



DESIGNING MULTI STAKEHOLDER EVENTS

Originally developed by: [FIT4FOOD2030](#)

OBJECTIVE

To design inclusive and engaging multi-stakeholder events

TARGET AUDIENCE

Intermediaries in food system transformation

TIME NEEDED

Applying the content of this document can take several hours, to several months or years

LIST OF MATERIALS

Depending on activities of the event but post-its, a flip over and pens are most often used

CONTACT PERSON

Athena institute, VU Amsterdam
secretariaat.athena.beta@vu.nl



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QUICK OVERVIEW

This tool provides guidance for designing multi-stakeholder events that foster meaningful dialogue, knowledge exchange, and co-creation in the context of food system transformation. It offers practical insights on structuring events that align with core principles such as inclusivity, reflexivity, and openness. By moving beyond traditional event formats, the tool helps facilitators create interactive, engaging, and purpose-driven experiences that effectively bring diverse stakeholders together. The goal is to enhance collaboration, decision-making, and long-term engagement for impactful food system change.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

- Understand the key principles of multi-stakeholder event design to foster collaboration.
- Learn to structure engaging and inclusive events that promote dialogue and co-creation.
- Identify common challenges in multi-stakeholder engagement and ways to address them.
- Develop facilitation skills to create safe and productive discussion spaces.
- Gain insights into adapting event formats to meet different stakeholder needs.

Designing Multi-stakeholder Events

Food system transformation facilitators, policymakers, or researchers who use the inspiration material provided in this document will be supported in creating and running memorable multi-stakeholder events. These events, in turn, help establish and sustain a network, platform, or living lab that can eventually contribute to food system transformation within a specifically targeted local context.

Participants of multi-stakeholder events designed using the inspiration materials in this document will enter ‘safe spaces’ that encourage inclusive and equal knowledge exchange, co-creation, and participation in food system transformation.

This document is designed for a variety of stakeholders interested in driving food system transformation. Users may include intermediaries in food system transformation (such as science centers and food policy networks), as well as researchers and policymakers.

The targeted participants of multi-stakeholder events, for which we provide inspiration in this document, include citizens and stakeholders (in the broadest sense of the word) who are connected to the food system in a specifically targeted local context.

Principles of Event Design

When setting up and running a project, living lab or other initiative for facilitating food system transformation, all your events are ideally organized and run in line with your intentions. When your initiative commits to (for instance) responsible research and innovation (RRI), pillars such as inclusion, equality, reflexivity, openness, and/or anticipation are relevant design conditions for your events¹.

Adhering to such pillars requires event design in which multiple stakeholders are included, either by means of heterogeneity within one event or by means of a series of ‘homogeneous events’. Furthermore, your events are likely to be focused on dialogue, knowledge exchange, and/or co-creation between the multiple stakeholders.

“In the practice of stakeholder engagement or dialogue event design, many organizers of events (still) have a tendency to apply ‘old-school’ principles of event design. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the typical mistakes: a podium with an expert giving talks, and rows or groups of ‘other’ participants who (only) get the floor during (lengthy) Q&A sessions. A good base for true dialogue – let alone knowledge exchange or co-creation – is hard to find in such settings.”

¹ See, for instance, van der Meij, M. G., Broerse, J. E. W., & Kupper, F. (2017). Conceptualizing playfulness for reflection processes in responsible research and innovation contexts: a narrative literature review. *Journal of Responsible Innovation*, 4(1), 43-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23299460.2017.1326258>



Figure 1: Drawing of a 'dialogue' event set-up in practice (adopted from Davies, 2011)

	% of responses	K's alpha
Drew a traditional classroom/auditorium	92	1.00
Scheduled an expert presentation	87	.75
Scheduled question or discussion period	83	1.00
Drew seating for 40 or more participants**	77	.89
Scheduled between 45 and 75 minutes of questions/discussion*	46	.77
Scheduled between 0 and 44 minutes of questions/discussion*	32	.77
Scheduled between 76 and 150 minutes of questions/discussion*	22	.77
Drew seating for between 21 and 40 participants*	16	.89
Drew tables for participants to face each other	14	1.00
Drew seating for 20 participants or less*	11	.89
Scheduled an opportunity to vote	9	.94
Expressed a negative sentiment in drawing or schedule	3	1.00
Scheduled an opportunity for one-on-one discussions	3	.82

*Measured as part of the same variable.

