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Achieving Policy Impact

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Key takeaways:

- Policy impact does not happen by itself. It requires strategic planning for engaging relevant audiences with the science, including active participation in policymaking environment.
- Presenting research to broad audiences in a variety of nonscientific fora allows to gain allies carrying the message forward.
- In order to plan a robust strategy, scientific organisations need to focus on building relationships and gathering policy intelligence: understanding drivers, actors and their different roles, the importance of timing and appropriate language, and the ways to increase visibility in policy and stakeholder circles.
- Policy impact planning fits already at the project design stage and can be adapted as circumstances change. It is useful to take into account societal and political contexts, as well as connections to other disciplines and policy areas, as the projects develop.
- Gathering policy intelligence and building skills for increased impact is a collective exercise. It is therefore wise to promote institutional instruments for systematic organisational learning and exchanges of peer tacit knowledge.



Scientists working in a policy context are not mere advisors, called up to answer an isolated question only when specific knowledge is needed. Parachuting detached knowledge into the policymaking process without proper cocreation is likely to be inefficient or even misunderstood (see [Chapter 1](#)). Instead, we believe science can only bring meaningful insights to policy if researchers and policymakers work closely together. Thus, scientists should actively participate in the policymaking process, even if they do not hold a policy position. They need to be engaged and understand the societal and political context of their work, in order to achieve policy impact. They need to be mindful of how to communicate, with whom to engage and be deliberate about planning their interventions.

This does not come naturally to many scientists. Conventional academic training does not emphasise policy engagement as a central expectation in the scientific profession. Therefore, scientists who start working in a science for policy context need to learn the policy world and its norms, and consider how to navigate an environment full of pressures different from academic life. This chapter aims to help: it sheds light on key principles to which scientists (and their organisations) need to adapt to achieve impact. For advice on how to become engaged without jeopardising scientific integrity, see [Chapter 10](#).

New Practices Helpful to Increase Impact on Policy

Transforming scientific findings into policy solutions is not a one-off, rarely is it a formal, fully structured and predictable process. Scientists and scientific organisations need to develop strategies and be aware of the importance of roles, communication, relationships and overall visibility in order to be able to better operate in the policy environment. Here are a few principles.

Scientists Should Know About Different Policy Actors and Their Role in the Process

Policymaking is a complex ecosystem with many actors involved, who vary in their priorities, interests, attention spans and knowledge needs. It is therefore crucial for scientists to understand the whole policymaking arena, for two reasons:

- To be able to distinguish the roles and be clear with which hat one speaks, with related norms and expectations.
- To understand the diversity of actors in the policymaking system.

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As with all models of policymaking, the list below is a simplification of the picture, but a useful one to help researchers understand the key players:

- *The decision-maker*: the person or the body empowered to take the policy decision. Most often politicians.
- *The policymaker*: the person or the body assisting the decision-maker in reaching a decision by providing policy analysis and generating policy options.
- *The scientific expert*: the person or the body providing scientific support and advice to the policymaker and the decision-maker, giving the best evidence on which to base the solutions. This evidence and advice also involve reviewing or identifying policy options from a scientific point of view and highlighting new implications for policy consideration from research results. This is an active role covering the full policy cycle from a problem definition to policy implementation and, where needed, the anticipation of future questions.
- *The stakeholders*: people or organisations that affect or are affected by a decision and have an interest in its outcome. They exert influence on the policymaker and decision-maker and lobby for a preferred outcome of the decision. They can be consulted in the formulation of the questions on which scientific advice is sought and they may also have scientific knowledge relevant for the advice.
- *The citizens*: all of us that ultimately are affected or also can affect the implementation of the decisions and the outcomes. Citizens can be involved not only for their matters of concern, for insights and knowledge about the particular policy issue but also because their expectations, values and imaginations matter.

In practice, people or organisations may find that they fulfil more than one of these roles in the decision-making process. Proper governance demands that everyone in the decision-making process understands which role they are playing at all times and avoid combining different roles to avoid conflicts of interest (see more in [Chapter 10](#)). Scientists are not always only the scientific experts: they can also act as issue advocates or as stakeholders ([Pielke, 2007](#)), or even play a more direct policy drafting or decision-making role. The art of scientific support also lies in *making clear* which role one occupies when and remaining impartial where possible. When advising, it is vital to clearly state to which values or objectives a piece of advice responds, if it comes from a clear value-based point of view and includes an opinion on top of research results.

Moreover, these different policy actors form distinct audiences with different communication needs. There is no such thing as the general public, also not in the policymaking process (see [Chapter 15](#)). Achieving impact means adapting a message and framing to each of them, without misrepresenting the data and results or delivering contradictory messages.

