Systems Thinking Collection: Stakeholder Analysis Exercise

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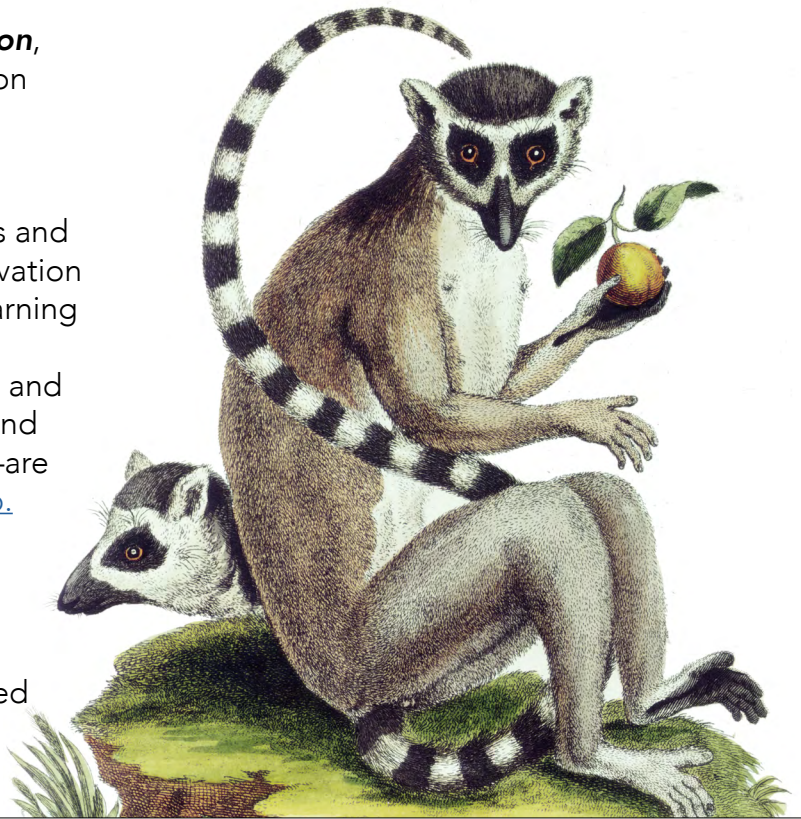
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Systems Thinking Collection: Stakeholder Analysis Exercise

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ABSTRACT

During this exercise, students will read readings on stakeholder analysis, then research case studies related to food, health, and/or environmental systems and work in small groups to use the systems thinking (ST) tool "Stakeholder Analysis" to understand the system presented in the case. As defined by Varvasovszky and Brugha (2000), stakeholder analysis is an "approach for generating knowledge about actors—individuals and organizations—so as to understand their behavior, intentions, relationships, and interests; and for assessing the influence and resources they bring to bear on decision-making or implementation processes." We have adapted this approach to more explicitly center discussions of power, social justice, and four dimensions of equity (distributional, procedural, recognition, and contextual).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Examine a diversity of stakeholders relevant to specific topics in health, food, and environment, and compare their varying viewpoints, degrees of influence and power, and involvement in the topic;
- Research the specific topic and select relevant evidence supporting stakeholder positions;
- Describe applications of stakeholder analysis as a systems thinking tool, and how it can support systems analyses.

EXERCISE OUTLINE

Prior to class, you will complete a series of readings on stakeholder analysis and current issues. This will prepare you for an exercise using ST to analyze a specific issue or problem based on a selected case study. The instructor will work with your class to identify intriguing current health, food, and environment policy issues. The best topics will relate to complex adaptive systems and/or center on problems with no easy policy solution. There should be some controversy, with various institutions or segments of society disagreeing on the analysis of the issue, its importance, or its resolution. It is best for students to identify current issues of interest to them.

Regardless of the topic chosen, the instructor and students will need to identify readings for each topic from both scientific journals and journalistic pieces, with at least two from the peer-reviewed literature. You will read the articles before class and identify, through discussion with your classmates, a particular question as a focus for your stakeholder analysis.