**Measured as part of the same variable.

Figure 2: Analysis of citizen-drawings about public engagement events (adopted from Besley, 2010)

Once you decide to work on multi-stakeholder food system transformation by means of events that facilitate true dialogue, knowledge exchange, and co-creation, event designs are more likely to look like the setup in Figure 3. This document provides inspiration materials to do so.



Figure 3: Event set-up suitable for dialogue, knowledge exchange and co-creation

Challenges of Multi-Stakeholder Events

The most commonly stressed challenge of multi-stakeholder events is the variety of ‘stakes’ that stakeholders have – the reason for calling them ‘stakeholders’ – regarding a topic that is central to an event.

With a transformative topic in mind, such as ‘changing the food system’, some stakeholders have more power to realize it; some have more interest, while others have less power or interest. Inviting and thereby including stakeholders with low(er) power and low(er) interest in the topic at stake is difficult in itself. Therefore we advise you to conduct a stakeholder analysis and categorize the identified stakeholders according to power/influence and interest (see separate tools ‘[stakeholder analysis](#)’ and ‘[stakeholder engagement plan](#)’). However, the differences in stakes between stakeholders pose the biggest challenges: this variety can inhibit maintaining a safe space for all participants.

Strong facilitation can help, and adequate event design can also play a crucial role. This document focuses primarily on the latter.

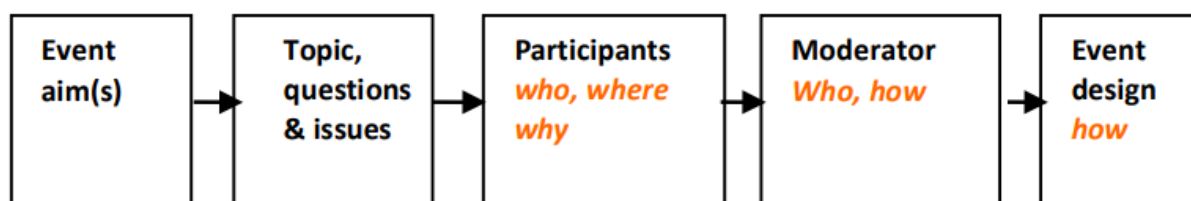


Figure 4: Components of event design (in reality not that linear)

Event Components

When running project, living lab or other initiative, you may organize multi-stakeholder events once per day, week, month, or year. Whichever event frequency you adopt, the design of such events remains largely the same. Figure 1 shows several components of designing multi-stakeholder sessions, although the process is not as linear as the figure suggests.

The aims of a multi-stakeholder event may vary, from relationship building, knowledge exchange, and co-creation to attitude or behavioural change, or a combination thereof. The event topic may be related to the current (transformative) actions you want to take in your initiative (e.g., ‘developing visions for food waste elimination’) or a broader theme (e.g., ‘towards a future-proof food system’).

The topic choice may come with a list of questions or issues to cover during the event. To keep participants focused, we recommend covering each question or issue sequentially rather than all at once in a logically ordered series of sessions.

The stakeholder list you invite to participate in your events depends on the event's objective and any specific conditions required for its success. For example, if 'representativeness' is a key condition for the multi-stakeholder event, the following types of representation can be considered:

- Demographic representation
- Stakeholder representation (Who is affecting, involved, or affected?)
- Cognitive representation (Diversity of ideas)

For each participant you invite, it is useful to consider and track the reasons behind their inclusion. Based on the final participant list, a decision can be made regarding the event location and format (online or offline).

Crucial to event design is the facilitation strategy you apply. The idea of a 'free dialogue' does not mean that the dialogue should be unstructured. On the contrary! Ideally, the facilitator (or facilitation team) ensures that the event design is highly structured yet incorporates built-in flexibility. The following section elaborates on this balance between structure and flexibility in event design.

Design Principles for an Event Setup

Ideally, multi-stakeholder event designs are highly structured yet flexible, follow a well-thought-out sequence of exercises, and apply conditions to ensure a safe environment for exchange. This section covers these aspects.