The immediate audience, predetermined by a project or topic, is not always the only one worth targeting. Engaging with more actors who may be interested amplifies the message. Stakeholders and other scientific experts in particular can raise visibility of a project, as third-party endorsement of one's expertise can boost its credibility. Particularly valuable is such endorsement when granted by stakeholders with different perspectives. Other influential experts can vouch for one's credibility vis-à-vis policymakers, if the work is respected by trustworthy scientists and prestigious journals (more how to reach various audiences in [Chapter 15](#)).



Scientists Working in Policymaking Should Speak the Language Policymakers Understand and Pay Attention to

The policymaking world is one in which bandwidth is limited, attention is scarce and solutions are often needed urgently. Faced with an overflow of information, human brains have developed coping mechanisms to manage, evaluate and prioritise it (Hallsworth et al., 2018; Banuri et al., 2017), often called cognitive biases. They increase our effectiveness in processing information and are also a proof that humans do not behave entirely rationally all the time. Such cognitive shortcuts can, for example, make us put more trust in information that confirms already held beliefs (confirmation bias), consider something important or useful just because it easily comes to mind (availability bias), make us unable to accurately judge how much we or the others know, how much we agree or disagree with each other or reinforce each other's views in homogenous groups. There are many more of these shortcuts, and while they do not doom us to failure,¹ they need to be reckoned with by anyone aiming to introduce new ideas and knowledge in an environment competitive for attention.

The policy world is full of competing providers of information, with different interests (see Chapter 10). Given the tempo and cognitive shortcuts of policymaking even in noticing new information (Hallsworth et al., 2018), scientific facts need ambassadors, willing to make their work visible, understandable and communicated effectively (Cook and Lewandowsky, 2011). Trust matters in how knowledge is validated, spread and accepted (O'Connor and Weatherall, 2019).

The quality of science is indisputably a key precondition for impact (although what quality means is a subject of ongoing debate, see Sarewitz, 2011, as well as Chapters 2 and 8 of this handbook). However, there is no iron law that excellent science will by itself attract attention. Therefore, any information and knowledge provider, scientists included, has to be purposeful about their communication, outreach and engagement. There is no way of reporting one's data that would be 100% neutral – there is no 'view from nowhere' and every presentation decision is a value-based choice. Ignoring this communication aspect does not guarantee impartiality. Thinking strategically about communication is not by definition lacking in scientific integrity.

Communication choices about which framing and narratives to use shape perceptions and decisions. People are more likely to support public health interventions when the predictive data present how many deaths can be avoided, instead of how many lives saved (Tversky and Kahneman, 1981). A choice of a frame matters even if the underlying data remain the same and has to do with people's interpretation and underlying values. Such a choice can carry important political consequences (Lakoff, 2004) and is not neutral - not paying attention to it does not mean one is a more objective scientist.

As the intake of evidence into policy processes does not happen without researchers' conscious efforts and strategies for attaining impact, being heard when engaging with policymakers requires also attention to language, both in its form and tone.

To be understood by a nonscientific audience, clear writing and balancing simplification and complexity are crucial (see Chapter 15 for our approaches to clear writing and visual

¹Hallsworth et al. (2018) detail techniques that counter the detrimental effects of these unconscious biases on noticing information, deliberating on decisions and executing them.



communication). Double meanings and connotations of some scientific terms in a nonspecialist context² represent pitfalls that hinder communication.

The tone of language is just as crucial in ensuring trust and effective relationships: being constructive but not offensive is indispensable. Within scientific communities, researchers often pay little attention to the sensitivities of other researchers if they think they are wrong. ‘Reviewer 2’ always seems particularly hostile. However, when scientists review policy documents or exchange arguments in policy debates, the purpose of their involvement is to help improve the outcome. This requires that policymakers are convinced it is worth listening to researchers’ arguments. Scientists and policymakers are partners in the process, not competitors, which requires mutual respect and a constructive tone.

Of course, scientific integrity comes first and scientists must not turn a blind eye to wrong or inaccurate arguments or self-censor in pointing out necessary changes in policy-related documents. This is how scientists add value in the process, but they are more likely to succeed if they convey their points constructively. Writing with denigratory language affects trust, which can eventually damage the relationships and close off opportunities for dialogue. This applies not only to reviewing and commenting on policy documents but also to publishing policy-relevant papers (see [Chapter 10](#) for advice on quality checks for publications).