This exercise consists of five steps:
Step 1.   Brainstorm topics and complete readings and research as homework
Step 2.   View presentation on stakeholder analysis
Step 3.   Initial reflection on the topic
Step 4.   Analysis of stakeholders, in small groups
Step 5.   Report back by the groups and final reflection

Steps for Students

Step 1

At least one week prior to the class session, you will brainstorm with your fellow students and instructor a range of possible topics of interest. You will be placed into a small group depending on the topical issue you select, and then your group will identify and complete readings as homework, in addition to the recommended readings listed below. Student-selected readings should be from peer-reviewed literature, gray literature, or popular media. Purdue University has published helpful tips on assessing the credibility of a source including a series of questions to consider about the source centering on authorship, date of publication, and author's purpose (Purdue OWL 2020).

Step 2

Your instructor will introduce the stakeholder analysis tool in a PowerPoint presentation. This presentation provides a definition for stakeholders and information on stakeholder analysis, including details on the uses of and optimal timing for application of the tool in addition to how the tool can allow for exploration of issues of power and equity. The presentation then reviews the steps of a stakeholder analysis: preparation, conducting the analysis, organizing and analyzing the data, and presenting and using the findings. A worked case study is provided on a hypothetical watershed management proposal so you can explore completed examples of a stakeholder table and grid.

Step 3

As a class, you will discuss the selected case studies with your instructor to ensure you are prepared to undertake the exercise.

Step 4

After completing the readings as homework, you will work in your small group on identifying a specific focus to use for a stakeholder analysis. Then your group will complete a stakeholder table and an influence/power and involvement grid (see figures and further instructions below).

There are many tools available to conduct a stakeholder analysis, and it can be helpful to employ a multiplicity of tools in combination to reveal different angles on a specific topic or issue from the perspective of stakeholders. For this exercise, you will focus on the following tools:

- A stakeholder table allows you to aggregate information on the different stakeholders related to a problem or issue.
- A stakeholder grid allows you to visualize or map the relative influence (on one axis) and relative level of involvement (on the other axis) of each of the stakeholder groups. This technique can be used either alone or in conjunction with the previously discussed table.

With your group, discuss and decide which key stakeholders are most relevant to the topic by assessing the following:
- Potential stakeholders from different sides of the issue.
  - You might consider: Who should be included? Do they represent a variety of different sectors and roles? Why or why not?
  - You should consider marginalized communities that exist in the country/locale relevant to your topic and include them in your stakeholder analysis. For example, in the United States, the marginalized communities might include undocumented immigrants, African Americans, and Native Americans. In another country, marginalized communities might include people

of ethnic minority status, Indigenous People, people of lower class or caste, or religious minorities. Sexual minorities (in US terminology "2SLGBTQ+") are almost universally vulnerable and you should consider their potential involvement in a stakeholder analysis.

