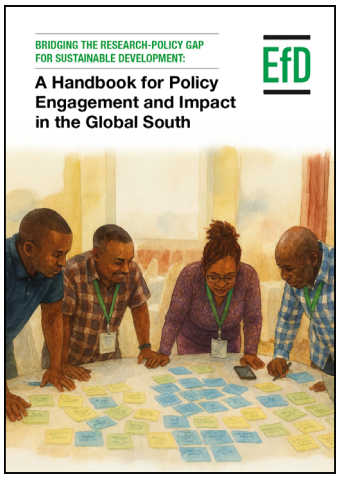
BRIDGING THE RESEARCH-POLICY GAP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT:

A Handbook for Policy Engagement and Impact in the Global South

Bridging the Research–Policy Gap for Sustainable Development: A Handbook for Policy Engagement and Impact in the Global South



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Preface

Environment for Development (EfD) is a global network of environmental economics research centers addressing the most pressing environmental and development challenges in the Global South. Making a difference with research is often very challenging. How-ever, we have ample evidence that policy-relevant research can make a real difference, especially when combined with active and persistent policy engagement.

The Handbook for Policy Engagement and Impact in the Global South aims to inspire and guide researchers, within EfD and beyond, on how to generate meaningful impact from their research through proactive policy engagement. This handbook, with a focus on the Global South, provides practical tools, strategies, and examples from the EfD network and beyond. Our goal is to support researchers in enhancing the relevance and application of their work in policymaking processes, ultimately contributing to informed decision-making and sustainable development.

Research-policy interaction is vital for addressing complex challenges related to the environment and development at local, national, regional, and global levels. This handbook emphasizes the importance of building long-term relationships with policymakers, the private sector, civil society, community-based organizations, and other stakeholders.

A dedicated team of EfD researchers and policy experts, committed to enhancing the impact of research on policy and practice has written this handbook. The work was led and coordinated by Daniel Slunge and Anna Mellin at Environment for Development (EfD), University of Gothenburg.

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In preparing this handbook, the authors used generative AI tools, including ChatGPT, to support editing by improving clarity, flow, and conciseness. All AI-assisted suggestions were reviewed and verified by the authors to ensure accuracy and relevance. An associat-ed AI chatbot has also been developed using Google NotebookLM, trained on the hand-book and related materials, to provide interactive guidance and exercises for researchers.

Financial support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) is gratefully acknowledged.

Glossary of key terms

Science–policy interaction – A broad term encompassing all forms of engagement between scientific communities and policymakers, often with a focus on natural and technical sciences. It includes activities aimed at ensuring that scientific evidence, data, and expertise inform policy debates, decisions, and implementation.

Research–policy interaction – A subset of science–policy interaction that includes all disciplines—natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities—focusing on how research findings are communicated to, interpreted by, and influence policy processes.

Policy engagement – Deliberate efforts by researchers, research teams, or institutions to connect with policy actors so that their knowledge or expertise is considered in policy formulation, implementation, or evaluation. *See BOX 1 for an expanded explanation and examples.*

Research engagement – Broader than policy engagement, this term refers to the ways researchers interact with non-academic audiences—such as communities, practitioners, civil society, media, and the private sector—often for mutual learning, knowledge sharing, and societal benefit. Policymakers are one possible audience within this broader category.

Research impact – The tangible and meaningful effects that research, accumulated expertise, and other scholarly contributions have on policy, practice, and society beyond academia.

Policy impact – A subset of research impact referring specifically to effects on public policy, such as influencing the content of policies, shaping how they are implemented, or reframing how issues are understood by decision-makers. *See BOX 1 for a typology of impact forms and examples.*

1. Introduction

Research plays a crucial role in shaping policies that address societal challenges. However, generating impact beyond academia is neither simple nor entirely within the control of researchers. Policymaking is often an unpredictable, multi-actor process, where scientific knowledge is just one piece of a much bigger puzzle. By combining rigorous research with proactive policy engagement, researchers can increase the likelihood that their work contributes to meaningful impacts. While researchers are typically trained in conducting research and teaching, few receive guidance on how to engage effectively with policymakers and other stakeholders.

This handbook aims to bridge this gap by guiding researchers to make policy engagement more strategic and systematic, ultimately enhancing the policy relevance and societal impact of their work. Drawing on insights from the Environment for Development (EfD) network and other contexts, it provides guidance that is particularly relevant to researchers working in diverse policy environments across the Global South.

The specific objectives of this handbook are to:

1. **Enhance researchers' policy engagement skills** by providing researchers with practical approaches and tools tailored to different policy and governance contexts.
2. **Strengthen researchers' ability to generate impact** by providing practical tools and methodologies for developing, tracking, and evaluating impact from research.
3. **Showcase practical examples from the EfD network and beyond** to illustrate different forms of policy engagement and pathways to impact.
4. **Highlight the importance of sustained partnerships** by emphasizing the need for long-term engagement with stakeholders beyond specific research projects.

Box 1: What do we mean by policy engagement and impact?

Policy engagement refers to the various ways in which researchers interact with policymakers and other stakeholders to ensure that knowledge informs and influences policy decisions. Policy engagement is not limited to disseminating results from specific studies. It encompasses a broader range of contributions, including:

- Providing direct advice based on research, accumulated expertise, or synthesis of existing evidence (e.g., through policy briefs, advisory roles, technical input, or participation in expert committees).
- Collaborating with policymakers throughout the research or decision-making process, including co-producing knowledge that is tailored to policy needs and grounded in local realities.
- Building the capacity of policy actors through training, dialogue, mentoring, and institutional partnerships—activities that may not stem directly from a research project but draw on a researcher's broader knowledge and skills.
- Advocating for evidence-informed decision-making by engaging with the public, media, civil society, and private sector actors to foster a culture of using evidence in policy discourse.

Impact - In this handbook, research impact refers to the tangible and meaningful effects that research, accumulated expertise, and other scholarly contributions have on policy, practice, and society beyond academia. Policy impact is a subset of research impact referring specifically to effects on public policy.

Research impact and **policy impact** can take various forms, including:

- **Conceptual impact** – Shaping how policymakers, practitioners, or the public understand and frame issues, often through dialogue and communication of insights, evidence, or accumulated knowledge.
- **Capacity-building impact** – Enhancing the knowledge, skills, and decision-making capabilities of policymakers, civil servants, and other stakeholders, whether through formal training, mentoring, or collaborative work.
- **Relational impact** – Strengthening trust and networks between researchers, policy actors, and other stakeholders, enabling longer-term collaboration and knowledge co-production.
- **Instrumental impact** – Contributing directly to policy change, such as the development or revision of laws, regulations, guidelines, or implementation practices.

1.1. Why focus on the Global South?

Most existing guidelines on research–policy interaction have been developed in and for OECD countries, often overlooking distinct Global South contexts. Policy engagement strategies that succeed in the Global North may not translate wholly to these contexts. Tailoring approaches to local realities is essential for achieving meaningful and lasting policy impact. A key contribution of this handbook is its focus on the Global South, where the institutional, economic, and political contexts for policy engagement often differ significantly from those in the Global North.

The Global South broadly refers to regions in Africa, Latin America, Asia, and the Middle East, encompassing diverse governance systems, economic structures, and cultures. While each country has its unique characteristics, many face common obstacles to using research in policymaking, including:

- **Institutional instability –** Frequent leadership turnover, shifting priorities, and weak governance structures make sustained research–policy collaboration difficult.
- **Limited funding for research and evidence-based policymaking –** The Global South has far fewer researchers per capita compared to OECD countries, and access to research funding is highly unequal. According to the UN, the least developed countries (LDCs) have about 66 researchers per million inhabitants, compared to 3,500 per million in OECD countries (United Nations, 2019). This imbalance limits the capacity to generate and apply research for policy impact.
- **Capacity constraints –** Many policy institutions have limited resources and staff with training in interpreting and applying scientific evidence, which hinders timely uptake of research.
- **Lack of transparency and trust –** Decision-making can be influenced by competing interests, with evidence overlooked or marginalized, making long-term trust-building essential.
- **Inequalities and exclusion –** Structural inequalities, including gender disparities and underrepresentation of certain groups, limit who participates in research–policy engagement. Women researchers in particular often face additional barriers to seniority, recognition, and access to decision-making spaces. International organizations and donors may also sideline national researchers in favor of external consultants, reducing the contextual relevance of policy recommendations and weakening local research capacity.
- **Politically polarized contexts and informal systems –** Research can be ignored or discredited if associated with a perceived political faction. In some settings, policy engagement takes place through informal or patronage-based networks, which can hinder the uptake of independent evidence.

These challenges, and strategies for addressing them, are discussed in more detail in Table 1 (Chapter 4).

Despite these challenges, there are many emerging opportunities for researchers in the Global South to conduct impactful policy engagement. Rapid urbanization, digital transformation, and escalating climate change are creating new policy spaces and increasing demands for research-based knowledge in shaping sustainable solutions.

1.2. Structure of the handbook

This handbook is organized into three main parts to support researchers at different stages of policy engagement:

- **Part A: Concepts and approaches** introduces key ideas, challenges, opportunities and models relevant to research-policy interaction. It provides a foundation for understanding the impact of research, the policy landscape, and context-specific strategies for engagement.
- **Part B: Policy engagement in practice** offers practical guidance on how to integrate policy engagement into research processes. It provides advice on planning, implementation, building relationships, and evaluating policy impacts.
- **Part C: Science communication** focuses on developing effective communication strategies to reach policymakers and other stakeholders. It includes tools, tips, and templates to support your engagement efforts.

Throughout this handbook, you will find real-world examples from the Environment for Development (EfD) network and links to additional resources and templates in the appendix.

For readers looking for a quick guide to effective engagement, the summary in Box 2 captures eight core recommendations, drawn from the literature, and points to where you can read about them in the handbook.

Box 2: 8 steps for successful policy engagement

Based on a systematic review of advice to academics on the do´s and don't´s of influencing policy (Oliver & Cairney, 2019), here are eight key practices for effective policy engagement:

1. **Do high-quality research**
   Ground your engagement in robust, credible research. (See Chapters 6 and 9)

2. **Communicate well: Make your research relevant and readable**
   Communicate clearly and tailor your work for policy audiences. (See Chapter 10)

3. **Understand policy processes, policymaking context, and key actors.**
   Learn how policy is made and where your work fits in. (See Chapter 4)

4. **Be accessible to policymakers: engage routinely, flexibly, and humbly**
   Foster availability and responsiveness through ongoing interaction. (See Chapter 7)

5. **Decide what your role is**
   Clarify whether you see yourself as an issue advocate or a neutral knowledge broker. (See Chapter 4)

6. **Build relationships (and ground rules) with policymakers**.
   Establish trust and collaboration with key stakeholders, ensuring diverse voices are included, especially those of marginalized groups such as women or youth. (See Chapter 7)

7. **Be entrepreneurial or find someone who is**
   Seek or create engagement opportunities actively—or find support to do so. (See Chapter 9.)

8. **Reflect continuously: should you engage, do you want to, and is it working?**
   Monitor and evaluate your engagement to stay relevant and improve. (See Chapter 8.)

These steps are a starting point, not a universal formula. As Oliver and Cairney (2019) emphasize, researchers need to understand and adapt to specific policy and institutional contexts. That is why this handbook also addresses opportunities, risks and incentives (Chapter 5), researchers' roles in different governance contexts (Chapter 4), and the need for sustained engagement strategies (Chapters 7 and 9).

Source: Adapted from Oliver and Cairney, 2019

The handbook is also accompanied by an **AI chatbot** specifically trained on this handbook to assist researchers in policy engagement and science communication activities (see Box 3).

Box 3: Handbook AI chatbot

The chatbot turns this handbook into an interactive tool.
Ask “How do I…?” and get step-by-step guidance, tailored examples, and quick links to relevant sections. Or just use it to assist you in your policy engagement or communication work.

Examples of how to use the chatbot:

- Get practical guidance with checklists and links to relevant sections.
- Generate or refine prompts for stakeholder identification and power–interest mapping.
- Draft prompts for theories of change and backcasting.
- Create prompts and templates for outcome harvesting (questions, evidence capture).
- Draft policy or research briefs, key messages, and talking points.
- Adapt messages for specific audiences, tailoring tone, length, and format.
- Translate and summarize content, or request short audio briefings in multiple languages.
- Design or get feedback on training sessions on policy engagement with exercises, agenda outlines etc.

Access the chatbot here

1.3. Sources of information

The handbook builds on practical experiences from the EfD network, including real-world examples and lessons from research-policy engagement. Additionally, it incorporates insights from peer-reviewed and grey literature (see references), ensuring a robust evidence base.

The handbook has also benefited from other resources on policy engagement, some of which are listed in Box 4. Since few resources focus specifically on research-policy interaction in a Global South context, this handbook aims to help fill that gap.

Box 4: Examples of other resources on policy engagement and impact

- **Research to Action - The Global Guide to Research Impact:** A learning platform for maximizing research impact and capturing evidence of impact. Read more
- **Integration and Implementation Sciences, Australian National University:** Resources available at i2Insights.org. Read more
- **Science for Policy Handbook:** Handbook for researchers to achieve impact on policy by the Joint Research Centre, European Commission. Read more
- **University of Oxford:** Various resources and support tools for researchers' policy engagement. Read more
- **FastTrackImpact** Evidence-based resources and training for researchers seeking to generate impact, developed by Mark Reed (Fast Track Impact). Read more
- **BetterEvaluation - Global Evaluation Initiative:** Collaborative platform for planning, managing, conducting, and using evaluation (Better Evaluation). Read more

PART A: CONCEPTS AND APPROACHES

Part A introduces key concepts and approaches for engaging with policy. It begins by explaining what research impact beyond academia can look like (Chapter 2) and why the gap between research and policy persists (Chapter 3). It then outlines different ways to engage with policy depending on context (Chapter 4) and how to navigate opportunities, risks, and incentives for researchers (Chapter 5). Together, these chapters provide a foundation for the practical guidance in Part B.

2. Understanding research impacts beyond academia

Research impact is receiving growing attention globally as research foundations, governments, and other funders increasingly emphasize the need for research to contribute to solving societal challenges.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), national research strategies, and significant funding programs such as the EU's Horizon Europe all stress that academic knowledge should not only advance science but also inform policy, influence practice, and foster social and environmental change (UN, 2019).