There may be situations when blunter language is needed to warn against certain decisions. Scientists should not hesitate to speak more forcefully when justified but should recognise when bridges are being burned and weigh this judgement carefully. In that context, it is also vital to communicate uncertainty in ways that will be understandable for policymakers, without stifling their decision-making.

Scientists Should Look for Windows of Opportunity, Build Relationships and Gather Intelligence About Policy Actors and Drivers

Irrespective of the context, planning for policy engagement and impact must happen from the beginning of a research project, and adapted if necessary. Anticipation is an ally of impact. Relationships and policy intelligence can help researchers to know when they could have valuable input and time it strategically. This way one can volunteer new perspectives, instead of waiting for a request that may not come. Two aspects are necessary to plan impact realistically: understanding the policy drivers and building relationships in the policy arena.

Policy problems are interconnected and complex and require joint initiatives in response. Interdisciplinarity and systemic thinking are an important part of a more agile scientific support

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²A video produced by Wellcome Trust shows some very relevant examples: ‘Beware double meanings when you talk science’: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mscn8QBu2Ws>, acc. 02.05.2020.



(see [Chapter 11](#)). Modern science for policy organisations should strive for it but this requires gathering ‘policy intelligence’, understanding of the different facets of the policy debates and drivers (Oliver and Cairney, 2019).

Scientists usually work on a narrow subject in detail, but the repercussions of their knowledge may be relevant for multiple policy fields and contexts. Equally, it is unlikely that one single piece of research will be decisive. Often connecting different pieces of research is crucial: it is not always that the latest study is most useful for policy. A well-known phenomenon from several years back may not have penetrated the policy sphere and may be more significant. Scientific novelty is not always a virtue in science for policy.

Navigating that reality is difficult. Some findings raise the interest of different actors (e.g., in different policy areas), who do not always approach it with the same reasons and attitudes. One set of results may be useful for one area and complicate the plans in the other. For that reason, science for policy organisations must work towards understanding multiple sides of policy processes and not work in silos.

One way of trying to get this understanding is networking beyond scientific circles (Badgett, 2015). It also helps to win legitimacy and brings multipliers of work, beneficial for visibility and trust. Both online and offline networking, being visible in not only scientific events, but also policy-relevant ones, help to understand where important conversations are happening, who is involved in them and how they drive policies. These affect the context of one’s research and policy support. Policy influencers can also be prominent scientists or analysts with an active policy role. [Chapter 10](#) sheds more light on how to avoid undue influence of interests when engaging nonscientific partners in science for policy work.

The right understanding of policy drivers and developments helps to proactively arrange and plan cooperation ahead of time (Badgett, 2015). By understanding this complex puzzle and investing in a strong network of policy actors at various levels, researchers can strategically build long-term relationships with policymakers, which are vital for impact. Policy support is very much a face-to-face, peer-to-peer endeavour, in which interpersonal relations can be the catalyst or downfall to a functioning collaboration. However, these relationships can pose some danger to integrity, or be abused for undue influence. For more on this, consult [Chapter 10](#).

Understanding the drivers and forging relationships with policymakers helps to identify windows of opportunity for engagement, in terms of timing, scope of support and agency. Policy intelligence helps to understand interests and developments among different groups that may all have interest in one’s research, but with different intentions. This can help to adapt to various interlocutors – to their individual goals and state of the relationship – and avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.

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Timing is a crucial driver of policymaking. Being on time and respecting the deadlines is key if one wants to receive any place in the policymaking process. However, figuring out the right timing and the expectations is not always easy or in control of the scientists. When policymakers are under time pressure to gather evidence, the strength of the existing relationship plays a role in whether scientists will have a window of opportunity.

Understanding the policy process also helps researchers to interpret what type of support they can provide at a given moment. For instance, at a later stage of policy development, only concise and easy to integrate data are welcome. Any detailed and nuanced input can be useful earlier, at the framing or drafting stages. Mixing these up will deter policymakers from using such evidence.

Of course, gathering ‘policy intelligence’ is not always possible for individual scientists, but there are institutional processes that can help:

- Horizon scanning (see more in [Chapter 12](#)): early capturing of even weak signals about topics gaining traction and likely to influence the policymaking agenda;
- Media monitoring: keeping track of the news and debates in relevant policy fields;
- Political briefs/dedicated policy officers: specific analysis on what is on the agenda, topics under formal debates, key policy events and developments in a field;
- Following policy influencers via social media: it helps to catch the pulse of a debate and recent developments and understand where the relevant conversations are happening.

It is not to suggest that one person should try to build up this entire picture alone. Science for policy is a team sport. Institutionally, there must be ways to gather intelligence on multidimensional policy drivers.