

# Effective Stakeholder Engagement to Operationalise the WEFE Nexus

## Insights from European & African Nexus Dialogues

### ABSTRACT

This policy brief offers **recommendations for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners** to improve stakeholder engagement in the process of **implementing the Water-Food-Energy-Ecosystems (WEFE) Nexus in river basins**. It reflects on so-called **Nexus Dialogues** carried out across eight case studies within the four-year Horizon 2020 project GoNEXUS. Evidence on how to effectively conduct Nexus Dialogues in river basins, especially in large projects with multiple case studies, is limited and has motivated this policy brief.

### KEY MESSAGES



Rather than being an end in itself, the WEFE Nexus serves as a valuable — though not exclusive — **framework for implementing cross-sectoral approaches to ensure sustainable water management**.



**Substantial donor investments in recent years have propelled WEFE Nexus initiatives** across the globe, with the EU being one of the largest donors.



**Stakeholder engagement through Dialogues** is at the core of successfully operationalising the WEFE Nexus — and the skills of engagement dictate the quality of their outcomes.



Dialogues serve multiple purposes, with the shared goal of **empowering their participants to make better natural resource management decisions**.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Outcomes & Impact

- **Connect Dialogues to existing processes, events or working groups** to maximise participation and reduce costs, whilst ensuring they remain a priority focus.
- **Ensure that Nexus research actively contributes to policy and planning processes** that stakeholders have collectively agreed upon.
- **Go the extra mile to involve high-level decision-makers and private-sector leaders** responsible for activities that significantly impact the basin's natural resources.
- **Involve local researchers systematically** — building their capacity for future Nexus research must be a top priority.

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## Focus & Approach

- **Address a concrete management or policy challenge** highly relevant to stakeholders and realistically achievable through the Dialogues.
- **Plan carefully and allow for buffers**, especially when relying on complex modelling, to avoid disruptions to the Dialogue process.
- **Prioritise in-person Dialogues** that foster higher engagement, better networking opportunities, and more fruitful discussions than virtual events.

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## Stakeholder Selection & Participation

- Adopt a **multi-sector approach** that integrates local, sub-basin, and basin scales and links between them.
- Determine a group size **balancing diverse stakeholders with productive discussions and tight budgets**.
- **Ensure continuity of the process** by minimising gaps between Dialogues and addressing participant turnover.
- **Commit to having a local convenor and leading research institutes** who support the entire process.

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## Knowledge Integration & Co-creation

- Tailor engagement approaches to **address stakeholders' varying levels of expertise** and ensure inclusivity.
- Actively **involve stakeholders as co-creators of knowledge**, especially in Africa where neo-colonial practices in academia are still widespread.
- **Assess and build on existing policies, initiatives and knowledge** to maximise the outcomes for participants and the dialogues.

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## Communication & Engagement Strategies

- **Focus communication on the needs and possible gains** of often highly sought-after stakeholders to ensure their commitment and engagement.
- **Engage stakeholders early and maintain consistent communication** — prolonged silence can kill momentum and undermine participation.
- **Proactively manage expectations** by communicating and addressing the limitations, changes and unmet targets.
- **Use creative tools and methods to convey complex concepts and models**, ideally involving communication experts.

# THE ROLE OF NEXUS DIALOGUES

The Nexus Dialogues are a central vehicle to operationalise the WEFE Nexus. In the GoNEXUS project, **three Dialogues were conducted** for each case study, each targeting specific objectives: the first identified **Nexus challenges**, the second developed **solutions and scenarios**, and the third validated **modelling outcomes**. These two-way discussions enabled research teams to understand the local context of each river basin, grounded Nexus assessments in real-world conditions, and provide stakeholders and the convenors with opportunities to learn. In GoNEXUS, these sessions varied in format — physical, online, and hybrid — with 15 to 30 participants, lasting from half a day to two days. By addressing different Nexus challenges and scales, **the Dialogues facilitated comprehensive WEFE Nexus assessments** and supported the integration of their outcomes into **water resource decision-making**.