- Involvement in the issue (a stakeholder's relationship to the issue or involvement in a process related to the issue, including how any changes in the issue may impact them).
- Position toward the issue. Position (whether supportive or opposed, or non-mobilized if no effort has yet been made to mobilize their support or opposition) may be obvious from the homework readings, but if not, speculate on their likely position.
- Influence/power to control what decisions are made.
  - You might consider how central each stakeholder group is to decision-making processes and also consider heterogeneity within stakeholder groups: What sub-groups or individuals hold formal or informal positions that allow them to make decisions on behalf of the group they represent?
- Relationships with other stakeholders (key relationships between stakeholders, i.e., influence, deference, antagonism, and also including any historic or current inequities or relations of oppression that influence whose knowledge is valid, whose knowledge and experiences are dismissed or disappeared).
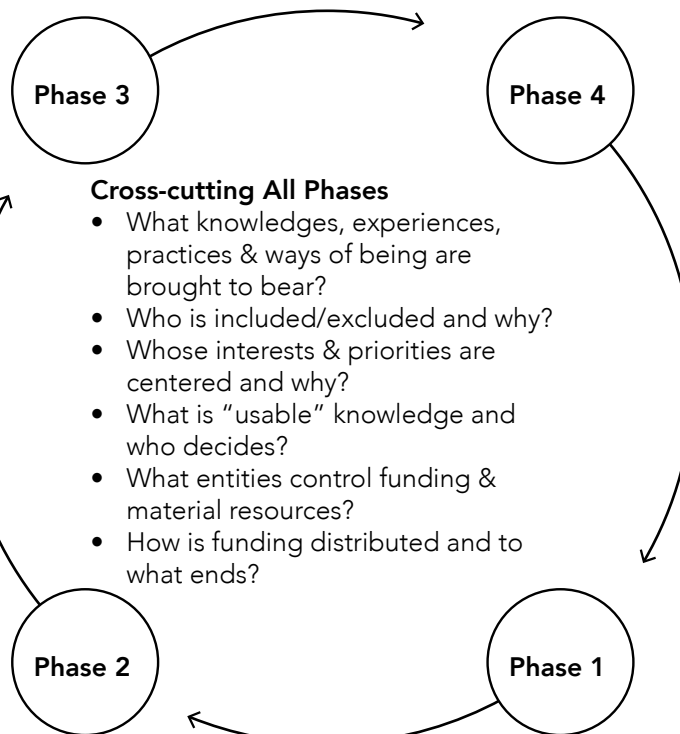
As you discuss your assessments with your group members, you should also consider a series of questions following the phases of an intervention cycle (Figure 1). Your answers to these questions may result in changes to your table and/or grid as you complete it in parallel with your discussion.

Figure 1. Key stakeholder questions related to influence and power, along an implementation cycle (adapted from Daly 2020).

Instructions for Completing Stakeholder Table

Using the column headers shown below (Table 1), construct a table of the stakeholders most relevant to your group's topic. Considering the scope of the topic selected, identify groups of people, organizations, or individuals that represent the stakeholders. Discuss some strategies or opportunities for the topic to be re-configured to take the stakeholders' involvement and risks into account. If possible, copy the stakeholder table below into an internet-based spreadsheet software program, such as Google Sheets, to allow easy group sharing and editing.

Stakeholder Grid

Create a stakeholder grid (Figure 2) by writing down each stakeholder from your table in the grid location that best describes that stakeholder's influence/power on the topic, and involvement relative to the other stakeholders represented.

When different stakeholder groups fall near each other on the grid, this cluster of stakeholders may be expected to form coalitions on a particular issue. Draw circles around these clusters from the same block in the grid and with similar positions that you would expect to work together towards common goals.

Next, look across the grid and consider which coalitions may be aligned and draw arrows between them—for example, between a cluster with high involvement and low influence and a cluster with high influence to identify potential allies for lower power groups.

After completing the table and grid, reflect with your group on your work and what insights you have gained from the process. You might also discuss the strengths and limitations of the tools used, and brainstorm what additional tools might have been useful in your work. Some possible questions to spark this discussion are below:
- Did the tools surface stakeholders you had not thought of at first?
- Are some stakeholders more visible than others?
- Are there stakeholders that could still be missing from your analysis? Why might that be?
- How does the heterogeneity of a stakeholder group affect determination of the group's decision-making power? How might you need to consider different individuals or sub-groups in a broader stakeholder group?
- Are there stakeholders who are not included in decision-making processes? Why might that be?
- If there are individuals or organizations made up of individuals with diverse social identities in the

Table 1. Stakeholder table, adapted from Varvasovszky and Brugha (2000). For involvement and influence/power, possible responses are high, medium, medium-high, medium-low, and low along with a descriptive rationale for the response. For position, possible responses are supportive, non-mobilized, and opposed with a descriptive rationale for the response.

