

Honing Our Craft: New Insights into Engagement Research and Practice

Walt Whitmer – Penn State University

Cheryl Burkhart-Kriesel – University of Nebraska-Lincoln

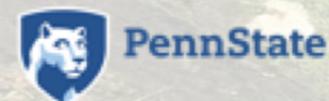
Jason Weigle – University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Weston Eaton – Penn State University

Kathy Brasier – Penn State University

NACDEP Annual Conference

June 1, 2020



Stakeholder Engagement as Solution?

- Stakeholder engagement as option to share views, learn together, coordinate action, leverage resources?
 - Better outcomes? (efficacy)
 - Voice and empowerment? (normative and moral reasons)
- ***But little empirical evidence for effectiveness of engagement***
 - Need for a “science of engagement” research agenda
 - What happens in the "black box" of engagement?

Water for Agriculture Project

Purpose: Build Science of Stakeholder Engagement

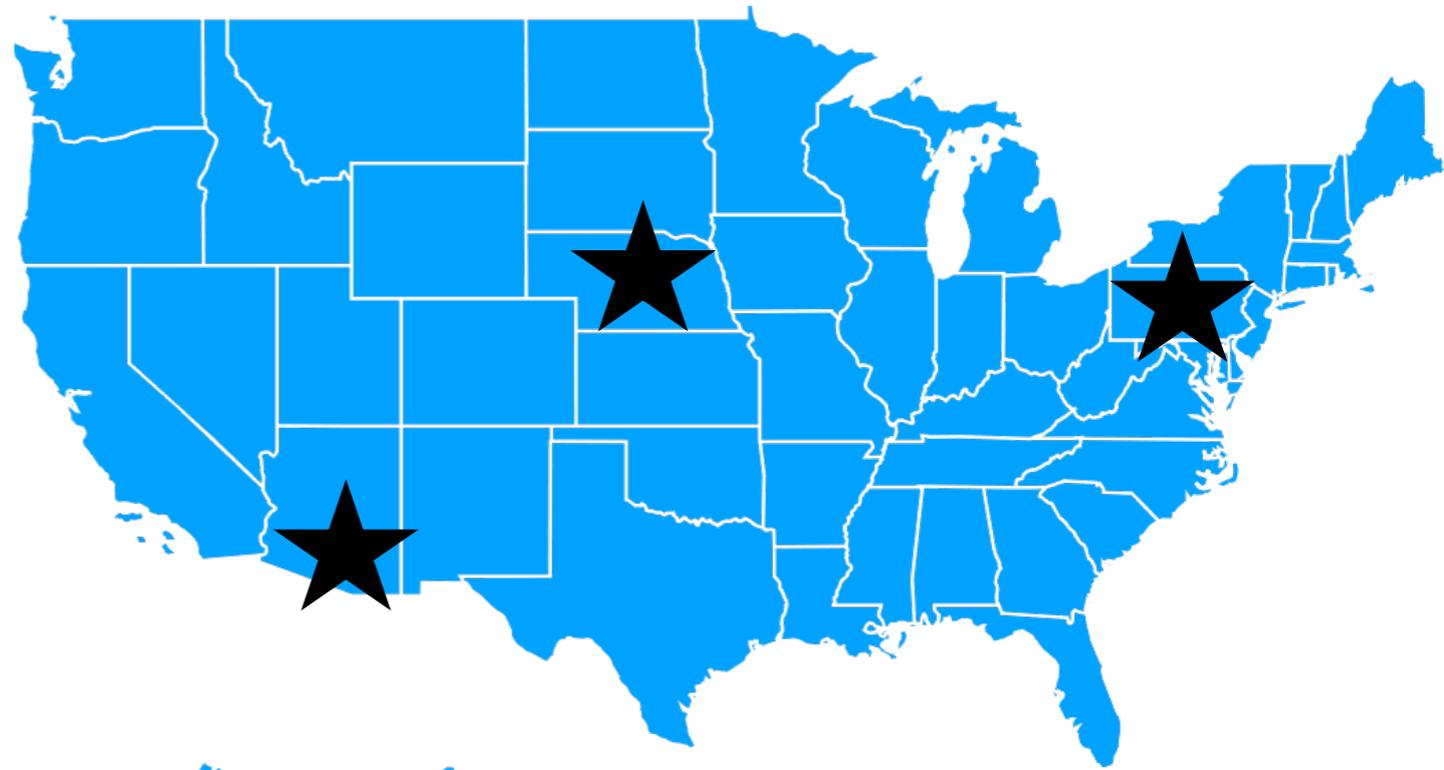
Water for Agriculture Project: A USDA NIFA funded multi-disciplinary, four-year collaborative research and engagement project that:

