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# Consensus Building for Long-term Sustainability in the Non-North American Context: Reflecting on a Stakeholder Process in Japan

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## Abstract

Practitioners of consensus building are stepping into a relatively new arena of practice: sustainability issues in the non-North American context. This article explores challenges in such settings, which we illustrate, with a case in Japan regarding the promotion of wood biomass usage through stakeholder dialogue in a small island community. Reflection from the experience reveals two challenges that are likely to occur in similar contexts: drawing the attention of stakeholders to the long-term risks to sustainability and dealing with personal relationships in a high-power-distance culture. We find that in our case and more generally stakeholders' problem recognition related to risk must be nurtured through learning opportunities and scenario exercises in the early stages of consensus building processes. The hierarchical nature of interpersonal communication in several Asian countries, where senior participants enjoy more power in negotiation, also requires careful design of processes, particularly when long-term issues are at stake.

## Consensus Building Processes in non-North American Contexts

In the United States, consensus building approaches have been used in a number of environmental policy decisions, initiatives, and conflicts (Bacow & Wheeler, 1984; Carpenter & Kennedy, 1988; Susskind & Cruikshank, 1989). Facilitators and mediators often assist in such processes to can help overcome obstacles such as psychological barriers and entrenched relationships (Schwartz, 1994; Susskind & Cruikshank, 1989). Convening the participants for consensus building entails interviews with stakeholders and assessing the likelihood that the process might succeed (Susskind, McKearnan, & Thomas-Larmer, 1999). The interviews explore positions on which consensus can be reached.

The practice of consensus building has evolved through the past 40 years of practice since early attempts in the mid-1970s. In recent years, scholars and practitioners have argued for the benefits of collaborative rationality and adaptive governance (Innes & Booher, 2010; Laws, Hogendoorn, & Karl, 2014), joint fact-finding approaches (Karl, Susskind, & Wallace, 2007; Matsuura & Schenk, 2016), and systematic evaluation of processes (O'Leary & Bingham, 2003). Of particular relevance to this article is the increasing attention to nuanced aspects of mediation (Forester, 1999, 2009) and to the role of context specifics.


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One consensus building trend is its increased use in constructing environmental sustainability policies in response to anticipated climate change (Raab, 2010; Schenk, 2015; Susskind, 2010; Susskind & Rumore, 2013; UNDP, 2010). Sustainability poses multiple complex challenges for consensus building practitioners: The magnitude and characteristics of climate change impacts are still uncertain; impacts are not yet fully visible but are likely to be significant in several decades, requiring incorporating the interests of future generations in current decisions; and scientific expertise is necessary for understanding issues, consequences, risks, and uncertainty. In response to these challenges, innovative approaches such as using role-plays, scenario planning, and polls have been tested in recent consensus building efforts around sustainability (Raab, 2010; Schenk, 2015; Susskind, 2010; Susskind & Rumore, 2013).

Another consensus building trend is the increasing use of such processes in non-North American contexts (Fairman, 2006). For example, similar approaches have been tested in Australia and the U.K. for environmental impact assessment and urban planning (Rozee & Powell, 2010; Saunders, 1995). In Nigeria and Papua New Guinea, consensus building practitioners from the United States mediated conflicts between resource developers and local indigenous communities (Adler, Brewer, & McGee, 2007; Hoben, Kovick, Plumb, & Wright, 2012). In Japan, there have been several experiments with consensus building processes, drawing explicitly on North American practices (Matsuura, 2009, 2016; Matsuura & Yamanaka, 2007).

Given these two trends—consensus building for sustainability issues and applications in non-North American contexts, this article investigates some of the challenges specific to designing consensus building processes for sustainability issues in non-North American contexts. We focus on an attempt to use a consensus building approach in 2012–2013 to explore the utilization of wood biomass for sustainable energy usage on a small Japanese island we will call T-Island. The case is illustrative at two levels: It sheds light on difficulties in conveying the need to manage resources sustainably, and it offers an example of conflict dynamics, when local cultures contend with a nonindigenous decision process. Cultural differences with respect to negotiations have been studied extensively (e.g., Ting-Toomey et al., 1991: 275–296). However, they are frequently experimental and focus on what can happen to processes and outcomes at the intersection of two cultures—such as Western and East Asian (see, for example, Adair, 2003; Adair, Okumura, & Brett, 2001; Lai, Lin, & Lin, 2008; Lee, Adair, & Seo, 2013; Tse, Francis, & Walls, 1994). Our case study is helpful to this stream of research in two important ways. The first is that the subjects are real and have a genuine stake in their own problems (as opposed to students role-playing). The second is that it sheds light on a different cultural aspect: Rather than informing on the more frequently studied interactional effects of intercultural negotiations, it suggests ways in which monocultural stakeholders apply processes developed in a culture different from their own. This is important as a test ground for the extent to which negotiation and intervention theories developed in one cultural and institutional context transfer to practice in a different one.