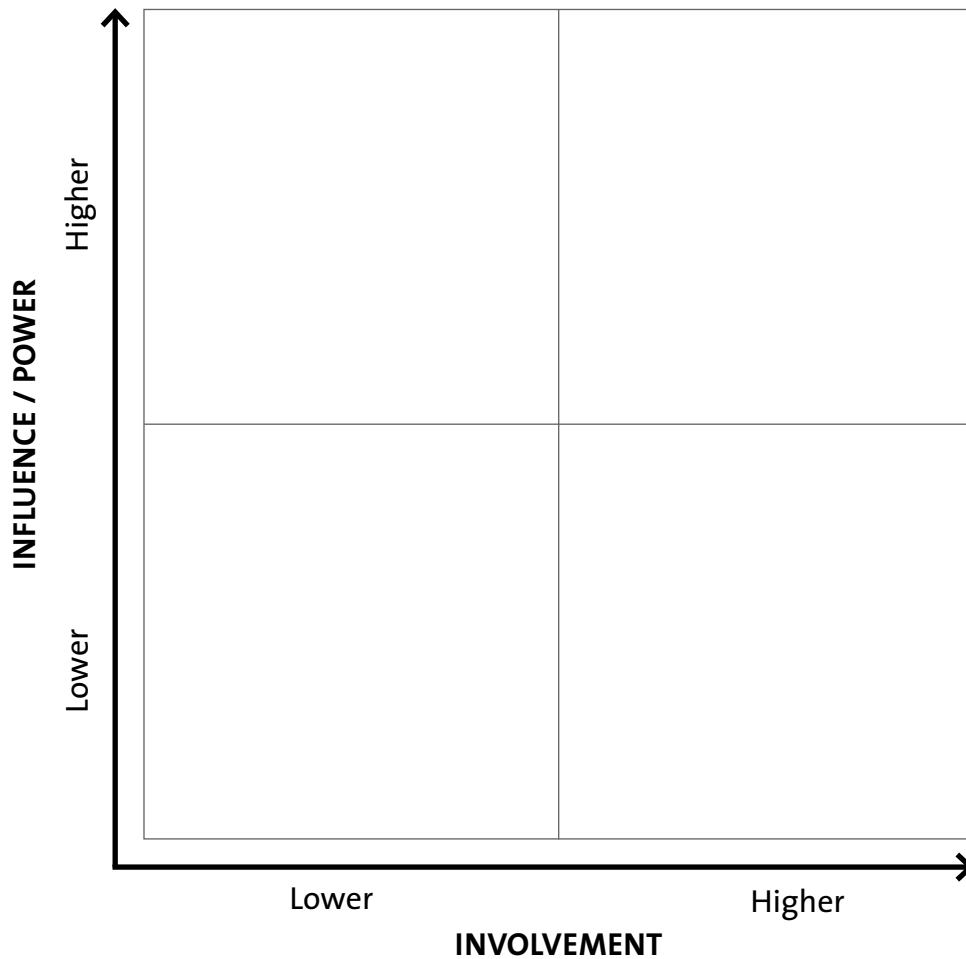| Stakeholder	Characteristics			
	Involvement in the issue	Position	Influence/power	Relationships with other stakeholders, including historical and current forms on inequities and oppression

Figure 2. Stakeholder grid.

stakeholder category, what are the implications on decision-making processes? Who ultimately benefits from the system? Are the intended (trade-offs) and unintended outcomes within the system that disproportionately impact low income individuals/communities, BIPOC, women, 2SLGBTQ+, or other marginalized groups?
- What was most challenging about the analysis and why?
- Should all stakeholders be engaged in similar ways? What could be pros and cons of doing this?
- What additional information you need to identify stakeholders and their involvement. Where might you get that information?

Step 5
Following small group discussion of the table and grid, each group will then report to the whole class their main insights and the consensus of their reflection at the end of Step 4. With your instructor, discuss how other stakeholder tools might help with identifying stakeholders and determining their relative influences on decision-making.

Recommended Readings

- Brugha, R., and Z. Varvasovszky. 2000. Stakeholder analysis: a review. Health Policy and Planning 15(3):239–46.
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Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL). 2020. Using Research and Evidence. Available from https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/academic_writing/establishing_arguments/research_and_evidence.html (accessed December 3, 2020).

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