However, the relationship between research and societal impact is rarely straightforward. Societal change is typically a complex, non-linear process involving multiple actors and external factors. Even when research is highly relevant and well-communicated, its influence may be indirect, delayed, or difficult to trace (Weiss, 1977; Cvitanovic et al., 2018). Moreover, impacts can take different forms, from informing a public debate, to shaping a policy document, to enabling better practices among professionals.

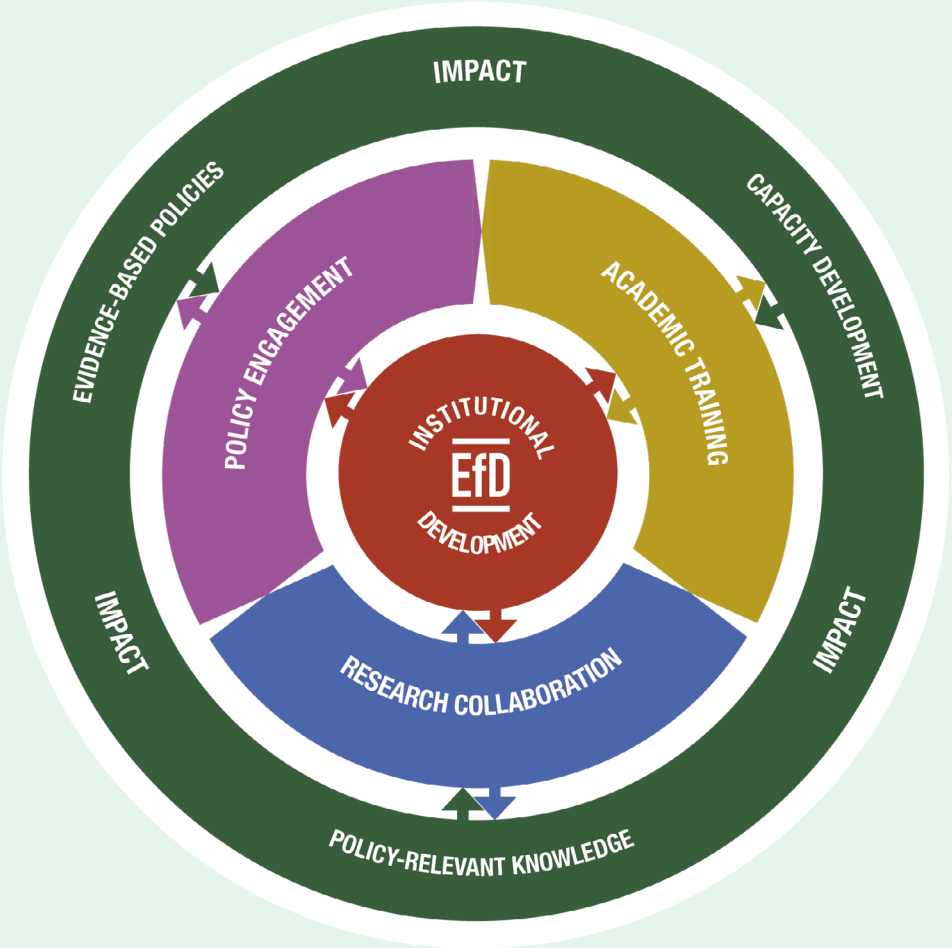
This chapter introduces key perspectives on research impact. It clarifies what researchers can reasonably aim for and prepares the ground for later chapters that provide practical strategies for enhancing and documenting research impacts.

Box 5: The EfD impact model – linking research, engagement, and capacity to real-world change

The EfD impact model (below) illustrates how research contributes to societal change through three interconnected pathways: policy engagement, research collaboration, and academic training, all supported by institutional development. Together, this increases the likelihood of long-term policy and societal impact from research.

The model emphasizes that research impact is rarely achieved through isolated outputs. Instead, it emerges through sustained engagement, collaboration, and capacity building. It provides a shared framework for EfD researchers and centers to plan, evaluate, and communicate their contributions to policy and societal change.

Figure 1: The EfD impact model



2.1. Perspectives on impact

In broad terms, research impact refers to the contribution that research makes to society, including changes in public policy, improvements in professional practice, enhanced public understanding, and broader societal benefits (see e.g. Penfield et al., 2014 and Dotti and Walczyk, 2022 for an overview).

One widely cited definition comes from the UK's Research Excellence Framework (REF), which defines research impact as *(UK Research and Innovation, 2025)*:

"An effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia."

The REF definition has gained traction internationally because it captures both direct and indirect societal effects and highlights that impact can be diverse, long-term, and not necessarily linear. Importantly, it moves beyond narrow notions of academic impacts (such as publications, advancement of scientific methods, theories, and applications within and across disciplines) toward considering real-world changes that research may influence.

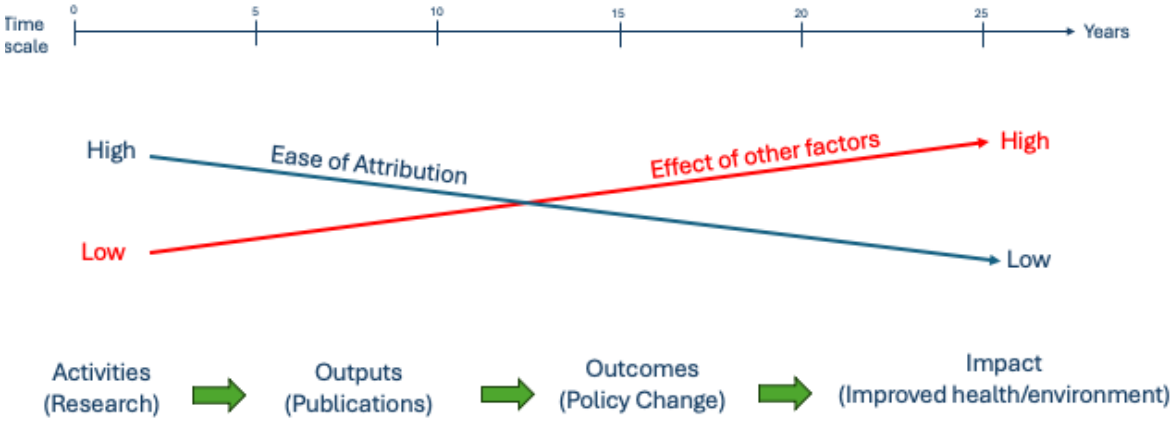
However, there is no universally accepted definition of research impact. In fact, a review by Alla et al. (2017) found no fewer than 108 different definitions across the academic literature. This reflects the wide variety of ways researchers, funders, and institutions conceptualize how research benefits society. Different definitions and frameworks emphasize different aspects (see Reed et al., 2021):

- **Scope of beneficiaries:** Some definitions focus narrowly on current human beneficiaries, while others include environmental outcomes and impacts on future generations.
- **Type of change:** Impact can involve changes in awareness, knowledge, attitudes, norms, behaviors, practices, policies, or systems.
- **Temporal dimensions:** Impact may occur long after the research has been conducted, and the significance of impacts can evolve over time.
- **Normative assumptions:** Most definitions implicitly focus on positive outcomes, though research can also lead to unintended negative consequences.
- **Causal relationship:** The extent to which research can be shown to have caused a societal change varies. Impact may result from research being necessary (a contributing factor) or sufficient (a direct cause) for an observed change.

It is also important to acknowledge that research impact often occurs over long timescales and is shaped by many contributing factors beyond the research itself. The significance of research outcomes may become clearer only years later, and impacts may change as societal needs and perceptions evolve. As a result, attributing specific societal changes directly to one research project is often difficult. Commonly researchers aim at demonstrating that research made a necessary (rather than a solely sufficient) contribution to the change.

Figure 2 illustrates how the attribution of impact to research typically weakens over time as more actors and external influences come into play.

Figure 2: Impact attribution of research and other factors over time



Source: Adapted from Hughes and Martin 2012

2.2. Frameworks for understanding and assessing impact

While recognizing the diverse ways that research can generate impact, it is equally important to understand how these impacts can be evaluated. Many frameworks have been developed to help researchers think systematically about the relationship between their work and societal change.

Reed et al (2021) propose a typology for understanding different approaches to research impact evaluation. They distinguish between assessments that focus on **summative purposes** (e.g., demonstrating that impact has occurred) and those designed for **formative purposes** (e.g., supporting learning and adaptation during the research process). Another dimension is whether the evaluation seeks to show that research was a necessary (i.e., significant contributing factor) or sufficient (i.e., sole cause) condition for achieving a particular impact.

Summative evaluations are typically retrospective, aiming to prove and document impacts for accountability purposes. Formative evaluations, on the other hand, strive to provide ongoing feedback that can be used to learn, adapt, and strengthen the likelihood of achieving impact. Demonstrating necessary or sufficient causality is particularly challenging when evaluating societal impacts, given the multiple factors that usually contribute to social change. Depending on their goals, resources, and audiences, researchers may select different evaluation strategies. Below, we briefly present some of the most common approaches (primarily based on Reed et al 2021).

Experimental and statistical methods: Experimental and quasi-experimental designs, such as randomized controlled trials (RCTs) or difference-in-differences analysis, are often seen as the most rigorous way to establish causal links between interventions, outcomes, and impacts. These methods aim to isolate the effect of a specific input (such

as research evidence) by controlling for other variables. These methods are commonly used in economic research, but financial, and logistical constraints often prevent the use of controlled experimental approaches to evaluate if and to what extent research has caused real-world impacts.

Systems-based approaches recognize that research impacts occur within complex social, political, and economic systems where multiple actors and factors interact. Rather than seeking simple causal attribution, these methods map pathways of influence, feedback loops, and contextual factors.

One example is contribution analysis, which aims to assess whether and how research plausibly contributed to observed changes. Rather than proving causality in a strict sense, contribution analysis gathers evidence to build a credible case that the research played an important role among other influences. Other systems-based methods include outcome mapping and network analysis, which can capture non-linear change pathways. Such methods are particularly valuable in policy engagement contexts where many stakeholders are involved, and where impacts may emerge over long time scales.

Indicator-based approaches use predefined frameworks and metrics to monitor and evaluate progress toward impacts. They are often organized around stages such as outputs (research products), outcomes (use of knowledge), and impacts (societal benefits). The theory of change approach is widely used. It sets out a visual or narrative model of how a research project expects to generate change, specifying assumptions, intermediate steps, and indicators to track along the way. Good practice in theory of change development emphasizes stakeholder involvement and iterative refinement as the project evolves. In Appendix 1, you can find an example of how a theory of change approach can be illustrated.

Other examples include the payback framework and logic models, which similarly try to track the progression from research activities to longer-term societal outcomes. While these models can help structure thinking, they risk oversimplifying change processes if applied too rigidly.

Textual, oral, and arts-based methods: Narrative methods such as case studies, impact stories, interviews, or visual storytelling offer rich, contextualized accounts of how research has influenced people, organizations, or policies. Rather than seeking quantifiable measures, these approaches aim to capture the processes and experiences that led to change.

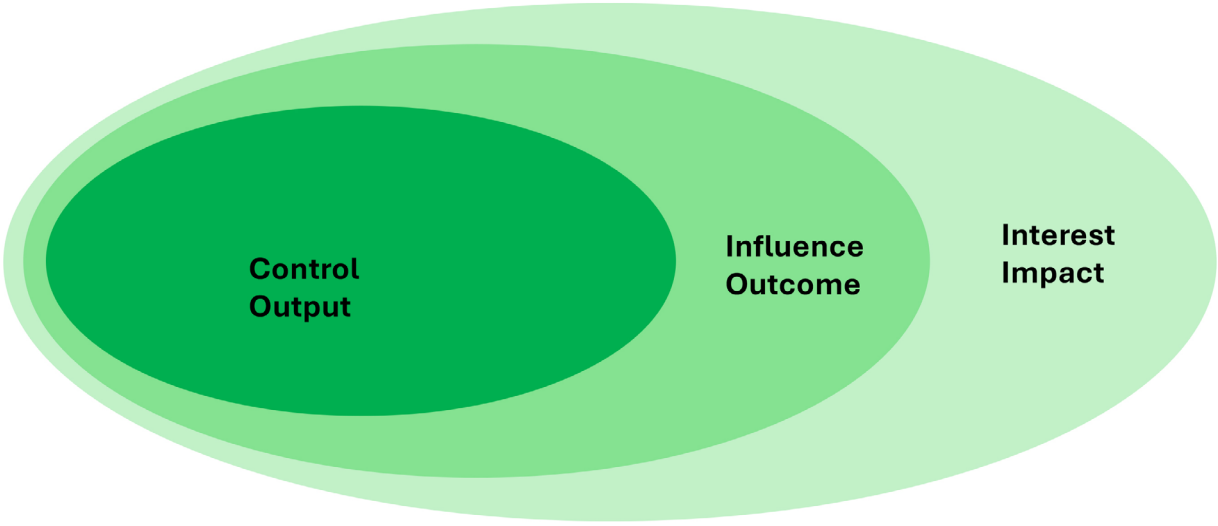
In contexts where quantitative tracking is difficult or inappropriate, storytelling approaches can provide compelling evidence of impact. However, they require careful documentation and triangulation with other sources to enhance credibility and avoid perceptions of anecdotalism.

Evidence synthesis approaches: In some cases, researchers or evaluators may aggregate findings from multiple studies, projects, or evaluations to assess broader patterns of research impact. Methods such as systematic reviews, meta-analyses, or realist syntheses can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how research influences policy and practice across different settings.

While these approaches are resource-intensive, they can be valuable for funders, policymakers, or research programs seeking to understand research contributions at scale.

A complementary way to think about research impact evaluation is through the lens of **spheres of control, influence, and interest** (see Figure 3). This framework emphasizes that researchers can directly control only their immediate outputs (such as publications, new theories, research methods and data, policy briefs, stakeholder engagement activities). They can influence, but not control, whether their research is used by decision-makers or leads to changes in behavior. Societal impacts, such as poverty reduction, improved environmental outcomes, or institutional reforms, lie in the sphere of interest but are far beyond the researchers' direct control.

Figure 3: Sphere of control, influence and interest of researchers



Source: Adapted from Ofir & Schwandt, 2012 and Slunge et al 2019.

This perspective encourages researchers to be realistic about outcomes and impacts, and very careful about attribution, while still being strategic in planning activities that maximize the likelihood of meaningful outcomes. It also helps distinguish between what can reasonably be monitored and reported within a research project's scope, and what constitutes longer-term societal aspirations.