## EU SUPPORT FOR NEXUS DIALOGUES



Several of the EU's international water-relevant strategies endorse the WEFE Nexus as an important tool for water management, including [the Council Conclusions on Water in the EU's External Action](#) and [the Council Conclusions on Water Diplomacy](#). This led to EU support of numerous projects aiming to align transboundary water management with WEFE Nexus thinking. The Dialogues in GoNEXUS and other EU-funded research projects focus mainly on conducting Nexus assessments to identify challenges and suitable solutions. [The Nexus Regional Dialogues \(NRD\) Programme \(2016-2023\)](#), which aimed to institutionalise the approach in governance structures and investment decisions, is one of the most significant examples. The NRD programme carried out numerous workshops, projects and Nexus assessments, including policy and investment dialogues. It also developed guidelines, studies, policy briefs, and training materials. In addition, the EU supports other Nexus Dialogue formats, for example in the context of WEFE Nexus Assessments carried out by the EU's Joint Research Centre in different African river basins.

# CHALLENGES, OPPORTUNITIES & RECOMMENDATIONS



## OUTCOMES & IMPACT

Projects like GoNEXUS must empower stakeholders to take ownership of Nexus research, build local capacity, and align activities with ongoing policy processes to ensure an effective science-policy-practice transfer.

### > **The WEFE Nexus is not an end goal, but a tool for promoting more sustainable water resources management.**

Operationalising WEFE Nexus activities should avoid creating parallel or stand-alone Nexus strategies or governance structures and instead focus on strengthening existing ones. This applies for the Nexus Dialogues as well, which could, for example, take place within or next to existing working or expert groups of River Basin Organisations (RBOs). Moreover, those aiming to operationalise the WEFE Nexus must recognise it as a valuable tool for fostering cross-sectoral approaches to sustainable water management, but not the only one. Its relevance—and whether it is the best choice among existing tools—often depends on the specific context. That is why the WEFE Nexus activities are less prevalent in Asia than in Africa due to differing regional priorities or governance structures. Furthermore, initiatives that are not explicitly labelled as WEFE Nexus can still be cross-sectoral and effective in addressing interconnected challenges.

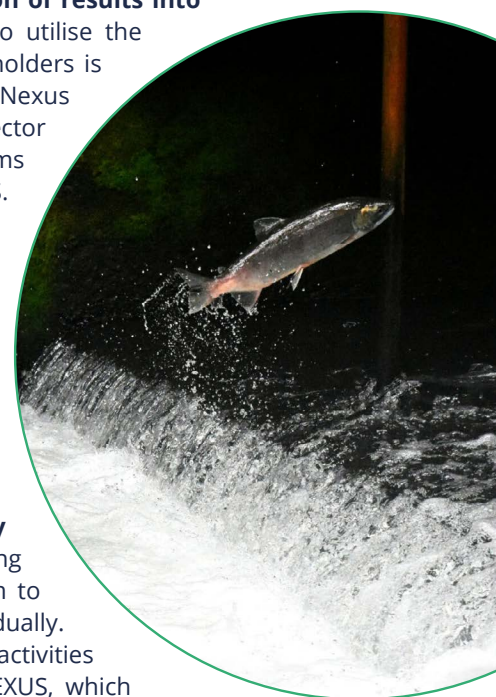
### > **Aligning Nexus research projects with basin-wide and regional planning and policy processes is vital for impactful Dialogues.**

Developing model-based Nexus assessments was central in GoNEXUS, but the project placed less emphasis on how results are integrated into real-world water resource decision-making. WEFE Nexus assessments simulating scenarios can meaningfully inform decision-making and strengthen the often weak cross-sectoral links in basin-wide management plans or national climate strategies — that is, their main goal. Conversely, poorly designed Nexus projects that are disconnected from ongoing policy or planning processes are unlikely to see their results adopted in practice. In the Zambezi Case Study, the GoNEXUS team geared the modelling exercises and Dialogues towards refining sectoral development scenarios outlined in the Strategic Plan 2018-2040, the key policy guiding water resources development in the basin, following a wish by the Zambezi Watercourse Commission (ZAMCOM). Identifying a specific challenge for the Nexus assessments to focus on, in collaboration with stakeholders, is a necessary first step. A thorough review of existing policies, political developments, and ongoing activities should inform this process, which can also benefit from including policy experts in case study teams or assigning a dedicated work package.

