



Building Containers for Change

What will you learn?

Why building up an initial core group of dedicated actors is essential for change

That engagement starts small and gradually builds functional collaboration ecosystems

What will it help you with?

To understand how a functioning collaboration eco system emerges from the initial container

How to maintain interest when different stakeholders might face different challenges

When is this factsheet particularly relevant?

To implement a successful Phase 1 of the **Dialogic Change Model** – and to benefit from it in Phase 2, 3 and 4



For an in-depth understanding of making collaboration work, please view our open access publication

Kuenkel, P., Kuehn, E., Stucker, D., Williamson, D.F. (2020)

Leading Transformative Change Collectively
A Practitioner Guide to Realizing the SDGs



Building good containers for change



There is a saying from African wise women that captures the quality of a good container well. It goes like this: “*Only dedicated circles can give birth to something new.*” It is the dedication that makes the difference. Once a group of stakeholders senses that they could make a difference together, the group becomes more alive. This is the seed of transformations towards systems aliveness.

The term **Container** refers to the function and relational quality of an initiating team or core group of interested actors in multi-stakeholder collaboration.

Ideally, this group of people already represents – to some extent, at least – the diversity of stakeholders so that it can embody the range of interests in the change initiative.

It is composed of people who can make a difference, who are highly interested in change, are willing to respect each other and who are committed to the goal. They become the microcosm of the future collaboration ecosystem.

Actors in the container develop a culture of **collective leadership** for the transformative change envisaged and enact high quality collaboration patterns.

But how to get from a thorough stakeholder landscape analysis (see factsheet 12: “Stakeholder Landscape Analysis”) to a good container for change?

It is clear that stakeholders engage when they - emotionally and rationally - resonate with the content and goal of the envisaged multi-stakeholder collaboration, regardless of whether it is a stakeholder dialogue, a stakeholder platform, a stakeholder initiative or a stakeholder partnership. Engaging stakeholders to become part of a good container for change is an art that requires both systems understanding, relationship building and a good sense of process.

The core group forming in Phase 1 of the **Dialogic Change Model** – the group of stakeholders that drive change together - functions as the microcosm of the change people want to see happening. Understanding from the stakeholder landscape analysis who should become part of the container is important, however, getting them on board, requires very deliberate process architectures (see **factsheet 1**: “High-quality Process Architectures”).

- The core group should be composed of stakeholders who are interested in the change and influential enough to make a difference.
- They do not need to all have the same degree of power in the system, but need to respect power differences without exploiting them.
- Ideally, this group of people already represents a microcosm of the diversity of stakeholders that are needed to get the envisaged change going.

The **important lesson from successful multi-stakeholder collaboration** is that *engagement* starts small. It is a step-by-step process of building enlivened *collaboration ecosystems*. The core group as the initial container must have time to form, create an identity, build personal relationships. This helps to hold differences and inevitable disagreements. The container is the guardian of the process that will be built on the *collective intelligence* of many more stakeholders.

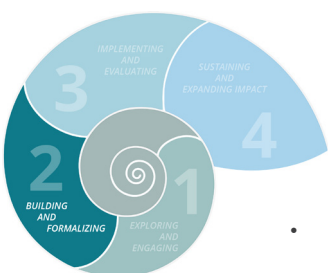
Engaging for container building in phase 1 and 2



Phase 1

The core group's task in its function as a good Container is to gradually establish a broader Container.

