



Keep it CRELE: Credibility, Relevance and Legitimacy for SPIs

The Brief in brief

This brief examines Credibility, Relevance and Legitimacy - attributes that have been used to explain the success and/or failure of science-policy interfaces (SPIs) to impact on policy and behaviour. Through workshops and interviews, SPIRAL has uncovered a need to explain what CRELE attributes mean in practice, to explore how CRELE attributes can be enhanced by SPI design, and explain how to build CRELE in to SPI structures. These issues are explored in turn in this brief, which is aimed at those developing and designing SPIs, and those evaluating or funding SPIs.

Credibility, relevance and legitimacy

Credibility, relevance and legitimacy (CRELE) are attributes which can explain the influence and impact of SPIs.

- Credibility is the perceived quality, validity and scientific adequacy of the people, processes and knowledge exchanged at the interface;
- Relevance is the salience and responsiveness of the SPI to policy and societal needs;
- Legitimacy is the perceived fairness and balance of the SPI processes.

These CRELE attributes are widely accepted and used, and can explain an SPI's influence. The emerging Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES, <http://www.ipbes.net/>) considers the CRELE attributes as important. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) uses CRELE to evaluate scenarios, draw lessons from past experiences and explain assessments' influence. .

Lessons learned on CRELE

SPIRAL has produced a set of lessons learned on how to build credibility, relevance and legitimacy into SPIs and on what design features enhance these attributes.

SPIRAL work also uncovered the importance of considering trade-offs across the CRELE attributes: sometimes it is not possible to achieve all three attributes, so it is necessary to prioritise.

Achieving Credibility

To be credible, SPIs must have access to excellent people, skills, and the latest knowledge. But that alone is not enough: the way the SPI is seen by others is vital.

Senior and respected participants enhance the credibility of the SPI. Key human resources, including 'champions' in strategic organisations, leaders, science translators, and charismatic 'ambassadors' can improve visibility and credibility.

Some continuity in membership of SPIs is useful to ensure that knowledge and skills about running the SPI are built upon and not lost, to maintain relationships, and to build trust.

Independence from external control and from vested interests enhances credibility. SPIs should be both cautious and transparent regarding links to other organisations and interests, in particular where significant funding is involved.

Formal and publicised procedures for peer review and quality control increase credibility, and reduce the risks of costly mistakes. Similarly, attention to accounting for and communicating uncertainty increases credibility.

Transparency and traceability regarding the origins of knowledge and outputs, with a full and open audit trail, enhance credibility and may save the SPI's reputation (and that of its participants) if things go wrong and scapegoats are sought.

Enhancing Relevance

Relevance is crucial for having a real impact. It is also key to motivating participation, not just on the policy side but also among scientists. Nobody wants to waste time.

Continuous and iterative policy support builds trust with policy makers and enhances capacities for communication on all sides. Seeking a policy mandate can further enhance relevance. It buys a direct line to policy but, on the other hand, it may also limit flexibility to explore wider issues and can diminish independence and legitimacy. Similarly, lobbying may increase relevance, but risks harming credibility.

Using understandable language adapted to the specific audiences is crucial to relevance. Avoiding jargon, explaining concepts, and establishing common assumptions all help to build understanding and maximise the chance of outputs reaching and influencing the intended audiences. Skilled "translators" can help to improve knowledge exchange. High-impact communication, for example using pictures, figures, or strong messages such as tipping points or irreversibility, can help get complex points across. On

the other hand, if uncertainties are glossed over this may threaten credibility in the long term. Presenting outputs at relevant events, by appropriate presenters for the audience, and at the right time in terms of policy cycle, in accessible format increases relevance.

“...but then the minister opened a conference with our simple diagram – called it the “ecological Dow Jones index of the North Sea” – presented it as simple, clear, and insisted that it must be in the third water management plan!” *Dr B, government scientist.*

Adaptability to changing circumstances is key to relevance. This requires on-going reviews of SPI activities and impacts, and horizon scanning for new knowledge, problems and opportunities. SPIs can even seek to be “gate keepers” for new knowledge,

helping policy makers to distinguish between “crackpot ideas” and “strokes of genius”, and ensuring early involvement in new developments. Flexibility is needed in order to modify previous agreements, correct weaknesses, understand changing science and policy contexts, and respond accordingly. Seeking out new members and skills may be necessary. Iterative and parallel processes of capacity building and SPI development increase relevance and effectiveness of the SPI, and create a sense of continuity and commitment.

Building Legitimacy

Legitimacy is especially important when knowledge is contested, when policy decisions involve winners and losers, and in all other situations where conflict may arise.

Wide coverage of expertise and perspectives not only increases the knowledge base and credibility of the SPI, it also helps legitimacy, provided time is taken to explore issues from a variety of perspectives. It may be necessary to have balanced membership for example through ‘seats’ or votes for relevant interests, sectors, or geographical areas.

Successful conflict management can enhance legitimacy. Clearly stated, appropriate and agreed methods are needed to manage conflict and dissent. Recourse to an external or neutral ombudsman may be necessary. Yet it is important to recognise that consensus should not always be the target. Usually, reaching compromise is a more realistic and even fairer objective.

Multi-stakeholder dialogue is often needed for building relationships, trust, and legitimacy. Formal consultation processes may be required, but it is also often helpful to encourage informal dialogue as people may be more comfortable with this.

Incorporating extended peer review, including scientists from a broad range of disciplines and also other stakeholders in quality control procedures, can build trust and enhance both legitimacy and relevance.

Final thoughts

Building credibility, relevance and legitimacy into SPI design is key to ensuring impact. But SPIs have to work with numerous constraints (resources, time, policy cycle and so

on), and it is not always possible to enhance all aspects of CRELE.

Though it may be tempting to focus on the immediate policy challenges, it is important to consider not just short-term improvements in CRELE, but also the long-term prognosis. CRELE takes time to build, but can be lost very quickly.

SPIs need to make strategic choices regarding what dimension of CRELE to emphasize and what specific features to prioritise to ensure high impact over the long term. There is no ‘one size fits all’ recipe: the right balance of features will vary according to the context. The SPIRAL brief on Trade-offs discusses this issue in more detail.

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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