



IVL Swedish Environmental
Research Institute

**Think
-lab**

**An assessment of lessons learned in the
communication and dissemination of emerging
scientific issues to environmental policymakers**

**SKEP Lot No. 2
Deliverable 2. Recommendations**

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Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed from the findings of the SKEP-ERA net research programme ‘An assessment of lessons learned in the communication and dissemination of emerging scientific issues to environmental policymakers’. They are based upon the lessons learned from case studies and the team’s experience and interactions throughout the process. Further details of the evidence supporting our recommendations are given in the Conclusions section of the programme’s main report. We believe the recommendations build upon communication approaches that have successfully used scientific research to inform and influence policy.

1. Identify your target audience by mapping the communication landscape
2. Develop an understanding of your target audience
3. Encourage co-production of knowledge, dialogue and learning between researchers and policy-makers.
4. Develop adaptive management mechanisms to open policy windows where new knowledge can be fed into the policy making process.
5. Use translators, in one form or another, to bridge the gap between stakeholders and facilitate dialogue between them.
6. Deal with uncertainty or scientific conflicts by identifying common grounds for progress.

We must emphasise that the specific combination of factors and qualities are specific to particular examples and scenarios – adding these factors together does not necessarily equal a best practice model.

1. Identify your target audience(s) by mapping the communication landscape

For scientists, familiarity with the policy situation and wider context within which you and those you want to inform act will help you understand and define your target audience and also identify other actors that might have a stake in ‘your’ issue. This will help you plan and target your communication activities effectively. We recommend that you:

- Map out the current policy situation; is there any person or Government department that has responsibility for dealing with scientific issues like yours?

In some cases an obvious policy target audience to communicate with may not exist; for instance, there may not be any policy institutions responsible for handling an issue like yours. In this case, ‘map the terrain’ to understand where alternative communication opportunities may lie.

- Map out the interest or potential interest of other groups that could be valuable to contact and suitable to approach; for instance NGOs, the media, existing or potential advocates and champions of the issue.

Wider contextual issues are also important for communication success. Identifying and taking these contextual factors into consideration can help you assess where your evidence may need strengthening and formulate the most appropriate communication approach to help you improve your chances of being heard.

- Identify evidence that might compete against or reinforce your scientific evidence – socio-economic factors, economic factors, the presence of detractors of your message.

NOTE: As newly emerging environmental issues are often identified by policymakers today, this recommendation is just as relevant for policymakers as researchers.

2. Develop an understanding of your target audience(s)

The more you know about needs, previous experiences and interests of those that you want to communicate with, the more likely you are to be able to target your message effectively.

- Learn as much as possible about needs, interests, experiences, of the groups that you define as important to communicate with, to be able to work out what, when and how you best communicate a clear message to this individual or group.

3. Encourage co-production of knowledge, dialogue and learning between researchers and policymakers

Often different actors have different needs and ideas when it comes to research outputs. For instance, while policymakers may want a short summary of a piece of research, many environmental problems are complex – they can't be summarised in one page and still provide any real understanding of the issue. Successful examples of where science has influenced policymaking often involve design and co-production of the research project with all stakeholders involved and / or dialogues between actors throughout the research programme to enable actors to develop and maintain a 'shared view' of the problem to be solved, the best means of going about this and what the output should be. There are a number of ways this could be supported on an institutional level:

- Provide arenas for and support initiatives that help researchers and policymakers to develop personal networks improving the basis for communication and uptake of results
- Create learning opportunities such as mentor programmes, science - policy pairing schemes, secondments to help scientists and policy makers to build a shared understanding of the different roles they play and also develop relationships and networks
- Don't be naive about the amount of time and understanding that might be required to form a shared understanding of an issue. Maintain arenas for meeting between science and policy to encourage dialogues and provide methodology and facilitators to support the communication processes.
- Commission policy-orientated research so that researchers and policymakers can both be engaged from an early stage and an ongoing relationship maintained. Ability to influence policy can be built into the research process from the start – either through dialogue with researchers and policymakers or by providing management structures, giving policymakers a say in research commissioning.

- Be adaptive in your communication approach – take opportunities as they arise, review what is and what isn't working on a regular basis and change accordingly.

NOTE: A common problem is that communication plans are made but not used. Communication is a more demanding task than simply sending a message and expecting that the receiver of that message will listen and make use of it. For the engagement process to work you must be open to change as well!

4. Develop adaptive management mechanisms to open policy windows where new knowledge can be fed into the policymaking process

Adaptive and transparent policy making and communications are needed to enable science to feed into policymaking in a timely way.

- Develop and support structures and working strategies that enable emerging issues to feed into policy processes on a regular basis. For example, adaptive management systems are policy structures that can provide transparent and deliberate ways of opening policy windows for new knowledge. Such processes are responsive and flexible, able to capture early warning signals and also adapt to changed circumstances.
- It is important that policymakers communicate to researchers in advance of a policy window opening. They should also encourage researchers to get involved in providing syntheses of current work and communicating new findings to them.

5. Use translators, in one form or another, to bridge the gap between stakeholders and facilitate dialogue between them

Translators frequently play a key role in successful science – policy communication. In this instance, the 'translator' is someone who converts material between the 'language' of science and the 'language' of policy, much in the same way that someone might translate material between French and German. Translators are individuals that are able to bridge the gap between research and policy and also between research and society. They are valuable for opening up for real communication, helping to create a shared understanding among actors and for distilling a clear, relevant message. Translators can also help mediate conflicts between the actors involved.

- Provide translators with a strong mandate to act.
- Recognise the value of translators in communicating and facilitating the communication of scientific evidence to policy, and ensure that they are encouraged and supported in fulfilling this role.
- Translators need to be chosen carefully and used effectively. They should have good communication skills and an understanding of how both science and policy processes work to enable them to build trust and communicate a clear message.

- Provide learning opportunities and communication training for people that work as translators or wish to develop those skills. Many such people have a science or policy background with little or no training in communication.

6. Deal with uncertainty or scientific conflicts by identifying common grounds for progress

Policymakers should understand that uncertainty in, or contested, scientific results don't necessarily mean that the science is poor quality. The way science works is that results are continuously debated and there is always uncertainty involved. However, measures that aim to achieve some sort of consensus view among the research community about what is agreed upon and what isn't, are likely to provide policymakers with a clear enough message for basing policy on.

- Report uncertainty in a transparent way, illustrate and explain where the uncertainty lies and why that is. This is an important starting point for developing trust. However, be aware of the risk that other strong interests may seek to use this uncertainty against you.
- Cultivate consensus through research assessments initiatives and independent science reviews.
- Identifying common ground by communicating what the science community agree and do not agree upon, and the level of consensus involved, can help inform values-based policymaking.
- Scientific disputes must be dealt with as they can contribute to sending an unclear message. While it may not be possible to resolve disputes, mediation may help bring the parties together to develop a shared view of the components of the evidence that they do agree upon.
- Decision support tools based on scientific knowledge can be useful for communicating and visualising a range of different policy options in the same format.