

Stakeholder engagement for the development and implementation of National Restoration Plans

Key recommendations across ecosystem types



Background and objectives

The European Union (EU) Nature Restoration Regulation (NRR) mandates each Member State (MS) to develop a draft National Restoration Plan (NRP) by September 2026, outlining how it will meet restoration targets. A critical component of this process is **broad-based stakeholder engagement throughout all preparation phases**.

Research conducted by four large Horizon 2020 Green Deal restoration projects across various European ecosystems offers guidance on how to activate stakeholder engagement for the successful delivery of NRR targets and provides concrete examples and tools to support this process (see links at the end of the document for resources covering the approaches and methods discussed in the brief).

Research recommendations

Stakeholder mapping and understanding stakeholder perspectives and needs

Effective design and implementation of restoration actions begin with the identification of all relevant stakeholders, i.e. of all those that can affect, contribute to, or be positively or negatively affected by restoration actions. It is also crucial to gain an in-depth understanding of the needs, values and socioeconomic contexts of all stakeholders, among them local communities and the often 'silent' broader public. This includes identifying the power dynamics and any (potential) conflicts among them.

Stakeholder mapping across individuals, groups, organisations, and sectors is a powerful tool to ensure an inclusive approach that captures vulnerable actors and those who may otherwise remain overlooked or uninformed.

Mapping of social media engagement around restoration plans and initiatives is particularly useful for identifying unexpected and overlooked groups, social views and citizen involvement.

Gaining an understanding of how community and stakeholder needs can be met by the environmental, socioeconomic and cultural benefits of restoration is a key

starting point for ensuring buy-in. If community and public concerns are not recognised and tackled from the start, resistance by local residents and politically active citizens can potentially hinder future NRP actions.

Conversations with key informants – individuals with detailed knowledge on local land use – is a good first step in understanding attitudes towards restoration actions in directly affected communities.

Targeted surveys of public perceptions on restoration can bring helpful insights on where citizens stand on restoration and why.

From consultation to collaboration: ensuring meaningful engagement

Stakeholder engagement goes beyond information provision and consultation. It involves meaningful participation in decision-making. This is less about finding consensus than ensuring that all views are considered, valuable input is taken on board, and expectations are managed. Stakeholder engagement also offers the opportunity to create new partnerships and collaborations, which in turn can unlock new pathways for restoration efforts and funding.

Trust and a sense of ownership are crucial for long-term stakeholder support. True listening, open discussions, and transparency about how input will be incorporated are vital for establishing trust and ownership. This requires the building of relations over time and continuously updating all stakeholders about the restoration activities. At the same time, to avoid stakeholder fatigue and to enable people to make real contributions, engagement activities need to have a clear purpose and to be concise and tailored to those involved.

Effective approaches for deep and ongoing engagement include holding regular workshops, developing local implementation boards, using citizen

science, implementing site visits, and forming inclusive and interdisciplinary communities of practice for regular interactions and learning. Involving stakeholders in decision-making by using Participatory Multi-Criteria Analysis (PMCA) can bolster the practical relevance of decisions by directly incorporating the values and preferences of those affected. Using a justice framework can help address social inequality issues and work towards a fair distribution of the costs and benefits of restoration initiatives.

Monitoring stakeholder engagement supports ensuring that no one is disenfranchised and identifies ways of improving the process.



Interactive Pilot session during a governance workshop at the REST-COAST annual meeting in Gdansk (Poland), September 2023. Photo © REST-COAST.



SUPERB stakeholder engagement workshop in Thy (Denmark), March 2024. Photo © Gesche Schifferdecker, European Forest Institute.



Field trip with students from Ballinamore Community School in Cuilcagh-Anierin Uplands SAC (Ireland). Photo © WaterLANDS.

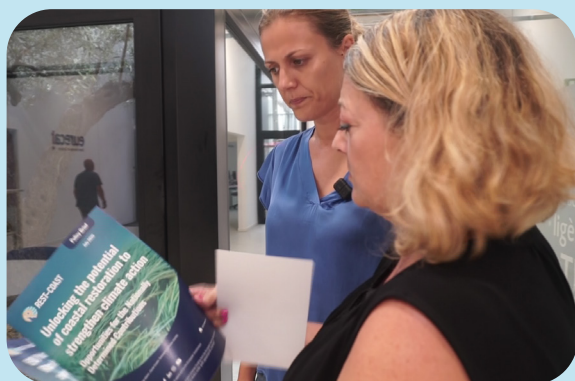
Building capacity in stakeholder engagement

It is important to build stakeholder engagement capacities at all levels, and particularly for those leading the implementation as the importance of stakeholder engagement is often not well understood and appreciated at local levels, where NRR actions need to be realised.

Involving social scientists and stakeholder engagement experts in the design, implementation and monitoring of the NRPs and working in multidisciplinary teams can facilitate constructive societal participation in decision-making. Their support is likely to be much needed, as bringing stakeholders together and effectively

designing strategies tailored to specific groups requires professional expertise.