No single method can fully capture the pathways from research to societal impact. A combination of approaches, adapted to the context, goals, and, not least, available resources, is often the most effective strategy. As a researcher, you should be mindful that demonstrating impact is not solely about meeting funders' requirements; it is also an opportunity to reflect on how your work contributes to societal progress, and how engagement strategies can be strengthened over time.

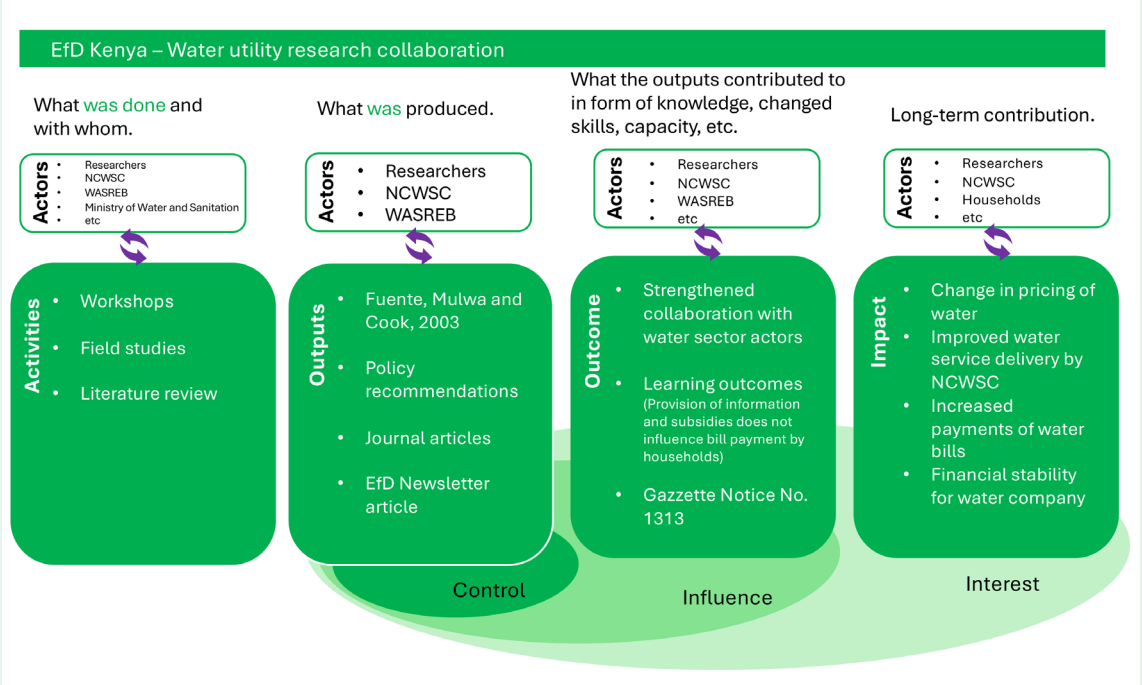
Chapter 8 of this Handbook offers practical guidance on specific tools and methods that researchers can apply to monitor and report on their research impacts more systematically. In Box 6 you can see an example of how a combination of research and policy engagement activities conducted by EfD researchers in Kenya generated impacts in the water sector.

Box 6: Different types of impact related to water sector research and policy engagement in Kenya

The research collaboration between EfD Kenya and key actors in the Nairobi water sector, including the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company (NCWSC) and the Water Services regulatory Board (WASREB), demonstrates how research can contribute to tangible policy and institutional changes over time. Through a combination of rigorous empirical research and collaboration with stakeholders, the research contributed to:

- Instrumental impact by informing regulatory decisions,
- Relational impact by fostering long-term partnerships between academic and policy actors,
- Capacity-building impact through training sessions and data-sharing initiatives with utility staff.
- Conceptual impacts as it changed the way the traditional pricing structure (increasing block tariffs) was viewed and led to an increased focus on full cost pricing models.
- Figure 4 illustrates this work using a theory of change and sphere of control, influence and interest framework.

Figure 4: Theory of change - example from water research in Kenya



Further information on this example:

3. Understanding the research–policy gap

Scientific research has the potential to play a critical role in addressing some of the world's most pressing challenges—from climate change and health crises to poverty and sustainable development. Yet, despite growing calls for research-informed policymaking, much policy-relevant research remains underutilized or ignored (UN, 2019).

A global survey on barriers to effective science advice conducted by Nature involving approximately 400 science-policy specialists underscores this disconnect (Pearson, 2024). The survey revealed that 80% of respondents rated their country's science-advice system as poor or inconsistent, and 70% indicated that governments do not routinely incorporate scientific advice into policymaking. Around 80% also responded that researchers lack incentives to engage in policymaking. Furthermore, 80% believed that policymakers lack sufficient understanding of scientific principles, while 73% felt that researchers do not adequately comprehend policy processes.

Lack of diversity was another barrier raised, with 60% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that science advice fails to incorporate a diversity of people or viewpoints (Pearson, 2024). Research studies have shown that gender-diverse teams are more likely to produce novel and impactful scientific work (Nielsen et al., 2017), and that diverse teams more broadly generate more innovative solutions and higher-impact research (Freeman & Huang, 2014).

The poor research-policy interaction is compounded by differing operational cultures. Researchers often prioritize objectivity, methodological rigor, and long-term inquiry, operating within academic timelines and incentive structures that emphasize peer-reviewed publications. In contrast, policymakers are driven by political mandates, often short-term objectives, strong influence from sources other than researchers, and a need to balance diverse stakeholder interests, often requiring timely and pragmatic solutions. These divergent priorities can lead to skepticism, miscommunication, and missed opportunities for collaboration.

There are, of course, many context-specific reasons for the gap between research and policymaking. This chapter outlines some common constraints on the policy and research sides respectively.

3.1. Policy-side constraints

Even when policymakers express interest in evidence-based decision-making, multiple barriers can limit the effective uptake of research. These constraints are both structural and political, and often relate to how policy processes are organized and how decisions are made in practice. One key challenge is timing (Oliver et al., 2014). The policy process typically moves at a faster pace than academic research, and windows of opportunity for influence—such as election cycles, budget processes, or crisis moments—can close before research findings are available. Research that arrives too late, or is not tailored to the specific policy moment, often fails to gain traction.

A second constraint is the limited capacity to use research. Policymaking institutions, especially in low- and middle-income countries, may lack the staff, time, incentives, or analytical skills required to interpret complex research (Damba et al., 2022; Semahegn et al., 2023). This is compounded by weak internal processes for integrating external evidence into policy formulation and implementation.

Political incentives also play a major role. Policymakers are not neutral actors; they are embedded in institutional and ideological contexts. Evidence that aligns with dominant narratives or political priorities is more likely to be considered, while findings that challenge powerful interests or require major policy shifts may be ignored or even resisted (Damba et al., 2022). Even compelling evidence can be sidelined if it threatens the status quo, the government's political agenda, or requires significant new investments (Kelly and Pande, 2025). In highly politically polarized environments, research produced by individuals or institutions perceived as sympathetic to opposing political factions may be dismissed outright, regardless of its objectivity and relevance. This can undermine the uptake of high-quality evidence and limit opportunities for evidence-based policymaking.

Another significant constraint to the use of independent research is that many government processes mandate the use of commissioned studies tailored specifically for policy development. These assignments are often given to consultants or consulting firms, bypassing the deep expertise and analytical capacity housed within research institutes and universities. As a result, high-quality academic research is frequently overlooked—not because it lacks relevance or rigour, but because it falls outside the formal policymaking structures. This disconnect weakens the potential for evidence-based decisions and limits the long-term institutional learning that research institutions can offer.
Communication gaps further reinforce these barriers (Oliver et al., 2014). Research findings are often not presented in a format or language accessible to decision-makers. Reports may be too technical, too long, or fail to address the practical implications of findings for policy design and implementation.

It is also essential to recognize that policymaking involves balancing a wide range of interests, values, and inputs. Scientific output is one of many legitimate sources of information, alongside political priorities, public opinion, and institutional mandates. The goal is not to displace these influences but to ensure that evidence plays a meaningful role in informing and shaping policy debates.

Although several constraints relating to instrumental or direct use of research for policy making exist, there is often a considerable indirect influence from research on policy making. Over time, research can slowly percolate into the minds of policymakers and contribute to a reframing of how problems and solutions are perceived. Rather than viewing research findings as prescriptions that should be followed in detail when formulating policy, research can have an "enlightenment function" (Weiss, 1977).

3.2. Research-side constraints

On the academic side, there are some noticeable and significant constraints to policy engagement and influence. Studies (see e.g., Owens, 2005; Pielke, 2007; Brownson and Jones, 2009; Oliver et al 2014; van der Arend, 2014; Lidskog and Sundqvist, 2015) show that researchers typically lack sufficient incentives to engage with policy makers and stakeholders more generally.

Factors constraining policy engagement include the formal criteria promoting academics and their career development and scientific esteem. The primary focus is more on conducting research, journal publications, and intra-academic relations, and to some extent teaching, than policy and stakeholder engagements.
Researchers have generally insufficient knowledge about the policy sphere (such as strategic planning, decision-making, and the inner workings of politics) and how to engage with it in a useful manner. Scientists typically have few contacts and entry points into the policy sphere. They can also face administrative and procedural barriers when trying to initiate contact with policymakers. These vary by country and institution, but can significantly slow down or complicate engagement efforts.

For example, researchers from one of the EfD Centers report that to meet with officials such as the head of a provincial Department of a Ministry, they must first send an official, stamped introduction letter from their university detailing the purpose and timing of the meeting. The department then processes the request and arranges the appropriate staff to attend, a process that may take considerable time. In many cases, informal or private contacts must be used to facilitate the arrangement before official procedures are initiated. Gender dynamics can further shape these constraints: persistent time-use inequalities and unequal domestic and caregiving responsibilities often limit women's ability to travel, network, and sustain research output, reducing their visibility in high-level policy arenas. In the social sciences, men still tend to be overrepresented in senior, agenda-setting positions, which can influence whose voices are heard and whose research reaches policy circles (Kleven et al., 2025; Jacobi et al., 2024).

Many researchers also lack the tools and strategies on "how to do it" as well as effective communication skills. Institutional cultures of *not* engaging with policy also pose barriers. When asked about it, researchers express a fear of "policy capture" and "research misuse" if they are drawn into the policy sphere. In such cases, it is safer to stay out and avoid the risk of being "hijacked" in uncertain policy processes. Moreover, researchers typically have unrealistic expectations of the influence their research might have on a policy process. As influence is typically smaller and change slower than expected researchers may get disappointed and refrain from further engagement.

Another factor that limits the usefulness of research for policy is the lack of multidisciplinarity. Researchers may fail to provide usable evidence when their work is too narrowly rooted in a single discipline. Yet, real-world policy challenges are rarely one-dimensional, they are complex, interconnected, and demand multidisciplinary perspectives. Policymakers are often left to engage separately with multiple experts across diverse fields, carrying the burden of triangulating conflicting or fragmented insights into a coherent and actionable intervention. This not only strains already limited policy capacity but also increases the risk of suboptimal decisions. To be truly policy-relevant, research must break disciplinary silos and speak to the full complexity of the problems it seeks to address.
See Chapter 9 for practical strategies to strengthen group-level capacity for policy engagement and institutional support systems.

4. Approaches to policy engagement in different contexts

Effective policy engagement is context-dependent. The success of your efforts will largely depend on the institutions and governance in your country, the nature of your research area, and the specific policy landscape. Beyond the external context, your approach will also be shaped by factors such as your experience, personal preferences, the type of research you conduct, and prevailing cultural norms.

This chapter explores different approaches to policy engagement, offering practical advice on navigating diverse policy contexts.

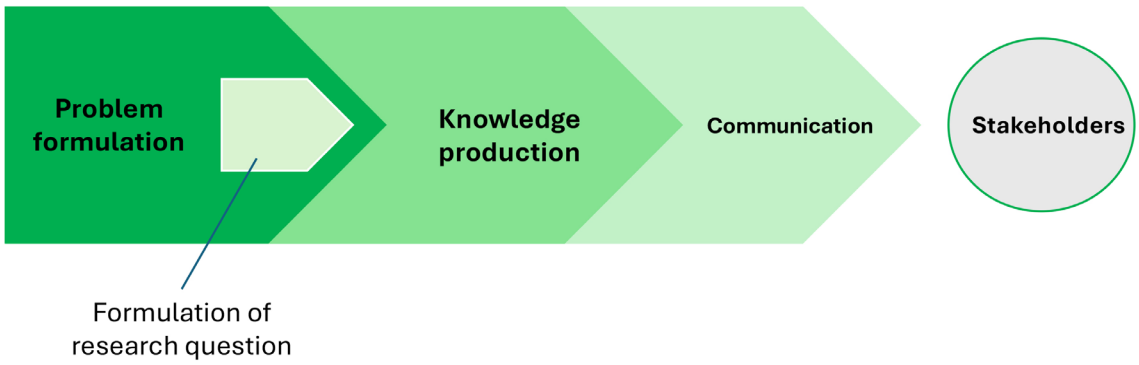
4.1 Transfer of knowledge or interaction and co-production?

There are different views and understandings among academics of what policy engagement means and can be. Some view policy engagement as something taking place primarily after the research is done, when scientific articles are published, and it is time to communicate or transfer the findings of the study to policymakers or other stakeholders. Other researchers want to be more proactive and interact with stakeholders throughout the research process. Knaggard et al. (2019) distinguish between two stylized approaches of stakeholder interaction in research processes: **transfer** and **interaction,** respectively.

Transfer - first research, then interaction

The Transfer model builds on an understanding of science as a neutral and independent activity that must be sheltered from political interests and other distorting influences. Therefore, it is essential that scientific research, as far as possible, is conducted without interference from stakeholders. Policy engagement is here understood as something happening primarily *after* research has been done and the results are properly published in scientific journals. Researchers unilaterally communicate or transfer their results to stakeholders, as shown in Figure 5. Ways to improve interaction within this model are focused on enhancing communication skills, timing, and knowledge about whom to contact for knowledge transfer.