In our case, the conveners included the local government, which expected that a series of stakeholder dialogues would increase wood biomass usage on the island by stimulating collaboration among stakeholders; however, the process did not achieve this goal. Instead, the outcome consisted of a list of possible measures, with no commitment by the stakeholders. Unsurprisingly, none of the proposed measures has been implemented to date. Why did the process fail to meet the conveners' expectations? In the following sections, we describe this Japanese case. It serves as basis for reflection on the kinds of challenges consensus building around sustainability issues might encounter in non-North American contexts.

## Participatory Action Research as a Reflective Practitioner

While negotiation research is frequently approached experimentally, case studies are the mode in the fields of planning and policy decisions. Case studies reveal the range of context-contingent behaviors, processes, and outcomes that help interveners develop response strategies and best practices. Single-case studies (Yin, 1994) have a number of obvious drawbacks, chief among which is that conclusions are not

generalizable in the "caeteris paribus" sense. Emerson, Nabatchi, O'Leary, & Stephens, 2003 have surfaced a host of problems with single-case descriptive studies of environmental conflict resolution. They have called for more systemic evaluation of cases. The United States Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution has endeavored to construct a database for negotiated and mediated environmental disputes, in order to overcome some of the case study drawbacks. However, single-case studies are valuable in identifying areas of interest that could be explored in subsequent studies (Merriam, 2009; Whyte, 1984). A single-case study can also suggest multiple hypotheses to be tested through subsequent qualitative and quantitative research.

We obtained field data for the Japanese wood biomass case while participating in the consensus building process. We designed and organized the process and observed all stakeholder meetings as well as preparatory meetings and email exchanges. Since we draw on self-reflection on our own experience, there is a concern with our ability to be objective in our analysis; however, participatory action research, which involves researchers embedded in the research subject, is considered a valid method of inquiry (Kemmis, 2008; Wicks, Reason, & Bradbury, 2008). Researchers can proactively intervene in a social problem and reflect on their own practice in order to draw a theory from an *emic* viewpoint. For instance, in "The Reflective Practitioner," Schön articulates the mechanism through which professionals draw lessons from failed experiences (Schön, 1983). The present article adopts the same approach to reflective practice. By reflecting on the author's experience of a failed consensus building effort in Japan, this article suggests areas for improvement in the practice of consensus building.

## Case Study: Adopting a Policy of Using Wood Biomass on T-Island

### Background

The island community in which we attempted to build consensus has a population of about thirty thousand. For several years, it implemented wood biomass technologies for heating water. Japan has a long tradition of public bathhouses. In 2006 and 2009, two wood biomass boilers were imported from Austria, with the help of a Tokyo-based dealer, for reheating hot spring water for public baths. Another boiler was installed in 2010 to power salt production at a local salt works. Two of these boilers benefited from national government subsidies for promoting use of timber and wood byproducts.

The Japanese forestry sector used to be very vibrant until cheaper, imported lumber became available, leading to the economic decline of communities relying on this industry. The T-Island community that is our focus is no exception. Younger generations, particularly after graduating from local high schools, are leaving the island for better jobs and higher education on the main island of Japan. Because of low profitability even with heavy subsidies from the national government, much of the nonnatural forests, planted with spruce, deteriorated due to poor maintenance. They pose a huge risk of landslides to the local community.

The utilization of wood biomass is considered one of the options for curtailing greenhouse gas emissions, because trees absorb atmospheric carbon dioxide during photosynthesis. This policy is also expected to contribute to revitalizing small rural communities previously reliant on the forestry industry. Finding a beneficial use for wood biomass would encourage the remaining local forestry industry to provide better stewardship of forest resources, by creating new demand for the trimmed lumber, which was previously considered waste.

