

# Conflicts in collaborative planning

## What is a conflict?

Conflict<sup>1</sup> is present when two or more parties perceive that their interests are incompatible, express hostile attitudes, or pursue their interests through actions that damage the other parties. Such interests include:

- Access to and distribution of resources (e.g. land, money, energy sources, food).
- Control of power and participation in political decision-making.
- Identity (cultural, social and political communities).
- Status, particularly those embodied in systems of government, religion, or ideology.

Conflicts are important and quite unavoidable features of dynamic organisations, communities and societies. In many planning processes conflicts should be anticipated, sometimes even welcomed, but also managed before they become destructive.

Increased stakeholder involvement in decision-making, which is essential to collaborative planning, may also increase the potential for conflict. Different people, groups and organisations have many different interests concerning the use of resources. There are also different types of power to influence negotiations and the outcome of conflict. Those with the greatest access to certain types of power tend to influence decisions in their own favour.

However, conflicts should not be feared and avoided at any costs. A conflict is rarely a situation where somebody is right and others wrong. Differences between people should be acknowledged and appreciated. Conflicts often focus attention on those issues that need to be addressed and they can be perceived as indicators that diverse stakeholder interests are represented at the decision-making table. Sometimes solving a conflict can be a very productive and creative event. New ideas or alternatives may emerge and the result may be a satisfactory win-win situation for all parties.

---

<sup>1</sup> Schmid, Alex P.(1998): Thesaurus and Glossary of Early Warning and Conflict Prevention Terms. Forum on Early Warning and Early Response, London.

## Sources of conflicts

Understanding causes and background of conflicts is essential for effective conflict management. These causes can be categorized in various ways, for example Douglas J. Amy<sup>2</sup> distinguishes four general sources of conflicts:

- **Conflicting interests.** An element that is usually involved in all conflicts is differing interests over access to and distribution of resources. Conflicts arising from this source should certainly be anticipated in collaborative planning situations.
- **Divergent values.** Differences in values and worldviews are a major source of controversies. These conflicts involve disagreements about intrinsic value, what is right or wrong, and about desirable goals and future visions.
- **Data or information conflicts.** Lack of information and misinformation, differing views on what is relevant data, the interpretation of data, and how the assessment is performed can all cause conflicts.
- **Interpersonal conflicts.** Psychosocial factors and ineffectual communication cause conflicts. In some situations, strong emotions and different personalities can lead to heated brawls. It is this type of conflict which can often escalate to destructive one even when the conditions to resolve the other sources of conflict can be met.

Engel and Korf<sup>3</sup> suggest that sometimes it is helpful to think of conflict as having the following three elements:

- **People:** how people think about and relate to the conflict; their feelings, emotions and perceptions of the problems and of the other people involved; and how these relate to each other and to natural resources in securing livelihoods.
- **Process:** the way decisions are made, and how people feel about this. The decision-making process is often overlooked as a key cause of conflict. However, resentment, feeling of being treated unfairly and a sense of powerlessness are often rooted in this area.
- **Problems:** the specific issues and differences among the people, groups and organisations involved. These often include values, incompatible interests and needs, or concrete differences regarding the use, distribution or accessibility of scarce resources. These are often referred to as the 'root causes' of conflict, about which people tend to take clear and strong positions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Amy, Douglas J. (1987): *The Politics of Environmental Mediation*. Columbia University Press, New York.

<sup>3</sup> Engel, Antonia & Korf, Benedikt (2005): *Negotiation and mediation techniques for natural resource management*. Prepared in the framework of the Livelihood Support Programme (LSP).FAO, Rome.