear on the purpose, then you may choose the wrong process, which might interfere with your ability to accomplish the goals and objectives of your overall project.

Stakeholders included in the stage 1 internal assessment:

- key decision-makers
- managers
- technical staff
- public participation staff

Key outcomes of the stage 1 internal assessment:

- Clearly articulate the challenge or opportunity that is being addressed
- Identify your goals for the project and for public participation
- Clearly articulate the likely scope of the decision to be made or action to be taken
- Articulate the likely process and timing of the project, including how decisions will be made and who are the decision makers
- Identify the available resources and commitment for public participation
- Identify any issues or constraints that may affect public participation
- Identify the specific opportunities where public input could help to shape the decision
- Articulate your agency's expectations about the appropriate level of public participation, potential roles for the public, and the specific areas where public input makes sense



GROUP DISCUSSION

Stage 1. Internal Situation Assessment

What are the advantages to articulating the project goals, scope, process, and timeline up front?

What are we doing now and how could we do a better job to communicate these items both internally and to our stakeholders?

Which of these outcomes above might be challenging for us to define and/or discuss? How might we overcome these challenges?

Can we effectively engage all of our internal stakeholders?

SECTION 2.5:**Stage 2. External Situation Assessment**

Whenever possible, we consult the affected public before we design our programs to ensure that the public participation approaches being considered will be able to accommodate the potentially affected parties' needs, preferences, schedules, and resources.

The external assessment will help to identify the full diversity of views on our project and gauge the time and resource commitment that stakeholders would need to make in order to participate.

Stakeholders in the stage 2 external assessment:

- community leaders
- organized groups
- the full range of stakeholders that might be impacted by the project
- other agencies that will be involved.

Key outcomes of the stage 2 external assessment:

- Identify the full range of stakeholders and stakeholder groups that could be impacted by the project and should be engaged
- Inform stakeholders about the nature and extent of the project, its potential impacts, and the potential for public participation
- Understand how stakeholders understand and perceive the situation
- Identify key stakeholder issues, interests, and concerns
- Identify any public misunderstanding and knowledge gaps
- Create a preliminary understanding of stakeholders desire and willingness to engage.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Stage 2. External Situation Assessment

How well do we generally understand the full diversity of our stakeholder communities?

What gaps do we generally have in our understanding?

What kinds of activities would be required to identify the full range of stakeholders and stakeholder groups that could be impacted by the project and should be engaged, including vulnerable stakeholders typically marginalized?

SECTION 2.6: Conducting the Situation Assessment

Start with Who You Know

Situation assessments begin by engaging known stakeholders – these are people and organizations already known to and identified by the sponsor agency, and those that have a history of involvement in their communities and the issue under discussion.

As we talk with these known and readily identified stakeholders, we learn about additional stakeholders to broaden our understanding of the full range of perspectives that will ultimately be important to our project's success.

Identifying Stage 1 Stakeholders

The internal stakeholders should include all parties who will be directly working on the project and can impact project designs and outcomes. In particular, it is essential to include all staff who will interact with or communicate to the public, and those who must consider the public input before making decisions.

Identifying Stage 2 Stakeholders

The vast majority of external stakeholders who will engage in your project are already involved in their community. Start with community leaders from all walks of life and think broadly about who else might be interested in or affected by your project. Asking community leaders who else would be interested in this issue will lead you to identify additional stakeholders who are active in the community.

You don't have to identify every possible stakeholder in the community. The goal is to find representatives of the diverse points of view present in the community. As you begin to hear many of the same names recommended to you in your interviews, you will gain confidence that you have identified the range of stakeholders that are most important to engage.

Conducting the Stage 1 Internal Situation Assessment

Engage the Full Staff

During the stage 1 internal assessment, it will be important to talk with all of the staff and managers that will likely be involved in the project.

While the scope and rigor of the internal situation assessment process will vary depending on the decisions to be made, it should always precede any actual stakeholder involvement efforts in order to set appropriate expectations when communicating with stakeholders.

An important part of the internal assessment is to make an initial determination about the likely goals and outcomes of public participation and ensure a consistent understanding of these goals across the project team. It is important that you do not set expectations too high when you begin your stakeholder conversations in the external assessment.

Clarify and understand the likely limitations of your public participation activities before you begin having detailed conversation with your community.

Identifying and acknowledging your goals, objectives, and constraints, and understanding the factors that determine success, will be important keys to identifying an appropriate approach to public participation.

When conducting the stage 1 assessment, look to answer the following types of questions to set the stage for public participation in your agency.

Stage 1 Internal Assessment Interview Questions

- What are the issues to be considered and how could stakeholder involvement help us to make a decision?
- Who are the decision-makers and what is the level of their commitment to considering public input?
- How will the decision process work?
- What is the timeframe of activities and how can we ensure time for a public process?
- How controversial is the decision and how much will the public want to be involved regardless of any formal access we provide?
- What are the possible roles that we are willing to consider for the public?
- Are there sufficient information sources and adequate data to communicate effectively with the public?
- What resources and capacity are currently available to us?
- What additional resources or capacity might be needed to engage the public?
- What do we know about the stakeholder community and who are the most important stakeholders for us to contact?
- Are we giving special consideration and attention to vulnerable populations and marginalized communities?
- What is the existing relationship between stakeholders and the agency, how much goodwill do we have in the community?