The use of wood biomass constitutes a distributed energy source that is locally available to remote areas. As such, it has added benefits for local energy security. It represents a viable source of energy, which is a precious commodity in places such as our island. There, due to conveyance costs, fuel prices are much higher than in more central places which are better linked by transportation networks. The island is off the national grid, and therefore, electricity has to be produced on the island. Utilizing the wood biomass available on the island could thus improve local energy security. It should be noted,

however, that the effectiveness of utilizing woody biomass energy for reducing atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration is debatable (Hudiburg, Law, Wirth, & Luyssaert, 2011; Mitchell, Harmon, & O'Connell, 2012). Thus, island inhabitants are facing trade-offs between short-term goals of responding to current demand for energy in a cost-effective way and long-term goals of reducing their contribution of greenhouse gasses.

In the current context, although the first-generation boilers operated somewhat successfully, no additional boilers were added at other locations on the island. In 2011, the island's municipal government and a few other stakeholders explored a proposal to install a wood biomass boiler at a newly built hospital. This proposal was not adopted due to the hospital operator's concerns about practicality and cost-effectiveness, as well as lack of time for redesigning the facility in order to accommodate the new equipment.

Sustainable management of natural resources requires the institutionalization of adaptive governance mechanisms. Stakeholders need to learn continuously from their experience and develop their own capacity for adapting to changing environments (Armitage, Berkes, & Doubleday, 2010; Berkes, Colding, & Folke, 2003). To expand the utilization of wood biomass on the island, forest owners, forestry companies, wood transporters, timber mills, wood chip producers, and facilities and consumers who use chips and pellets would need to work together so that a streamlined process, from production to consumption, can be sustainably managed. Such a network for managing the use of wood biomass did not exist previously on the island. To construct the network, it became necessary to reach out to the various members of the community who would have a stake in this (local government) initiative, to enable debate and arrive at a decision.

## Convening Stakeholders for a Dialogue

Local government staff members were interested in accelerating the use of wood biomass because of the multiple expected benefits to the community. However, they faced challenges in scaling up from their pilot projects. Meanwhile, we were exploring with the prefectural government potential research collaborations with local communities. In 2011, these contacts led to our research project—*Integrating Joint Fact-Finding into Policy-making Processes* project (iJFF)—for exploring the applicability of evidence-based stakeholder processes in Japan. With help of the prefectural government, the authors and staff from the island's local government collaborated to initiate a consensus building process seeking commitment from direct stakeholders to contribute to the goal of increasing the use of wood biomass on the island. At the inception of this collaboration, our shared understanding was that promoting use of wood biomass was necessary for a transition to a viable economy on the island that would be environmentally sustainable.

In summer 2012, we began our involvement in the island community with a stakeholder assessment study. We selected and interviewed 54 island residents who had some stake in wood biomass utilization. By analyzing the interview results, we identified five key issues that had to be explored in the experimental joint fact-finding dialogue we designed (Baba & Matsuura, 2012). Additionally, we identified a list of stakeholder groups which had to be involved in the dialogue. In early 2012, the local government had already convened a working group of ten participants, representing various interests in wood biomass utilization. For the sake of complete representation of interests, based on our interviews we suggested adding six more individuals to this group.

Following the completion of our study, the local government decided to organize a consensus building process for engaging stakeholders in decisions regarding wood biomass utilization. It reconvened the initial working group, as well as the six additional members we suggested. The dialogue process was to be designed and managed in collaboration with us. Central to it was a joint fact-finding committee.

## The First Stakeholder Meeting

On February 25, 2013, the first meeting took place in a meeting room of the island's main community hall. The goal of this first meeting was to convene the stakeholders and explain the purpose of the proposed joint fact-finding committee. We hired a Tokyo-based professional facilitator to assist us in designing the program and facilitating the meetings. Approximately 20 representatives of stakeholding groups attended the meeting. At the beginning, our student assistant presented the results of our stakeholder assessment study and asked participants to suggest scientific issues and questions to be explored in subsequent sessions.

