



Goals and Roles: SPI objectives and functions

The Brief in brief

This brief examines the objectives and functions science-policy interface (SPI), and identifies some lessons learnt. This brief is aimed at those developing SPIs, as well those assessing or funding SPIs.

What are SPI objectives and functions?

A distinction can be made between structures, objectives, functions, processes, outputs, and outcomes of SPIs. An SPI objective refers to the stated (or sometimes implicit) aims of the SPI. Objectives address one or more policy or societal needs by fulfilling a role in the interaction between science and policy. In practice, SPI objectives may be flexible, and in some cases participants may not agree on details, or may have conflicting goals or hidden agendas. SPI functions, or the roles that an SPI *actually* fulfils, may differ from its objectives. Possible SPI objectives and/or functions include, for example:

- knowledge creation and synthesis
- watching and early warning
- communication and translation between science and policy
- awareness raising
- direct policy support
- shaping research agendas
- mediation between different actors and perspectives
- capacity building

These generic goals and functions of SPIs can apply at different scales, and to different policy processes or science areas. They will partly determine appropriate structures and processes for an SPI. Important aspects include:

- the geographical, administrative 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 takes 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.

Objectives 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 objectives have different requirements for CRELE, depending on various contextual features. For example, credibility may be strongly emphasised for knowledge creation and synthesis, direct policy support calls foremost for relevance, while a mediation role makes legitimacy a priority. Thinking about the impacts on CRELE, both immediately and in the long term, can help in making decisions about SPI objectives and functions.

Criteria for SPI objectives and functions

SPI goals vary hugely, but all SPIs can be evaluated in terms of two crucial features of their objectives (see table below). These features are often strongly connected to credibility, relevance and legitimacy.

Functional Features	Components
Vision	Clarity, scope and transparency of the objectives of SPI
Balancing supply and demand	The balance struck between meeting immediate policy needs and focus on broader, long-term or emerging issues

Vision

Having a clear and transparent strategic vision helps to achieve agreement on the scales, sectors and actors that a SPI targets, clearly locating an SPI in the wider science-policy landscape. A well-defined vision enhances relevance by making it clear who target audiences are and who are possible collaborators. Transparency about funding links, objectives, and working processes and rules enhances credibility and legitimacy.

Within the vision, the choice of strategy between pushing a particular perspective, approach or issue versus a more objective or neutral stance regarding a range of possible scientific paradigms or policy options can be important. Lobbying may be effective in some instances, and may enhance relevance. Wider approaches and opening up policy options can increase legitimacy and credibility. Either strategy may be appropriate, depending on the context, but it is probably better to pick one and stick with

'If policy is asking for something that isn't actually possible, the only thing you can do is to try and get the people who are asking for it to understand that it isn't possible' *Dr. S, Scientist*

it – applying different strategies at different times, places or issues is likely to confuse participants and audiences and damage CRELE.

Having ambitious goals, for example aiming to address big issues, make strong contributions to policy processes, or play a major role in shaping research agendas, can motivate participants, and helps to emphasise the relevance of the SPI in broader contexts. But ambitions need to match resources, at least in the long-run, and trying to achieve too much with too little is likely to backfire.

Dynamic aspects of the vision can also be important. Some SPIs are specifically set up, or decide, to serve a short-term or one-off purpose: for example, production of a national ecosystem assessment. Such SPIs may give substantial thought to their legacy – the long-term impacts of their output – but need not otherwise be concerned with long-term, dynamic features at the level of the SPI.

Other SPIs that have non-prescribed lifespans and longer term goals will need to consider long term aspects of their vision, and the consequences of current decisions on their ability to achieve long-term goals. Features of continuity, iteration, adaptability and long-term resourcing become important, as does the need to maintain CRELE over the long haul.

Balancing supply and demand

A science- or supply-driven vision can aim to create policy demand by addressing important societal problems, topical concepts, and gaps in knowledge and policies, through a variety of awareness raising and demonstration methods. But there can be danger that science-driven SPIs lack policy relevance, and therefore practical impact, if the issues addressed by SPI do not match with policy needs.

A policy- or demand-led vision is an alternative strategy. Some SPIs are set up with a specific policy mandate, and fall automatically into this camp. Other SPIs may decide to seek an explicit mandate. Such mandate means the SPI cannot be easily ignored by policy makers, but this can come at the cost of limiting the field or scope of action, the processes and rules, and the forms of communication and reporting. Relevance is usually enhanced, but perceived

legitimacy and/or credibility could suffer. The SPI can become tied to a particular political process, with the risk that if that process ends, the SPI fails.

Intermediate visions are also possible, in which SPIs seek to satisfy policy demand, while also leaving sufficient resources to work on emerging issues and maintain adaptability, credibility and long-term policy relevance.

'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*

Final thoughts

SPIs can fulfil a wide range of functions and goals, and the most appropriate and relevant features to prioritise vary according to a number of dimensions of the policy problem, governance context, scientific evidence, and people involved. So it is neither possible nor desirable to derive 'one size fits all' solutions to the problems of designing and improving SPIs for influencing behaviour. There are many possible 'visions' for an SPI, and many possible positions regarding the balance of supply and demand in shaping an SPI's work. Clarity about these features is always desirable, and will help ensure that SPIs are fit for purpose and meet the expectations of participants. Consideration of the short- and long-term vision, alongside awareness of CRELE and the associated requirements for the SPI, will help in guiding design and operational choices.

Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, including separate briefs focussing on characteristics of SPIs or lessons learned from 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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