



Foreign, Commonwealth
& Development Office

COAST Evidence Review 2

Multi-stakeholder partnerships in coastal resource management

This brief presents key findings on the barriers and enablers to effectively balancing stakeholder needs and priorities in multi-stakeholder partnerships (MSPs) for effective and equitable coastal resource management (CRM). It drawn from an evidence review conducted by COAST's MEL Services team, a structured analysis of 69 sources, primarily academic and some grey literature. Findings have been shared with the COAST programme to support implementing partners in designing, facilitating and sustaining inclusive partnerships.

About the Climate and Ocean Adaptation and Sustainable Transition programme (COAST)

Funded through the UK's International Climate Finance, COAST is a multi-year programme under the UK government Blue Planet Fund.

COAST aims to strengthen and sustain adaptive capacities, climate resilience and prosperity for vulnerable coastal communities through the equitable and sustainable management of coastal resources in selected low- and middle-income countries.



FINDING 1

Strong partnership foundations built on shared vision and values, strong leadership and inclusive practices, are essential for balancing stakeholder priorities

The evidence shows that MSPs are more likely to balance stakeholder needs effectively when they are built on strong foundations. These include inclusive stakeholder representation, a clear understanding of the partnership's value, shared or compatible visions, and capable leadership. Meaningful inclusion of all relevant stakeholders, particularly coastal communities, is a critical enabler. When key actors are excluded, or when participation is tokenistic, partnerships struggle to achieve equitable and sustainable outcomes. Community exclusion has been linked to reduced legitimacy, weak buy-in, and poor long-term effectiveness.

Balancing priorities is also enabled when partners understand the benefits of participation and see clear value-add in collaboration. Partnerships that align community interests, government mandates and private sector incentives are more likely to sustain engagement. Conversely, when value is unclear or unevenly distributed, participation declines and power imbalances intensify. Leadership and facilitation capacity play a central role in establishing and maintaining these foundations – effective leaders create neutral spaces, support dialogue, promote shared understanding and values, and facilitate shared ownership of processes and outcomes.

What this means in practice: Practitioners should invest early in stakeholder mapping, inclusive engagement processes, shared problem analysis and skilled facilitation. Partnerships should be designed to reflect community priorities and demonstrate clear value for all participants.

FINDING 2

Implicit and explicit power dynamics strongly shape whose priorities are heard and addressed but can be mitigated through deliberate facilitation

Power relations are central to how stakeholder needs are negotiated within MSPs. Stakeholders enter partnerships with different levels of influence based on wealth, status, political connections, knowledge and communication skills. These inequalities can result in the dominance of more powerful actors and the marginalisation of local communities. Power operates in explicit and implicit forms, including through social norms, cultural hierarchies and institutional practices.

The evidence shows that power imbalances can be mitigated through deliberate facilitation, support for community organisation, and strengthening of social capital. External actors, including NGOs, can play an important role in supporting marginalised stakeholders to build agency and influence..

What this means for practice: Partnership facilitators should analyse power relations and actively support less powerful stakeholders to participate meaningfully. This includes strengthening community organisations, creating safe spaces for dialogue, and ensuring decision-making processes do not privilege dominant actors. Associations are another way to ensure the less dominant stakeholders are heard.



FINDING 3

Trust-building, transparent communication and accountability mechanisms underpin effective collaboration

Trust and transparency are critical enablers for balancing stakeholder priorities. Where trust is weak, conflicts are more likely and collaboration becomes fragile. Transparent communication, inclusive decision-making and recognition of cultural norms help build mutual confidence. The timing and form of trust-building activities matter as different cultures build trust in different ways. For example, in some contexts, early formalisation through contracts can undermine relationship-building and investing in joint activities, shared learning and vision-setting before formal agreements can strengthen partnerships.

Accountability and commitment are also essential. Weak accountability mechanisms allow powerful actors to dominate and undermine equitable outcomes. Strong commitment, driven by shared motivation and long-term relationships, supports cooperation and sustained engagement. The literature highlights that accountability is strengthened through clear roles, transparent reporting, and mechanisms that enable stakeholders to hold each other to account.

What this means in practice: MSPs should prioritise transparent communication, culturally appropriate trust-building processes, and clear accountability arrangements. Long-term relationship-building should be treated as a core programme activity rather than an informal by-product.

FINDING 4

Governance structures and access rights shape equity and participation

Governance and operational arrangements strongly influence how stakeholder needs are balanced. Supportive legal and institutional frameworks can protect marginalised groups, regulate powerful actors, and create a level playing field. Strong government regulation of community rights, for example, provide legal protection. Whilst fragmented or weak frameworks undermine equity through poor enforcement, regulatory loopholes and unclear responsibilities.

Access rights, such as territorial use rights and preferential access areas, are particularly important for distributional equity. These mechanisms help secure livelihoods and protect small-scale users from displacement by larger actors. Voluntary frameworks and national strategies, such as National Adaptation Plans, can also provide shared visions that align stakeholder priorities, even where legal enforcement is limited. However, their effectiveness depends on political commitment and local ownership.

What this means in practice: Implementers should work within and strengthen existing governance frameworks, support legal recognition of community rights, and ensure financing arrangements do not reinforce power imbalances.



FINDING 5

Knowledge, learning and communication enable stakeholders to articulate and negotiate priorities

Access to knowledge and opportunities for learning are critical for effective participation in MSPs. Clear, accessible and co-designed communication helps stakeholders understand issues, express priorities and engage in decision-making. Inequitable access to information reinforces power imbalances. Physical, technological and educational barriers often prevent marginalised groups from accessing data on ecosystems, markets and climate risks, limiting their influence.

The review highlights the importance of recognising local, contextual and Indigenous knowledge alongside scientific evidence. Excluding these knowledge systems undermines legitimacy and weakens mutual understanding. Participatory monitoring, joint learning processes and co-production of knowledge strengthen shared understanding and support adaptive management. However, limited monitoring capacity remains a persistent barrier in many contexts.

What this means in practice: Partnerships should invest in accessible communication, participatory learning and recognition of diverse knowledge systems. Monitoring and knowledge generation should be co-designed with communities and linked to decision-making.

Conclusion

The evidence shows that balancing stakeholder needs in MSPs for CRM is inherently complex and shaped by a range of technical and political factors. Effective MSPs do not emerge automatically but require sustained investment in inclusion, facilitation, governance and learning. Strong foundations, attention to power dynamics, trust-building, supportive governance structures and equitable access to knowledge are all necessary conditions for inclusive and effective partnerships. Without these, MSPs risk reinforcing inequalities and undermining long-term sustainability.

The [full evidence review](#) is available for more detail on the evidence behind the brief.



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