### > **Stakeholder engagement is central to the Nexus Dialogues, and the integration of results into practice depends on the diversity, quality and engagement of participants.**

To utilise the Nexus assessments to their full potential, attendance by a broad spectrum of stakeholders is instrumental. While academics or environmental NGOs may readily participate in Nexus Dialogues, securing high-level decision-makers from relevant ministries and private-sector leaders — such as CEOs of hydropower operators, irrigation companies, and mining firms with significant environmental impacts — remains a challenge, including in GoNEXUS. Nonetheless, it is the actions of these influential players that significantly impact water management and the basin's natural environment. Going the extra mile to commit to involving them can considerably enhance the quality of the results but requires strong local networks and additional resources for managing invitations, which should be factored into project budgets. The Danube case underscores just how challenging this issue is. Despite years of effort, the International Commission for the Protection of the Danube River (ICPDR) has consistently faced resistance from the agricultural sector, which has refused to engage in workshops similar to Nexus Dialogues.

> **Horizon projects like GoNEXUS are central to ensuring that EU funding for the WEFE Nexus, whether in Europe or Africa, translates into follow-up investments by national and local governments.** These research projects can contribute to convincing governments of the value of cross-sectoral water management and encourage them to progressively prioritise and invest in it, enabling the EU to phase out project financing gradually. To achieve this, it is crucial to empower local stakeholders to independently drive Nexus activities in the long run, such as carrying out WEFE Nexus assessments. Projects like GoNEXUS, which often prioritise the use of Dialogues for conducting Nexus assessments and gathering inputs in a one-



directional manner, should shift their focus more towards building local capacity. This includes enhancing skills such as data management and modelling, as well as supporting RBOs and other basin actors in securing follow-up funding. Examples could include training for RBOs on modelling software and infrastructures or implementing PhD sandwich programmes, enabling African researchers to align their work with the project goals and engage EU policymakers and financiers — initiatives that foster long-term local impact.



**Connect Nexus Dialogues to existing processes, events or working groups to maximise participation and reduce costs, whilst ensuring they remain a priority focus.** For instance, integrating Dialogues into pre-planned local or regional meetings — such as RBO expert or working group meetings — can reduce costs and enable a more diverse stakeholder participation. However, care must be taken to avoid the Dialogues being overshadowed by the broader event or becoming too lengthy overall for participants to remain engaged.



**Ensure that Nexus research actively contributes to policy and planning processes that stakeholders have collectively agreed upon.** Recognising that the WEFE Nexus is not an end in itself, a comprehensive analysis of existing policies, decision-making frameworks, and activities should form the starting point of Nexus assessments. Only through this approach can they effectively inform basin-wide management plans or national climate strategies, ultimately achieving meaningful real-world impact.



**Go the extra mile to involve high-level decision-makers and private-sector leaders responsible for activities that significantly impact the basin's natural resources.** While academics and NGOs commonly participate in Nexus Dialogues, project teams need to target influential actors such as high-level government officials and CEOs of hydropower, irrigation, and mining firms. Their involvement is critical for driving real change in water management but requires strong local networks, a committed local partner and allocating additional resources to secure their participation and commitment.



**Involve local researchers systematically — building their capacity for future Nexus research must be a top priority.** Instead of just providing inputs or being end-users of knowledge, local stakeholders should be empowered to run Nexus activities independently beyond the project's end, which is crucial to guarantee long-term impact. Often underfunded and understaffed, RBOs and local research institutes frequently express both interest in and a need for training to enhance their skills in areas such as data management, modelling, and funding procurement. Integrating these capacity-building efforts into research projects like GoNEXUS should be considered essential to ensure their sustainability.



