

## Stakeholder Inclusion in Conservation Program Evaluation, by Caplow, Susan

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### ABSTRACT

#### Stakeholder Inclusion in Conservation Program Evaluation

Stakeholder participation has become an increasingly important aspect of sustainability and conservation programs worldwide. Recent conventional wisdom holds that including stakeholders in decision-making is requisite, yet practitioners continue to disagree about how that participation can be meaningful, fair, and productive. This issue is especially salient in the context of sustainable development and conservation in less developed countries, where cultural/language barriers and inherent power dynamics render successful community participation in development projects incredibly difficult. Because sustainable development represents a neutral political zone for development and conservation advocates, “win-win” situations for both ecological and human communities continue to represent the highest goal of conservation initiatives in less developed countries.

In order to assess whether community conservation projects are meeting their goals, formal project evaluations have become increasingly important. However, while the inclusion of stakeholders in the projects themselves has been highly desirable, the evaluations of local stakeholder inclusion in conservation work (in the form of both direct community involvement and NGOs as representatives) have been both difficult to implement and harsh in their results. These assessments attempt to measure either the environmental accomplishments of a project or its ability to produce genuine and democratic participation within communities (or in some cases, both); many projects have fallen short in these reviews. However, despite past shortcomings, the ability to effectively evaluate sustainable development/conservation projects remains principally important, as the failures of many community-based conservation projects provide fodder for researchers who recommend exclusionary practices in biodiversity conservation.

Considering the inherent difficulties in effectively meeting the stakeholders’ needs in conservation and development projects, it logically follows that the inclusion of stakeholders in the evaluation process represents a key methodological component, as the determination of whether they have been meaningfully included in the project can only be fully determined by the stakeholders themselves. Thus, the challenge for actors at the conservation development nexus is to ensure that the local community’s needs are being met in conservation and development projects on their own terms via effective evaluation mechanisms. These stakeholder-driven evaluations are preferably

built in to the project's structure so as to ensure that the program is meeting its community-inclusion goals and informing the field through its experience. My paper will present a history of community stakeholder involvement in conservation planning and subsequent evaluation in less developed countries, examining landmark research in the field as well as the evolution of the ethical underpinnings to stakeholder inclusion. From these topics, I will offer ideas as to how research within this debate can inform sustainable development practitioners, both within and outside of the business sector, who wish to take a leadership role in the inclusion of local communities in evaluation of sustainability initiatives. This paper will fall under the key topic "Stakeholder theories: How do latest developments influence evaluation practice?"