CoBlue
Co-production of Knowledge and Politics for a Just and Sustainable Blue Economy

Universidade Vigo

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GUIDELINES

Conducting inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement actions

Lessons learnt from the CoBlue project on offshore wind in Galicia

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TIASLab A living lab for public participation

POST-GROWTH INNOVATION LAB

Guidelines for conducting inclusive multi-stakeholder engagement actions. Lessons learnt from the CoBlue project

This publication has been jointly produced by the Research Centre for Territory, Transports and Environment (CITTA) of the University of Porto and the Post-Growth Innovation Lab of the Universidade de Vigo. The CoBlue action is part of TIAS lab, the living lab for public participation of the Universidade de Vigo.

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Executive summary

These guidelines distil the lessons of the multi-stakeholder engagement process (MEP) that the CoBlue project carried out in Vigo in 2025. The process brought together 36 people from 29 organisations to co-produce policy recommendations on offshore wind farms in south-west Galicia. The guidelines were produced by CITTA of the University of Porto, which observed the process, and by the Post-Growth Innovation Lab of the Universidade de Vigo, which designed and conducted it.

The main message is that the level of inclusiveness and diversity of an engagement process should match the nature of the problem it addresses. Complex problems, with interconnected causes and unpredictable effects, require high levels of inclusiveness and diversity. Complicated but bounded problems can be addressed with less demanding approaches. In practice, what any process can achieve also depends on its conditions, such as time, resources, clear communication, facilitation skills, the intensity of engagement and the procedures that ensure fair participation.

From the CoBlue experience, the guidelines propose a standard methodology of four stages and twelve phases that can be adapted to each context. They then examine nine procedural dimensions and offer a recommendation for each one, distinguishing between simpler and more complex processes.

Key messages

- Match the level of inclusiveness and diversity to the complexity of the problem.
- Contact decision-makers before designing the process, to know how far they are willing to use its results.
- Communicate objectives, rules and expectations clearly and in plain language.
- Invest in facilitation skills, especially when the process involves many people and activities.
- Use varied, creative and interactive techniques to keep participation active and fair.
- Align ambitions with the context, so that participants do not face unfulfilled expectations.

CoBlue achieved a high level of inclusiveness and diversity. Its long-term institutional uptake is still uncertain, although the ongoing dialogue with local and regional bodies is improving the prospects that its results will be accepted and used.



1
Context and objectives

1. Context and objectives

Why these guidelines

These guidelines result from joint research by CITTA of the University of Porto and the Post-Growth Innovation Lab of the Universidade de Vigo. The research examined the CoBlue project, which the Post-Growth Innovation Lab designed and conducted in 2025 to promote active citizen engagement and to co-produce policy recommendations on offshore wind farms in south-west Galicia. The project sought to benefit local communities and governments with a more comprehensive approach to decision-making. It builds on research that shows the ability of citizens to frame problems and their consequences, propose solutions and help to implement and monitor measures [1, 2].

Based on observations and meetings during the project, the guidelines examine the role of inclusiveness and diversity in multi-stakeholder engagement processes and aim to help similar initiatives.

Two key concepts

Inclusiveness is the degree to which a process enables the meaningful participation of a broad range of people and organisations, with different orientations, types of institution and social and professional backgrounds. It concerns who takes part.

Diversity is the extent to which inclusive participation becomes a real plurality of perspectives, viewpoints and ways of framing the issue, shaping how it is discussed, understood and addressed. It concerns the range of perspectives that emerge from that participation.

What a multi-stakeholder engagement process is

Multi-stakeholder engagement processes enable society to take a more direct and active part in solving socio-economic and environmental problems that are difficult to tackle through centralised approaches [3]. They foster accountability, equal participation, transparency and partnership among stakeholders at the different stages of decision-making [4]. Their main purpose can vary. Some aim to raise awareness of a complex issue, others to empower communities or to promote policy integration and changes in governance [5, 6]. They can also take many forms, such as meetings, forums and workshops [3].

Understanding the problem is the starting point of any process, because the nature of the problem gives clues about how to address it. Table 1 shows the difference between complicated and complex problems.

Table 1. Differences between complicated and complex problems

A complicated problem...	A complex problem...
has isolated causes that are easy to identify	has multiple and interconnected causes
falls within one clear administrative sector	overlaps many administrative sectors
can be addressed and solved in parts	can only be solved if it is understood and tackled as a whole
has a clear and proportional relationship between causes and consequences	has an unpredictable relationship between causes and consequences
has simpler and long-term solutions	has temporary solutions, as new problems may emerge
can rely on lower levels of inclusiveness and diversity	should rely on higher levels of inclusiveness and diversity

The size and difficulty of a challenge therefore help to decide the appropriate degree of inclusiveness and diversity. At the same time, involving many social groups and examining many views, and how they change during the process, helps to define problems whose causes and consequences are hard to describe.

