



Improving the use and impact of your research: Recommendations to EU research projects

The Brief in brief

EU-funded research projects are increasingly asked to include policy and societal dimensions into their work plans and strengthen their dissemination and science-policy interface (SPI) activities. This brief outlines some challenges that research projects currently face, and some recommendations to address these challenges.

Challenges faced by research projects

Most environmental research projects recognise their responsibility to contribute to addressing societal problems and the importance of developing strong science-policy interfaces. Yet projects are still facing basic challenges in planning and implementing their interface work, including:

- Framing the project in the broader policy and societal context;
- Engaging with policy and other actors throughout the lifetime of the project;
- Interacting better and more broadly;
- Working with other projects and learning from their experiences.

Recommendations for research projects¹

The following recommendations could help to overcome the above challenges, particularly if complemented by funders' supporting actions (see companion SPIRAL brief).

- **Establish a dialogue over the lifetime of the project.** Remember that effective SPIs and communication should not be end-of-pipe. In many cases, establishing a dialogue with policy makers and other stakeholders from the onset, and keeping them involved in the formulation or refinement of research questions, can

significantly contribute to effective science-policy interactions. Steps to support this include the need to:

- Ensure early links with relevant actors at the EU level. Projects should ask the project officer at the European Commission to support an early meeting with appropriate policy officers from relevant policy Directorate-Generals at the start of the project, preferably before the kick-off meeting of the project to allow work package leaders responsible for communication and the project coordinator to meet key individuals face-to-face and understand their knowledge requirements.
- Develop a strong strategy for science-policy interfaces and dissemination. Such a strategy should be implemented and revised as appropriate, and include, in particular, timed and targeted actions for different audiences, but also for different types of knowledge (some knowledge may not be directly policy-relevant yet still worth communicating to policy-makers as background information). Maintain a database of key contacts and build the 'brand' of your project. Include an internal evaluation process in the strategy. Allocate enough resources to the implementation of the strategy.
- Make scientists aware of how policy works. Inform scientists in your project about policy processes, policy cycles, the societal context and what types of results are useful for policy.
- Ensure you have knowledge brokers on board. Make use of people or teams in the consortium who are good knowledge brokers. Both young and more senior scientists may be interested in contributing to science-policy or science-society interfaces. Consider bringing in partners with specific knowledge brokering skills, and/or providing a PhD position in the project to focus on science-policy interface aspects in the project.
- Improve involvement of policy-makers at relevant levels. Interact with policy-makers from sub-national to international level as appropriate. Be sure to also include some policy implementing partners such as local administrations or NGOs in the project.
- Use advisory boards and stakeholder groups. These can include carefully selected policy makers and other key stakeholders. If well run, with the right people involved, they are extremely useful to identify key research avenues of value to policy, identify policy-relevant results, provide input to the implementation plan, alert researchers to priority issues on the policy agenda, help bring

¹ The following recommendations were developed at a workshop on "Better interfacing EU research projects and EU policy-making", organised by SPIRAL jointly with the European Commission Directorate General for Research and Innovation (DG RTD), with the participation of the European Environment Agency (EEA).

research progress rapidly to the attention of policy-makers and other potential users, and help develop targeted policy relevant outputs from the projects.

- Use existing science-policy institutions. Institutions such as the European Environment Agency, national environment agencies and national biodiversity platforms can be very useful to learn more about policy needs and to disseminate results.
 - Develop a policy section on websites. A dedicated section on the project website could make policy-relevant information easily accessible and act as a forum where policy makers can ask questions that could be answered by the project.
 - Ensure interaction events at the end of the project, and beyond. Projects must ensure there is sufficient time and resources set aside for interaction via personal meetings and larger events with policy makers when the final results have been produced. In order to foster the uptake of project results in policy, it might be relevant to maintain a dialogue beyond the project's duration.
 - Involve policy-makers and other stakeholders in the development of scenarios, storylines, models, policy options and decision-support tools to ensure that they are adapted to user needs.
- **Connect with past and present projects working on related topics.** It may be helpful and efficient to cluster projects for science-policy interactions and broader dissemination. Such SPI alliances of projects can enhance joint learning, make it easier for policy makers to engage (fewer meetings) as well as provide a broader picture and a more refined input to policy. This can be top-down driven if supported by funding agencies (see our companion SPIRAL brief on recommendations to funders) or more informal and bottom-up when initiated by projects.
 - **Produce targeted and attractive briefs.** Such briefs are a major policy-relevant product and should be made widely and systematically available, e.g. via information systems such as the Biodiversity Information System for Europe (BISE). Briefs need to be targeted and readable, they should link the issues to relevant policies or at least provide a “policy hook”, an explanation as to why this matters, and when appropriate what policy-makers could do about it. Briefs should include a short summary, suggest further reading, and provide a point of contact. Explore innovative ways of producing and updating briefs, e.g. “wiki-briefs”.
 - **Make use of existing science-policy dissemination channels.** Projects should more systematically provide articles to Science for Environment Policy, the news and information service set up by the EC Directorate General for Environment and to similar SPI channels. There are more and more peer-reviewed environmental science journals accepting commentaries or papers with an explicit science-policy focus, in which projects could aim to publish.
 - **Use open policy meetings for dissemination.** A number of broader open policy meetings exist (e.g., high

level conferences, Bridging the Gap series, Green Week), where projects can improve their impact and recognition. Also joint presentations of related research results from several projects showcasing on-going research can be a good way to reach policy makers.

- **Disseminate more broadly.** Better dissemination to the wider public is key. Possible actions include: striving for more dissemination through the media, including European ones (e.g. Euronews); production of popular or children's books; using new media such as video via Youtube and social media (e.g. Twitter); using tools such as Eye on Earth. Projects should explore opportunities to use specific partners for dissemination, including NGOs, professional communicators, Science Museums, Aquaria, Planetaria.
- **Provide training in science-policy activities.** Educating and training researchers in communicating beyond the scientific community is still a major task. This should play a broader role in university education, but could also be part of larger projects or clusters, e.g. via summer schools that address policy, SPI and communication issues.
- **Make your data available to other researchers, policy makers, and the public.** Options to do this include BISE or Eye on Earth (see companion SPIRAL briefs). Projects should ensure they set aside enough resources to prepare and upload data to repositories in a format that is appropriate for future uses.

Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, including separate briefs focussing on recommendations to funders, policy-makers, BISE and Eye on Earth, 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 Johannes Timaeus, Carsten Neßhöver & Heidi Wittmer (UFZ); Juliette Young & Allan Watt (Centre for Ecology and Hydrology); and Sybille van den Hove (Median).

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