

Guidance to Create More Diverse Participation for Panel Discussions

Background and Introduction

At WRI, we recognize the importance of creating compelling panels for events and we are distinguished in our ability to bring together diverse groups, sectors, and individuals on critical environmental and development topics. Although WRI values balanced representation of gender and underrepresented groups as helpful for increasing engagement, our Editorial Board's review of engagements over the past year shows we need to more consciously consider balance on our panels.

Last fiscal year, 70 percent of the speakers at WRI-organized events were male. For external speaking engagements during that same time period, we had more balance. WRI staff participating on externally-organized panels were close to even between men and women (although, that is not to say that these externally-organized panels were gender balanced). However, when we looked at keynote speakers or individual presentations, the divide started to grow again with men in 60 percent of those speaking roles.

WRI should strive for a 50/50 balance in representation of expert men and women, and similar participation from underrepresented (i.e., gender and minority) groups, on panels and other forms of public engagement.

To support this shift to more balanced panels, we have prepared the following recommendations as guidance. We hope that these recommendations will inspire all staff to think about ways that we can achieve gender balance and diversity, and help WRI to reflect the array of audiences with whom we are engaged.

Following are two proposed recommendations for WRI staff who are organizing and participating on panels:

1. Whenever possible, if you are organizing a panel think about how to encourage diversity and aim to include women, as well as participants from an underrepresented group. If the panel is discussing a particular country or region, make every effort to include an expert from that country or region.
2. If you are participating on a panel, actively encourage organizers to bring in diverse speakers, including women and participants from an underrepresented group or the country/region of focus, as per above.

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Whether you are organizing a panel or participating in one, what can you do to help diversify panel discussions?

- 1. Expand your network.** We build panels from our existing networks, which often leads us to rely on the same people, limiting the views and experiences expressed during a panel. Identify networks of people typically underrepresented in your professional world and invest effort in developing relationships with them. This may be a long-term endeavor, but this broader base of expertise and perspectives can enhance future events, as well as projects.
- 2. Reach out.** Once you have a concept for an event, reach beyond your immediate team to identify speakers from this broader base, making it clear that you seek people with a particular technical expertise who also bring varied perspectives in relation to the topics that are important to represent.
- 3. As an organizer, commit yourself to improving your selection process.** Do not put the responsibility for engaging panelists from underrepresented groups on someone else from that group. Reach out yourself, build a rapport with potential speakers and engage in a meaningful dialogue on the topic to ensure that the invitation is genuine.
- 4. As a panelist, commit yourself to sharing the stage with a diverse panel.** If you are invited to speak on an externally-organized panel, ask the organizers who will be joining you. If you notice the panel is homogenous, ask the organizers if they have considered including speakers from underrepresented groups. Be prepared to offer suggestions on who the organizers could invite in order to build a more diverse panel.
- 5. Mobilize resources and support.** Speakers from underrepresented groups may face the issue of underfunding. Set aside budget to ensure you are able to support their participation. In determining the timing of your event, you may also want to check the availability of these speakers and adjust as necessary to accommodate their participation. If you are organizing a longer event, such as a conference or workshop, survey participants to understand what needs they may have, particularly related to child care, to be able to attend and effectively engage.
- 6. Avoid tokenism.** Invite speakers from a variety of relevant backgrounds. If only one member of an underrepresented group is on the panel, avoid asking that person to speak for that group. Ask that person to provide their insights and expertise on the subject being discussed. If you do want to ask the person to 'represent' a particular perspective, prep the person for the question in advance and preface the question with why and how it is relevant to the discussion. However, make every effort to have a fully diverse panel so even a last minute drop out won't leave you with a homogenous group.
- 7. Prepare your speakers.** Women and speakers from underrepresented groups may not have as much experience participating on panels and may need support in preparing to effectively deliver comments. Provide speakers with background information and a set of guiding questions that you would like them to answer. Inform them of who the other speakers are and what questions they will be addressing. Tell your speakers their order on the panel. Inform them of your preference for PowerPoint. If it is their choice, let them know if the other speakers will or won't be using that tool. Let speakers know at least a day in advance how the room will be arranged, how many attendees are expected. If possible, connect the speakers by email or set up a prep meeting in person or virtual so speakers can develop a rapport and discuss style and flow.

- 8. Offer speaker training, particularly for WRI staff.** Programs that expect staff to engage in WRI hosted as well as external speaking events, may want to consider providing guidance to help them perform at the level your attendees expect. You can deliver the actual training online and in groups. You can also pair experienced speakers with beginners for coaching sessions. This provides an opportunity to showcase the expertise housed within WRI, and offers new opportunities for staff to grow.
- 9. Offer safe trials.** Host brown bags or other informal events where you can get to know experts new to your network without risking your reputation. This will also give you a sense of their style and the perspective they may add to a project or event.
- 10. Don't rush.** Identifying and garnering commitment from new contacts to speak at events may take time. Give yourself enough lead time to reach out through expanded networks, develop a rapport and prepare speakers from underrepresented groups to effectively participate in your event.

Adapted from:

<https://hbr.org/2014/01/theres-no-excuse-for-all-white-male-panels/>
<https://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2011/03/26/how-to-avoid-a-gendered-conference/>
<https://netimpact.org/blog/6-steps-for-planning-a-diverse-conference>