

Frequency and time required

Two to four group meetings, each lasting one day. Depending on the number of meetings, the time required will be 1 to 4 months.

When to use it

- when the stakeholders have very different perceptions of the problem
- suitable for analysing problems and generating policy options

When better not to use it

If the atmosphere among the participants is very oppositional or hostile and they have little respect for each other's opinions.

Advantages

Group model building links the knowledge available among the participants, so that it can be used more effectively. The results are supported by the participants, because they own the process and its outcome. Group Model Building helps in the formation of consensus on the solution to the problem and can increase commitment to the strategy to be followed.

Pitfalls

The conceptual model is sometimes less accessible for people who did not take part in developing it.

Participants

Mainly small groups. Larger groups can be broken down into subgroups, so that several models are produced, which can then be presented to the other subgroups. This allows different approaches to be considered, which can produce added value.

Points to consider

GMB requires good supervision of the process by a person with specific experience. Sometimes several facilitators are needed. It also demands the requisite time for organisation and reporting. The process should be open enough to allow room for diversity of topics, concepts and opinions.

References

- Vennix, J.A.M. (1996), *Group Model Building*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.
Vennix J.A.M et al., ed. (1997), Special Issue Group Model Building. *System Dynamics Review*, 13 (2).

5.7 Group decision support¹

What is it?

Group Decision Support involves the use of a Group Decision Support System (GDSS) in a workshop: a network of computers with special software for computer-supported meetings. The MNP uses the Policy Lab of Utrecht University for this (see References). GDS is a method of supporting group processes, which can also be used to complement other participation methods (for instance, scenario workshops or face-to-face Delphi).

The method uses a combination of written input via the computer and group discussion. As such it is a hybrid of focus groups and Delphi. Using the computer ensures that everyone has an equal chance to make a contribution and guarantees anonymity where necessary. In the discussions, the participants exchange ideas and examine the issues in more depth.

The software consists of a number of tools that can be used for surveys, brainstorming and sounding out opinions among other things. The results are compiled and analysed by a central server and then projected, so the participants can react to them at once. If required, the results can then be processed, prioritised or classified. The workshop is led by a moderator (panel chairman), while a technical facilitator operates the central server and software.

What can it deliver?

- Collection, categorising and prioritising of new and old ideas and strategies.
- Overview of different views, arguments and motives.

1. This section was written by Arjan Wardekker

Frequency and time required

Several workshops are needed, certainly for complex subjects. Sometimes it is also useful for each subgroup (policy-makers, scientists etc.) to follow its own path. The process will certainly take several months.

When to use it

For

- taking stock of old and new ideas
- categorising, weighing up/comparing (e.g. multi-criteria analyses), prioritising and developing ideas
- refining and analysing arguments
- forming policy strategies and action plans
- formulating knowledge questions
- evaluating policy (ex post) or policy options (ex ante)

When better not to use it

When

- a very broad subject has to be dealt with
- the atmosphere between the participants is hostile and they have little respect for each other's opinions

Advantages

Flexible method that can be used in a variety of situations. The simultaneous input via computers means that much more information can be contributed in a short time than with face-to-face discussion. This prevents proceedings being dominated by a few individuals and, if necessary, anonymity can be guaranteed. An electronic session report becomes available almost immediately (generated by the software) and various analyses can be performed after the session (cross correlations, etc.).

Pitfalls

The workshop is exacting and can take up to a maximum of 4 hours. There are limits to what can be investigated/discussed. Use of the computer creates the risk of a highly tool-based design, while participants often feel the need for a face-to-face discussion. Allow enough time for this.

Participants

Mainly small to medium-sized groups (around 4-20 participants), but in theory can also be used for large groups, depending on the facilities available and the terms of the software license.

Points to consider

An experienced panel chairman and a technical facilitator are important for the workshop to proceed smoothly. It is difficult to estimate the time required. It often turns out that there is not enough time. Keep your eye on the time, scrap sections if necessary, and plan to do important sections at the beginning as much as possible.

Literature

- Turban, E. & Aronson, J.E. (1998), *Decision Support Systems and Intelligent Systems*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- GroupSystems: GroupSystems Workgroup Edition & Professional Suite, Version 3.4. See: <http://www.groupsystems.com/>.
- Utrecht University's Beleidslaboratorium: <http://www.cs.uu.nl/beleidslab/>.
- Wardekker, J.A. & van der Sluijs, J.P. (2006), *Evaluatie van Onzekerheidscommunicatie in de Milieubalans 2005*. And background reports. Utrecht: Copernicus Institute, Utrecht University. See: <http://www.chem.uu.nl/nws/www/research/risk/Uncertainty%20Communication.htm>