- This broader Container is composed of people who are supportive of the multi-stakeholder collaboration purpose, may get involved in certain meetings and take the dialogue process beyond those who form the initial Container.
- Ideally, each member of the core group identifies who else needs to be involved as part of the broader container. Hence, the members of the core group will engage high-level sponsors, decision-makers who are crucial to the success of the transformative change endeavor. They will also get into conversations with selected key stakeholders in a more informal way (e.g. in bilateral meetings or small focus-group meetings).
- Such conversations will always center on the content and the goal, but promote the multi-stakeholder collaboration as an appropriate approach to achieve the envisaged transformative results
- It is crucial for the preparation of any events in a Phase 2 of Building and Formalizing that 'structurally significant' actors – decision-makers, people who can make things move – are sufficiently engaged.
- They must support the goal and form of the multi-stakeholder collaboration and promote both within their respective stakeholder groups, institutions and constituencies.
- People engage when they get to experience meaningful conversations that tap into their desire to make a difference.
- Preparatory conversations with key stakeholders do not only serve to understand the stakeholder system better – they need to be conducted in a way that inspires potential participants to engage.



Phase 2

If the process design of Phase 1 has generated sufficient interest and resonance, it is time to prepare for the engagement of the entire *collaboration ecosystem* in Phase 2.

- These are usually those actors who participate in one or several stakeholder events, such as consultation meetings, workshops, planning meetings, etc. Good preparation of such events ensures that a sufficient number of participants have already been part of bilateral informal or formal conversations in Phase 1.
- The core group then knows already who is supportive, who is doubtful, who is opposed, or who is highly engaged. The structure and form of the stakeholder meetings must support further Container-building between the wider group of stakeholders. This is the glue that keeps the collaboration ecosystem functioning.
- There must be room for respectful acknowledgement of difference, authentic listening to concerns, task-orientation in the meeting itself, transparency in planning the way forward, and result-orientation to ensure tangible outcomes.

From the container to the collaboration ecosystem



Engaging stakeholders means gradually building larger and larger containers for change. This is what makes the dialogic process successful. Engagement does not necessarily mean consensus: critical stakeholders can play an important role. But only a well-built engagement process can ensure that they stay in the process, remain constructive with criticism and are willing to compromise if a successful outcome is at stake.