## FOCUS & APPROACH

Nexus Dialogues require a narrow thematic focus, realistic objectives, and careful planning to balance available resources, depth, stakeholder engagement, and smooth execution to ensure meaningful solutions are found for the commonly defined Nexus challenges.

➤ **Nexus research projects should adopt a narrow thematic focus by limiting the number of sectors, Nexus challenges or geographic scope.** For instance, the GoNEXUS Global Dialogues concentrated on dams' impacts on freshwater fish habitats, enabling in-depth discussions with a few niche experts. In discussions prior to the Dialogues, the ICPDR emphasised the need for modelling the ecosystem component, which subsequently became the case study's focus. Conversely, adopting a broader focus that encompasses the entire WEFE Nexus can provide a comprehensive overview and promote cross-sectoral understanding. However, this approach often sacrifices depth. In large river basins, assessing the Nexus across all sectors and political-administrative levels is technically unfeasible, as models can only compute a

limited set of indicators. As a result, such a broad focus is unlikely to effectively address the specific policy or management challenges identified by stakeholders.

➤ **Setting realistic objectives and the right scope for the Dialogues is crucial.** Projects such as GoNEXUS with high ambitions, involving scenario-based modelling in eight different case studies, run the risk of overwhelming the Dialogues, which lasted between half a day and two days each. Every additional sector or scale involved implies more stakeholders who need to be invited and given a voice. Adopting a “less-is-more” approach is advisable or even necessary, focusing on fewer Nexus challenges and solutions but discussing them in greater detail with stakeholders who have sufficient room for expressing their opinions. This way, the discussions have better chances to capture the maximum of stakeholders’ interests and resonate with real-life circumstances in the basin.

➤ **Deploying scenario-based modelling in the Nexus assessments, as pursued in GoNEXUS, adds complexity to the Dialogues, requiring highly effective planning and coordination to ensure they are executed smoothly.** In GoNEXUS, the timely completion of model-based Nexus assessments presented a challenge, significantly impacting the Dialogues. In several case studies, the complex and time-intensive modelling exercises faced delays, which hindered the ability to conduct the Dialogues as scheduled and left some stakeholders frustrated by the incomplete results and unfulfilled objectives. Given the inherent complexity of the modelling exercises and the significant time required to run the models, such delays are not uncommon. To mitigate this risk of a derailed time plan, incorporating buffer time and adjusting the scope of ambition are two low-hanging fruits.

➤ **While more costly and time-consuming, in-person Dialogues tend to be more impactful and have lasting outcomes.** Some case studies observed that physical participation increased both the number of participants and their level of engagement, while brainstorming sessions fostered deeper discussions, for example, in group exercises to identify Nexus challenges on a printed map. Additionally, there was more room for networking and exchange, for example during side activities and excursions. However, travel costs can be prohibitive, whereas online formats offer greater inclusivity. The latter, though, rely on functional technology, which has been a constraint for some Dialogues. A practical solution, as recommended before, is to connect the Nexus Dialogues to events or processes where the target group meets anyway. However, care must be taken to avoid the risk of Dialogues becoming secondary to the main event or events becoming overly lengthy, as this could discourage stakeholder engagement and negatively affect outcomes.



**Address a concrete management or policy challenge highly relevant to stakeholders and realistically achievable through the Dialogues.**

A “less is more” approach that limits the number of Nexus challenges and solutions allows for deeper, more meaningful discussions that align with real-life conditions and stakeholder priorities. For example, narrowing the focus to the impacts of dams on freshwater fish habitats during the Global Dialogues allowed for in-depth engagement with niche experts. These discussions centred on how the findings could contribute to informing Red List Assessments by the International Union of Nature Conservation (IUCN).



**Prioritise in-person Dialogues that foster higher engagement, better networking opportunities,**

and more fruitful discussions than virtual events. Physical meetings, as widely acknowledged, lead to richer discussions and stronger stakeholder connections while enabling informal exchanges during coffee breaks and shared meals. A much-recommended solution is to link Nexus Dialogues to existing events where the target group already gathers, as noted earlier. However, when physical participation is impossible, well-planned and carefully facilitated hybrid formats — though requiring similar preparation time as in-person events — are the only alternative.