Conflict emerged early in the process. The facilitator asked each participant to suggest ideas along with the five issues identified in our analysis. During this process, one of the local participants complained about the way the dialogue was designed. He argued that the scientific issues were already well understood, and claimed to understand all the issues that the community needed to know. The facilitator responded that his role as an external helper was to assist the entire stakeholder group in making their own decisions. This neutral attitude offended the participant, who responded that he would not attend subsequent meetings.

This individual, who produces and distributes wood biomass chips on the island, was considered one of the most important stakeholders on the island because he had also served as the project manager of a previous installation of biomass boilers. He had returned to the island from Tokyo after his retirement and had since developed expertise in using wood biomass. He was also the oldest person in the meeting room. Combined with his role centrality, his respect-commanding age had a profound influence on other participants. They became mildly reluctance to speak up when the facilitator questioned them about their interests and concerns. Thus, the first meeting failed to reach its objective of drawing a holistic picture of stakeholder interests in expanding the use of wood biomass.

## Follow-Up and Outcomes

After the first unsuccessful meeting, the authors revisited the island and held an hour-long meeting with community government officers. Together, we decided to redesign the entire process: Rather than facilitating a dialogue between representatives to encourage their commitment toward using wood biomass, each meeting would be geared toward learning about available options for the use of wood biomass. Then, we paid a visit to the offended stakeholder's timber mill and successfully persuaded him to return to the subsequent meetings.

The second meeting consisted of a site visit. Working group members toured a forest that produces excess wood biomass materials from thinning. The next stop was the wood chip facility operated by the senior stakeholder who had complained during the first meeting, in order to learn about how the chips were produced.

In the third and fourth meetings, experts from the main island of Japan were invited to share their experience with various wood biomass projects across Japan as well as their studies of Austrian cases. After each presentation, participants were given opportunities to ask questions and then make specific suggestions for promoting wood biomass usage in the community. Although they were attentive during the lectures, stakeholder turnout was low: Only 10 and 8 of the total of 16 invited members attended the third and fourth meetings, respectively. Even though a few participants asked the presenters technical questions, the exchanges were not as vibrant as we had hoped.

The stakeholder dialogue was intended to produce a list of recommendations for action. However, only relatively mundane policy recommendations emerged for wood biomass usage on the island. One reason may well be the lack of active participation. Another reason may be that such recommendations tend to generate less conflict; the desire for consensus overshadowing the specific goals of a consensus building process has also been observed in some joint decision situations in the United States.

We prepared the final recommendations document by summarizing the invited presentations. We circulated this document among participants for review. A few stakeholders offered comments in response to the draft, but overall, the final report produced in early summer 2014 had little input from the participants. The recommendations include measures for raising everyone's awareness on the island about their connection to the forest, as well as educating them about the forestry and local energy situations. Currently, almost 2 years after its publication, there are no visible signs of the community government or local stakeholders enacting any of these recommendations.

## Drawing Lessons From the Wood Biomass Case in Japan

### Reflecting on the Case

It is quite evident that the series of stakeholder dialogues we designed did not achieve the objective of encouraging stakeholders on T-Island to commit to a transition to utilizing wood biomass. Our case illustrates the challenges of organizing stakeholder-driven processes at the local level, for making adaptive changes that might put the community on track for long-term sustainability. It also illustrates the challenges in organizing stakeholder processes within the high-context and high-power-distance settings prevalent in Japan and other Asian countries (Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1983). By exploring these challenges in this particular stakeholder process in Japan, we are able to derive some observations that deserve further study, as well as inform future consensus building efforts for local transition to sustainability (Table 1).

### Raising Awareness of Long-Term Sustainability Issues

***Invisible but Major Risks to Long-Term Sustainability***

Our experiences in the case suggest that awareness-raising at the beginning of any consensus building processes is critical particularly when the impacts of the issues of concern accrue in the long run, are uncertain, and may not be salient to stakeholders and the general public. On T-Island, there was no debate or dispute surrounding the use of wood biomass. The impacts of climate change, the undesirable dependence on fossil fuels, and the state of the poorly managed forests on the island also seemed not to have risen to the attention of the community. Organizing a consensus building process around issues that are not yet—even if wrongly—of central concern to residents may be doomed to failure. Thus, upon reflection, the utilization of wood biomass appears to have been insufficiently salient to the community to justify organizing a consensus building process.