What makes a process possible

In principle, every process would gain in effectiveness and integration with more inclusiveness and diversity. In practice, every process depends on its resources, time, professional skills and other procedural conditions (Table 2). The complexity of the problem indicates how a process should be, and the procedural dimensions determine how it can be designed, conducted, evaluated and disseminated.

Table 2. Procedural dimensions of a multi-stakeholder engagement process

Group	Procedural dimension	Description
Linked to inclusiveness and diversity	1. Duration	Time available or needed for all the stages of the process
	2. Resources	Funding, infrastructure and staff available for the process
	3. Procedural transparency	Clear communication with stakeholders on procedures, rules, objectives and expectations
	4. Facilitation skills	Ability of practitioners to design, run, coordinate, assess and synthesise the process
	5. Reach of engagement	Intensity and frequency of stakeholder engagement
	6. Procedural inclusiveness	Conditions for more horizontal and equal participation between different types of stakeholders
Independent of inclusiveness and diversity	7. Institutional embeddedness	Readiness and willingness of public and private organisations and other decision-makers to accept and use the results
	8. Impact	Use that practitioners make of the results of the process
	9. Objective alignment	How practitioners define the objectives and intentions of the process



2

A standard methodology

2. A standard methodology

There is no single way to foster active engagement. This chapter presents a basic structure to design and conduct a multi-stakeholder engagement process. It has four stages and twelve phases (Figure 1) and can be adjusted to the procedural dimensions that limit or enable each process.

Preparatory stage	Engagement stage	Refinement stage	Proposal stage
1. Preliminary. Check institutional embeddedness.	**4. Recruiting.** Collect data on recruited stakeholders.	**7. Validation.** Create and share a feedback report with all stakeholders.	**10. Reporting.** Communicate the results to local and regional institutions.
2. Design. Map affected stakeholders and define rules, objectives and structure.	**5. Orientation.** Get to know the stakeholders and brief them on the planned activities.	**8. Analysis.** Examine the data gathered before, during and after the event.	**11. Proposal.** Consolidate the final report with the proposals.
3. Advertising. Communicate the process and the project.	**6. Event.** Conduct the activities of the process.	**9. Revision.** Refine the methodology.	**12. Impact.** Assess the impact of the process.

Figure 1. Stages and phases of a standard multi-stakeholder engagement process.

Preparatory stage

The preparatory stage creates the conditions for the process. It begins with the **preliminary phase**, in which facilitators make first contact with the local or regional decision-makers responsible for the problem. This phase is crucial, because it shows how committed these authorities are and how able they are to take up the process and its results. This guides the **design phase**, in which facilitators set the scope of objectives, rules and structure. In the **advertising phase**, the process is announced to local communities, with a brief explanation of its purpose and of the ways in which stakeholders can contribute to co-creating solutions and proposals.

Engagement stage

The engagement stage covers the phases of direct contact with stakeholders. In the **recruiting phase**, facilitators collect data on the recruited stakeholders and build a group in which everyone can contribute actively and equally, without any perspective dominating the others. In the **orientation phase**, facilitators get to know the participants, for example in online meetings, and explain the planned activities. This phase can strongly increase engagement in the next one.

The **event phase** can take different formats, such as forums, assemblies or workshops, and different frequencies, from a single meeting to monthly or yearly meetings. Facilitators choose them according to what is feasible. Creative and interactive dynamics help a fair and cooperative debate. Cards, board games, drawings, poetry and other techniques make interaction easier, keep participants interested and give everyone an equal opportunity to express their views (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Cards and sticky notes (left) and a board game on the implementation process (right) used in CoBlue to share perspectives, concerns and proposals on offshore wind.

How CoBlue applied the event phase

The CoBlue event phase was a forum with three meetings. In two in-person meetings, held on 6 and 13 June 2025, participants discussed the problems through different dynamics. In an online meeting, held on 20 June 2025, the team presented the results and discussed them with participants. Throughout the meetings, facilitators used ice-breaking activities so that all stakeholders felt comfortable taking part.

Refinement stage

The refinement stage improves the methodology and validates the results with key actors who may not have taken part directly. In the **validation phase**, facilitators share a feedback report with the relevant stakeholders, including those who were absent from the engagement stage. This phase shows the progress of the process to the decision-makers contacted in the preliminary phase and offers a new opportunity to include groups that were reluctant to take part. The **analysis phase** assesses all the data collected before, during and after the event. It runs across all stages and is crucial to make the most of the results. It also shows where the methodology can be improved in the **revision phase**.