**Plan carefully and allow for buffers, especially when relying on complex modelling, to avoid disruptions to the Dialogue process.**

While unavoidable, delays in modelling exercises, as experienced in some GoNEXUS case studies, can hinder Dialogue timelines and stakeholder engagement. Adopting a “less-is-more” approach — again — as well as committing the consortium to adhere to timelines and building flexibility into the process, can help mitigate these challenges while maintaining stakeholder trust.

Nexus Dialogues must balance diverse stakeholder representation with logistical constraints, ensuring inclusivity, legitimacy, and continuity. A multi-level, multi-sector approach is key, supported by careful planning and strategies to manage complexity and power imbalances.

➤ **In several case studies, the Dialogues provided a valuable platform for stakeholders from diverse sectors, countries, and societal spheres to exchange ideas and build mutual understanding, thereby fostering trust** — especially in river basins with high tensions. This was particularly appreciated after the Covid-19 period, when many communities had been disconnected for years. However, cross-sectoral exchange may be institutionalised to an advanced degree in some basins while it is non-existent or even unwanted in others. The design and planning of the Dialogues need to consider these differences in institutional development and stakeholders' interests, avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach.

➤ **Adopting a multi-sector approach that combines local, sub-basin and basin-scale Dialogues ensures that all voices are heard and that outcomes are both legitimate and inclusive.**

In many river basins, water governance focuses on regional and national entities, often excluding local stakeholders who are most affected by unsustainable water management and are crucial for on-the-ground actions like conservation or subsistence farming. Consequently, their insights are overlooked, creating a disconnection between river basin-scale, national policies, local-level needs and action. Power imbalances among stakeholders, including gender disparities where decision-making is dominated by men, impede equitable participation. The Senegal and Danube case studies conducted local Dialogues alongside basin-level ones. The challenge lies not in proving the value of multi-level and diverse stakeholder representation, but in ensuring a project can manage its complexity such as effectively integrating links and results across levels and stakeholder groups.

➤ **The need for diversity and inclusivity of stakeholders easily stretches budgets and capacity.** On the one hand, a diverse representation of sectoral interests and values from different scales is needed. On the other hand, a high number of participants limits possibilities for engagement. Moreover, high travel costs quickly become a bottleneck, especially in large basins and where Dialogues are organised as stand-alone events, requiring stakeholders to travel from across the basin to one place. While trying to strike this balance, most case study teams in GoNEXUS wished for more diverse stakeholder representation in hindsight. Since compromises are inevitable, leveraging existing events and instructing local partners to execute Dialogues without onsite participation of the entire case study team can be a cost-efficient strategy. Additionally, given the limited capacity, an intelligent selection process — guided by clear criteria and possibly interviews — should prioritise stakeholders who can provide the most value.

➤ **Maintaining stakeholder engagement throughout a four-year project is challenging, especially due to long time gaps between Dialogues and high participant turnover.** In GoNEXUS, there were gaps of up to 1.5 years between Dialogues. These gaps can give the impression that the Dialogues are disconnected, rather than a cohesive process where each Dialogue builds on the previous one. In addition, new participants replaced previous ones, requiring repeated explanations of project goals, progress and modelling basics. This turnover can weaken continuity and hinder incremental learning. To address these issues, some case study teams offered briefings for new participants, ensuring they were quickly integrated. Short interim update meetings between Dialogues and, as discussed later, continuous communication can further foster a sense of continuity.

