

Use of the Term ‘Stakeholder’

Reflections and Alternative Terms

Reflection

“Stakeholder” is a term HSRI has used extensively in past communications. In recent years, it has become apparent through multiple sources that this term is largely considered offensive to Indigenous Peoples due to its roots in colonialism (please see “Background”). Further, the use of generalized, overly broad terms like “stakeholder” can result in a lack of clarity when it comes to specific recommendations and guidance related to engaging or understanding specific groups.

The RET has established that “words matter.” Therefore, it is the recommendation of the Communications Subcommittee of the RET to move away from the use of “stakeholder”; instead, a more precise term related to the situation/context should be used.

Background

The term “stakeholder”¹ has roots in colonialism—settlers would drive wooden stakes in the ground to literally stake their claim on Indigenous land. The term has also been used in mining prospecting in which one would drive four stakes in the corners of the property they wanted to claim. While the current use of the term generally mean “people with direct interest in the topic being discussed”, the history of the [OBJ] word can evoke oppression of one group by another. In this context, public health researchers should reflect on intention versus impact.

Alternatives

It is important to keep in mind that when choosing an alternative for “stakeholder” that you try to best describe a group of people based on relevant context. In HSRI's work this is often:

- People who access services and supports and their loved ones/caregivers
- People with lived experience [of...]
- Policymakers
- System administrators and managers
- Service providers

¹ According to Merriam-Webster, stakeholder is defined as “a person holding property or owing an obligation that is claimed by two or more adverse claimants and who has no claim to or interest in the property or obligation” (Source: <https://sph.uth.edu/research/centers/dell/blog/posting.htm?id=reflecting-on-our-language-stakeholder>).

- Members of underserved or marginalized groups
- Specific groups such as:
 - People with disabilities
 - People who are unhoused or experiencing homelessness
 - Racialized peoples/communities of color
 - People who do not speak English

Below, we provide some alternative words to “stakeholder” (adapted from Goldie MacDonald and Anita McLees from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention).

Table 1. Words we’ve used to replace stakeholder and the individuals or groups we aimed to represent.

Example Language	Individuals or Groups Represented
Collaborators or contributors	Those who co-create or participate in evaluation activities or provide in-kind resources to support evaluation
Community members	Those with an interest in a program or its evaluation located where activities are implemented or other relevant places or spaces (physical or virtual)
Donors or funders	Those who contribute financial resources to support a program or its evaluation
Intended users	Those expected to use an evaluation in some way
Other evaluators	Peers or professionals whose work shapes ours or who apply or learn from our work
Organizational leaders	People who contribute to decisions that can influence a program or its evaluation (e.g., access to human or financial resources)
Partner organization	Government or nongovernment entities who collaborate on program or evaluation activities
Policymakers	Officials who influence or make acts, laws, or rules that can shape a program or its evaluation
Program colleagues, personnel, or staff	Those who plan, implement, or manage a program

Example Language	Individuals or Groups Represented
Program or evaluation participants	People who take part in a program or its evaluation (e.g., complete a survey)
Subject matter experts	People with specialized knowledge or experience relevant to a program or its evaluation (laypersons or professionals)
Service users	People who interact with and or use medical or non-medical health or long-term disability related services

Resources

[As an evaluator, do I use words \(e.g., stakeholder\) that can be harmful to others? by Goldie MacDonald & Anita McLees](#)

[Preferred Terms for Select Population Groups & Communities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[9 Terms to Avoid in Communications with Indigenous Peoples, Indigenous Corporate Training Inc.](#)

[Banishing "Stakeholders" by Joshua M. Sharfstein](#)

[Should we banish the word "stakeholder"? by Prof. Mark Reed](#)

[Terminology in Indigenous content, Government of British Columbia](#)