Table 1
*Lessons Learned and Proposed Remedies*

| Challenges identified in the case | Proposed remedies to challenges |
|---|---|
| • Raising awareness of long-term sustainability risks | • Provide learning opportunities<br>• Introduce exercises (e.g., scenario and role-play) for nurturing long-term perspectives |
| • Facilitating a dialogue between seniors and juniors in a high-power-distance culture | • Improve facilitation skills and ground rules<br>• Separate seniors and juniors into two working groups<br>• Create a forum of frontrunners for experimenting with innovations |

The notion of conflict ripeness, coined for international conflicts (e.g., Zartman, 2000; Zartman & Berman, 1982), may apply here too: Even if residents should be concerned about environmental sustainability and might benefit from practices that make the best of local resources, convening them to resolve a problem they do not yet perceive is unlikely to yield action despite efforts to "educate" them in the process. When governments seek to engage residents in decisions, they should first surface the problems and persuade the residents that they should attend to them. U.S.-based consultant Frank Blechman made this point in an interview (Forester, 2009: 178). When assessing environmental disputes, he used to ask stakeholders: *Are you having fun yet?* He argued that if everyone's answer is *yes,* then they may have little incentive to engage with each other. A similar test of willingness to engage should have been applied in our case. Most stakeholders were probably comfortable with the status quo and therefore had insufficient incentive to make changes.

On the other hand, the community is still faced with the issue of unattended trimmed timbers in the forest, which could trigger a landslide during severe weather. The community also remains vulnerable to energy supply crises, due to its location far from Japan's main island. The island is off-grid: All electricity has to be generated locally. However, all fuels, including those for the electric generator, must be shipped in from the main island.

Government policymakers were concerned about these risks. Their intention in coorganizing with us the consensus building process was to involve the local community in addressing these risks by expanding the use of wood biomass on the island. Participating stakeholders, however, did not necessarily share in the understanding of the magnitude of these long-term risks or the potential of wood biomass to alleviate them; instead, they were more concerned about short-term, easily predictable costs and benefits. As long as the long-term concerns remain invisible to residents, it is unlikely that dialogue will succeed in prompting them to take action.

This challenge is likely to be common to other situations where communities fail to consider long-term risks until it may be too late to successfully adapt to changes. Psychology scholars have pointed to the human tendency of paying insufficient attention to long-term risks (Bazerman & Watkins, 2004; Kahneman, 2011). The perception gap between the convener and the stakeholders in framing the long-term risk should have been addressed in the initial stakeholder assessment and in the early stages of the process. This insight may point to ways in which the consensus building process in our case and elsewhere can be designed to reduce the perception gap.

### *Raising Awareness Through Learning Opportunities and Scenarios*

Based on a number of case studies, Layzer (2012) suggested that the status quo has inertia and constitutes a major obstacle to achieving significant change in environmental policies, especially when the salience to the public of an issue is relatively low. One remedy she suggested resides in how information is used to define problems (Layzer, 2012: 560–562). Problem recognition has been identified as a major impetus for policy change (Kingdon, 1995; Stone, 2002). Aligning the problem recognition concerning long-term sustainability issues among the stakeholders with the need to respond must therefore be the first step in organizing processes for dealing with such issues.

One way to increase the salience of issues whose consequences accrue in the long term is to provide learning opportunities for stakeholders and other members of the community. For instance, our project on the island could have begun with a series of public seminars tailored to the interests of community members, about the science of estimating risks from climate change, energy dependence, and poorly maintained forests. Had the stakeholders recognized these issues as major threats to the island's sustainability, they might have been participated more actively in the consensus building process; they might have considered more seriously expanding the use of wood biomass as one option for dealing with the risks. This lesson applies to other consensus building processes on similar issues involving long-term sustainability. The conveners, who consider that a sustainability-related issue is sufficiently problematic to be addressed by involving stakeholders, might begin using public lectures, symposia, and other forms

of learning opportunities for sharing information and attempting to align the community's problem recognition with their own.

