

Participatory methods for working with stakeholders in a Living Lab

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Introduction

Living Labs are open innovation ecosystems in real-life environments based on a systematic user co-creation approach that integrates research and innovation activities in communities and/or multi-stakeholder environments, placing citizens and/or end-users at the centre of the innovation process. Living Labs as real-life test and experimentation environments, foster co-creation and open innovation among the main actors of the Quadruple Helix Model (<https://enoll.org/living-labs/#living-labs>).

A wide range of tools are available for working with the different actors in Living Labs. For example, The Engage2020 Action catalogue (<https://actioncatalogue.eu/>) is an online decision support tool that is intended to enable researchers, policy-makers and others wanting to conduct inclusive research, to find the method best suited for their specific needs.

For working with stakeholders throughout a co-creation process, stakeholder working groups and scenario workshops are highly useful participatory methods designed to engage diverse actors in shaping research and policy processes. Both emphasize inclusion, dialogue, and co-creation, aiming to surface barriers, generate ideas, and build consensus. However, they differ in format, purpose, and strategic application.

Which methods?

Stakeholder Working Groups are ongoing, task-oriented collaborations involving selected participants who commit to regular engagement. These groups contribute technical expertise, policy insight, and strategic guidance. They are ideal for projects requiring iterative input, long-term coordination, and detailed refinement. Their strength lies in continuity, depth, and trust-building.

Scenario Workshops are short-term, high-intensity events that convene a broader mix of participants including citizens, policymakers, experts, and private sector representatives for focused dialogue. Designed to stimulate creativity, uncover assumptions, and co-design actionable visions in response to predefined challenges, they are best suited for mobilizing diverse perspectives quickly and generating fresh insights.

To use these methods strategically, stakeholder working groups are recommended when sustained, detailed input is needed across multiple phases. Scenario workshops are more appropriate when broad engagement is required to prioritize solutions within a defined timeframe. These methods can also complement each other: working groups can shape

scenarios and interpret outcomes, while workshops can expand the stakeholder base and inject new energy into the process.

Methodology

Stakeholder Working Group

To begin, relevant stakeholders linked to the research scenarios should be mapped. Methods such as the Prospex-CQI method for stakeholder identification and selection are also useful methods for choosing a full and diverse range of participants (10.1007/s10584-014-1225-x.). Approximately 35 participants should be targeted, representing policymaking, academia, business, civil society, media, and other sectors. Two recruitment strategies are possible:

1. Organize one consultation per scenario group. This allows for focused discussion and expert depth but requires more resources.
2. Host one consultation for multiple scenarios. This promotes diverse input and cross-sectoral dialogue but demands careful facilitation due to its complexity.

Before the workshop, participants should receive a short briefing document introducing the project, the scenarios, and the scope of the workshop.

Meeting Structure

The workshop consists of five steps:

1. Welcome and Introduction (45 min): Set a warm, inclusive tone. Present the project background, participant roles, and scenarios. Use printed materials and informal moments such as breakfast to foster engagement.
2. Warm-Up (25 min): Use ice-breakers to encourage introductions and personal investment. This builds trust and opens dialogue.
3. Prioritization (30 min, optional): Participants review scenarios and select one per table through consensus or voting.
4. Enriching Research Scenarios (60 min): Guided by a Table Moderator, groups use structured templates and varied formats such as pair discussions, flip-charts, and post-its to develop their scenario.
5. Exhibition, Voting, and Wrap-Up (40 min): Groups present enriched scenarios. Participants vote using stickers or post-its. The Head Facilitator summarizes next steps and invites final reflections.

If consultations are held separately, voting may be conducted later via online tools, once results are consolidated.

Logistics and Atmosphere

To support a productive environment, name tags, printed materials, and refreshments should be prepared. Informal moments are important for networking and cohesion. Table sizes should be limited to a maximum of seven participants to ensure effective dialogue.

Scenario Workshop

This method unfolds over six months and supports stakeholders in assessing, envisioning, and proposing solutions to complex development challenges.