Conducting the Stage 2 External Situation Assessment

The first step in this process is to reach out to those known external stakeholders you have identified in your internal assessment and request an interview. Interviews are best conducted in person, but can be conducted by phone if resources are a challenge.

To conserve resources, interviews are generally scheduled in a single visit to a community, often over a series of days. Interviews are conducted individually or in small groups to ensure a safe environment and to be able to talk deeply about issues. Allow stakeholders to identify locations where they are most comfortable. Leave time to schedule additional interviews as new stakeholders are identified.

When conducting stage 2 stakeholder interviews, you will design an interview process to ask a wide variety of detailed questions to understand what the community knows, the type of information they need, the stakeholders and structure of the community, how they may want to be involved, and the next steps in the process.

The following types of questions can be used to gain insight into the many issues we examine in a situation assessment.

Stage 2 External Assessment Interview Questions

Questions related to the current situation

- How well do you understand the situation to be addressed?
- How important is this situation to you, your family, and your community?
- What are your main concerns about the current situation?
- What are your main interests in the project or decision that is being planned?
- What information and sources of information are available to you now, which do you find most useful?

Stage 2 External Assessment Interview Questions (continued)

Questions related to the stakeholder community

- Whose support is crucial to implementing a good decision, who are community leaders?
- Which groups or individuals are going to be most interested in this project?
- What important relationships among stakeholders in this community should we understand?
- Who else should I be speaking to?

Questions related to stakeholder involvement

- How important is it to you and others in the community to get involved in decision making?
- What are the different types of information that you will need?
- How would you like to receive information and what are the sources of information that you use and trust?
- What are the most effective ways to conduct conversations and meetings in the community?
- How much time and resources might you be willing to commit?
- What are the most important outcomes from your perspective?
- Do you have any concerns about the public participation opportunities?

Questions and information related to

- Describe the project, process, and timing.
- What types of things could be done to help make this a meaningful process for your community?
- This is what you can expect from us as the project moves forward.



GROUP DISCUSSION Stakeholders

What do you think is most important to learn in the external situation assessment?

What additional questions do you think would be important for many of your projects?

SECTION 2.7:

Using the Results of Your Situation Assessment

If you don't clarify what you are hoping to achieve, you will likely end up with something that you can't use

The results of the situation assessment should provide you with the knowledge to create a plan for the public participation process that will meet your needs as well as your stakeholder's information and participation needs.

In some cases, we may uncover that the agency's and stakeholders' understanding of the situation and need for action, and/or the expectations for public participation simply do not align. There may be disconnects in what stakeholders believe is most important or the level at which they want to participate.

If the agency and public have very different understandings of the problem or issues to be addressed through the project, it becomes challenging to produce a sustainable decision.

It is difficult to agree on a decision or solution when parties do not agree on the problem.

In these cases, more work may be required to frame the problem in a mutually acceptable way and/or align public participation expectations before designing and proceeding with public participation.

Once we complete our situation assessment, we will want to analyze, organize, and summarize results of the situation assessment to help the designers of the public participation process. ***Creating a written document that summarizes the key results and findings of your situation assessment will be an important tool in designing your public participation program.***

Items to include in your summary of situation assessment results:

- A summary description of the *project goals and objectives*
- A summary of *community concerns, issues, and interests*
- A summary and description of *issues important to the community that should be addressed and discussed* in the public participation process
- A comprehensive list of the *diverse stakeholder perspectives* important to the project
- A comprehensive list of *key stakeholder representatives* that have been identified within each of these perspectives, as well as any areas where key communities have not yet been contacted
- Clear identification of the potential *areas where public input and influence are possible* and would be welcomed by the agency
- A comprehensive identification of the *constraints on the process that will limit or prohibit public input*
- The *financial and manpower resources* that will be available.

The results of *the situation assessment provides us with a starting point for each of these issues* to assist us in planning for our public participation program. We will gain more detailed information and knowledge over time and our understanding of these issues will expand. Each of these items will be discussed in more detail in later modules, including the steps involved in designing a public participation process.



GROUP EXERCISE

Design a Situation Assessment

Work in teams of four to five people. Select a project that you would like to consider for public participation and ensure that everyone in the group knows something about the project and the community of stakeholders. Conduct the following activities:

Design Key Components of the Stage 1 Internal Assessment

1. Identify all internal stakeholders that should be interviewed.
2. Identify any challenges that you expect in conducting interviews with internal stakeholders in general and any specific stakeholders that may be hard to reach. Identify strategies for overcoming these challenges.
3. Identify the key outcomes that you want to achieve through the internal assessment for this project. Remember to focus on what you need to learn in order to design the external assessment and the overall public participation project.
4. Develop the questions you would like to ask your internal stakeholders as part of this process.

Design Key Components of the Stage 2 External Assessment

1. Identify the range of perspectives you need to reach in the community in conducting your external stakeholder interviews.
2. Identify what you would like to learn from your stakeholders.
3. Develop the questions you would like to ask your external stakeholders as part of this process.