- **Facilitates community-led stakeholder engagement** to address water & ag issues that matter most to them
- **Supports** those teams with biophysical and social science research and information
- **Studies what changes** with *individuals, groups, communities,* and the environment through the engagement process



Key Strategy Approaches

- Form and support 5 local leadership teams
- Facilitate modified strategic planning processes (18-24 mos.)
- Identify issues, existing approaches, plans for action, resources needed
- Mixed method data collection
- Support from social and biophysical researchers





Snapshot of Project Sites



Verde Valley



North Platte Region



Central Platte Region



Mifflin County



Potter/Tioga Counties

Water4Ag Engagement Definition

A community-led approach to dialogue and decision-making that:

- Builds **relationships and trust**
- Surfaces and **incorporates views** of multiple stakeholders.
- **Co-creates group knowledge and learning**
- **Proactively identifies** issues, opportunities; sets priorities and action plans
- **Develops common frames, directions, and actions**
- Leverages and grows local **resources and capacity**



Engagement Process Goals

1. Foster **trust** and build **relationships**
2. Identify **key partners and programs**
3. Assess **existing information and data**; identify new collaboration opportunities
4. Assess **effectiveness of current programs**; identify gaps
5. **Identify and prioritize critical issues** at the nexus of water and agriculture
6. Build group **capacity for long-term action** (leadership and technical)
7. Develop **engagement plan** to reach other organizations and community
8. **Evaluate** actions
9. Assess **sustainability** and intent to work beyond current time horizon

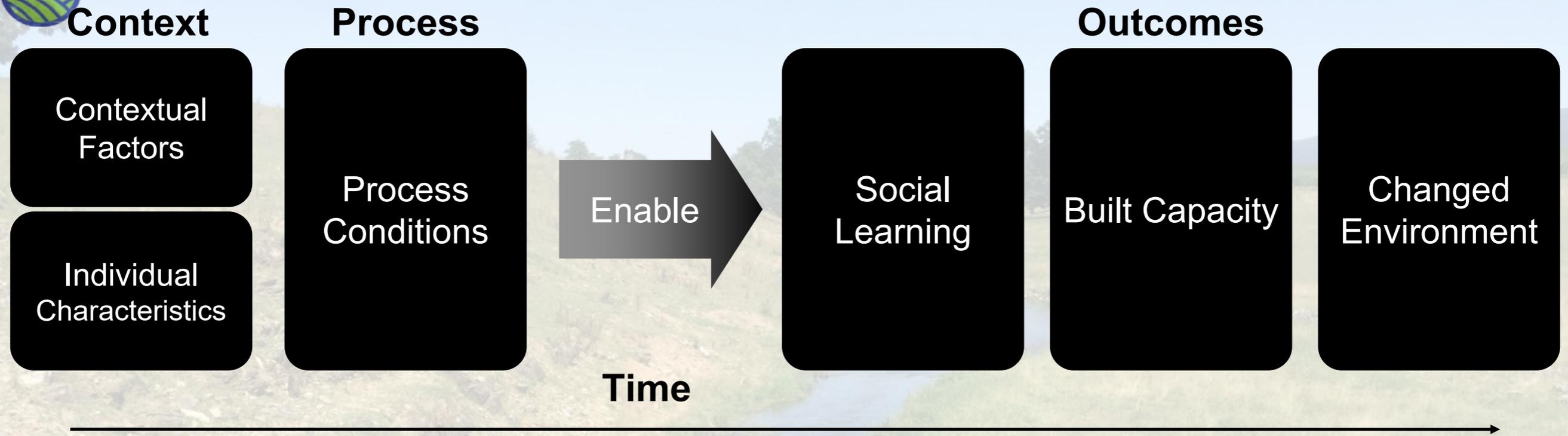
Adaptive Engagement



*Adhering to process goals, working principles,
and evaluation/research metrics...while
remaining adaptive and responsive to local
priorities, needs, conditions and circumstances*