Proposal stage

The proposal stage contains the last phases. It does not necessarily close the process, because the methodology can be repeated for the same problem, a related issue or a new one. In the **reporting phase**, the results are communicated to local and regional authorities. In the **proposal phase**, the final proposals are consolidated and presented in different formats, such as meetings, reports, guidelines or workshops. In the **impact phase**, facilitators assess the overall contribution of the process to the local community, including the participants, and to decision-makers, and analyse how far its objectives were met.



3
Recommendations

3. Recommendations

This chapter describes the nine procedural dimensions and how each one shapes a multi-stakeholder engagement process. For each dimension, it offers a recommendation adapted to the level of inclusiveness and diversity suited to simpler or more complex processes. Tackling a complex problem with few resources can have harmful effects, so the recommendations deserve special care in those cases. Table 3 at the end of the chapter summarises them.

Duration

A more generous timeframe allows practitioners to work more on every stage. It can help them invite and engage more stakeholders, deepen the dialogue with local authorities and the wider community in the recruiting and validation phases, analyse stakeholder views in more detail, refine the methodology as unexpected challenges emerge and monitor the impacts for longer.

Phases where it matters most. It influences all phases.

Recommendation

Shorter durations can be enough for simpler processes with lower levels of inclusiveness and diversity. Processes that address harder and more complex challenges, with a broader range of social groups and activities, benefit from a longer timeframe.

In CoBlue. The three sessions took place within one month. This kept momentum, but left little time to analyse the material between sessions.

Resources

Financial and non-financial support are both important to develop a process suited to the difficulty of the problem. Having enough support to advertise the initiative, hire and prepare practitioners and find spaces for the activities is essential, especially because public funding is often limited.

Phases where it matters most. It influences all phases.

Recommendation

Simpler and more straightforward processes can work with fewer resources. Extra funding, infrastructure or staff help to develop more detailed and elaborate processes, which usually also need more time.

In CoBlue. The forum was funded by the European project REINFORCING and took place in a university building, the Redeiras building of the Universidade de Vigo.

Procedural transparency

Stakeholders need a clear understanding of the design, objectives, rules and expectations of the process for it to work well.

Phases where it matters most. Preliminary, advertising, orientation and validation.

Recommendation

In a simple process, it is easier to make sure that stakeholders understand the rules, objectives and expectations of each part. When a process involves more people and activities, the methodology becomes more complex, and extra effort is needed to explain it so that all participants, whatever their cognitive abilities, understand the purpose of the activities and their role in them.

In CoBlue. Ten baseline rules and a shared narrative about the purpose of the forum were presented at the start of each session. The preliminary results report was sent to participants three days before the online session.

Facilitation skills

The training of practitioners is decisive to design, analyse and run a process that allows broad, horizontal and equal participation in all its phases and stages.

Phases where it matters most. It influences all stages.

Recommendation

More inclusiveness and diversity usually require more capacity building for practitioners, who will have to manage a wider set of activities and stakeholders. Simpler processes on more straightforward issues can be run without much time and resources spent on training facilitators, because their methodology can be less elaborate.

In CoBlue. The team combined three roles, with facilitators guiding the activities, observers following the group dynamics and note-takers recording ideas and disagreements.

Reach of engagement

The intensity and frequency of engagement among stakeholders, and between them and the facilitators, can be decisive for a more inclusive and diverse process. Creative and dynamic activities promote more active and consistent participation, help participants understand the knowledge and views shared and leave a lasting impression.

Phases where it matters most. Advertising, orientation, event and validation.

Recommendation

Processes that aim to be more inclusive and diverse should offer continuous, engaging and dynamic activities in the phases where stakeholders are most directly involved. Creative and interactive techniques, like those used in CoBlue, keep participants interested, encourage them to interact and give them more inclusive and equal ways of communicating in the debates.

In CoBlue. Activities included movement-based ice-breakers, sticky notes and voting with stickers, illustrated Dixit cards, a speed-dating exercise, a puzzle of the implementation process and an online board on Padlet.

Procedural inclusiveness

An inclusive environment is essential so that all stakeholders have an equal and fair opportunity to share their views and proposals. A more inclusive and welcoming process needs procedures that take into account the different communication and cognitive skills of participants.

Phases where it matters most. Design, orientation, event and validation.

Recommendation

Processes that seek more inclusiveness and diversity should provide procedures and tools for a larger number of participants with a wider range of communication and cognitive skills. In simpler processes this is less urgent, because fewer and less varied social groups take part.

In CoBlue. Every participant was invited to an individual interview before the sessions, which helped the team know their needs. Small groups, written contributions and voting with stickers helped to balance voices.

Institutional embeddedness

Whatever the level of inclusiveness and diversity, institutional embeddedness describes how likely it is that governments and key decision-makers will understand, validate and integrate the results of the process.

Phases where it matters most. Preliminary, design, validation and reporting.