Phases of Implementation

The process is divided into three main phases:

- **Preparation Phase (Months 1–4):** An external planning group develops alternative scenarios reflecting technical, organizational, social, and political dimensions. Carefully selected participants receive these scenarios in advance, along with workshop materials and programme details.
- **Workshop Phase (Month 5):** Facilitated sessions combine group work, brainstorming, debate, voting, and plenary discussion. Participants are grouped by role or theme and move through three structured stages: critical analysis, vision making, and implementation. In the first stage, participants reflect on the scenarios, offer feedback, and identify barriers. These scenarios serve as inspiration rather than choices for personal visioning. In the second stage, participants craft and refine personal visions for future development within thematic groups. In the final stage, groups assess feasibility, present action proposals in plenary, and prioritize them. The final output is a consolidated action plan.
- **Reporting Phase (Month 6):** The planning group synthesizes workshop results into a final report, which is disseminated to stakeholders and relevant audiences.

Variants and Enhancements

Several adaptations can strengthen the method. Independent workshops using different scenarios allow for broader exploration. Sequential workshops with the same participants enable deeper engagement and scenario refinement. Early citizen involvement, especially during scenario design and criteria setting, enhances inclusivity and relevance. Preparatory scenario-writing workshops involving experts from research, policy, and civil society help shape foundational content.

Voting is optional and should not overshadow dialogue and collaborative refinement. Overemphasis on voting may limit the constructive use of diverse ideas.

Results

Stakeholder working groups generate a range of meaningful outcomes. Through collaborative input, research scenarios are enriched and prioritized, ensuring that the thematic focus of the project reflects stakeholder perspectives. Participants actively shape the direction of the work, which enhances its relevance and legitimacy. The process often leads to the initiation of new partnerships, opening avenues for future collaboration, knowledge exchange, and dissemination of results. In addition, stakeholder working groups strengthen organizational networks and deepen familiarity with key actors, including public authorities and institutions. This lays the foundation for sustained engagement and long-term trust.

Scenario workshops also produce both direct and indirect results that contribute significantly to project development and stakeholder engagement. Directly, they result in action plans that incorporate collaboratively created visions, innovative ideas, and concrete recommendations for future actions, policies, and initiatives. Indirectly, the workshops foster mutual understanding between citizens and policymakers, increase awareness of complex societal issues, and build trust across diverse groups. By facilitating dynamic interaction and joint problem-solving, scenario workshops often influence real-world decisions and promote inclusive, informed, and sustainable development pathways.

Issues to Consider

Stakeholder Working Group

To ensure success, it is important to maintain participant motivation, especially during final prioritization. Adequate breakout space must be provided. Facilitators should be thoroughly trained in the method, content, and neutral moderation techniques. The approach requires intermediate subject-matter expertise, basic IT skills, and advanced capabilities in facilitation, event organization, and project management.

Scenario Workshop

Several factors must be considered when planning a scenario workshop. Topics should be socially relevant, broad enough to accommodate diverse perspectives, and open to influence. Stakeholders should be recruited based on practical or experiential knowledge. Early outreach and clear value propositions are essential to secure participation. Scenarios must be presented as open-ended visions rather than predictions to stimulate critique and creativity. Moderators must create safe spaces for open sharing, especially in mixed groups. Group composition should be balanced to foster constructive dialogue. Policymakers and media should be engaged early to ensure uptake and visibility of the results.

About this practice abstract and eco2adapt

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Permalink:

<https://www.eco2adapt.eu/practice-abstracts>

doi.org/10.57745/S1VYGM

This practice abstract was elaborated in the eco2adapt project, based on the EIP AGRI practice abstract format.

eco2adapt - Ecosystem-based Adaptation and Changemaking to Shape, Protect and Maintain the Resilience of Tomorrow's Forests, is running from September 2022 to August 2027.

The overall goal of eco2adapt (a multi-actor, participatory project) is to create smart and practical solutions that will help forests thrive for generations to come. With the support of local communities, we're working on new ideas for managing forests to keep them healthy and resilient in the face of challenges such as climate change.

Project website: www.eco2adapt.eu