➤ **Having a local convenor as a committed project partner to support the entire process is beneficial, if not essential.** In the Zambezi case study, for example, the Zambezi Watercourse Commission (ZAMCOM) managed invites, dealt with the venue, granted access to data and provided feedback on the workshop design and exercises. The local convenor's feedback on intercultural and sensitive issues, particularly in the African case studies, was crucial too. It can be equally beneficial to involve local or regional research institutes, which can complement RBO's inputs and intelligence while facilitating access to data. However, securing funding for project participation and managing financial administrative tasks has been challenging for both ZAMCOM and the Senegal River Basin Development Authority (OMVS). OMVS's financial challenges and inability to support the Dialogues resulted in the absence of stakeholders from outside Senegal. To address such issues, proposals should include attractive, financially viable, and administratively simple arrangements to ensure the participation of underfunded RBOs and partners, particularly in the Global South. This approach enables their involvement in research projects that may not directly align with their immediate priorities or mandates.





**Adopt a multi-sector approach that integrates local, sub-basin, and basin scales and links between them.** The Dialogues must address power imbalances between states, governance levels, sectors, and societal groups to ensure equitable participation, legitimacy, and inclusivity, without overwhelming the project. Achieving this high yet essential ambition requires an intelligent stakeholder engagement strategy, ideally supported by dedicated stakeholder engagement experts in each team.



**Ensure continuity of the process by minimising gaps between Dialogues and addressing participant turnover.** Gaps of more than a year can make Dialogues feel disconnected, while turnover weakens continuity and hinders incremental learning. Providing briefings for new participants to integrate them and holding short interim update meetings can contribute to maintaining momentum and foster a sense of continuity throughout the process.



**Determine a group size balancing diverse stakeholders with productive discussions and tight budgets.** Select participants using clear criteria — such as stake, sector, experience, and motivation — and consider pre-dialogue interviews to ensure the limited spots are filled by highly committed stakeholders who can truly add value to the Dialogue discussions. Leveraging existing events, as aforementioned, and empowering local partners to lead Dialogues can improve cost-efficiency and maximise diverse stakeholder representation.



**Commit to having a local convenor and leading research institutes who support the entire process.** In GoNEXUS RBOs have played a critical role in facilitating Dialogues in some case studies, while local research institutes can provide access to data and inform the Nexus assessments (e.g. by providing intelligence on existing research and policy initiatives). Often underfunded RBOs and research institutes, especially in the Global South, require targeted financial support to ensure their active participation. Conversely, poorly designed financial arrangements can undermine their engagement during the project, putting the Dialogues at risk.



## KNOWLEDGE INTEGRATION & CO-CREATION

Effective co-creation in Nexus Dialogues requires integrating stakeholder perspectives, local knowledge, and existing expertise while addressing gaps in understanding, inclusivity, and capacity-building.

➤ **Stakeholders exhibited varying levels of familiarity with modelling and Nexus approaches, which, while expected, complicated discussions and required efforts to build a shared understanding.** Participant turnover in Dialogues 2 and 3 exacerbated this challenge, while language barriers and disruptions to translation services further widened gaps in comprehension and engagement. Allowing all participants to engage effectively requires simplifying generally overly technical and complicated content around the modelling, tailoring language to diverse audiences, and using relatable formats to enhance understanding and participation. Training on basic modelling skills and tailored briefings sent prior to the Dialogues can help bridge knowledge and skills gaps in such cases.

➤ **Integrating existing knowledge and expertise is vital in WEFE Nexus assessments and Dialogues to ensure that solutions are relevant to local cultures and the contexts.** Incorporating local knowledge and experiences is fundamental to better address the unique Nexus challenges and dynamics of each region or basin. In fact, this integration is particularly crucial when European researchers organise Dialogues in Africa, where there is a risk of overlooking local perspectives and priorities, especially indigenous knowledge. Practically, stakeholders' ideas and interests should form the foundation of every Nexus assessment and shape the goals they pursue. Unfortunately, studies show that non-academic partners are often end-users of academic research rather than co-creators of knowledge in Nexus research projects. Neo-colonial practices in academia remain widespread, and capacity-building efforts to empower stakeholders are frequently limited.