Figure 5: The Transfer model

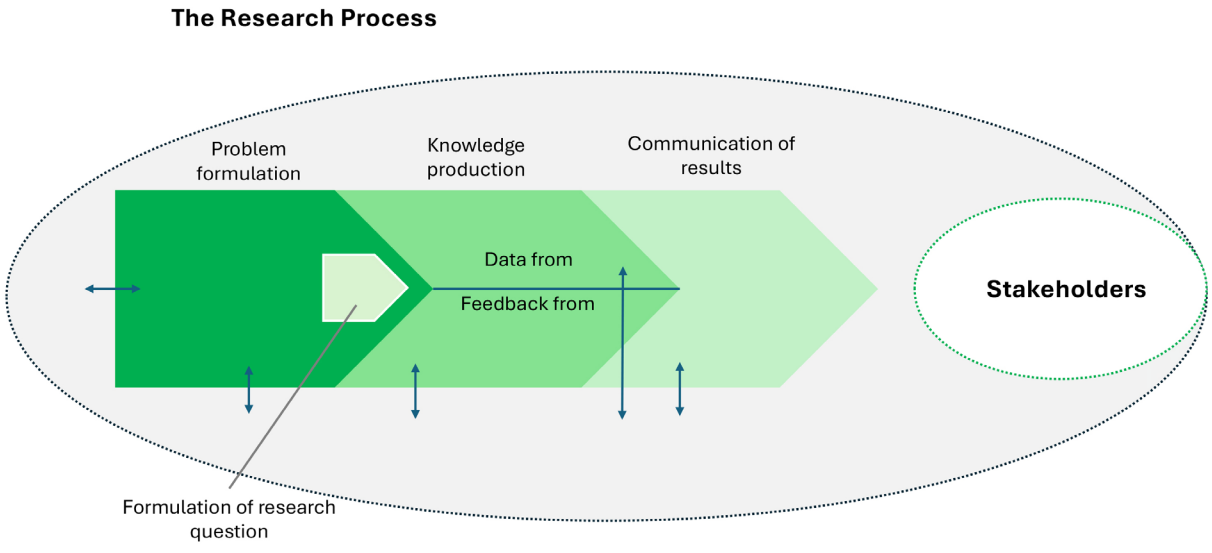


Interaction - interact during the whole research process

The Interaction model builds on a very different understanding of the relation between science and society, and researchers and stakeholders, respectively. Here, scientific research is not understood as an activity that can or should be separated from society. Instead, it is connected to other actors and activities. The authority of science lies in its methods and systematic approach, rather than in being separate from society. In this model, it is perceived as imperative and beneficial to include stakeholders in different ways throughout the research process (see Figure 6). Reasons for this, beyond communicating results and gaining societal impact, are, for instance, to gain access to data, to get contextual information, and ultimately to improve research.

The interaction between researchers and stakeholders can improve the quality of research and its policy relevance. Continuous stakeholder interaction, therefore, is desirable for good scientific quality. The focus on enhancing interaction is, thus, much broader than within the Transfer model, including issues like how to engage with stakeholders in effective ways and the importance of building stakeholder networks.

Figure 6: The Interaction model



The term co-production is closely linked to the interactive approach. See Box 7 for four principles for co-production identified by Norrström et al (2020):

Box 7: Principles for knowledge co-production in sustainability research

1. Context-based: situated in a particular context, place, or issue
2. Pluralistic - explicitly recognizing the multiple ways of knowing and doing
3. Goal-oriented - articulate clearly defined, shared, and meaningful goals related to the challenge at hand
4. Interactive - allows for ongoing learning among actors, active engagement, and interactions.

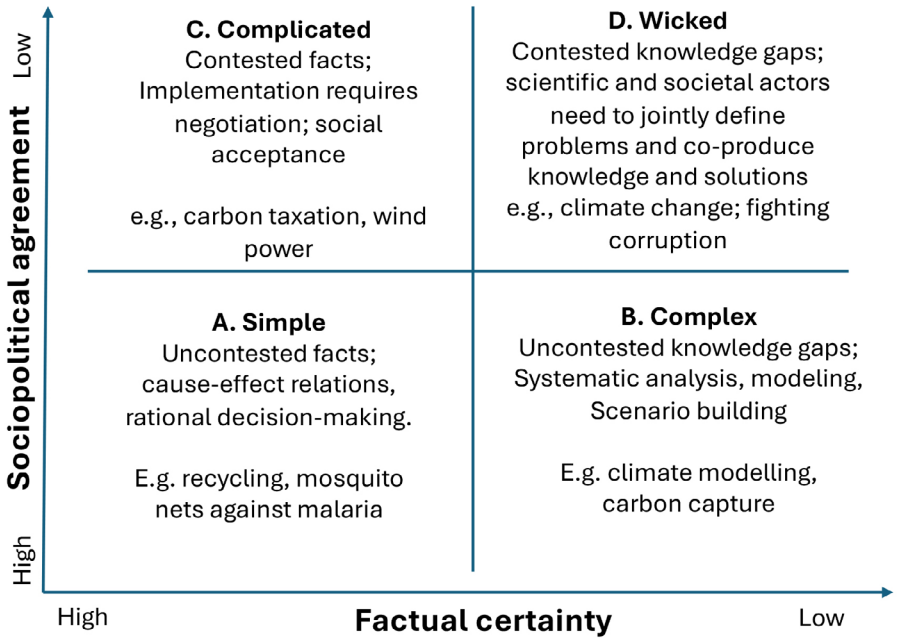
Source: Norström et al., (2020)

Irrespective if your research is aligned with the Transfer model or the Interaction model, there may be several ways of improving stakeholder interaction linked to your research. In practice, most researchers operate along a spectrum between these two models, adapting their approach based on the research project and policy context.

4.2 Navigating complexity and socio-political disagreement

The approach you take to policy engagement may also depend on the degree of complexity and socio-political agreement surrounding the policy-problems related to your research. Well-established facts and broad consensus characterize some policy areas, while others are riddled with uncertainty and conflicting interests. Figure 7 gives a stylized categorization of the interplay between these factors.

Figure 7: Approaches to policy engagement in different contexts



Source: Authors, based on the United Nations, 2019.

Quadrant A: "Simple" – high certainty, high agreement: In this context, scientific evidence is widely accepted, and there is broad consensus on the problem and its solutions. Policy decisions are typically based on rational and objective arguments, and research plays an uncontested role in providing factual evidence for decision-making.
Example: **Child immunization campaigns in Rwanda.** Research on the effectiveness of childhood vaccinations is well-established, and government policies largely align with science-based public health recommendations. The focus of policy engagement is on improving implementation and outreach rather than debating science. (See, for example Sibomana et al. 2018).

Quadrant B: "Complex" – low certainty, high agreement: Here, evidence is not contested, but there are significant knowledge gaps and uncertainties about the magnitude of the problems and how best to address them. Researchers play a critical role in systemic analysis, scenario building, and modeling, ensuring that decision-makers understand uncertainties and assumptions.
Example: **Water resource management in Ethiopia.** Climate variability and unpredictable rainfall patterns make water planning highly uncertain, even though there is broad agreement on the need for better management. Researchers use hydrological modelling to help policymakers and communities plan for sustainable water use, but engagement must clearly communicate the inherent uncertainties in the models. (See, for example, Dinsa and Nurhusein, 2023).

Quadrant C: "Complicated" – high certainty, low agreement: In this context, scientific evidence is available, but there is strong disagreement among societal actors about how to interpret it and apply it in policymaking. Providing more facts alone is insufficient—dialogue, negotiation, and social acceptance are crucial for effective policy implementation.
Example: **Charcoal taxation in Kenya.** While research shows that reliance on charcoal

as a household fuel contributes to deforestation and air pollution, many low-income households and informal vendors depend on charcoal for their livelihoods. Attempts to impose taxation or restrictions on charcoal have been met with resistance. Research on policy attitudes of different groups and policy engagement, enhancing dialogues and negotiations, can be constructive approaches (see e.g., Njenga et al., 2013).

Quadrant D: "Wicked" – Low Certainty, Low Agreement. Both high uncertainty and deep societal disagreements characterize "wicked" policy problems. There is no single solution, and tackling these issues requires continuous engagement among scientists, policymakers, and other stakeholders to jointly define problems, co-produce knowledge, and explore adaptive and broadly accepted solutions.
Example: **Land tenure reforms in West Africa.** Conflicting land ownership systems, e.g. traditional customary laws vs. formal land titles, create significant challenges for rural development and agricultural investment. There is no universally accepted solution, and reforms must navigate power struggles, legal uncertainty, and resistance from different groups. Research can play a role in facilitating dialogue, providing evidence on various policy options, and supporting long-term engagement with affected communities, decision-makers, and other stakeholders. (see e.g. Djeukam et al., 2013).

You should tailor your engagement strategies based on where the research and policy issues you are working on fall within this framework. While some contexts may allow for direct knowledge transfer (Quadrant A and B), others require co-production of knowledge, negotiation, or adaptive approaches (C and D).

4.3. Inside or outside track?

Individual researchers can play several roles and pursue different strategies vis-à-vis policy and stakeholder interaction. Should you work with the government or engage with actors outside the government who can hold the state to account? The choice may start from the your preferences related to what it is that you want to accomplish. What objectives do you want to attain?

Using such questions as guidance, the choice of role(s) and strategies may be developed. Another point of entry is the kind of research pursued and the opportunities to inform and influence in that field. It may depend on whether you conduct applied (policy-relevant) research or basic/fundamental (theoretical) research.

Although not exclusive, if you conduct *applied research,* you are more likely to be in closer contact with stakeholders. If you conduct more *fundamental research,* you are more likely to have indirect linkages to stakeholders. You have the option to play several roles and choose among several different interaction strategies. In this case, there is indeed nothing right or wrong, but a matter of choice, individual preferences, and "research culture" within your group or institution. Pielke (2007) attempts to structure the issue; he suggests researchers can assume one of (in combination) four different roles in stakeholder interaction: the Pure Scientist, the Science Arbiter, the Honest Broker, and the Issue Advocate.

As a *pure scientist*, you focus on conducting research and peer-reviewed research publications. As the *science arbiter,* you answer specific questions posed by planners, policy

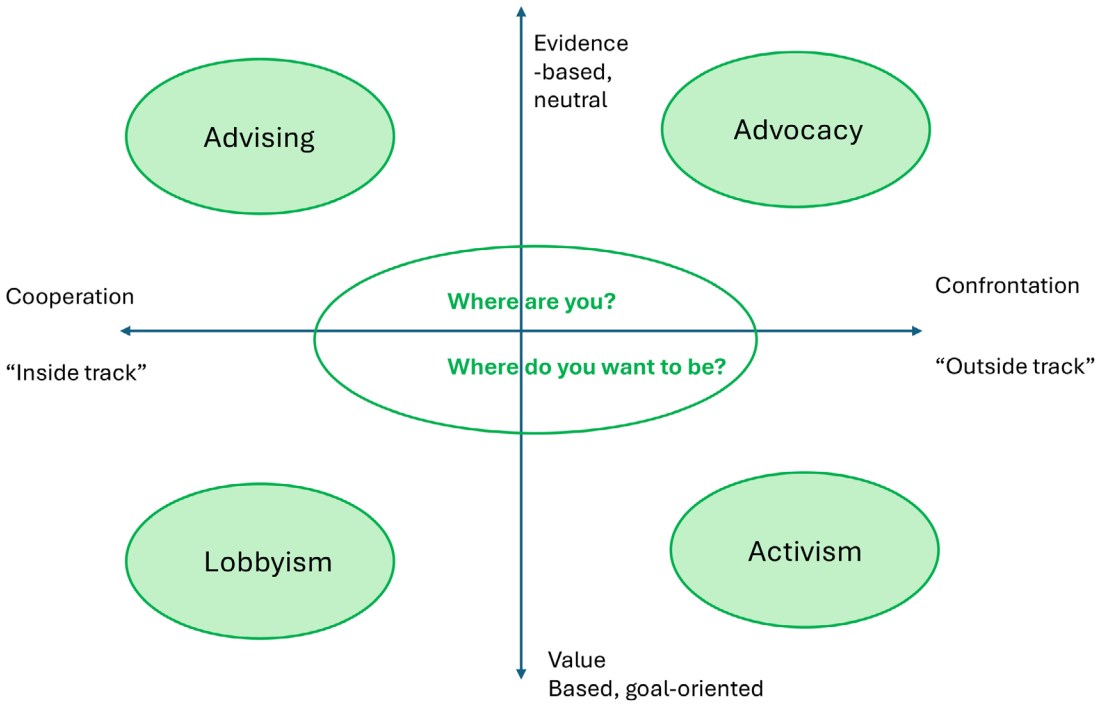
makers, or other stakeholders within your field of expertise. As an *honest broker,* you attempt to clarify and expand the choices available to planners and decision-makers; you integrate scientific knowledge with stakeholder concerns and place research within the context of a wide range of policy options. The *issue advocate* advances a specific political agenda of the individual researcher and narrows down the range of possible decisions.

A related and perhaps simpler way of understanding roles and strategies that may be used for policy engagement is the "inside track" vs the "outside track". As illustrated in Figure 8 below, you can either work more closely with the government or stakeholders, and hence choose the "inside track" (cooperation) in the roles of advisor or lobbyist. Arguably, the advisor is more closely aligned with knowledge and acts based on science and evidence. The lobbyist would be more closely aligned with values, ideology, and specific interests, and thus be more value-based.

Another strategy concerning the government or stakeholders would be to choose the "outside track" (confrontation) as an issue advocate or activist. Although there might be exemptions, the issue advocate is arguably more closely aligned with knowledge and acts based on science and evidence. The activist would be more closely aligned with values, ideology, and specific interests and thus be more value-based.

When governments actively seek research-based information and knowledge, engagement is often straightforward, and you can use the "inside track". However, in contexts where research is met with disinterest or hostility, engagement becomes more challenging, making the "outside track" preferable (Carden, 2009). Effective policy engagement may often require a combination of both tracks, depending on the context and your objectives.

Figure 8: Researchers' role and orientation in the policy sphere



Box 8 illustrates how researchers in South Africa used an advising role as researchers when developing methods to assess the climate vulnerability of protected areas.

Box 8: Researchers collaborated with SANParks, South Africa

Climate change is a challenge for Protected Areas (PA), such as national parks, in many aspects. It can affect biodiversity, infrastructure, and income from tourism. With limited resources, how should efforts be prioritized to meet those challenges?

EfD South Africa researchers developed a framework to assess PA's vulnerability to climate change. The framework helps prioritize resource allocation. The method was then used extensively by SANParks and WWF.
Read more

4.4. Tackling challenging contextual issues

In many countries of the Global South, factors such as institutional instability, capacity gaps, inequalities in participation, and inadequate access to research funding can create significant obstacles to evidence-based policymaking. Understanding these challenges is a first step towards developing strategies that enhance the effectiveness of your policy engagement.