Another option is to lengthen the stakeholders' perspective through scenarios, visioning, and backcasting exercises (Roorda, Frantzeskaki, Loorbach, van Steenbergen, & Wittmayer, 2012; Roorda & Wittmayer, 2014; Susskind, 2010). In such exercises, rather than exploring future contexts incrementally from the current standpoint, participants look at the current self from the standpoint of possible futures identified in scenario and visioning exercises. By considering these alternative perspectives, stakeholders might also be able to broaden their attention to different pathways to the long-term future. Recent stakeholder-oriented projects involving long-term sustainability issues have incorporated such future-oriented processes, including the use of role-play simulations (Schenk, 2015; Susskind, 2010; Susskind & Paul, 2010; Susskind & Rumore, 2013). This strategy contributes to learning and might help focus a community's attention on how its current decisions may affect its future. However, current thinking privileges incremental adaptive moves (rather than characterizing a long-term vision or target and then acting to reach it) to avoid causing irreversible changes in either the natural or the built environment (e.g., Quay, 2010). In fact, in the island case, the use of wood biomass could well be such a move.

## Dealing with Relationships Among Local Stakeholders

### *The Role of Personal Relationships in Local Stakeholder Dialogue*

Our project to encourage dialogue on wood biomass illustrates the challenges of dealing with (culturally scripted) personal relationships in a locally oriented stakeholder forum. It is a long-established Japanese convention for people to respect senior individuals, particularly in communal settings (Nakane, 1970). Studies of communication processes have revealed that Japanese, along with Koreans and Chinese, are relatively cautious and deferential toward actors considered to have greater power and higher social position (Brett, 2001; Hall & Hall, 1990; Hofstede, 1983; Meyer, 2014: 125; Ohbuchi & Atsumi 2010).

In contrast to the high-power cultural trait, participants in consensus building processes have equal standing to express their concerns. This contradiction between the hierarchical nature of communication in some Asians cultures and the requisite equal representation in stakeholder forums challenges process designers. When participants with differing status and age are making joint decisions, the deference accorded to some participants may stifle dialogue. Younger, less socially powerful group members may forego expressing dissent from the views of their "betters." Indeed, in our case, participants in their 20s and 30s presumably had much less standing to speak for their interests. They made no comments at all in the first meeting, although senior participants did contribute. These relatively younger participants did not come to the subsequent meetings despite our attempt to empower them by intentionally inviting them to be the representatives of some stakeholders' interests.

One way to address this problem is to find ways to privilege the ground rules within a dialogue process. If the participants have no relationship outside the forum, enforcing ground rules about the equality of voice can bolster their willingness to take risks and communicate differently. However, this is all but precluded in small rural communities like the one we studied—and even in larger communities. When tightly woven communal ties are present, any deviations from the conventional norms of hierarchy, even if limited to the forum, can be penalized in venues outside the forum. In other words, in a local rural community setting, having infringed on deference norms inside a forum can have dire consequences. The parties may have no way out other than leaving the community altogether, because outside this specific forum the parties depend on each other in many other venues. We are left with the challenge of identifying some culturally acceptable ways to deal with power asymmetries arising from differences in age and status, particularly in Asia, in order to enable meaningful, broadly participatory stakeholder dialogue in matters of long-term environmental sustainability.

***Strategic Management of Consensus Building in Local Forums***

A frequent practical approach to managing consensus building processes, and specifically tensions between participants, is to employ trained facilitator who help set from the outset (consensually) well-articulated ground rules. Then, even if some participants attempt to dominate discussions, facilitators can help enforce the ground rules and encourage the quieter participants to speak up. This approach is, however, much more difficult to implement in rural Asian communities than in other settings. A facilitator's intervention that goes counter the cultural norm of deferring to seniority and high power distance could be construed by participants as a threat to the integrity of their community.

Alternatively, separate working subgroups for seniors and for juniors could be assembled, to enable deliberations on an equal footing. In fact, a similar strategy is common practice in Japanese business negotiations, since it is important to include representatives of equal status from each of the sides (Movius, Matsuura, Yan, & Kim, 2006). Even though such senior and junior groups eventually have to interact with each other so that their differing interests can be accommodated, the use of separate working groups provides a safe space for junior actors to express their views without worrying about being stigmatized for having challenged their "betters."

