Tool 45: Comparing proposals

Aim of the tool
To analyse an issue by looking at it from different stakeholders' perspectives in order to support decision-making.

When to use it?
The convergence stage: when different perspectives on the MSPs issue are voiced and need to be compared.

What is Comparing proposals?

This tool is a simple matrix for weighing proposals from different perspectives. It captures alternative proposals developed by the group, and analyses the corresponding trade-offs. It will help the group understand that there are different options, and that there are no easy answers to complex issues.

The tool is designed by The National Issues Forum (NIF) and is also known as the 'NIF Study Guide'.

Issue area		
Problem Description: General Overview *The issue is (succinct statement)....*		
Perspective A	Perspective B	Perspective C
What should be done		
Argument in favour		
Arguments against		
What costs and trade-offs are required?		
Other questions to help explicate differences...		

The MSP Guide: How to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships
Get the MSP Guide and all 60 tools at www.mspguide.org
www.wageningenur.nl/cdi

The eventual goal of the tool is to agree on how to address the issue and eventually, decide on what actions will flow from the dialogue. The agreement should be expressed in such a way that it gives participants a sense of shared ownership.

Potential challenges or difficulties

The process of deciding on a common agreement or proposal can cause an initial lack of trust among participants. Hence, disagreements in a group might threaten the possibility of consensus. Furthermore, some participants can undercut or manipulate the process. For example, when:

- A representative of a decision-maker claims he or she is not authorized to make a decision the group has agreed upon.
- The group takes advantage of the situation by introducing another issue at the final stage of the process, known as the 'Trojan horse'.
- Some participants require significantly more time than others to consult or persuade their constituents. This can lead to a clash of expectations concerning the time line for completing the decision making process.

Another challenge can be the lack of support from constituencies, which can delay or threaten the decision the group has made. Last of all, a group can reach a decision that is beyond their mandate to implement, for example by calling for a new law when no government representatives are part of the group.

Helpful tips and strategies

1. To avoid a breakdown in the process, it is important to create and maintain a sense of safety and trust. This can be stimulated by:

- Creating a set of ground rules everyone has to adhere by (see also Tool 9, 'Ground Rules');
- Agreeing before-hand on a specific ground rule for decision-making, for example majority voting (see also Tool 52 'Set Decision Rules');
- Carefully framing the decision-making process, thus avoiding a sense of winning/losing;
- Carefully managing external communications (agree on what can be shared with media organisations).

2. To keep the possibility of consensus alive in the light of disagreement, inquiring into the nature of the disagreement is helpful. A useful tool for this is 'Gradients of agreements', developed by Sam Kaner (2014). For a description of the tool click here. Additionally, it is useful to raise the question of whether complete consensus on every item is actually needed.

3. Whenever participants' actions seem deliberately intended to stall or manipulate the decision-making process, it is helpful to avoid negative labelling and instead inquire into the reasons for these actions.

4. It is important to pay attention to the connection between advances in the dialogue group and the constituencies that the participants represent, for example through a communication strategy.

5. The facilitator or project team should remain alert when the direction or scope of the dialogue requires other actors to be included in the process, in order to avoid decisions being taken that exceed the group's mandate.

WAGENINGEN
UNIVERSITY & RESEARCH

The MSP Guide: How to design and facilitate multi-stakeholder partnerships
Get the MSP Guide and all 60 tools at www.mspguide.org
www.wageningenur.nl/cdi

Learn more

This description is based on:

Bettye Pruitt and Philip Thomas (2007) Democratic Dialogue: A Handbook for Practitioners. Washington, DC: CIDA, International IDEA, the GS/OAS and UNDP. Page 131-133. http://tinyurl.com/nv8cafr

Gradients of Agreement: Kaner, Sam, Lenny Lind, Catherine Toldi, Sarah Fisk and Duane Berger (2014, third edition) Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Page 333-373. Also see: http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/gradients_of_agreement_can_help_move_groups_forward