Context Factors Shape Engagement Process

Process factor (literature)	Examples of implementation
Information exchange	Presentations and discussions of research, practices implemented, data, etc.
Opportunities for interaction; understanding of others	Small-group and facilitated conversations; World Café meetings
Inclusiveness	Leadership Teams purposively invited to maximize diversity related to issues of concern
Extended engagement	Breaks, dinners, time for informal interaction at all events
Process control	Leadership Teams set agenda, goals
Process equity; managed power dynamics	Active facilitation of all events to manage power dynamics among participants
Unrestrained thinking	Broad range of issues discussed; (e.g., accomplishments to date; history of place)
Constructive conflict	Facilitator draws attention to areas of conflict, tension; uses to move toward commonalities
Democratic structure	Structure of meetings, processes governed by participant input
Facilitation	Neutral facilitator to ensure credibility, inclusion
Incentives for participation	Sufficient incentives for participation
Timing	Issue of concern; awareness of broader state, regional policies and activities

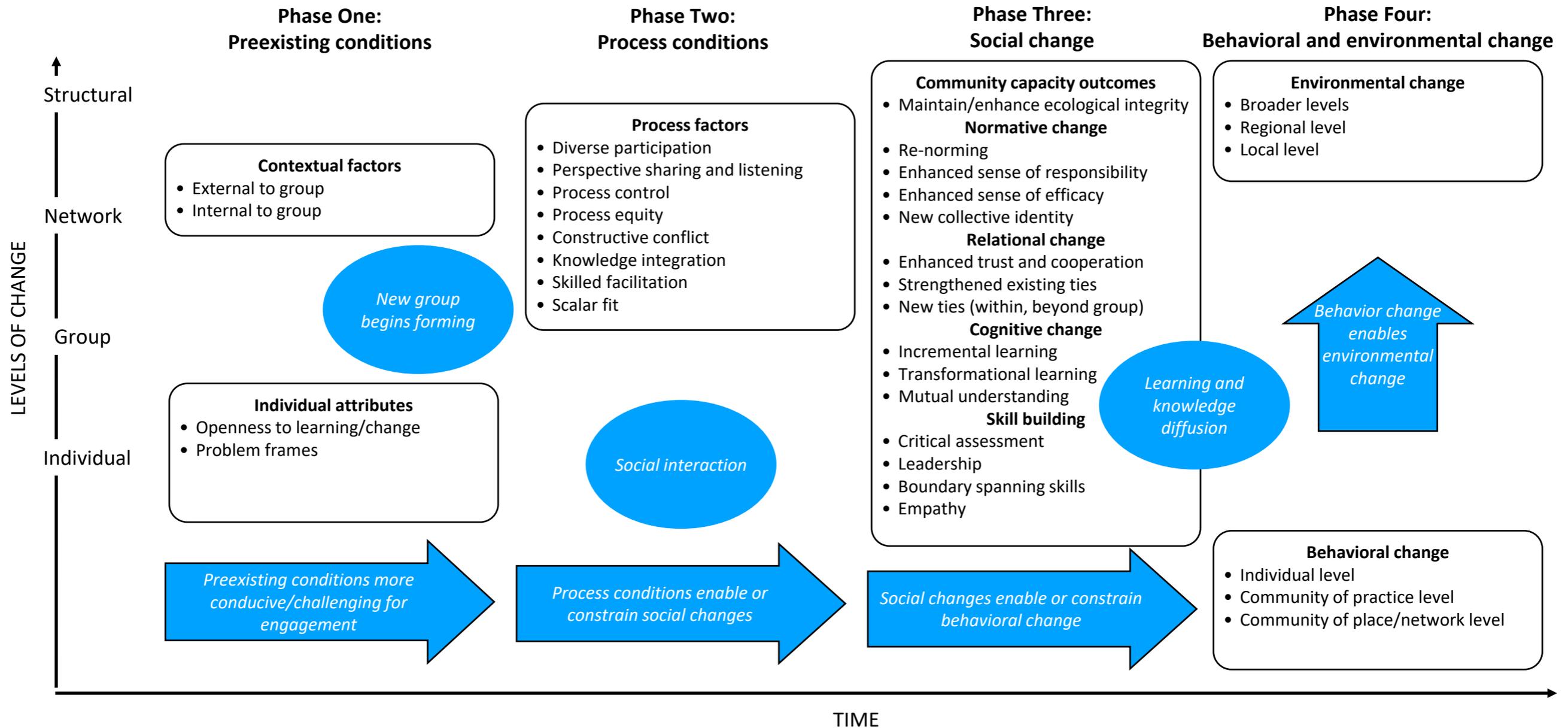


How do we study change through engagement?

*Research Question:
Whether and how, under what conditions, and for whom (individuals; stakeholder groups; broader community) social and environmental change happens?*

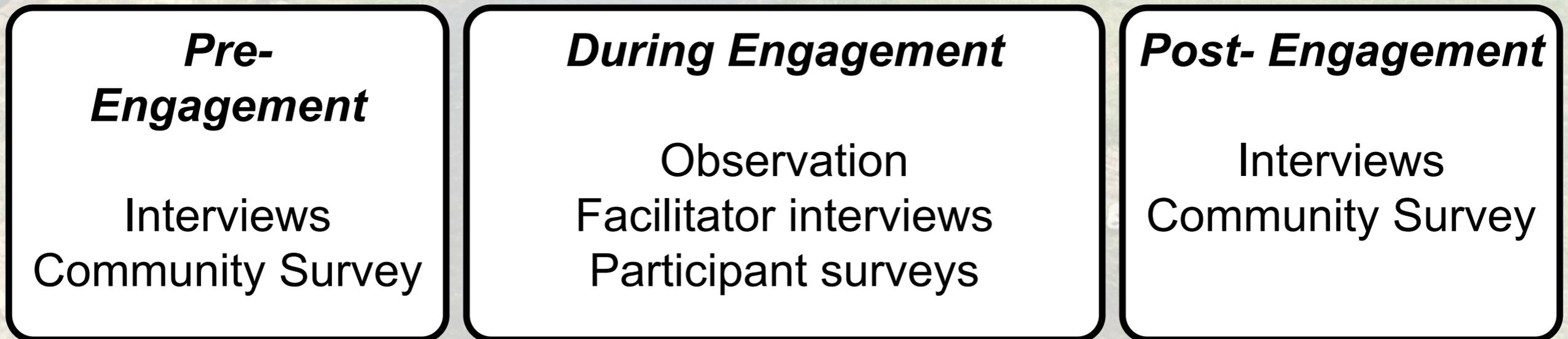
Conceptual Model for Social and Environmental Change through Community and Stakeholder Engagement

PROCESS DYNAMICS & FACTORS





**How do we study change?
Why? Empirical evidence & support engagement**



Time



Community Leadership Project & Activities

- Workshops, field days, media, field projects, etc
- Local ag branding
- Modeling projects
- Double cropping research project
- Water quality assessment efforts
- Grant writing and funding acquisition



Reflections and Lesson Learned



Continual facilitation, conflict management and professional development and learning are critical



Knowing when to wear which hat requires careful reflection!



The intentions and expectations of community-led approach sometimes difficult to convey



Importance of local facilitators, embedded relationships, and “thick” relationships