Recommendation

Practitioners should keep a constant dialogue with key institutions and organisations to examine and strengthen their willingness and readiness to accept and use the results. The more ambitious the objectives, the greater the effort needed for the process to have the desired impact on governance. Sometimes it is better to reduce the scope of the objectives when institutional embeddedness is too weak for them to be acceptable. A process can also be used precisely to start changes in institutions, by showing decision-makers what participatory approaches can achieve.

In CoBlue. Eight organisations, including public administrations, reviewed and validated the recommendations, and the team continues the dialogue with local and regional institutions.

Impact

The impact of a process is the extent to which its results contribute to the objectives set at the beginning. Impacts can be very varied. A process can produce useful documents on the problem, such as reports, guidelines or recommendations, and can also change how policy is made, through changes in practices and institutions, community empowerment, awareness raising and knowledge exchange. All these results help to consolidate the potential of these processes to improve or transform decision-making.

Phases where it matters most. Preliminary, design, analysis, proposal and impact.

Recommendation

Measuring impact depends directly on the quality and quantity of the data collected, assessed and synthesised in all phases. Continuous evaluation makes it possible to explain how the process changed the views of stakeholders on the problem, or on the process itself, before, during and after their participation. These impacts can be hard to capture, but they can be examined and compared with the objectives set in the preparatory and design phases.

In CoBlue. The forum produced 13 policy recommendations, a methodological guide and these guidelines.

Objective alignment

Every process should align its objectives with the social, economic and political conditions that can increase or limit the impact of its results.

Phases where it matters most. Design, validation and impact.

Recommendation

Practitioners should consider the degree of institutional embeddedness and of active civic culture in the context where the process takes place. Ambitious targets where institutional and community support or interest is limited are likely to cause unfulfilled expectations for practitioners and participants alike. Aligning the objectives with the feasibility of the proposals supports a positive perception of citizen engagement.

In CoBlue. The forum was presented as a pilot, focused on flexibility and learning, with the aim of showing that public participation can be a regular part of decision-making.

Summary of recommendations

Table 3. Recommendations by procedural dimension

Dimension	Phases where it matters most	Simpler process	More complex process
Duration	All	A shorter timeframe can be enough	A longer timeframe for broader groups and activities
Resources	All	Fewer resources can be enough	Extra funding, infrastructure and staff
Procedural transparency	Preliminary, advertising, orientation, validation	Rules and objectives are easier to explain	Extra effort so that everyone understands the purpose and their role
Facilitation skills	All	Limited training can be enough	More capacity building for facilitators
Reach of engagement	Advertising, orientation, event, validation	Basic engagement activities	Continuous, dynamic and creative activities

Dimension	Phases where it matters most	Simpler process	More complex process
Procedural inclusiveness	Design, orientation, event, validation	Less urgent with fewer and similar groups	Procedures and tools for varied communication and cognitive skills
Institutional embeddedness	Preliminary, design, validation, reporting	Constant dialogue with institutions in all cases	More effort as ambition grows, or a narrower scope
Impact	Preliminary, design, analysis, proposal, impact	Data collection and evaluation in all cases	Continuous evaluation before, during and after participation
Objective alignment	Design, validation, impact	Objectives matched to the context in all cases	Ambition matched to institutional and civic support



4
Final remarks

4. Final remarks

CoBlue worked as a laboratory to identify and analyse procedures, and made it possible to set out the recommendations presented in these guidelines. Its design also offered a solid basis for a standard methodology. Each stage of this methodology offers opportunities to adjust the inclusiveness and diversity of participants and of their views on the problem. This flexibility allows facilitators to adapt their process to barriers, foreseen or unexpected, before, during and after the activities.

The procedural dimensions offer a more grounded way to design a process. When new projects address social and environmental problems, the gap between the ideal process and the feasible one is often visible, because time, resources, institutional embeddedness and other conditions are frequently insufficient. Working on a complex problem and supporting affected communities may require more modest initial targets that build social and institutional support over time. These gradual achievements may not solve a complex problem immediately, but they can produce visible effects in the local context.

Even when the conditions are not enough for the ideal methodology, these processes are still worth promoting. They draw attention to the issue, show the potential of citizen engagement and can encourage the institutionalisation of other ways of making decisions.

The CoBlue team continues to work with the local and regional institutions that plan offshore wind projects in Galicia to promote the results of the process. It is still unclear whether the process will be institutionalised in the long term. The dialogues held before and after the forum have strengthened its institutional embeddedness. The process also succeeded in creating an active and holistic deliberation that, for most participants, represented a more democratic way of making decisions.

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More information

CoBlue at TIAS lab · tiaslab.uvigo.gal/case.html?id=coblue

CoBlue project page · postgrowth-lab.uvigo.es/projects/coblue

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