➤ **Leveraging existing knowledge, publications, and projects in building Dialogues demonstrates to participants that the convenors and researchers are thoroughly prepared and dedicated to using everyone's time efficiently**, which will affect the outcomes positively. For stakeholders who participate in Dialogues voluntarily, nothing is more discouraging than being asked to provide information that could have been easily gathered through desktop research. In hindsight, some case studies acknowledged that the Dialogues would have profited from more thoroughly analysing basin-wide strategies plans, policy processes and previous projects to inform and develop Dialogue exercises. In fact, starting with a comprehensive review of existing initiatives ensures that the project wastes no time and neatly ties in with existing efforts, maximising the outcomes the Dialogues can achieve in the limited time available. Optimising this process requires engaging local partners, such as RBOs or research institutes, who possess in-depth knowledge of the basin in each case study.



#### **Tailor engagement approaches to address stakeholders' varying levels of expertise and ensure inclusivity.**

Stakeholders often have diverse backgrounds and levels of familiarity with Nexus concepts and modelling. While ensuring effective translation is a must, tailoring content, simplifying the language, ensuring space for Q&As, as well as providing training on basic modelling and tailored pre-session briefings as part of an engagement strategy developed with professionals can bridge knowledge and skills gaps.



#### **Actively involve stakeholders as co-creators of knowledge, especially in Africa where neo-colonial practices in academia are still widespread.**

Stakeholders should not merely be treated as end-users of academic research, as is still often the case, but as partners in defining challenges and co-creating solutions. This means involving them — as highlighted throughout this policy brief — already at the proposal stages, focusing on their interests and building capacity to empower them to conduct Nexus research independently in the long run.



#### **Assess and build on existing policies, initiatives and knowledge to maximise the outcomes for participants and the dialogues.**

This approach prevents unnecessary repetition, demonstrates preparedness, and respects stakeholders' time, which is often volunteered. Conversely, disregarding existing work and starting from scratch can be highly discouraging for stakeholders. A comprehensive review of existing work should form the start of every Dialogue series, not the least because it will provide a solid foundation for identifying goals and setting up the Nexus assessments.



## 5 COMMUNICATION & ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Effective stakeholder engagement requires transparent communication that prioritises stakeholders' needs, manages expectations, and simplifies complex concepts through creative tools and professional expertise to ensure co-creation and sustained participation.

➤ **To inspire and engage stakeholders effectively, it is crucial to clearly communicate the tangible benefits of their participation.** Participants invest substantial unpaid time in a sometimes unfamiliar approach and may speculate about its potential outcomes and personal benefits. To make Dialogue participation more appealing, communication should prioritise stakeholders' needs, expectations, and interests, rather than imposing a "here's what we do" approach driven by researchers' agendas. This is relevant even at the stage of invitation (for example by clearly highlighting benefits and outcomes determined through interviews in the Dialogue invitations). As noted earlier, Dialogues could include training sessions on modelling or finance, as well as matchmaking events with potential financiers — opportunities often inaccessible to RBOs and other basin actors. These benefits should be communicated transparently. Moreover, professional communication, such as well-designed invitation letters and technical briefings, is essential for attracting high-profile stakeholders.

Stakeholders need to feel that they are part of a co-creation process and not just providers or end-users of knowledge. To this end communication is crucial, in addition to the previously discussed measures that foster a sense of continuity of the process or capacity building. Convenors need to make sure that they share new progress at a suitable frequency, send preparatory materials like technical briefings on the modelling approach and initial results prior to a Dialogue, proactively address stakeholder requests rather than waiting for problems to arise, and involve stakeholders in evaluating the Dialogues.

> **The expectations of the Dialogues should be clearly communicated from the outset and consistently managed throughout the project, rather than only addressed when issues arise.** While the initial brainstorming exercises generally go broad in generating ideas for challenges, only a few of them can eventually be modelled, partly due to limited capacity for computing. Confining the research scope is natural and will always be necessary. However, initially considered but ultimately excluded research elements or delayed progress can disappoint and discourage stakeholders who have devoted time and resources, and who may want to utilise certain results. Therefore, convenors need to be transparent and honest about capabilities of the models, manage expectations around the objectives and outcomes, communicate progress, challenges and achievements proactively.

