



Designing for success: SPI structures

The Brief in brief

This brief looks at how the structures of Science-Policy Interfaces (SPIs) impact on the credibility, relevance and legitimacy of the SPI and draws lessons for SPI design choices. This brief is aimed at those developing SPIs, as well as actors evaluating or funding SPIs.

What are SPI structures?

A distinction can be made between structures, objectives & functions, processes, outputs, and outcomes of SPIs.

SPI structures are institutional arrangements set up to achieve the objectives of the SPI. SPI structures vary, ranging from:

- very formal, institutionalised bodies (e.g. Subsidiary Body on Scientific, Technical and Technological Advice of the Convention on Biological Diversity, Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services) to informal and flexible relationships (e.g. ad hoc advisory boards, seminar series)
- one-off or time-bound exercises (e.g. Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, national ecosystem assessments, interfaces for specific research projects) to periodic assessments (e.g. Global Biodiversity Outlook) or semi-permanent institutions (e.g. national biodiversity platforms).
- large international bodies to small groups and even individual relationships

Structure and function of SPIs are closely linked. SPIs can fill a wide range of objectives and functions, and this will partly determine appropriate structures. Important aspects include:

- the geographical and temporal scales of the SPI;
- the political level(s) at which it operates;
- whether it is closer to policy or to scientific processes;
- whether it focuses on a relatively narrow issue or has a broad remit;
- whether it focuses on a particular policy, or particular stages of the policy cycle (early warning, issue identification, policy design, implementation, assessment, review);
- whether it has a formal mandate and fixed rules, or is more informal and flexible.

Structures and CRELE

Three important attributes may help to explain SPIs' influence, outcomes and impacts: the perceived credibility, relevance and legitimacy (CRELE) of the knowledge and processes involved (for more information, see the "Keeping it CRELE" SPIRAL Brief). Different structures have different implications for CRELE. The relationships, and appropriate design decisions, will depend on the goals and functions of the SPI as well as on other contextual features.

Criteria for SPI structures

Although SPI structures vary hugely, all SPIs can be considered in terms of three crucial structural features (see table below). These features are often strongly connected to credibility, relevance and legitimacy.

Structural Features	Components
Independence	Freedom from external control, transparency, objectivity, balanced membership
People	All relevant expertise and interests included; competent participants; open to new participants
Resources	Financial resources, human resources (e.g. leadership, champions, ambassadors, translators), networks, time

Independence

Independence of SPI from external control and vested interests increases credibility. For some SPIs, full independence is impossible: they exist to report to a specific organisation. Others can be formally independent, but may have links with one or more organisations.

Credibility and legitimacy can be maintained by use of 'Chinese Walls' and codified independence from interference in due process. Ensure transparent documentation for all dependencies such as funding links and power structures.

Seeking an objective, transparent and rigorous stance can be important for credibility and ultimately relevance. Becoming tied to a particular perspective or partisan policy agenda can damage the perception of credibility and even lead to exclusion from some forums.

Ensure a balanced membership to enhance legitimacy as well as credibility. This may be in terms of geographical representation, interest groups, scientific perspectives... The details will vary according to the context. Be aware of a need to update membership with evolving contexts.

People

An SPI is only as good as the participants. Get good people involved, then keep them. A wide coverage of expertise increases the knowledge base, legitimacy and credibility of the SPI. A range of theoretical and applied experience, coverage of different views/paradigms, types of knowledge, and interdisciplinary skills may be relevant. Ensure opportunities for participation are genuine – involving token members with no real say may damage perceived legitimacy. Prioritise recruitment and maintenance of highly competent participants with sufficient expertise, peer-group respect, and ability to represent their constituencies. This is key to credibility and also legitimacy. But remain open to

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new participants to increase legitimacy and create commitment from the next generation of experts.

Ensure that participants are motivated and committed: incentives, clear policy demand, or simply feeling valued and useful can attract participation and action by relevant scientists, policy makers, and other stakeholders.

Resources

SPIs depend on human and financial resources to achieve their objectives. Shape the workplan to respect short-term resource constraints, and seek out resources for long-term ambitions. Adequate and sustained financing enables the SPI to achieve objectives; inadequate funding endangers continuity and motivation. Trying to achieve short-term targets with inadequate resources is a temporary option that may cause long-term damage.

Key human resources can play critical roles. 'Champions' in strategic organisations and charismatic 'ambassadors' to strategically important events can create audiences and secure support. Well-respected and visible participants enhance credibility and legitimacy. 'Translators' can facilitate knowledge exchange between science, policy and stakeholders.

...by the end of 13 months people had put so much into it, and they could not keep up the volunteer work they had invested in it, they just dissolved. It was like survival of the fittest at the end...Dr H, scientist.

To conclude, SPI structures vary greatly. The most appropriate features to prioritise vary according the SPI

goals and features of the policy, governance and scientific contexts. So it is neither possible nor desirable to derive 'one size fits all' solutions for SPI structure. Consideration of the impacts on CRELE features may help design an appropriate structure.

Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, including separate briefs focussing on lessons learned from other SPI processes, see companion SPIRAL briefs at <http://www.spiral-project.eu/content/documents>

This brief is a result of research and interactions within and around the SPIRAL project. This brief was written by Simo Sarkki (University of Oulu), Jari Niemelä (University of Helsinki), and Rob Tinch (Median).

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