

Technology and Environmental Conflict Resolution: National Strategic Planning Session

Summary Report

On May 6-8, 2009 the US Institute for Environmental Conflict Resolution convened the first "Technology in Environmental Conflict Resolution: National Strategic Planning Session" in Tucson, Arizona. The session sought to address the rapidly growing interest in integrating new technologies and environmental conflict resolution (ECR) processes. More than 90 participants from a variety of backgrounds participated in discussions and planning activities. Focusing on the need to ensure this is a people-centered process, the working group developed a set of recommendations and initiatives. A Coordinating Committee has been established to guide this work into the future.

Background

An increase in new and innovative, participatory, and modeling technologies, combined with practitioners' desire to enhance collaborative decision-making are signs of a newly emerging community of practice. In addition, overarching policy initiatives such as the recent White House memorandum on Transparency and Open in Government,¹ suggest this is an opportune time to think strategically about initiatives in this area. This initial session was convened to help direct existing interest and energy, and to begin defining goals and objectives for integrating emerging technologies and ECR processes.

The Session

The three-day meeting was attended by individuals representing government, academia, technology providers, technology developers and ECR practitioners. The session opened with a Technology Fair which offered participants the opportunity to explore a wide range of cutting-edge technologies and their application to collaborative environmental decision-making processes. Thirteen exhibitors shared their knowledge of technologies over a range of applications from social networking for enhancing public participation, to complex modeling for collaborative planning.

The Strategic Planning Session itself was a hands-on event, with participants working primarily in small groups to identify common interests and develop practical suggestions for moving toward a shared vision. Working groups drafted

recommendations across numerous topic areas, including "Creating a Learning Community," "Identifying Overarching Principles and Current Practices," and "Implementing Institutional and Cultural Change." Lively discussions ensued among participants grappling with key issues such as: *What are the core/ethical principles for integrating technology with ECR?*; and *How can we ensure that best practice from "carbon/people-based" approaches are reflected in new "silicon/computer-based" approaches?*



Outcomes and Recommendations

A synthesis group compiled recommendations from each of the working groups into a Final Report which is available online.² A separate version of the report has been made available as a Wiki document for continued editing by workshop participants. The workshop Steering Committee has also compiled a list of priority initiatives from this report, many of which have already begun to be implemented.² The Steering Committee is in the process of evolving into a

¹ http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/TransparencyandOpenGovernment/

² The full report from the workshop, along with other relevant documents, can be found at: <http://sites.google.com/site/tececr/Home>

project Coordination Committee, representing a broad range of interests, that will provide support and oversight for implementing these initiatives.

The major initiatives and recommendations from the Strategic Planning Session's working groups are:

Establish a Dynamic Learning Community

- Formalize a network of practitioners and technologists and promote linkages between these groups
- Develop a “tools clearinghouse” to support practitioners in selecting appropriate technologies
- Support learning and skills exchange which will help technologists develop better tools for collaboration
- Establish a roster or network of technologists

Advance Training and Build Capacity

- Integrate the use of technology tools into ECR training and collaborative competencies
- Develop an ECR training for technology providers and developers
- Develop curriculum and training materials that focus on how tools enhance collaborative processes, and how practitioners can select and evaluate appropriate technologies.

Proceed in the Context of Key Guiding Principles

- Convene a meeting on “core principles/current practices for integrating technology and ECR”
- Evaluate the application of technologies with/against ECR core principles
- Develop best practices and core principles that address: collaborative process design; risk, uncertainty and ambiguity; dynamic, adaptive and complex systems

Make Use of Case Studies and Pilot Projects

- Develop and support pilot projects to showcase and evaluate innovative integration of technology and ECR; use these to support the development of lessons learned and best practice

Consider Opportunities to Advance Policy and Strengthen Institutions

- Offer an award celebrating innovation in incorporating technology into ECR processes
- Develop a clearinghouse of current laws and policies with relevance to ECR and Technology

Promote Technology and ECR Activities

- Plan for a technology track at ECR 2010, using this as key milestone for other ECR/Tech initiatives

General Comments and Broader Insights

Throughout the session, discussions returned to important cross-cutting issues that demand a wider conceptualization of the topic. Central to this is the recognition that this community is growing: synergy between technology and participation *will* happen, with or without our leadership. Participants agreed this will proceed in a more thoughtful and efficient manor if we share our existing knowledge and keep in mind several fundamental insights.

The most important of these is to ensure this always remains a *people-centered* process: tools serve human dialogue and understanding, not the other way around. “Good” tools should build on and promote core conflict resolution values such as accessibility, fairness and transparency. To do this successfully we must remember that, while technology can create opportunities to empower growing numbers of people, it can also exclude individuals or preclude participation. Tools and applications should be as simple as possible, and both technologists and mediators need to recognize when *not* to use tech tools. In addition, many of the session participants have experienced some of the barriers to applying technology in collaborative processes, whether institutional, financial, managerial or process driven. Finding ways to remove these barriers is critical if new technologies are to have a wide application.

Finally, in order to effectively pursue these initiatives, as well as responsibly address these fundamental broader insights, we must promote shared learning where facilitators, technologists and stakeholders can gain experience from one another. We should continue to support capable leadership and diversity in this newly emerging learning community.