> **Deploying professional experts for communication and moderation is essential to convey complex technical modelling approaches and results clearly and effectively.** Research projects often consist of scientists with limited expertise in communication and stakeholder engagement. In some of the Dialogues in GoNEXUS, this resulted in presentations on modelling that were overly technical and lengthy. Some participants struggled to comprehend the content and were overwhelmed by the complexity and length of the presentations. Tailoring the language to the participants, reducing information density, and incorporating sufficient short breaks for reflection and discussion are essential for maintaining continuous engagement. Greater involvement of communication and stakeholder engagement experts in reviewing and advising on Dialogue approaches, including presentations, would have benefited GoNEXUS across all case studies.

> **Creative methods and tools to communicate information and facilitate exercises stimulate engagement and improve outcomes.** Nexus assessments are inherently complex and demand advanced technical expertise, which may be beyond the capabilities of some stakeholders. This is particularly relevant to scenario-building and indicator selection exercises. Consequently, communication tools and methods are essential to convey effectively information on the modelling and exercises. In the Senegal case study, for example, local Dialogues translated scenarios into the local language and presented them as radio broadcasts or TV news spots, an approach that received positive feedback. Generally, discussions should be collaborative, inclusive, and focused on exchanging ideas and perspectives to reach mutual understanding and informed decisions — a process known as deliberation. Deliberation fosters mutual learning and ensures that diverse viewpoints are considered in decision-making.



**Focus communication on stakeholders' needs, expectations, and potential gains to ensure their commitment and engagement.** Communication needs to focus on addressing stakeholders' priorities rather than imposing a researcher-driven agenda. This should begin at the invitation stage by highlighting expected outcomes and benefits identified through interviews (including practical elements such as training on modelling or finance). Professional communication, such as well-designed invitations and technical briefings, can further attract high-level stakeholders and enhance engagement.



**Proactively manage expectations by communicating and addressing the limitations, changes and unmet targets.** Regularly update stakeholders on progress, challenges, and achievements to maintain trust and motivation, ensuring stakeholders feel they are part of the co-creation process. Since participants enter the Dialogues with expectations, transparently communicating model capabilities and limitations and avoiding overpromises is key to maintaining stakeholder's engagement and trust. Delays or issues should be addressed and communicated promptly, rather than waiting until a crisis arises.



**Engage stakeholders early and maintain consistent communication — prolonged silence can kill momentum and undermines future participation.** Communication should begin months before the first Dialogue and remain consistent, including progress updates, preparatory materials like technical briefings, proactively addressing stakeholder requests, and managing logistics. This will foster co-creation and sustained engagement, which are crucial for successful Dialogues. Engaging communication and stakeholder engagement professionals that work closely with the case study teams to develop and implement an effective engagement strategy is advisable.



**Use creative tools and methods to convey complex concepts and models, involving communication experts.** The project's communication experts should help the case study teams simplify technical content, tailor language to diverse audiences, and use relatable formats to enhance understanding and participation. For example, some case study teams presented results through accessible formats such as radio broadcasts or TV spots to ensure inclusivity and broader engagement. Deliberation should be an integral part of the Dialogues, fostering mutual learning and ensuring diverse perspectives are included in decision-making.

## Imprint

**This policy brief is the third among three policy briefs on EU Water Cooperation and the WEFE Nexus as part of the EU Horizon 2020 Project GoNEXUS.** The Policy Brief was developed by André Müller (adelphi) based on the work of the [EU Horizon 2020 project GoNEXUS](#), with contributions from Guido Schmidt (Fresh Thoughts Consulting GmbH). It was reviewed by Kyra Bauman (adelphi) and Guido Schmidt (Fresh Thoughts Consulting GmbH), Laura Seguin (BGRM) and Sandra Ricart Casadevall (Politecnico di Milano). The Policy Brief builds on reflections and discussions within the project as well as on the Deliverable 6.7 - Guidelines and recommendations on Nexus Dialogues. GoNEXUS aims to create a framework for innovative and sustainable governance of the WEFE nexus, integrating policy changes, technical measures, and participatory Nexus Dialogues using scenario-based model.

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