Structuring of multi-stakeholder events can be achieved, amongst others, by:

- Allocating and adhering to precise durations for exercises.
- Using prepared materials such as canvases or cards to facilitate participant discussions.
- Providing clear instructions from a facilitator.

For the latter, we recommend scripting and piloting all exercises before an event. Further structuring elements to apply during events include:

- The 'listen-summarize-clarify' method ("So you said ____, is that right? And what does it mean to ____?").
- Note-taking using keywords (on post-its, a flipchart, or a big screen).

When creating a logical even sequence, it can be useful to distinguish between diverging, converging and clustering (see Figure 5).

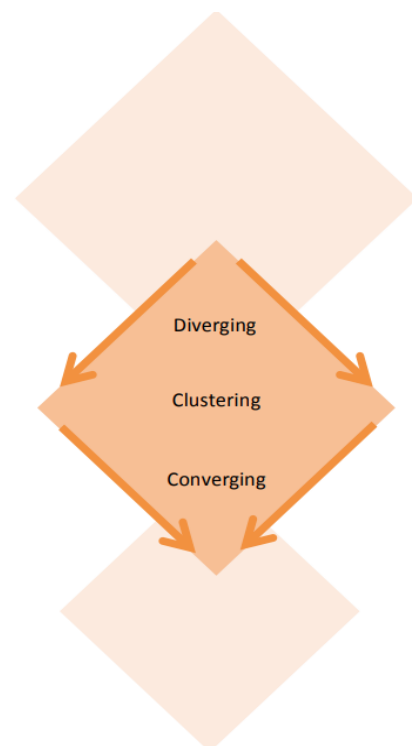


Figure 5: Visualization of diverging, clustering and converging

Some events cover all of these elements, while others focus on only one:

- **Diverging:** Focuses on idea generation, where diversity and quantity over quality are key. Exercises for diverging are mostly creative, such as:
 - Free mind-mapping or brainstorming (post-its).
 - Flow diagrams, drawing, association, or role-play (e.g., thinking from the perspective of a superhero: *What would they do?*).
- **Converging:** Involves selecting or prioritizing ideas and elaborating on them to a desired level of detail or quality. Common tools include:
 - Ranking: Assigning points to each alternative idea.
 - Timelines: Determining what should be addressed first to enable the next step.
 - Matrices: Example: *Needed now* vs. *needed later* and *Currently represented* vs. *currently underrepresented* (see Figure 6).
- **Clustering:** A step between diverging and converging, where generated ideas are sorted for uptake in the converging phase. Common clustering exercises include:
 - Post-it re-clustering: Grouping related ideas and assigning themes or names.
 - Mind mapping: Creating a hierarchy of concepts (*What belongs where?*).
 - Timelines: Establishing a step-by-step process for execution.

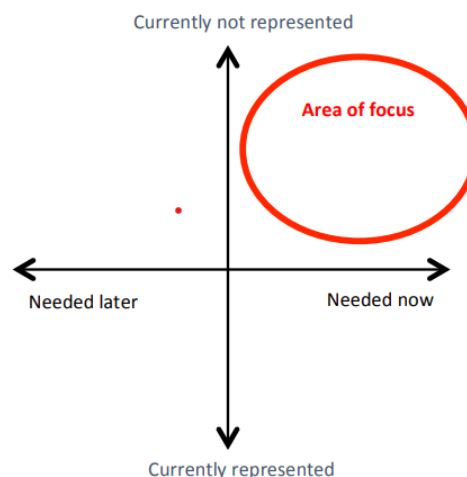


Figure 6: Example matrix for converging

When designing an event, it is important to identify which steps involve diverging, clustering, or converging, and to align exercises accordingly. We recommend maintaining the sequence of diverging → clustering → converging when covering all these steps in one event or throughout various exercises.

After all, multiple ‘diamonds’—exercises containing both diverging and converging elements—may build upon one another (see Figure 5). In such cases, earlier exercises allow broader brainstorming, while later exercises focus on refining ideas within stronger boundary conditions. In addition to structure, multi-stakeholder events should incorporate a high degree of flexibility. This involves:

- Responding to the needs of participants at each event stage.
- Allowing time between exercises for spontaneous discussions and interactions.