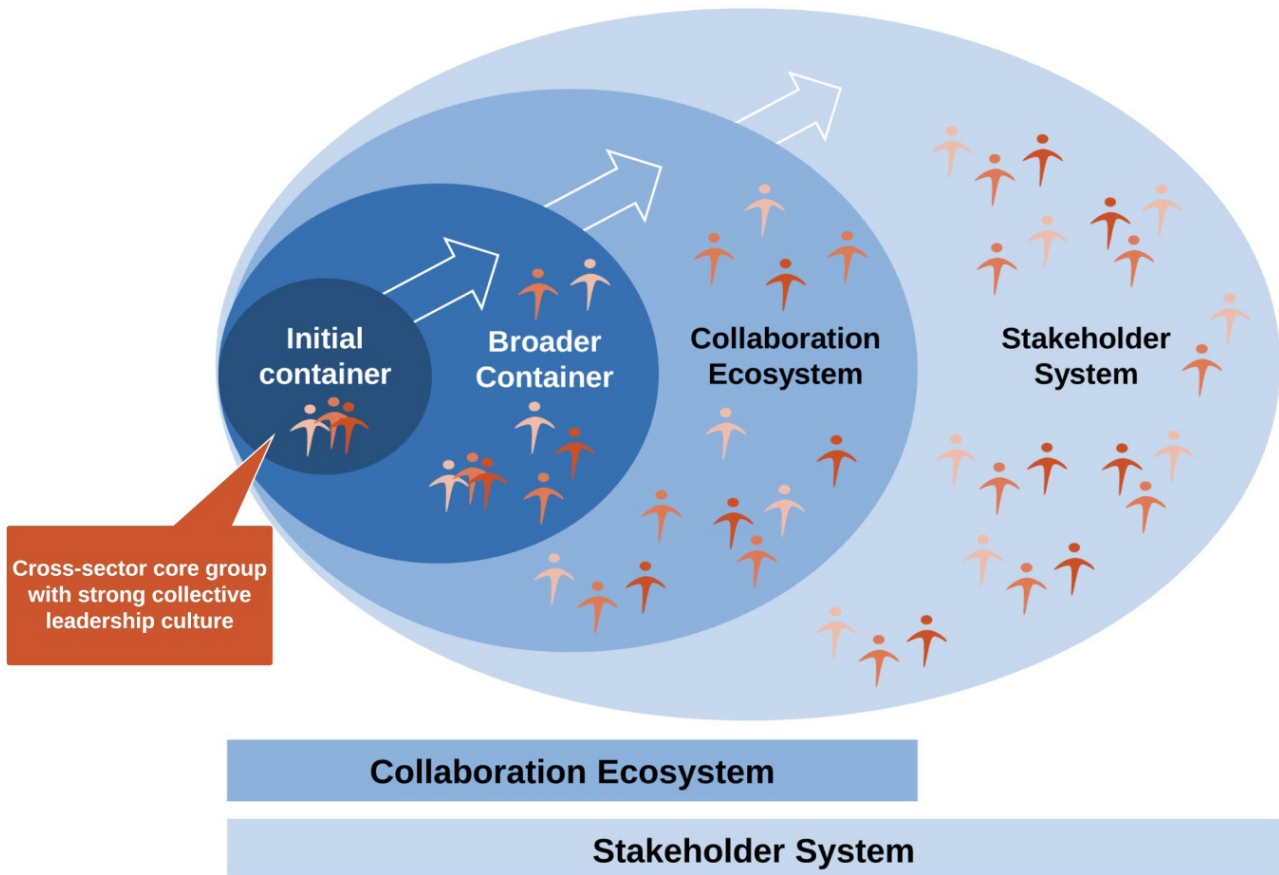


Figure 1: Building Containers for Change towards Collaboration Ecosystems

Once the collaboration ecosystem is willing to engage, participating stakeholders will connect with the wider stakeholder system of indirectly involved stakeholders and will begin to create an effect. These can be people who know of the initiative, but do not participate directly, and people who are directly or indirectly affected by the outcomes of the multi-stakeholder collaboration. When they perceive the existence of a diverse group of actors who (and not always in agreement) move an issue forward, they become attracted to engage, too.

Engaging stakeholders differently



Initiators sometimes overlook the differences of different stakeholder groups in their motivation to join and engage. It is helpful to keep in mind that each group may need to be treated in a different way to maintain interest. The following is a reminder of what needs to be taken into account when engaging the three large societal stakeholder groups. Depending on the context, this may be even more complex: a stakeholder landscape analysis (see **factsheet 12**) helps to understand the motivations that can lead stakeholder groups to engage.



Private sector



- Know that the private sector always has a busy schedule.
- Involve private sector in the planning process.
- Build a result-oriented process and create a flexible and practical environment.
- Plan short meetings in a convivial setting.
- Show the business case for change (help them to argue the business case for engagement).
- Provide the opportunity to showcase their work and promote their image.
- Take advantage of competitiveness to stimulate involvement and commitment.



Public sector



- Understand the power dynamics and hierarchical structures.
- Recognize the importance of socio-cultural factors.
- Be aware of formal, but also traditional, structures.
- Ensure knowledge of existing rules and regulations.
- Always respect protocol.
- Show the reputational case for change.
- Consider supra-national and regional structures and their interests.
- Highlight sustainability aspects.
- Make reference and ensure conformity to international conventions.



Civil society



- Consider logistical or financial support for participation.
- Ensure transparent and inclusive communication.
- Be aware of their requirement to consult with their constituencies.
- Respect the different mandates of different organizations.
- Strengthen weaker representation (e.g. translation for community groups).
- Respect and appeal to value-orientation.
- Show the societal case for change.
- Be prepared to address questions on impact-monitoring.



Good container-building is the lifeblood of multi-stakeholder collaborations. Core groups as good containers often get their legitimacy not only from their official mandate but from the way they are able to engage the different stakeholders successfully. They recognize their success when they see that stakeholders beyond the actual collaboration ecosystem begin to engage, and work together collaboratively.



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