SPIRAL Briefs
SCIENCE POLICY INTERFACES: RESEARCH, ACTION & LEARNING

Focus on Impact

The Brief in brief

Science-policy interfaces (SPIs) have a crucial role to play in bringing about necessary changes in awareness and behaviour relating to biodiversity. This brief explores how to ensure that SPIs are fit for purpose, focused on reaching their target audiences in timely and effective ways. This brief is aimed at those developing SPIs, as well actors assessing or funding SPIs.

SPIs make a difference

Human behaviour is putting great pressure on biodiversity and ecosystem services. Science helps to protect biodiversity and sustainably use ecosystems by providing key evidence to policy-makers and others, in particular regarding:

- The causes of biodiversity loss;
- The ecological, human and economic consequences of biodiversity loss;
- Policy options for protection and sustainable uses of biodiversity and ecosystems, and their pros and cons.

SPIs are ways to manage the interactions between scientists and policy-makers (see Figure 1). Information exchange and dialogue may result in learning and changes in the behaviour or decisions of participants. This in turn may lead to the development and implementation of policy instruments (such as indicators, targets, scenarios, regulations, quotas, charges) that modify people's and organisations' behaviour relating to biodiversity.

Thus, one practical set of outcomes of SPIs is how they change behaviour:

- Directly, through raising awareness of problems and solutions and triggering action;
- Indirectly, via policy decisions taken by policy makers informed through the SPI;
- Indirectly, via the long-term consequences of research decisions influenced by the SPI (for example, encouraging scientists to address policy-relevant topics).

Focusing on the impact of SPIs means working out how to boost the positive behavioural changes the SPI contributes to: this is what really matters for biodiversity. Achieving this requires consideration of SPI features, target audiences, and policy contexts. These must be reflected in the overarching goals and strategy of the SPI.

Impacts depend on SPI features

SPI impacts can be enhanced by certain features of the SPI structure, processes and outputs.

There is not a single recipe for success, but rather a suite of features that need to be taken into account in a context-dependent way.

Important features may include:

- Capacity building, at all levels;
- Understanding, trust-building and inclusiveness;
- Iterative and joint processes and learning, with science and policy communities mutually enriched by their participation in SPIs;
- Tailoring of information and outputs to the intended audiences, and ensuring communication uses appropriate language for the intended audiences;
- Quality control and balancing the needs of scientific credibility and caution with the time constraints of the policy process.

Impacts depend on audiences

Depending on the target audiences of an SPI, the kind of information needed and the SPI features that can enhance the impact on behaviour will vary.

For local stakeholders, for instance, emphasis is often needed on capacity building, trust building, feedback mechanisms, and accessible outputs. For policy makers, independence, strong quality control, robustness and clarity of messages may be particularly important. While for experts, technical details, establishing scientific credentials, and demonstrating wide knowledge are often crucial.

But these are not hard rules: audiences vary, and understanding their needs is key. Often there is more than one target group, so it is important to tailor the processes and outputs accordingly, and to make sure that various needs are met.

Impacts depend on contexts

The specific contexts and goals of the SPI will influence the kind of tools that can be used, the kind of outputs produced, and what aspects of the SPI to prioritise.

If the goal of an SPI is awareness-raising within various target audiences, it is essential to tailor outputs according to target groups' needs. Using various media and methods can give wide visibility. Using scenarios to highlight choices can make messages 'real' and stimulate debate. Including procedures for feedback and dialogue can enhance legitimacy and encourage learning on all sides. A policy mandate, or strong leadership from policy actors, may be counterproductive and may limit ability to explore and raise awareness of emerging issues.