It is equally important to ensure adequate time, funding, and staffing, as stakeholder engagement requires sustained resourcing to be meaningful and inclusive.



Sharing REST-COAST policy briefs with local authorities at Ebro Delta (Spain). Photo © IUCN/Jorge Astorquia for REST-COAST.



High-level policy event 'Supporting National Restoration Plan Development', 10 March 2025 in Brussels (Belgium), organised by the four EU Horizon 2020 Green Deal 'Restoration Cluster' projects. Photo © Rina Tsubaki, European Forest Institute.

Building support through positive messaging and targeted communication

Opposition to restoration often stems from limited understanding of the synergies that can arise between restoration and long-term economic development, business opportunities, and ecosystem services such as water management and wildfire control.

Communication campaigns and engagement activities with clear, positive messages on the economic and social benefits of the ecosystem, while also being transparent about potential trade-offs are essential for fostering stakeholder and public support for NRP actions and maintaining trust.

Highlighting concrete cases of win-win examples as a starting point for outreach and discussion is recommended. Involving scientists in engagement and communication activities can help strengthen the positive narrative and the overall dialogue. In addition, it is important that the language of these activities is tailored to specific stakeholder groups.

Effective conflict resolution and stakeholder empowerment

Conflicts around restoration are not uncommon. They need to be tackled early and openly and may only be effectively addressed if stakeholders feel they have a real say in decision-making. This may include compromising on or adapting some measures considered desirable from a restoration perspective, at least until such stakeholders are reassured.

Professional facilitation of engagement by neutral, trained moderators is crucial especially when tensions are expected. In this way stakeholders may feel heard, and trust is built.

Approaches such as Collaborative Learning workshops – geared at conflict resolution – where a mutual understanding of different positions is developed, can help alleviate tensions and be a first step towards reaching a solution.

Addressing existing power dynamics and empowering stakeholders who have previously been marginalised in decision-making is also key for achieving social justice in restoration efforts, creating broad-based social benefits, and gaining the societal support that is fundamental for the long-term success of the NRPs.

This policy and practice brief was written by the 'Restoration Cluster', a collaborative initiative of four major EU Horizon 2020 research and innovation project funded under the Green Deal and focusing on ecosystem restoration: MERLIN (restoration of freshwater-related ecosystems in a landscape context), REST-COAST (restoration of coastal ecosystems), SUPERB (forest and forest landscape restoration) and WaterLANDS (restoration of wetlands), with particular support by Prospex Institute and European Forest Institute.

Authors: SUPERB

Nina Horstmann¹, Marcel Hunziker², Yulia Poskakukhina¹, Elisabeth Schatzdorfer³

MERLIN

Kirsty Blackstock⁴, Alhassan Ibrahim⁴

REST-COAST

Pilar Marín⁵, Laura Puértolas⁶, Agustín Sánchez-Arcilla⁷, Iván Cáceres Rabionet⁷, Tommaso Demozzi⁵

WaterLANDS

Craig Bullock⁸, Emma E. Hart⁸

Affiliations:

- 1 Prospex Institute
- 2 Swiss Federal Institute for Forest, Snow and Landscape Research WSL
- 3 European Forest Institute
- 4 James Hutton Institute
- 5 IUCN
- 6 Albirem
- 7 Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya – BarcelonaTech
- 8 University College Dublin

Citation:

Horstmann, N., Hunziker, M., Poskakukhina, Y., Schatzdorfer, E., Blackstock, K., Ibrahim, A., Marín, P., Puértolas, L., Sánchez-Arcilla, A., Cáceres Rabionet, I., Demozzi, T., Bullock, C., Hart, E. (2025): Stakeholder Engagement for the development and implementation of National Restoration Plans. Policy and practice brief.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36333/rs14>



SUPERB
Upscaling Forest Restoration

MERLIN



REST-COAST



WaterLANDS



These projects have received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 101036849, 101036337, 101037097 and 101036484.



List of examples and tools

Stakeholder mapping / engagement / conflict resolution guidance and tools

[Assessment of socioeconomic options](#) (WaterLANDS). This resource contains the **Participatory Multi-Criteria Analysis** (PMCA) method, which involves engaging stakeholders in a structured decision-making process, ensuring that their preferences and values are considered when evaluating the alternatives.

[Engagement monitoring and tracking tool](#) (MERLIN). Template for **tracking stakeholder participation** over time using anonymous identifiers. Helps maintain consistent records of workshops, meetings, and direct contacts for monitoring and reporting.

[Forest Knowledge Gateway](#) (SUPERB). An online, easily searchable knowledge repository hosting many resources developed by SUPERB and topically related projects and initiatives. It includes tools and advice on **stakeholder mapping, engagement, and conflict resolution**, and approachable research conclusions on societal attitudes towards restoration.