The third option entails creating a forum for young "frontrunners" with radical ideas and technologies for changing the existing institutional arrangements in order to achieve transition to environmentally sustainable practices (Loorbach & Rotmans, 2010; Nevens, Frantzeskaki, Gorissen, & Loorbach, 2013; Roorda & Wittmayer, 2014). When all stakeholders sit around one table, a community's dominant players may obstruct proposed changes for fear of losing their power (Hendriks, 2008; Voß, Smith, & Grin, 2009). Instead, a forum exclusively for frontrunners can open avenues for pilot projects testing innovative approaches. Such an approach can gradually affect the power dynamics between incumbent powerful stakeholders and frontrunners. This strategy has been used in several European nations in recent years (Loorbach & Rotmans, 2010; Meijer, Koppenjan, Pruyt, Negro, & Hekkert, 2010; Roorda & Wittmayer, 2014).

## Conclusion

This article explored challenges to two emerging trends in the practice of consensus building around environmental disputes and initiatives. One is the increasing focus on long-term sustainability issues; the other is application of a joint decision-making approach developed in the United States to non-North American contexts. We illustrated some of the issues that come up in such a transfer with a case in which stakeholders were asked to consider an initiative to use wood biomass in the T-Island community in Japan. Reflections on the experience revealed two key challenges: (a) drawing the attention of stakeholders to the long-term risks for sustainability, and (b) dealing with personal relationships in a high-power-distance culture. Other case studies often pin the blame for failure to build consensus on deviations from the North American canon of process design. We have illustrated here a situation in which the cultural context clashed with this canon, and we have proposed several strategies for adapting consensus building to this context for which it was not initially designed.

To prepare and adapt or mitigate long-term environmental risks, stakeholders must recognize and prioritize them. Stakeholders' awareness must be nurtured through learning opportunities and scenario exercises preceding, or in the early stages of, consensus building processes, if status quo inertia (Layzer, 2012) is to be overcome. In countries where communication is of a hierarchical nature (Hall & Hall, 1990), process design should give it careful consideration. This is particularly important because, although younger stakeholders might find it difficult to promote their interests in the presence of senior actors, they will be the ones who will bear the costs and impacts of climate change and other sustainability challenges in the future. Therefore, the inclusion and active participation of younger actors is necessary. It could be achieved in several ways—better facilitation, ground rules, separate working groups for younger stakeholders, or a forum for frontrunners toward transition. In the absence of processes tailored

to their specific contexts, consensus building efforts—costly and time-consuming—are headed to failure, not only causing the immediate damage of a problems unsolved, but also discrediting community participation in decisions that affect it.

We drew these lessons from a single case in Japan. To validate our findings regarding the match between a North American decision approach and culturally institutionally different context, it is necessary to examine similar cases from around the world. Such an effort would help arrive at a more robust set of adaptive recommendations. A more systematic evaluation of consensus building processes in climate change-related policies and projects is also necessary, to explore how this specific problem compares to others addressed through consensus building. The integration of techniques such as scenario planning, for reorienting stakeholder perspectives on the long-term future, would also benefit from further investigation, because the need for consensus building processes for sustainability policy, such for formulating city-level climate change adaptation plans, is likely to soar in coming years.

One last observation has to do with observing effects of culture from within it. In our case, we—the designers of this consensus building process—had no difficulty identifying the salience and cultural obstacles that have contributed to the stakeholder group's failure to agree on changes regarding the use of wood biomass. However, we did not notice as readily an institutional obstacle: The change proposal put before the group came from the government, as did the expectation that the information given to the stakeholders would generate interest and cure any opposition. In other cases of consensus building around proposed initiatives, the first problem formulation itself—here, a proposed different handling of wood biomass—often ends up being negotiated and broadened. The effect is to allow other problems to surface, and to trigger the crafting of solutions that address not only the initial issue but the broader issues as well. At times, the issue that triggered the consensus building effort gets solved in ways other than expected at the outset, or loses priority. Think of positional versus interest-based negotiations: Proposing to the community to agree on using wood biomass in certain ways is tantamount to the government's position. Perhaps being used to this top-down approach, we have tended to attribute the community's lack of interest in this issue to lack of appreciation of the risks, or to cultural dynamics. Viewed from the outside, the list causes of failure we identified is not complete until we add the positional nature of this process. We will not know the value of this conjecture in the Japanese context until we try to add to the strategies proposed above an attempt to allow the stakeholders to work on the problem definition and on the space of possible solutions to them, rather than merely discuss implementation of proposed changes.

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