Table 1 below highlights key governance and institutional factors that can influence policy engagement and suggests ways for individual researchers and research groups to navigate them. Addressing these challenges is rarely straightforward, but there are approaches that can increase your influence and resilience

For example, strengthening regional and international collaborations can amplify visibility and create a stronger voice in policy debates. Advocating for increased domestic research funding and stronger national research institutions can also have long-term impact. Additionally, expanding the use of open-access platforms and digital tools can improve the accessibility and reach of Global South research, ensuring it informs both national and global policy discussions.

Advocating for increased domestic research funding and stronger national research institutions is also essential for long-term impact. Additionally, expanding the use of open-access platforms and digital tools can improve the accessibility and reach of Global South research, ensuring it informs both national and global policy discussions.

While understanding external contexts is essential, you also need to navigate internal factors such as motivation, time and career incentives. The next chapter explores how you can assess and manage these trade-offs as part of a strategic approach to policy engagement.

Table 1: Policy engagement in challenging governance environments

GOVERNANCE CHARACTERISTIC	IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY ENGAGEMENT	STRATEGIES FOR RESEARCHERS
Institutional instability (frequent leadership changes, shifting policy priorities, weak governance structures)	Long-term collaboration is difficult; agendas may shift or be deprioritized after political changes. Political transitions can also open windows for introducing new evidence and reforms.	Be adaptable. Build broad networks beyond top officials, including civil servants, civil society, and private sector. Engage via dialogues, collaborations, and regional networks to maintain continuity and seize transition moments.
Capacity constraints in policymaking institutions	Limited staff, skills, and resources to interpret and apply research effectively can slow uptake of evidence. These gaps can also create demand for training and technical advice.	Tailor outputs to audience needs (e.g., concise briefs, presentations). Offer training, capacity-building workshops, or co-create decision-support tools with ministries to strengthen institutional capability.
Lack of transparency and trust	Evidence may be sidelined by competing interests; opaque decision-making processes make it harder to influence policy. Public demand for transparency can create openings for impartial, well-communicated evidence.	Maintain integrity, neutrality, and transparency. Engage diverse stakeholders, including civil society and media. Build credibility through consistent, long-term engagement and open communication.
Gender inequality in research and policy processes	Women researchers often face systemic barriers to funding, leadership positions, and publication opportunities. In policy contexts, gender biases can limit the inclusion of diverse perspectives, resulting in less gender-responsive policymaking.	Ensure inclusivity within research teams and engagement strategies. Actively involve women in policy discussions, promote mentorship, and integrate gender analysis into research to strengthen policy influence and impact.
Bypassing local expertise and social inclusion gaps	International organizations and donors may prioritize external consultants over national researchers, limiting contextual relevance and undermining local capacity. Marginalized groups within countries may also be excluded from research–policy dialogues.	Actively position local expertise in policy debates. Publish in accessible formats and foster collaborations with government and civil society. Ensure diverse stakeholder representation, including marginalised groups, in research design and engagement processes.
Political and informal system dynamics (polarization, patronage networks)	Research may be ignored or discredited if linked to a perceived faction; decisions may be shaped through informal channels. Informal networks can sometimes provide faster influence if trust is established.	Build bipartisan credibility. Engage multiple political actors. Identify trusted intermediaries to bridge formal and informal systems, while safeguarding independence and neutrality.

5. Navigating opportunities, risks, and incentives

Policy engagement offers significant opportunities to enhance the relevance, visibility, and impact of your work. At the same time, it requires navigating a set of practical and strategic trade-offs. This chapter explores key opportunities, risks, and incentives for policy engagement that you should consider when developing your approach to policy engagement as part of your research career.

5.1. Seizing opportunities

Engaging stakeholders and policymakers in a systematic, science-based approach can not only contribute to better-informed policy decisions but also provide essential opportunities for researchers. By fostering dynamic collaborations and strategic communication, you can:

- **Enhance relevance:** Identify societal challenges and perspectives, elevating the policy relevance of your research.
- **Improve research quality:** Access richer datasets, local knowledge, and contextual insights through collaboration with policy actors and other stakeholders.
- **Access funding:** Tap into research funding opportunities that increasingly prioritize stakeholder involvement, co-creation, and impact.
- **Forge strategic collaborations:** Build long-term relationships with policymakers, civil society, and other knowledge users/providers. This can improve visibility, lead to co-designed research projects, and align research agendas with pressing policy needs.
- **Influence and impact:** Achieve real-world (*instrumental*) impacts by contributing to better-informed policy decisions.
- **Strengthen professional recognition:** Demonstrating policy engagement and impact can boost your reputation within and beyond academia, and may open doors to advisory roles, expert functions, public commissions, and broader domestic as well as international collaborations.

The experiences of EfD researchers across different regions show how policy engagement can raise professional visibility, open new opportunities, and contribute to both national policy and global processes (see Box 9).

Box 9: Real-world recognition and influence through policy engagement

Professor Martine Visser, Director of EfD South Africa and the Environmental Policy Research Unit at the University of Cape Town, has gained national and international recognition for applying behavioral economics to environmental challenges.

During Cape Town's severe drought, her team's evidence-based "green nudges" reached hundreds of thousands of households, influencing municipal water policy and becoming a model for conservation strategies across South Africa. This visible and impactful engagement has led to advisory roles with government agencies, partnerships with biodiversity and climate initiatives, and participation in global research networks on behavioral policy. It also contributed to her appointment as SARChI Research Chair in Governance and Economics of Ecological Infrastructure. Visser's career demonstrates how sustained policy engagement can strengthen professional standing, expand collaborations, and shape policy debates from the local to the global level.
Further information

Dr. Pham Khanh Nam, Director of EfD Vietnam, was appointed to a high-level UN Expert Group tasked with developing alternatives to GDP as part of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda.

His inclusion in this globally influential group, alongside Nobel laureates and world-leading economists, highlights how sustained engagement with policy-relevant research in Southeast Asia elevated his visibility and credibility. It also underscores how contributing to national and regional debates can open doors to international advisory roles and shape global policy frameworks.

Further information

Professor Wisdom Akpalu, Director of EfD Ghana and Dean at the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), received the EfD Policy Impact Award in 2023 for his instrumental role in advancing sustainable fisheries policies in Ghana.

Through rigorous research *and* active policy engagement, he contributed to significant policy reforms, including the implementation of video monitoring on industrial trawlers, adjustments in mesh sizes, the initiation of alternative livelihood training programs, and the establishment of a Scientific and Technical Committee under the Fisheries Commission. His evidence-based approach to addressing politically sensitive issues, such as harmful subsidies, has earned him the trust of both government officials and artisanal fishing communities. In 2025, the President of Ghana appointed him as the Chairperson of the Governing Council of Ghana's Fisheries Commission.

These cases illustrate how strategic, sustained policy engagement can not only improve public policy but also strengthen professional standing, research relevance, and global influence.

5.2. Recognizing and managing risks

Engaging in policy-related research, particularly in regions characterized by political instability and corruption, can create significant risks for researchers. Understanding and managing these potential risks are crucial for developing effective policy engagement strategies. Importantly, women researchers may face additional barriers related to safety, mobility, and workload, making it essential to factor gender into risk assessments and mitigation plans.

Key considerations include:

- **Reputational risks:** You may be perceived as an advocate rather than an impartial contributor, potentially compromising the credibility of your research findings. This is especially pertinent in politically sensitive environments where neutrality is essential. Maintaining objectivity and clearly distinguishing between evidence-based recommendations and personal opinions can help reduce this risk. Gender stereotypes may also influence how credibility is judged, with women sometimes facing greater scrutiny or dismissal of their expertise.
- **Manipulation of findings:** There is a risk that research findings may be misused or misrepresented to serve particular agendas, leading to unintended consequences for you as a researcher. Ensuring clarity in reporting, providing comprehensive context, and proactively addressing potential misinterpretations or limitations can help protect both the integrity of the study and your professional reputation.
- **Personal safety:** Research that challenges the interests of powerful groups can lead to threats against personal safety. For example, studies on sensitive topics like corruption or illicit activities such as illegal natural resource extraction may expose you to intimidation or harm. Conducting thorough risk assessments and establishing emergency response plans is essential in such contexts (See the example from Colombia in Box 10). In many settings, women researchers face heightened risks of harassment or gender-based violence, both in the field and online, requiring additional protective measures and support networks.
- **Time constraints:** Policy engagement demands significant time and effort, which might detract from other research activities. In politically unstable settings, the investment in building relationships may be jeopardized by frequent changes in leadership or policy priorities. Early-career researchers, in particular, should be cautious not to let engagement activities compromise their publication output and career progression. Time constraints can disproportionately affect women researchers, who may shoulder a greater share of caregiving and administrative responsibilities, making institutional recognition and workload adjustments especially important.

Awareness of these risks—including how they may be experienced differently by women and men—empowers you to develop strategies that mitigate challenges and approach policy engagement with a nuanced understanding and adequate management measures.

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Box 10: Risks when researching gold mining and royalties in Colombia

Researchers working on sensitive topics such as gold mining and royalties in Colombia encountered specific risks during stakeholder engagement.

While the interaction provided valuable insights and strengthened the analysis, field visits to gold mining territories posed safety concerns due to the presence of violence. To mitigate these risks, the researchers traveled with local experts familiar with the region and its dynamics.

5.3. Incentives for policy engagement

Incentive problems exist in most universities internationally: career progression continues to depend heavily on the publication of peerreviewed journal articles ("publish or perish"). At the same time, policy engagement and societal impact often receive limited formal recognition. This can result in a significant mismatch between the outputs that academic institutions reward and the types of contributions that are most needed to address urgent policy challenges.

This mismatch can thus discourage researchers—particularly those in early career—from investing time in policy engagement that can generate broader societal impact. In many low-income countries, particularly in parts of Africa, the issue of incentives is compounded by economic constraints. As academic salaries are typically modest, there are strong financial incentives for researchers to engage in comparatively well-paid consultancy work. While such consultancies may involve policy-relevant work, they can divert time and energy away from publishing and long-term academic development. For early-career researchers, in particular, this creates a difficult trade-off: short-term financial gain may come at the expense of building a robust academic track record.

Yet policy engagement need not be at odds with academic success. When approached strategically, it can enhance your visibility, open up new avenues for collaboration and funding, and contribute to excellent research. The challenge lies in navigating these dual demands and risks, identifying meaningful opportunities for engagement, and aligning them with career goals and institutional expectations.

Policy engagement strategies are not static but typically evolve over a research career. It might be easier and more natural, as a junior researcher, to mainly focus on building research experience, conducting research, and publishing in peer-reviewed research publications, compared with a more senior researcher. But this is not cast in stone, and even a junior researcher may be very active in engaging with stakeholders.

As a researcher becomes more senior, expectations for policy engagement often grow as well. As a senior researcher with an interest in policy engagement, you can be invited to serve on advisory boards, government panels, and task forces, leveraging your established authority and credibility. As your career evolves, you can benefit from reflecting on your preferred roles and strategies for policy engagement and make deliberate choices on how and when to engage.

The following questions may help guide such reflection and associated actions:

- **What kind of researcher do I want to be? What are my professional goals?**
- **How vital is policy engagement to my goals—and why?**
- **What are the opportunities and constraints I face at this point in my career?**
- **What skills or support do I need to engage more effectively?**
- **What concrete next steps can I take to better integrate engagement into my research practice?**

While this section focuses on individual strategies and trade-offs, Chapter 9 discusses how research units and academic institutions can create incentive systems and support structures that make policy engagement more sustainable and rewarding.

PART B: POLICY ENGAGEMENT IN PRACTICE

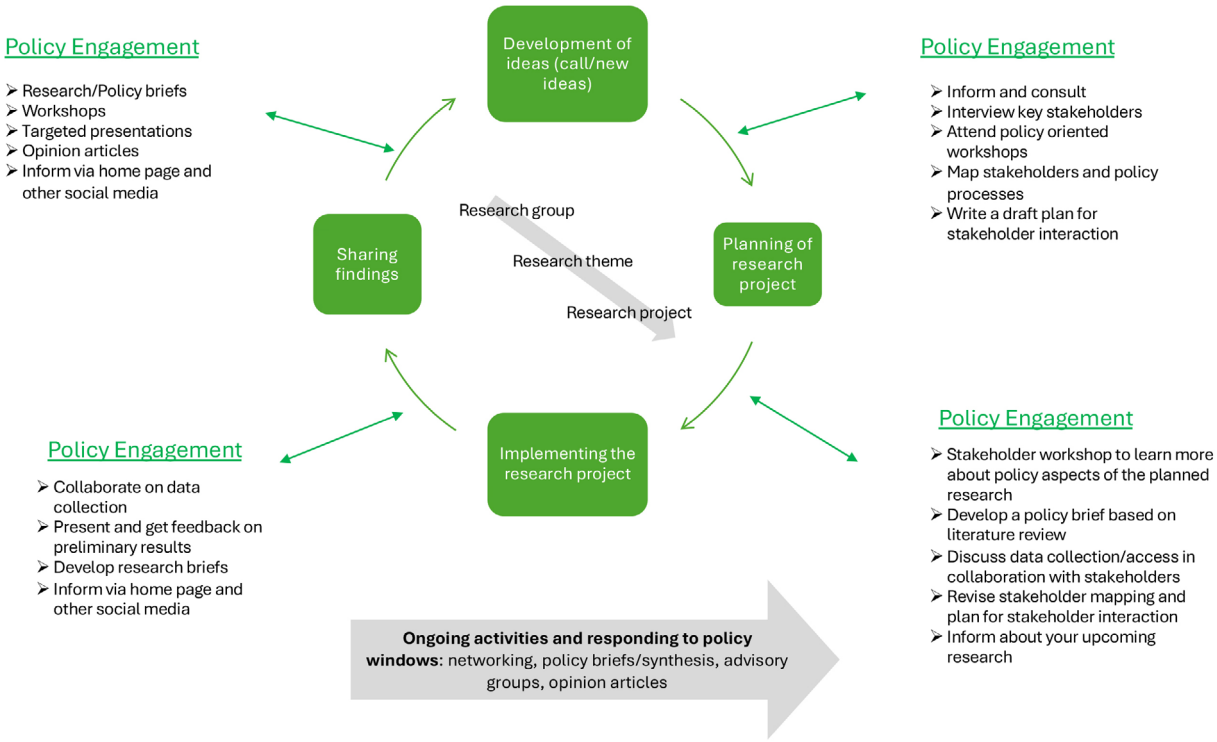
Part A discussed foundational concepts and approaches to policy engagement. In Part B, we turn to practical guidance. The following chapters outline concrete steps and activities you can undertake to effectively engage with policymakers and stakeholders during different stages of a research project, how to nurture trust and long-term relations, measure impacts and develop capacity for policy engagement at your research unit.