[Forest Storytelling and Engagement for Change – A toolkit for effective stakeholder engagement and communication](#) (SUPERB). Hands-on advice on the topic, including tools for **stakeholder mapping, social media mapping**, and developing stories for transformative engagement.

[Guidelines for Conducting Surveys](#) (SUPERB). Provides practical advice for **designing household and online surveys** on public views of forests and restoration. Includes links to ready-to-use multilingual questionnaires and key insights to generate high-quality data for evidence-based decision-making and public engagement.

[Guidelines for Stakeholder Mapping and Establishing Stakeholder Board in Mainstreaming Restoration in MERLIN](#) (MERLIN). Step-by-step guidance on how to **map stakeholders** and **form stakeholder boards**. Explains methods for identifying roles, interests, and influence. Supported by ready-to-use templates.

[Pilot Site Governance Briefs](#) (REST-COAST). Offer a detailed evaluation of the governance frameworks across the project's Pilot Sites. Assess the status and progress toward transformative governance using standardized metrics and visual tools, including **stakeholder mapping** to identify key actors and their roles in the restoration process.

[Report on Deliberative Processes and Stakeholder Values](#) (WaterLANDS). Explains the process of **deliberation** and how it is being applied in the project Action Sites. Deliberation is a discussion with stakeholders of issues such as the environmental and social context, use and knowledge of a location and the values that people attach to certain attributes/activities. It allows for the participants to better understand the location and of one another's awareness, positions, needs and values.

[Stakeholder mapping tool](#) (MERLIN). Template for **recording and analysing stakeholders** across scales, interests, and influence.

[The Collaborative Learning Approach – Guidelines for Conflict Management in Forest Restoration](#) (SUPERB). Provides practical guidelines for organising a **Collaborative Learning** workshop with diverse **stakeholders** to address **conflicts** related to forest restoration.

Strategies for stakeholder engagement and inclusive governance

[Roadmap for governance transformation strategy and criteria for effective restoration programmes at the Pilots](#) (REST-COAST). Outlines a strategic framework and site-specific roadmaps to guide project Pilot Sites toward transformative governance for large-scale coastal restoration, integrating socio-economic, policy, and **stakeholder dimensions** in alignment with EU environmental goals.

[Strategy for community engagement at the Action Sites](#) (WaterLANDS). Provides an overview of the context and strategies for **stakeholder engagement** at the six

WaterLANDS Action Sites, with additional context and support from the WaterLANDS Knowledge Sites.

[Transformative stakeholder engagement: a strategy for the SUPERB demonstration areas](#) (SUPERB). Outlines the project's **transformative stakeholder engagement** vision and **strategy** in its demo areas. Presents practical engagement formats and a framework for analysing and addressing engagement **enablers** and **challenges**.

Analysis of sectoral perspectives and governance challenges/solutions

[Focus Sectoral Strategies for mainstreaming freshwater restoration](#) (MERLIN). Strategies for **six economic sectors** (agriculture, hydropower, insurance, navigation, peat extraction, and water supply & sanitation) for mainstreaming nature-based solutions. Useful for **understanding the underlying rationale**, methodology, and strategic framework to support sectoral actors in advancing restoration.

[Mainstreaming aquatic restoration using Nature-based Solutions](#) (MERLIN). Summarises experiences of **engaging six economic sectors** – agriculture, hydropower, insurance, navigation, peat extraction, and water supply & sanitation. Highlights sectoral perceptions, barriers, and opportunities for freshwater restoration. Useful for **anticipating conflicts** and **aligning sector interests**.

[Report mapping the governance status quo in pilot sites](#) (REST-COAST). Provides an overview of the governance status quo across the nine Pilot Sites at the start of the project. Serves as a baseline to support future planning, **facilitate dialogue**, and guide the development of each Pilot Site throughout the project's implementation.

[Recommendations from Core and Fellow Pilots as a key management element for present/future restoration actions](#) (REST-COAST). Provides advice on strengthening the governance criteria for the successful implementation of restoration programmes at each project Pilot Site. Provides guidance on effective natural resource management and assesses the possible outcomes of **different governance approaches**.

Just transformation

[Just Transformation – Embedding stakeholder engagement to mainstream nature-based solutions in freshwater ecosystems](#) (MERLIN). Presents lessons from 19 freshwater restoration sites, focusing on how **justice principles of representation, procedure, and distribution** play out in practice. Offers practical insights for local implementers on challenges and opportunities when engaging communities, landowners, and other local stakeholders.

[Just Transformations: Sectoral Stakeholder Engagement, Processes and Perceptions of Mainstreaming Nature-based Solutions](#) (MERLIN). Summarises engagement with six **key economic sectors** and how **justice principles** of representation, procedure and distribution were manifested. Helps understand sector-specific priorities, navigate trade-offs, and encourage engagement to ensure that restoration initiatives are just. Describes the project's experience with building **Communities of Practice (CoPs)**.