



# Co-constructing INBO's policy relevance

## The Brief in brief

We introduce how INBO is 'on the move' by changing its science-policy interface culture. Based on the results of an assessment by a management school, INBO's management has initiated several actions leading up to a cultural change oriented towards increased policy relevance. INBO personnel are being extensively consulted during this process. Moreover, the preferences from stakeholder organizations have been given a more structural place in INBO's research. This brief presents this co-construction of INBO's policy relevance, two examples of science-policy interface practice and some key lessons.

## Setting the scene

INBO is the Flemish research and knowledge centre for nature and its sustainable management and use. INBO carries out research and supplies knowledge to all those who prepare or make policies or are interested in them. As a leading scientific institute, INBO works primarily for the Flemish government, but also supplies information for international reporting and deals with questions from local authorities. In addition, INBO supports organisations for nature management, forestry, agriculture, hunting and fisheries. Originally, some 30 years ago, INBO was set up as a kind of science-policy interface (SPI). According to the current management board, over the years the SPI-performance became increasingly hampered by the ambition to have policy impact (advocating for nature conservation), rather than playing the role of an "honest broker" by providing objective scientific knowledge for policy, on the basis of which a number of policy relevant scenarios are constructed, so that policy makers can make a well informed choice. At the same time the record of INBO researchers' scientific peer-reviewed publications could be improved as a credible objective scientific basis. In order to improve INBO's SPI (knowledge brokering) performance, a management school was asked for an assessment. According to the current director of INBO there were two main reasons to choose a management school for this task: 1) To be a frontrunner in Flanders as the first Governmental Agency doing such an assessment. 2) In order to legitimize INBO within a policy landscape that is dominated by a business culture. In 2011 the Vlerick Management School assessed INBO's performance in order to detect INBO's 'unique value proposition': "A particular

*bundle of benefits offered by the company, and being sought and bought by the customer. The value proposition communicates why customers should buy a company's products and/or services over that of the competitors. The value proposition is different than the products and services offered by the company in that it considers the user's total consumption system."* Based on a stakeholder analysis (potential clients and competitors) and focus group discussions with those stakeholders, INBO's unique value proposition was constructed: "INBO carries out scientific, policy relevant nature research in Flanders. It is committed to short and long-term research. The short-term research aims at developing a broad knowledge base and is carried out on demand of policymakers. The long-term research aims at knowledge generation for future support of policy makers. Long-term research is defined as research for which you have to collect data over a period of several years. A separate part (called the Own Capital) of INBO is committed to medium range nature research in partnerships with other research organisations in Flanders and Europe (universities, research organisations, consultancy bureaus)". The assessment provided the following recommendations:

- Move away from the perception of being: subjective, not neutral, not flexible enough, not transparent enough, doing science for science only.
- Main targets: objectivity (reference to literature, data availability), neutrality (decision support e.g. with display of possible scenarios), flexibility (demand driven), transparency (disclosure of all material);
- More economic and sociological research.

Two examples illustrate how INBO is trying to implement policy relevance in line with the above mentioned recommendations in practice: the so-called "envelope financing mechanism" and participatory research exemplified by a project on wild boar management.

### 1. Envelope financing mechanism.

This mechanism was instigated in 2012 to specifically enhance the policy relevance of short term INBO-research. Stakeholders get a yearly budget which they can use to ask for specific short-term INBO research. Financial resources are covered by structural funding of INBO and by human resources (scientific personnel). This mechanism is being implemented both with the historically most important clients, such as the Agency for Nature and Forest (ANB) as well as with new clients including from less nature-conservation-oriented policy domains such as agriculture. Broadening the client base is an important element in assuring a more balanced analysis and perception of INBO's research. Currently INBO is in the process of developing a simple and flexible procedure for implementing the

mechanism. As this mechanism is rather new, it is too early to judge its functioning.

## 2. Participatory research: Wild boar management project.

This project aims at organising collaborative impact management of wild boar, the population of which is growing substantially, both in numbers and in geographic spread, causing problems which might develop in an even more problematic situation in case of inaction. The project instigates close collaboration with a diversity of local stakeholders, such as farmers, hunters, nature organizations, communities, etc. The initiative of this experimental project was taken by ANB of the Province of Limburg together with ANB at the Flemish level. INBO assists ANB with scientific input both on the ecological and technical aspects of wild boar management and on the more social aspects of this management. INBO organised several workshops with the different stakeholders and ANB to determine the different aspects of the desired future conditions that could be the fundamental objectives of wild boar management in Limburg. The output of these workshops serves as a further input for the decision-making process by ANB.

### Approach taken in SPIRAL to study the test case

We studied the general re-orientation of INBO based on several documents including confidential overviews of anonymous reflections from INBO personnel. We discussed this in an interview with two senior INBO management representatives. We also looked into the two examples above to have a clearer view on practical aspects of the re-orientation. We built upon the SPIRAL overviews of key SPI-aspects.

### Key lessons learned from the Test Case

Being a better science-policy interface, understood here as increasing policy relevance, is one of the main strategic aims of INBO. This is underlined by the outcomes of the external assessment and was formalized by implementing a new strategy addressing the main challenges identified in the assessment. INBO faced the double challenge of improving policy relevance and its reputation for scientifically sound research. It addressed these by implementing mechanisms to involve the clients from the outset in the process of defining the research question, as well as significantly increasing its scientific publication record, which has contributed to its research being recognised as objective and based on state of the art science. One of the new strategic actions aiming for policy relevance is external (client) control: demand-driven research. The issue of neutrality is, however, important for INBO, not only at management level but also (listening to

discussions in the INBO-corridors and on the INBO-Yammer) this topic leads to intense discussion among the scientists. Recently INBO management picked up the need for a more structured discussion about what neutrality means and how it should be operationalized. At the end of 2012 the issue was brought to the attention of INBO personnel via the research group leaders to be discussed at research group level. Currently results of these discussions are being processed and will result in what management considers as a co-constructed and broadly supported text on INBO's neutrality.

The key lesson from this case is a series of remaining questions which may be relevant to the development of other SPIs: (i) Will an essentially top-down approach, formally organising and managing policy relevance be successful? (ii) To what extent is the complexity related to science-policy relations manageable? (iii) Will the approach be flexible and adaptive enough? (iv) Will it be effective for all relevant activities of INBO? (v) How and to what extent will there still be room for informal science-policy relations that may function without such top-down orchestration, and may even be hampered by it? For INBO it is too early to judge.

### Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, including separate briefs focussing on results from other test cases, 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 Hans Keune (INBO) with contributions from Janine van Vessem (INBO), Jim Casear (INBO), Heidi Wittmer (UFZ), Annamarie Krieg (NIOZ), Carlo Heip (NIOZ), Koen Van Muylem (INBO), Maurice Hoffman (INBO), Jurgen Tack (INBO).

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