6. Policy engagement during the research project lifecycle

This chapter discusses practical ways to engage and communicate effectively with policymakers and other stakeholders throughout your research project's life cycle. Figure 9 provides examples of engagement activities you can undertake at each stage—from developing a research idea and planning your project, to conducting the research itself and sharing the final results.

The figure also emphasizes the importance of continuous activities beyond individual research projects or programs. These ongoing actions, such as regular networking, participating in advisory groups, publishing opinion articles, and actively responding to emerging policy windows, help maintain and strengthen your relationships with key stakeholders and ensure readiness to engage effectively as opportunities arise. This part is further developed in Chapter 7.

Figure 9: Policy engagement during different stages of a research project



6.1. Policy engagement when developing research ideas and proposals

Having a good understanding of stakeholders and relevant policy processes is essential for developing research that is both scientifically robust and policy-relevant. Early engagement with stakeholders helps ensure that your research is grounded in real-world needs and enhances your chances of attracting funding and generating societal impact. It can also build relationships and interest that ease collaboration throughout the research process.

A useful way to approach this is to start by envisioning the long-term impact your research aims to contribute to. What is the broader change you hope that your research can contribute to? Try to be specific about the policy or behavioral change, and about who would benefit from this change? Consider how different groups, including women, men, marginalized communities, or specific organizations, may be affected differently. Taking gender and social inclusion into account at this stage strengthens the relevance and legitimacy of your work.

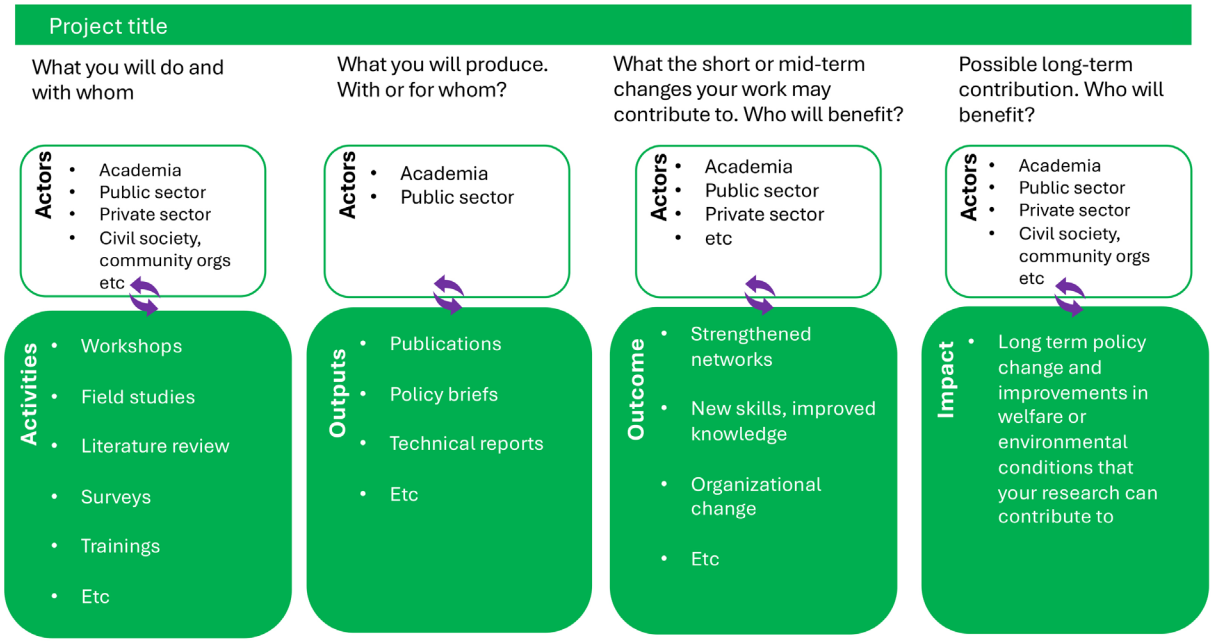
Once you have a long-term vision, work backwards:

- **Impact**: Define your aspirational goal — a policy change, behavioral shift, or improved environmental or social outcome. Who stands to benefit, and how?
- **Outcomes**: Identify intermediate changes needed to move towards the impact. This could include increased capacity, strengthened institutions, or improved decision-making. Who are the actors that need to change, and in what way?
- **Outputs**: Specify what your research will produce — reports, journal articles, policy briefs, recommendations, tools, etc. These should feed into the outcomes.
- **Activities**: Plan the research and engagement activities needed to generate the outputs. This may include stakeholder consultations, literature reviews, field studies, or workshops.
- **Actors**: For each step, list the relevant actors — researchers, government agencies, NGOs, community members, or private sector stakeholders.

This type of thinking is often called "backcasting" and is the foundation for many theory of change approaches. It strengthens your ability to plan for impact from the start of your project and demonstrates to funders that your work is strategically positioned to make a difference.

Figure 10 offers a visual template that can help you organize your thinking (see also Annex 1). It illustrates how to link your planned activities and outputs with desired outcomes and long-term impacts, while also specifying who is involved or affected at each stage. This figure can be used as a tool to plan stakeholder engagement and policy relevance when designing a research project. Start with your envisioned impact and identify who benefits. Then specify the outcomes needed, what outputs are required to achieve these outcomes, and the activities that will generate those outputs. Finally, identify the actors involved at each stage.

Figure 10: Planning for impact – from activities to long-term contribution



In addition to this planning framework, it is important to explicitly identify and analyze stakeholders and policy processes. See Box 11 and Box 12 below for guidance and use the templates provided. You can also conduct the following activities when developing your research ideas and proposal:

- Conduct interviews with key stakeholders to understand their perspectives on the research problem and questions.
- Attend policy-oriented conferences to gather input and test the relevance of your research ideas.
- Establish a reference or advisory group that can provide feedback and guidance throughout the project.

Box 11: Mapping of policy processes linked to your research

Determine which policy processes your research can inform, for example, upcoming reforms in forestry, energy, taxation, or international environmental agreements. Be specific:

- What is the name of the process or legislation?
- Who is leading it (agency, ministry)?
- What is the timeline?
- What decisions are being made, and when?

To map policy processes:

- Check government and agency websites.
- Review policy briefs and reports.
- Consult with colleagues or advisors.
- Attend relevant policy workshops or hearings.

Box 12: Stakeholder identification and analysis

What is a stakeholder?
Anyone who may influence or be affected by your research — directly or indirectly. This can include policymakers, civil society actors, private sector representatives, communities, and consumers..

How to identify stakeholders

- Brainstorm based on your research topic, system, and context.
- Review stakeholders mentioned in similar studies or policy documents.
- Conduct key informant interviews, stakeholder mapping exercises, or participatory workshops.
- Include diverse groups — think across sectors, levels (local to international), and social dimensions such as gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

How to analyze stakeholders
Use the Power-Interest Grid (Appendix 2) to group stakeholders based on their level of influence and interest in your research. This helps determine how to best engage with each group.

Prioritize engagement strategies

- High power/high interest: Engage closely and regularly.
- High power/low interest: Keep satisfied; engage selectively.
- Low power/high interest: Keep informed and build capacity.
- Low power/low interest: Monitor with minimal resources.

See Appendix 2 and 3 for further guidance and tools, see also Biodiversa stakeholder engagement handbook (Durham et al., 2014)

When conducting stakeholder analysis, it's essential to be realistic about who you, as a researcher or research team, can meaningfully engage with. High-level decision-makers such as ministers or agency heads are often inaccessible, especially during the early stages of research. However, there are many influential intermediaries — such as technical advisors, think tanks, civil servants, NGOs, and media actors — who can help bridge the gap between research and high-level policy. Engaging with these actors may be a more feasible and strategic path to policy influence. Mapping out these intermediary pathways is an essential part of building a credible and achievable theory of change for your project. Box 13, 14 and 15 exemplify how stakeholders have been involved in research projects in Vietnam, Nigeria and Colombia.

Box 13: Policy engagement on mangrove environmental services in Vietnam

In Hai Phong City, Vietnam, researchers aimed to develop a Payment for Forest Environmental Services (PFES) mechanism for mangrove ecosystems. They began by identifying eight key environmental services provided by mangroves, including carbon sequestration, water purification, and coastal protection.

To understand potential stakeholders, the team conducted 50 interviews across various sectors such as ecotourism, aquaculture, and transportation. This stakeholder mapping revealed 20 potential buyer groups for mangrove services, notably highlighting carbon sequestration and water purification as services with the highest interest.

Building on these insights, the researchers developed a mechanism for payment for mangrove environmental services and assessed stakeholders' willingness to pay. Surveys and focus groups with fishing boat owners, cruise operators, and port authorities provided data on feasible payment methods and amounts.

Further extending their research to Ho Chi Minh City's port areas, the team engaged with shipping industry stakeholders. Discussions indicated a willingness to participate in PFES schemes, contingent upon transparent fund management and equitable payment structures.

This case exemplifies how early stakeholder engagement and policy process mapping can inform the design of research projects aimed at achieving tangible environmental and policy impacts.

References: Pham et al, 2020 and Pham et al, 2021

Box 14: Engaging stakeholders for plastic waste management in Nigeria

Plastic pollution is a critical sustainability issue in Nigeria, where around 2.5 million tons of plastic waste are generated annually, with less than 12% being recycled.

In response to this challenge, EfD researchers engaged various stakeholders, including households, restaurant owners, recycling companies, government agencies, and waste pickers, through focus groups and interviews. The goal was to explore strategies that promote behavioral change and incentive-based policy options for reducing plastic waste and to assess stakeholder perceptions of Nigeria's planned ban on single-use plastics by 2025.

Key findings from these engagements revealed a lack of waste segregation at the source and limited collaboration within the plastic value chain. Waste pickers, often informal actors, emphasized the need for government formalization of their role. Stakeholders recommended a phased approach to eliminating single-use plastics, with viable alternatives in place.

However, challenges such as low participation rates and communication difficulties due to diverse educational backgrounds emerged during the stakeholder engagement workshops. The findings underscore the importance of raising public awareness, incentivizing waste segregation, and providing affordable alternatives to plastics for effective plastic waste management in Nigeria.

Box 15: Building trust for impactful fisheries management in Colombia

Researchers from EfD Colombia aimed to address sustainability challenges in Colombia's fisheries and aquaculture sectors. Recognizing that effective policy recommendations require trust and collaboration, they engaged stakeholders from the outset.

By involving experts from public institutions as co-authors in scientific publications and committing to transparent data sharing, they built strong relationships with policymakers, industry representatives, and local communities. This approach not only facilitated access to valuable data but also ensured that their research was attuned to the real-world needs and constraints of stakeholders. Consequently, their findings have informed policy discussions on sustainable fisheries management, demonstrating the tangible benefits of integrating policy engagement into the research process.
Further information

6.2. Policy engagement during initiation and detailed planning of the research project

Once your research proposal is approved, it is essential to revisit and refine your policy engagement strategy, considering new developments. This phase offers an opportunity to align your research activities with stakeholder expectations and ongoing policy processes. Updating your engagement approach now can help build trust and increase the likelihood of later uptake and collaboration.

When informing stakeholders about the launch of your research project, consider also discussing their possible roles and expectations. Clarify how and when you intend to share information and involve them. Transparent dialogue at this stage sets the tone for a respectful and collaborative working relationship. Also consider whether any changes in the policy landscape, access constraints, or feedback from proposal reviewers affect your planned engagement.

This is also a good time to think about how you will track progress on your policy engagement throughout the project—for example, by identifying key milestones such as stakeholder feedback received, meetings held, or advisory groups formed.
Even a simple internal plan or checklist can help you stay on track and reflect on what is working. This will also help you later when reporting results to the funder.

Possible activities include:

- Informing stakeholders about your new research project
- Clarifying stakeholder roles and expectations
- Finalizing your engagement and communication strategy
- Revisiting your stakeholder analysis and making necessary updates
- Identifying relevant upcoming policy events or decisions that may influence the timing or focus of your research
- Conducting informal outreach to strengthen relationships and build buy-in

Consider using a stakeholder engagement and communication matrix (see Appendix 3) to document how different actors will be involved, what level of engagement is anticipated, and how this supports your overall theory of change.

6.3. Policy engagement during the implementation of the research project

Engaging with stakeholders during the implementation phase of a research project offers many advantages. It can increase the relevance and visibility of your work, provide access to valuable data and feedback, and foster relationships that enhance policy uptake. This phase is also an opportunity to adapt your research activities based on stakeholder perspectives or evolving policy dynamics.

There are many ways to sustain engagement during this phase. Consider the following:

- **Data collaboration:** Partner with public agencies, NGOs, or private actors to access relevant data. You may also involve individuals in data collection through citizen science or participatory monitoring initiatives.
- **Surveying expert and stakeholder perspectives:** Supplement quantitative data with

qualitative data from expert surveys, interviews, or stakeholder assessments. This is especially useful when investigating feasibility, implementation barriers, or local knowledge. Be mindful of survey fatigue and ensure that participation provides value to stakeholders.

- **Sharing early findings:** Share preliminary results or synthesize insights from your literature review into short formats such as policy briefs or stakeholder memos. This can generate early feedback and engender policy interest.
- **Workshops and focus groups:** These are useful formats to test your emerging insights, discuss interim findings, and co-refine recommendations with relevant actors.
- **Using social media:** Use project websites, social media, or other communication channels to communicate progress and invite input. This can be especially helpful for building visibility outside formal policy processes.
- **Applying collaborative research approaches:** When appropriate, you can also co-design the research with stakeholders using approaches like participatory action research or policy labs (see Box 16). These formats foster co-ownership of both questions and solutions.

Box 16: Policy labs

A Policy Lab is a collaborative space where researchers, policymakers, and stakeholders co-create and test policy solutions using evidence-based approaches. Participants often include researchers, policymakers, industry experts, civil society representatives, and community stakeholders. Activities in a Policy Lab involve brainstorming, prototyping and testing solutions, simulations and scenario planning, and data analysis for evidence-based decisions. Benefits include fostering cross-sector collaboration, encouraging innovative solutions, grounding policies in evidence, and enhancing stakeholder buy-in. For further guidance, see Hinrichs-Krapels et al., 2020.