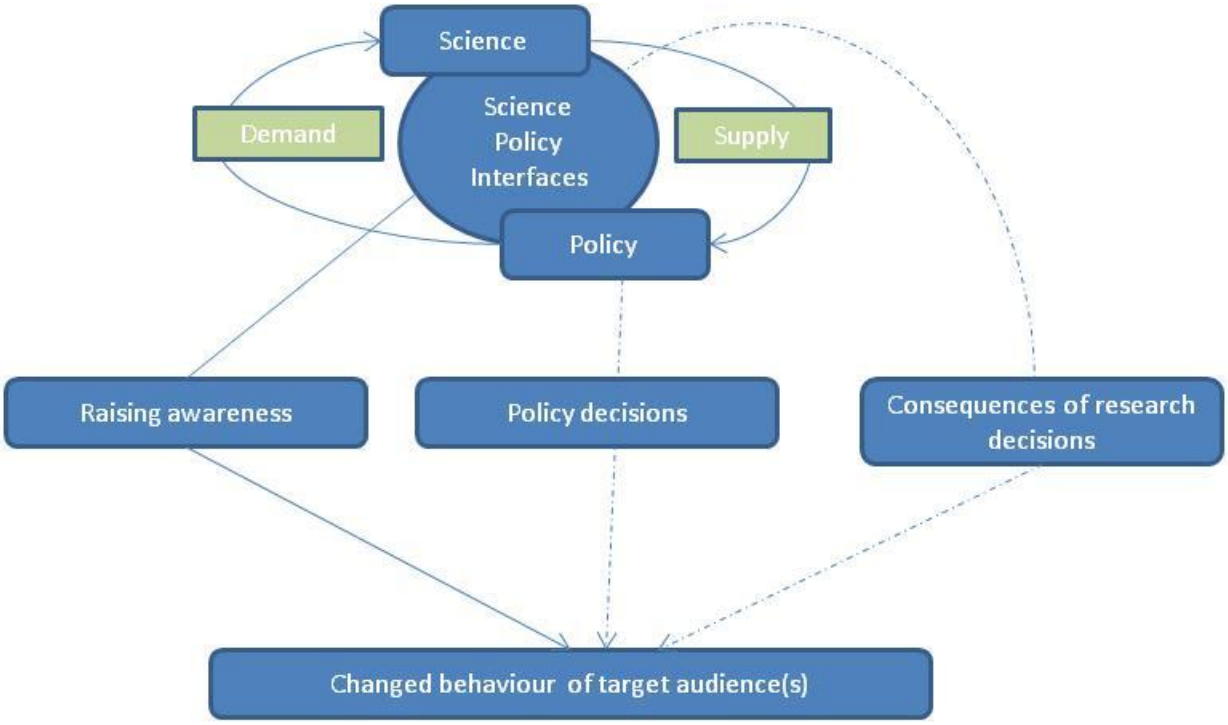

Figure 1. The figure shows the ways in which science, policy and SPIs interact and influence biodiversity-related behaviour both direct (shown as solid lines) and indirectly (shown as dashed lines).

If the goal is to contribute to consensus building (or reaching compromise) on particular issues or in specific areas, conflict management tools are needed and trust building must be emphasized. Independence is important to create a credible position for the SPI in conflict mediation. Particular attention is needed to agree the procedures and methods for reaching consensus or compromise – bringing people together and establishing an agreed process may be the main impact.

If the goal of a SPI is to directly support policy processes, clear understanding of the policy cycle is essential. Outputs and interventions must be timely, targeted, strategic and appropriate. Seeking a clear policy mandate can be important. At early stages in policy development, opening up uncertainties may be useful, and focus can include exploring issues from a variety of perspectives. At later stages, when there is urgent need to support decision-making, clarity of advice and filling specific gaps in knowledge become most relevant.

'Mainstreaming' biodiversity into policy

'Mainstreaming' biodiversity considerations into all policy sectors is essential to stopping biodiversity loss, and to avoiding the dire consequences of continued erosion of our natural capital. Holistic approaches to biodiversity and the causes and consequences of its loss are a vital step. Innovative policy solutions are urgently needed. These changes will only occur if there is a generalised change in the understanding and awareness among policy makers, in businesses and the general public. SPIs have a crucial role to play in contributing to bringing about these necessary changes in awareness and behaviour.

SPIs must be fit for purpose, and focused on reaching their target audiences in timely and effective ways to maximise influence.

This requires joint consideration of audiences, policy contexts, SPI features, and goal-oriented strategies that prioritise the impacts of SPIs. There is no 'one size fits all' solution, and indeed the arguments outlined above demonstrate that some features that help with some objectives and/or audiences may hinder with others. These ideas are developed further in SPIRAL briefs on Credibility, Relevance and Legitimacy in SPIs, and managing trade-offs between SPI features.

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), Rob Tinch and Sybille van den Hove (Median), Juliette Young and Allan Watt (CEH).

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