Shaping Event Conditions

When participants engage in creative thinking—mostly in diverging exercises—a balance should be sought between competitive and complementary interaction. In such cases, applying event rules can be a solution. Commonly applied event rules include:

- One conversation at a time; focus on one topic.
- Try to avoid interrupting one another.
- Ideas belong to everyone (co-creation).
- This session is not about who you are, but about what you think.
- Everything is okay and allowed; wild ideas are encouraged.
- Postpone judgments (focus on the present moment).
- Try to build on each other's ideas.
- Quantity is more important than quality at this stage.

An often overlooked aspect of multi-stakeholder event design is the need to explicitly build in elements that create a safe and trustworthy environment where conversations flow freely. To safeguard this, we recommend the following:

- Choose a background noise-free environment (soft, absorbing materials on walls and ceilings; use mute by default in online meetings!).
- Open structure with enough space to talk and walk.
- (Sub-)Group sizes of 5–12 participants maximum.
- No hierarchy (round seating, no table heads, no podium).
- Maximum event duration: 2–3 hours.

Atmosphere

- Comfortable furniture.
- Uplifting music upon arrival.
- Inspiration materials to spark creativity.

Activities

- Warm-up and get-to-know-each-other exercises.
- Positive, energetic tone throughout.
- Alternation between individual, small-group, and plenary exchanges.
- Constructive and creative exercises to encourage engagement.

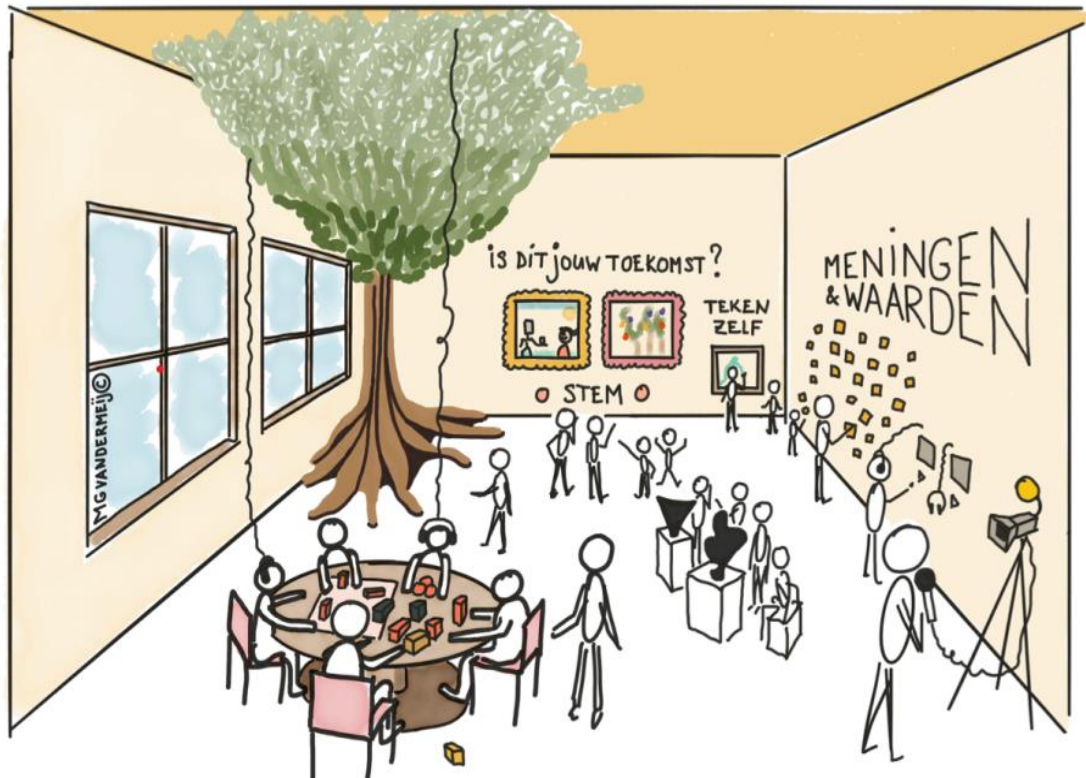


Figure 7: Artist impression of a creative and safe space for multi-stakeholder interactions (by MG van der Meij).