6.4. Sharing research results

As your research project concludes, it is time to share your results and maximize their potential to inform policy and practice. By communicating your findings effectively and strategically, you increase the chances that your research will inform decisions, inspire debate, or contribute to longer-term change.

There are many ways to share your research results, and the best approach will depend on your target audiences and the policy context. Consider the following activities:

- **Conferences and workshops:** Present your findings at academic, policy, or practitioner-oriented events.
- **Policy and research briefs:** Summarize your findings and recommendations in accessible formats that policymakers and practitioners can quickly absorb. Tailor the language, length, and level of detail to your audience.
- **Opinion articles:** Publish opinion pieces in relevant media outlets to highlight the significance of your research and its implications for policy and practice.

- **Short videos:** Create a short video to visually present your results and make them more engaging and accessible to a wider audience.
- **Targeted presentations:** Develop tailored presentations for key stakeholders to directly address their interests and concerns.
- **Press releases:** Draft a press release to inform journalists and media outlets about your findings. This can raise public awareness and open the door to further engagement.

For detailed guidance on how to develop these materials and improve your communication skills, see Chapter 10.

Sharing research results is not the end of the journey, it is also a key moment for learning and generating new ideas. Discussions with stakeholders may reveal knowledge gaps, raise new questions, or identify emerging policy needs. These reflections can feed directly into the design of your next research project. In this way, the end of one research cycle becomes the beginning of another. This cyclical nature of research and policy engagement is illustrated in Figure 9 at the beginning of this chapter.

7. Building relationships and platforms for policy engagement

Developing a strategy for policy engagement is crucial not only for specific research projects (as discussed in chapter 6), but also for broader research programs and research groups.

In addition to the lifecycle of a specific research project, continuous activities such as networking, participating in advisory groups, publishing opinion articles, and responding to policy windows play a vital role in establishing long-term relationships and trust with policymakers, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders. These activities help ensure that research remains relevant and impactful over time.

This chapter focuses on practical, actionable strategies for building and maintaining long-term relationships with stakeholders. It builds on Chapter 4, which discusses approaches for policy engagement in different contexts, and Chapter 5, which explores incentives for policy engagement.

7.1 Continuous policy engagement activities to build trust and visibility

To ensure your research group and its outputs are known and accessible to relevant stakeholders, it is important to engage in regular activities that build familiarity and trust. These may include writing opinion articles, attending public consultations, joining expert working groups, and participating in media commentary. Courtesy visits to key agencies and actors can also be useful, particularly in contexts where relationships are built through informal dialogue.

In addition, it is important to be prepared to respond when policymakers or other stakeholders request advice or input. Being visible and maintaining regular contact increases the chances that decision-makers will reach out when opportunities arise. Responding to these "policy windows" — moments when research input is particularly timely or needed — can significantly enhance the relevance and impact of your work.

Horizon scanning — the regular practice of identifying emerging policy issues and opportunities for engagement — can also help you stay proactive and relevant. These ongoing efforts often lay the groundwork for future research collaboration or evidence uptake. Even small, repeated interactions can establish you or your research group as a trusted source of knowledge over time.

7.2 Developing platforms for sustained interaction

To institutionalize and deepen engagement, it is helpful to establish platforms for ongoing interaction. These may include seminar series, policy roundtables and advisory boards. For example, some EfD centers have established policy advisory boards with representatives from government agencies and other key institutions (see Box 17). These boards can guide the center's strategic focus and ensure alignment with policy needs.

EfD Policy Days are another example of a structured engagement format. These events bring together researchers and policymakers around a specific theme. They are designed to foster mutual exchange, build networks, and raise the visibility of research contributions to pressing policy debates (see Box 18). Seminar series and brown bag lunches can also serve as accessible, low-cost platforms for regular engagement.

Box 17: The policy advisory board at the EfD Center in Tanzania

The EfD center in Tanzania has established a policy advisory board to strengthen links between research and policymaking. The board includes representatives from key ministries, agencies, and international organizations relevant to EfD's focus areas. The board has played an important role in aligning research with policy needs by:

- Supporting **strategic planning** through the identification of research priorities to inform policy reforms and capacity development activities;
- Encouraging **stakeholder participation** to enhance research relevance and uptake;
- Facilitating the **dissemination of research results** and dialogue between researchers and policymakers at the annual Policy Day and other fora.

By providing a structured forum for ongoing exchange, the board has helped identify priority policy questions, capacity needs, and opportunities for collaboration. For example:

- **Capacity development:** Training on Cost–Benefit Analysis for Environmental Impact Assessment in March 2023 responded to needs identified by NEMC through the board.
- **Policy analysis:** Engagement in the preparation of the Tanzania Country Environmental Analysis Report (World Bank, 2019), a comprehensive review of environmental trends and policy pathways.

The Policy Advisory Board has helped EfD Tanzania maintain strong connections with national institutions and enhance the center's contribution to sustainable development.
Read more

Box 18: EfD Policy Day

What is an EfD Policy Day?
An EfD Policy Day is a platform for researchers and policymakers to interact, present, and discuss research results and ideas. The format is flexible and context-specific, tailored to each center's goals.

Why conduct a Policy Day?

- **Improves interaction:** Enhances dialogue between policymakers and researchers, promoting evidence-based decision-making for sustainable development.
- **Increases visibility:** Elevates the EfD center as a crucial collaborator in evidence-based policymaking.
- **Promotes collaboration:** Strengthens the sense of belonging and collaboration among EfD research fellows.

How to conduct a Policy Day

1. Planning: Start several months in advance, setting clear short and long-term goals.
2. Internal Meeting: Agree on the purpose and goals with EfD center members, focusing on long-term relationship building with stakeholders.
3. Topic Selection: Choose a policy-relevant topic where your center has strong expertise, preferably a "hot policy topic" that aligns with stakeholder interests.
4. Collaboration: Partner with relevant actors to enhance networks, open new interaction arenas, and reduce costs.
5. Timing: Schedule the event based on the chosen topic and strategic timing for stakeholder engagement.
6. Invitations: Invite a mix of stakeholders relevant to the topic, leveraging personal contacts and follow-up calls to ensure participation.
7. Budget and Responsibility: Set a budget and assign a project lead, potentially a junior researcher, for hands-on experience.
8. Communication: Decide if the event is open or closed, and tailor your advertising strategy accordingly.

At the Policy Day:

- Use various techniques to engage participants actively, such as small group discussions, short presentations, role-plays, and interactive tools like thermometers or panel discussions.

Evaluation:

- Evaluate the event to build long-term relations and improve future interactions. Use simple methods like round-table discussions, on-the-spot electronic surveys, or brief participant feedback sessions. Example of an EfD policy day in Kenya

7.3 Engaging and investing in science-policy interfaces

Engaging effectively with policy processes often requires participating and investing in structured platforms and institutions designed explicitly to bridge the gap between science and policy. Researchers can enhance their influence and visibility by participating in established science-policy interfaces at various levels. These include national science advisory boards, which directly inform government policy, and international panels such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), which synthesize scientific knowledge for global policy processes.

While not many researchers get the chance to participate in these forums, if you get the chance it provides direct opportunities for policy influence and also strengthens your credibility as a policy relevant researcher.

There are also larger-scale investments in institutions and programs aimed explicitly at bridging science and policy within specific thematic areas or sectors, such as the UN CGIAR research institutes, which facilitate science-based policies in the area of food, land and water systems.

If considerable resources are available, establishing dedicated training initiatives and communities of practice can further enhance policy engagement capacity. Initiatives such as the EfD-facilitated Inclusive Green Economy (IGE) program exemplify such larger-scale investments. This initiative provides structured training, collaboration and peer learning among researchers and policymakers in five East African countries (see box 19).

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Box 19: The Inclusive Green Economy (IGE) Program – Strengthening Evidence-Based Policy Making

The EfD-facilitated IGE Program strengthens national systems for inclusive green economy reforms through long-term collaboration between researchers and senior civil servants in five East African countries. It focuses on capacity building, transformational-change processes, and institutional learning.

Key components include:

- In-service training: Senior civil servants receive targeted training on inclusive green economy approaches, supported by mentoring and peer learning.
- Transformation Initiatives: Researchers and civil servants work jointly on pressing policy challenges (e.g., climate impact's on agriculture, biomass dependency), applying economic tools to real-world problems.
- Communities of practice: Ongoing interaction through workshops and IGE Forums fosters shared learning and sustained engagement.

The program exemplifies how structured, long-term investments in science–policy interfaces can enhance both research relevance and policy capacity.
Read more

8. Measuring the impacts from your research

Being able to showcase your impact in a trustworthy and clear way is an increasingly important factor in attracting (public) funding (see chapter 2). In this chapter, the focus is on how we in practice can measure the impact beyond academia from research. In the following section, some specific tools and approaches are highlighted that have been developed to measure impact, from indicators to outcome harvesting and impact stories.

Since no single method is ideal in all situations, it's important to make deliberate choices based on your goals, context, and available resources (time, funding, and human capacity). Combining methods is often a good approach. For example, using specific indicators to track progress toward goals, outcome harvesting to capture unexpected results, and impact stories to convey the narrative can together create a fuller picture of a project or programme's impact.

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Box 20: Further information on evaluating impacts

There are more methods available than the ones presented in this chapter. For further reading, see:

- **Evaluation Methods and Approaches | BetterEvaluation** – An extensive, searchable repository of evaluation frameworks, tools, and guidance for diverse contexts. Read more
- **Evaluation Toolkit | UNICEF** – Practical guidance, tools, and examples for designing and conducting evaluations in development and humanitarian contexts, with a focus on low- and middle-income countries. Read more
- **UK Research Excellence Framework (REF)** – Incorporates societal and policy impact directly into national research assessment, using narrative case studies to capture contributions beyond academia. Read more
- **Fast Track Impact** – Guides, training, and podcasts on planning, evidencing, and increasing the impact of research. Read more

8.1. Indicators

Indicators are commonly used to monitor and evaluate project or program performance. They help track progress toward specific goals by providing benchmarks and milestones. While not a method in themselves, indicators guide the selection and structuring of evaluation methods (Reed et al., 2021). By showing changes over time, they can highlight areas for improvement, support communication with stakeholders, and promote transparency and accountability.

Indicators can be quantitative such as number, percentage, ratio etc (e.g. reduced percentage of emissions, number of attendees, respondents ranking) or qualitative which is a more subjective measure which relies on observation e.g. in forms of narratives, interviews or surveys with open-ended questions. Examples of indicators at the *output level* can be number of publications and attendance at different events arranged, on *outcome level* it can be citations in strategic policy documents, and on *impact level* it can be evidence of an actual change based on an intervention linked to your research e.g. by using national statistics (Reed, 2025).

When selecting indicators, it is commonly recommended they be **Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant** and **Trackable** (SMART). Three key tips:

- **Relevance:** Choose indicators aligned with your project's goals so they reflect what you really want to measure.
- **Measurability:** Opt for indicators that are feasible to assess quantitatively or qualitatively.
- **Inclusion:** Involve stakeholders and collaborators in selecting indicators to ensure shared ownership and usefulness.

Indicators are suitable for projects or programs when causal links are relatively clear and you need to compare progress across time or between projects. However, they may not capture the full complexity of change, and excessive focus on narrow indicators can cause you to overlook broader objectives.

Practical considerations: Indicators can be developed by the project team, sometimes with input from external evaluators or stakeholders. They should be set early in the project to allow for baseline data collection, but they can be refined during implementation. Costs are generally lower than for qualitative methods like outcome harvesting, but they still require time for data collection, analysis, and reporting. A lack of reliable data sources can limit their usefulness, particularly in low-resource settings.

Altmetrics and Overton are two examples of indicator-based webtools that you can explore and use as one way to track some aspects of the policy impact of your research (see Box 21).

Box 21: Examples of indicator based webtools: Altmetrics and Overton Index

Altmetrics track the online dissemination of research outputs beyond academia, such as in policy documents, news outlets, social media, blogs, and Wikipedia. They aggregate these mentions using identifiers like DOIs and present the data in one place. While there is no single accepted standard for altmetrics, these tools can complement traditional bibliometrics by showing broader engagement. Read more

Overton Index is a tool that tracks policy citations and finds how your research is used by decision makers. It analyzes texts in policy documents and grey literature to identify citations, references to people, organizations, and key concepts. Results can be filtered, exported, and shared in several formats useful for demonstrating your policy influence. Read more

8.2. Outcome harvesting

Another tool to identify potential results from your research work is to conduct so-called outcome harvesting. As the name implies, it does not focus on impact but outcomes from your project or program (see Chapter 2). These outcomes can be positive or negative, large or small, and often include shifts in relationships, behaviours, or social norms.

The aim of outcome harvesting is to find evidence of changes (the outcomes) that can be attributed to your interventions. These can be both positive and negative as well as small or big ones. When you have identified changes, you start assessing if and how the research team, project or program contributed to that change.

Adapted from Outcome Mapping (Earl et al., 2001), outcome harvesting is typically applied after or during implementation, even when no formal plan exists or when the project has diverged from its original design. This makes it useful in unpredictable contexts where plans need frequent adjustment. The method works best when learning and adaptation are priorities, and it can provide rich insights into how research influences policy and practice.

However, critics note that outcome harvesting can be subjective, relying on personal perspectives rather than quantitative data. Its lack of standardization makes comparing results across different projects difficult. Additionally, it can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, requiring significant staff time and expertise.

Practical considerations: Outcome harvesting is often led by an independent facilitator or an internal team trained in the method. It can be done at key milestones, at the end of a project, or periodically during long-term programmes. The time and cost vary with scope: small-scale harvests may take days, while comprehensive ones may require weeks and a dedicated budget for staff time, travel, and validation activities. For many research

teams in the Global South, constraints in funding, facilitation skills, and stakeholder availability can be real obstacles to applying the method, making scaled-down or adapted versions worth considering.

Typical steps of outcome harvesting:
Step 1: Design the harvest. Identify the intended users of the harvest and jointly develop the guiding questions. Decide what information needs to be collected and from whom. If you have a Theory of Change, link the questions to your outcome objectives, and include questions to capture your contribution to each change.

Step 2: Gather data and draft descriptions. Review existing documentation to identify evidence of potential outcomes—both those originally planned and any unexpected ones. Draft descriptions of each change, explaining what happened, how the project influenced or contributed to it, who was affected, and why the change is significant. Outcomes can be positive or negative.