Reflections and Lesson Learned



Importance of situation assessment prior to starting



Identify projects as early as possible but not too early



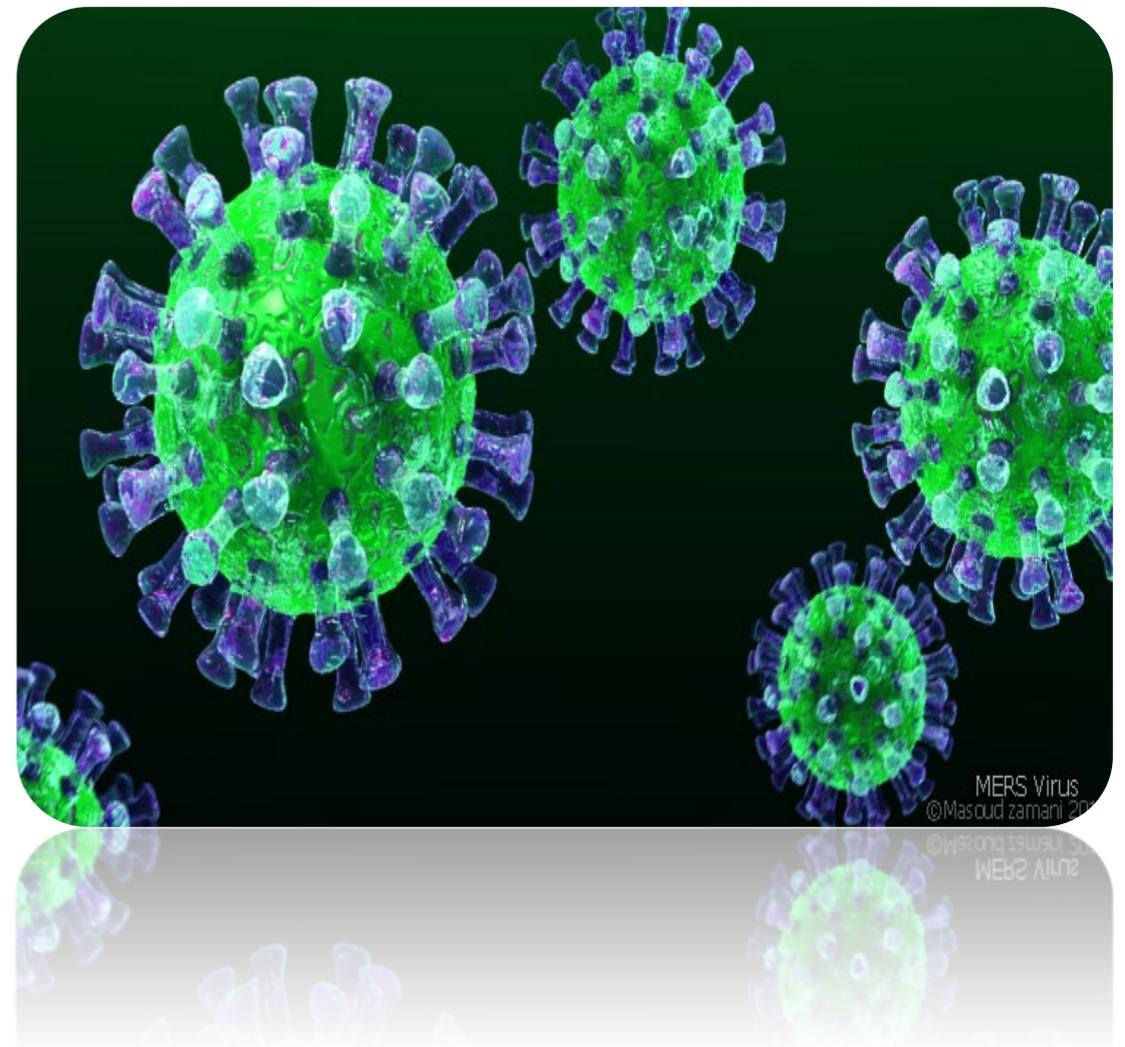
Me=>we takes time, intentionality – but when there are moments, need to recognize them as they are important steps to learning, capacity building



Roles of scientists and technical experts – how to prep them, engage them in process

Covid 19 Take-aways

- Prior personal relationships influence transition to virtual engagement
- Careful assessment of and attention to needs and access matters
- Recognizing and adapting to the myriad pressures everyone is under is key
- Adaptive engagement!
- Expanding our technological toolbox is critical
- Facilitation techniques and best practices still matter



Visit our website:
<http://water4ag.psu.edu>

Contact:
Walt Whitmer
Penn State University
wew2@psu.edu
814-865-0468