

MOTU DIALOGUES

An innovative process for tackling polarising questions

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As a small country New Zealand can be more innovative when developing policies, and we are disproportionately visible internationally. This creates an opportunity to show leadership and help other countries tackle difficult issues.

Motu uses an innovative stakeholder dialogue process for investigating challenging topics that are the subject of polarising public debate.

MOTU DIALOGUES

Motu has run eight dialogues since 2007 and is currently continuing its Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) Dialogue as well as working with the Deep South National Science Challenge impacts and implications programme.

A Motu Dialogue is not a decision-making body, but a group with a wide range of perspectives. The aim is to provide a basis for more constructive and informed public discussion on challenging issues. The group for each dialogue is composed of up to 20 individuals who work together over an agreed amount of time, to frame challenges within the sector, and create ideas on how to move forward.

The group meets in person for a series of either half- or full-day meetings. It aims to develop a shared understanding of the issues and current knowledge, identify creative ideas to address the challenges, found mutual trust among participants, and develop potential effective, efficient and fair solutions to the identified challenge (including well-formulated research questions). It does not aim to create consensus among participants though consensus on some issues is often reached.

PARTICIPANTS

The aim is not to have a representative selection from the New Zealand population, but rather to ensure that a wide range of perspectives and experience are represented. This involves including both the communities affected by the issue – from business, government and Māori representatives – and technical experts.

Participants are selected based on their knowledge and characteristics such as being a good thinker, open-mindedness, and amenity to working as part of a group. Each individual attends in their private capacity, not as a representative of their organisation.

“This was a radical initiative which showed that self-authorising, bottom-up initiatives could be very influential. It was one of the early examples of a working collaborative process which gave encouragement to later and larger scale initiatives like the Land and Water Forum, and to regional collaborative approaches.”

Alastair Bisley, then Chair of the Land and Water Forum, Participant in the Water Quality in Lake Rotorua Dialogue

“Being able to connect with others tackling the same issues that we are trying to solve is enormously valuable. The complexity of responding to changes we know are coming as a result of climate change means that we must work together, and it is vital there is a place for iwi insight to come to the fore as options and solutions are developed.”

Maria Bartlett, Senior Policy Advisor, Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, Participant in the Sea Level Rise and Flood-prone Communities Dialogue





PROCESS

The dialogue process creates conditions in which participants learn from one another, come to a common understanding, and innovate together. The process covers a wide range of relevant topics. Technical experts provide key background material and present the latest research. Other participants challenge the scope and interpretation of existing research and contribute new ideas.

The small number of participants and the consistent attendance of members over time allows a strong group rapport to build. This rapport, and the length of time given to the process, allow the issues to be discussed honestly and in depth. Group discussion and thinking can progress and converge, rather than be subject to a polarised debate that solidifies existing views and positions.

OUTCOMES

The dialogue process creates a more informed policy and research environment. The results of the work are communicated to government and others in the policy community and beyond. The dialogue process also creates a network of well-informed and -connected people who are experts on the issues discussed.

Insights are drawn from the collective thinking of the participants. After the different dialogues, Motu produces various materials, including short films, presentations, teaching resources, blogs, games, working papers and non-technical notes. Published outputs acknowledge the members' participation if they choose but represent the opinions of Motu researchers alone.

"I am pleased to have been able to contribute to setting the research agenda around the question of how our vulnerable coastal communities can adapt to climate change. I know the research that comes out of this dialogue will be useful for understanding the exacerbating effects of climate change on already flood-prone communities."

Professor Jonathan Boston, Victoria University of Wellington, Participant in the Sea Level Rise and Flood-prone Communities Dialogue

"Until very recently there has been little leadership about the downstream effects of climate change. How the issues may be adaptively managed is also critical to the debate as communities realise the danger they may be in. The Dialogue is opening up these avenues for future decision-makers, providing innovative pathways of which they may have hitherto been unaware."

Hon. Shonagh Kenderdine, ex-Environment Court Judge, Participant in the Sea Level Rise and Flood-prone Communities Dialogue