Step 3: Engage with informants. Identify the individuals or groups that have been involved in the intervention and could have influenced an outcome, such as the research team and partners. But can also be the direct beneficiaries of the project or program. Invite them to review and refine the drafted outcome descriptions, and identify any additional examples.

Step 4: Substantiate the outcomes. Verify the accuracy and credibility of each identified outcome to assess whether your intervention contributed to it. This may involve interviews with individuals independent of the project or triangulating with other data sources.

Step 5: Analyze and interpret. Categorise the outcomes if relevant, and use the evidence gathered to answer the guiding questions developed in Step 1.

Step 6: Support use of findings. Based on what your outcome harvest has identified, use this knowledge to improve ongoing work or inform the design of future interventions.

See e.g. Wilson-Grau et al. (2013) for further information.

8.3. Impact stories

Impact stories (also called impact case studies or stories of change) are evidence-based narratives showing how research has contributed to changes in policy, practice, or society beyond academia. They are often used to communicate research impact to funders, policymakers, and other stakeholders, and can be built on information gathered through outcome harvesting or other evaluation methods.

In the UK Research Excellence Framework (REF), impact case studies are the main mechanism for assessing impact beyond academia. The REF provides useful guidelines and published examples that may serve as inspiration.

When crafting an impact story, your goal is to clearly show the pathway from research to impact. Make the connection between your research, the engagement process, and the observed change. Try to specify how your contribution can be verified. You will find a template in Appendix 4 and examples from the EfD network in Box 22 and 23.

Five steps for writing an impact story:

1. Describe the research and the specific outputs - Summarise the key research insights, outputs and engagement activities that underpinned the impact. This may come from one project or accumulated work. Select the most relevant elements and consider whether the example truly qualifies as an *impact* story rather than a news story.

2. How did the research lead to/contribute to the impact? Describe how your research reached and influenced actors beyond academia, including the context and why the change matters. Be clear about your project's contribution, recognising that other factors may also have played a role.

3. What was the impact? Who benefited and what changed? - Identify what changed, who benefited, and in what way. Remember that impact can take many forms, from changes in policy instruments to shifts in practices, behaviours, or organisational processes (see Chapter 2).

4. How was the impact measured?- Explain the methods used to assess the change and link it to your research. This could include interviews, focus groups, surveys, observations, statistics, or document reviews.

5. How can the impact be verified? - Cite evidence that supports your claims, such as testimonials, official meeting notes, references to specific documents, or media coverage, depending on the nature of the impact.

Writing an impact story helps you reflect on how your research contributed to change and how it was used. It is also a powerful tool for learning, advocacy, and accountability.

Practical considerations: Impact stories can be produced at the end of a project, at key milestones, or as part of ongoing communications. They can be written by the research team, communications staff, or an external writer, but accuracy depends on close collaboration with those directly involved in the work. Developing a strong story typically requires evidence gathering (e.g., interviews, documents, statistics) and clear, accessible writing. Time and cost vary—short stories may take only a few days, but well-documented case studies can require weeks of work, especially if verification is needed. In low-resource settings, a challenge can be balancing the depth of evidence with available time and funds, making it important to prioritize the most significant and verifiable examples.

Box 22: Impact story from India

Mangroves provide storm protection: This impact case study is based on EfD researcher Saudamini Das's PhD research (2005–2007) at the University of Delhi, funded by SANDEE.

The study, conducted in Kendrapada district, Odisha—an area devastated by the 1999 super cyclone—investigated the protective role of mangroves against storm damage. Motivated by the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami and subsequent debates on mangrove efficacy, the research aimed to rigorously assess whether mangroves:
1. Reduced human and livestock deaths,
2. Minimized damage to static properties like houses,
3. Diminished cyclonic wind velocity.

Using an interdisciplinary approach and robust econometric modeling, the study found that mangroves significantly reduced storm impact—human deaths would have been 54% higher without them. Dissemination began locally and expanded through FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) workshops, gaining traction among global stakeholders.

How did the research lead to/contribute to the impact?

The study's relevance was amplified by increasing climate threats and the need for sustainable disaster mitigation strategies. Mangroves emerged as a cost-effective, nature-based solution. FAO adopted the findings to support its coastal plantation initiatives. Subsequently, organizations like the World Bank, UNDP, UNEP, and various Indian state governments engaged with the research, inviting the researcher to present findings and advise on mangrove-based adaptation strategies.

What was the impact? Who benefited and what changed?

The research helped shift perceptions—mangrove storm protection is now widely accepted. Coastal governments have integrated mangrove conservation into policy and practice. The study also spurred academic interest in nature-based climate adaptation, influencing further research and regeneration efforts. While not the sole driver of change, this study played a pivotal role in catalyzing broader action.

How was the impact measured?

Impact was evidenced through:
- Over 100 invitations to present the study,
- A documentary by the American Museum of Natural History,
- A feature article in The Nature Conservancy Magazine (Summer 2010),
- A commendation letter from FAO,
- Approximately 15 academic publications stemming from the research.

These indicators reflect the study's reach and influence across policy, academia, and public awareness.

How can the impact be verified?

Verification can be provided by:
- FAO (via official correspondence),
- The Nature Conservancy Magazine,
- American Museum of Natural History (documentary),
- SANDEE and other academic collaborators,
- Government agencies and international organizations that engaged with the research.

Box 23: Other impact stories from the EfD network

- **Air quality improvement in Bogotá, Colombia**
  EfD Colombia's analysis of socioeconomic and air-quality indicators has guided local policies and interventions to reduce air pollution. Read more
- **Marine plastic pollution solutions**
  EfD's policy framework for reducing marine plastic pollution has been adopted by the Global Plastics Action Partnership in pilot countries including Ghana, Vietnam, and Indonesia. Read more
- **Laser-assisted rice farming in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam**
  EfD-funded pilots of laser land leveling improved rice yields and reduced environmental impacts, leading to large-scale adoption. Read more
- **Tanzania takes action for clean cooking**
  EfD researchers played a pivotal role in shaping Tanzania's clean cooking agenda through years of research, culminated in active participation at the national Clean Cooking Conference. Read more

9. Developing capacity for effective policy engagement

As researchers, we are trained to do research and teach, but rarely on policy engagement. This chapter explores strategies to build capacity and institutional support for effective policy engagement within research units. It highlights the importance of understanding current capabilities, identifying areas for improvement, and developing tailored learning plans. Practical examples from the EfD network provide insight into successful engagement strategies. Finally, we discuss how incentives for policy engagement can be created at the organizational and institutional levels.

9.1. Identifying capacity needs and planning for effective policy engagement

Understanding the current capabilities of the research team and identifying areas for growth in policy engagement are crucial steps for successful impact. This section therefore outlines a flexible approach to mapping capacity needs, ensuring that activities are adapted to the team's specific strengths and challenges.

1. Initiate with a capacity mapping activity
Begin with an activity to assess the team's existing skills, experiences, and knowledge related to policy engagement. This could take the form of a short survey (see Box 24), workshop, or facilitated discussion, where members share insights and identify areas where they need more support. The goal is to create a documented overview of the unit's collective strengths and needs.

2. Facilitate an inclusive team discussion
After gathering input, hold a meeting to review the findings. This provides space for reflection, sharing personal experiences, and voicing concerns. Such discussions help build a shared understanding of what effective policy engagement and meaningful impact looks like, and where capacity gaps exist.

3. Identify policy engagement priorities and plan shared learning
Use the results to pinpoint priority areas for improvement such as mapping policy issues and stakeholders or developing targeted communication strategies. Create a collaborative learning plan to address identified capacity gaps. Make it feasible to implement by including policy engagement at regular meetings, shorter workshops and use peer mentoring.

4. Set objectives and track progress
Agree on clear objectives for the capacity-building initiatives and define flexible ways to assess progress. These could include the number and quality of policy engagement activities, feedback from policymakers, or self-reported confidence levels among team members. Consider a short follow-up survey to assess how new skills are being applied.

Box 24: EfD Colombia's survey on policy engagement experiences

Researchers at EfD Colombia conducted a survey to evaluate their capacity and experiences in engaging with policymakers. The aim was to identify both strengths and challenges to enhance their societal impact. Participants reflected on their roles in various stages of engagement, including problem definition, research dissemination, and follow-up.

Key findings included:
• **Engagement practices:** Most researchers actively engaged with stakeholders through interviews, policy briefs, and press releases. Despite their efforts, limited access to policymakers remained a significant barrier. Policymakers' busy schedules and the overwhelming volume of competing information made it challenging to secure meaningful dialogue.
• **Communication challenges:** Translating complex research findings into actionable, easily digestible formats requires significant time and effort. Furthermore, the researchers noted a misalignment between academic research timelines and policymakers' urgent decision-making needs.
• **Systemic barriers**: The survey revealed that systemic issues within academia, such as a lack of incentives for policy engagement and prioritization of journal publications, discouraged proactive outreach. Additionally, the researchers reported difficulties aligning their work with policymakers' immediate priorities.

Example questions to guide this type of activity:
1. How is the policy engagement work going at the center?
2. What's the core difficulty in collaborating with policymakers?
3. Why don't researchers develop the necessary processes to deal with these challenges?

Impact: This mapping exercise underscored the need for tailored training in communication strategies, improved access to policymakers, and institutional support to foster more impactful policy engagement. It highlighted steps to consider, including creating incentives for researchers and bridging the gap between academic and policymaking timelines.

9.2 Building skills through training, peer learning, and coaching

Research units can support skills development for effective policy engagement through a combination of **training workshops, regular peer learning, and mentoring or coaching**, adapted to the needs identified in the capacity mapping process (Section 9.1). Efforts to strengthen skills should not only address technical capacity but also actively counter gender disparities and other structural inequalities by ensuring that training, peer learning, and mentoring opportunities are accessible and equitable.

Training sessions and workshops

Training workshops work best when they combine practical, hands-on exercises with real examples from the participants' contexts. Core skill areas might include stakeholder mapping and analysis, crafting policy briefs, preparing for media interviews, using digital platforms for dissemination, and tailoring messages for diverse stakeholders.

Local case examples can provide valuable perspectives and highlight context-specific approaches. Breakout sessions, role-plays, and interactive exercises allow participants to practice new skills in a safe, constructive setting, while personalized feedback helps to embed learning. Workshops can also reinforce the idea that effective policy engagement is not only a way to amplify research impact but can also generate new research opportunities.

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Box 25: EfD Uganda's policy engagement and science communication training

In October 2024, EfD Uganda held a training at Makerere University for over 30 researchers and graduate students, aiming to bridge the gap between academic research and policy influence in environmental economics.

The program focused on co-creation in research, writing policy briefs and press releases, and using technology—including AI—for communication. Interactive sessions included role-plays, practical exercises, and stakeholder mapping, helping participants learn to align research with policymaking needs while balancing academic rigor with practical communication.

Feedback showed that participants gained new perspectives on aligning research with policymaking needs, building both confidence and competence. Reflections suggested adding modules on advanced negotiation skills, context-specific policy cycles, and visual storytelling to future sessions. Read more

Peer learning and dialogue

Regular, structured opportunities for researchers to share experiences, challenges, and successes help build a culture of continuous improvement. Hosting a dedicated policy engagement session at least once per semester can strengthen collaboration and create a space for discussing best practices and lessons learned. Embedding policy engagement into personal development discussions ensures that it becomes part of individual growth plans.

Moreover, including a dedicated section on policy engagement and science communication in research proposals promotes forward-thinking strategies from the outset. This component of proposals can serve as an excellent topic for group discussion and peer feedback sessions at research units. Such collaborative review processes not only improve the quality of proposals but also ensure alignment with real-world policy needs.

Peer learning spaces should also be intentionally inclusive. Women and other underrepresented researchers often face additional barriers to participating in policy discussions, such as unequal access to networks or speaking opportunities. By actively facilitating balanced participation, recognising diverse perspectives, and ensuring that contributions are valued equally, research units can make peer learning not only a vehicle for skill development but also a platform for advancing gender equity in policy engagement.

Mentoring and coaching

Mentoring and coaching provide more personalized support, particularly valuable for early-career researchers. Mentoring can take the form of one-on-one guidance, small-group sessions, or learning-by-doing through involvement in ongoing engagement activities. Including early-career or graduate students in research teams gives them direct exposure to experienced colleagues' approaches. Senior researchers can for example invite younger colleagues to join stakeholder dialogues or meetings with policymakers.

Proactively supporting women's participation in these spaces helps to counteract structural biases that often limit their visibility and influence in policy arenas (see Box 26 for an example).

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Box 26: WinEED – Empowering women researchers for policy engagement

The Women in Environmental Economics for Development (WinEED) initiative aims to strengthen the leadership, visibility, and professional networks of women researchers in the Global South.

While its scope spans academic careers more broadly, WinEED's mentorship, targeted training, and cross-regional networking directly support women's ability to engage effectively in policy processes.

Through proposal-writing workshops, thematic seminars, and career progression surveys, WinEED provides participants with skills, opportunities, and professional connections that are critical for influencing policy debates. By fostering a strong peer network and amplifying women's voices in environmental economics, WinEED advances more inclusive, representative, and impactful research–policy engagement.
Further information, WinEED

9.3 Institutional incentives and support for policy engagement

Creating an enabling environment for policy engagement is as much an institutional responsibility as it is an individual effort. Many universities still base promotion and tenure decisions primarily on peer-reviewed publications, often overlooking the societal and policy relevance of research. This narrow focus can discourage researchers from investing time in engagement activities, even when they are essential for addressing pressing policy challenges.

Institutions can address this by reforming promotion and evaluation criteria to explicitly recognize societal and policy impact, broadening the definition of academic excellence to include stakeholder engagement, capacity building, and contributions to policy processes. The San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA), for example, advocates assessing research on its own merits rather than on journal-based metrics, and recognizing a wide range of outputs and impacts, including those that influence policy and practice.

They can also create or strengthen interdisciplinary centers and other platforms with strong policy connections, where researchers work alongside policymakers, civil society, and the private sector on applied, policy-relevant projects. Additional support could include internal grants for engagement activities, dedicated knowledge-broker roles, and training in policy communication.

While much of the responsibility lies with institutional leadership, researchers themselves can help drive change. This might include initiating conversations with department heads about including policy engagement in promotion criteria, showcasing examples of impact in annual reports, or forming working groups to propose reforms. Building alliances with like-minded colleagues, professional associations, and external partners can also strengthen the case for institutional change.

When institutions provide the right incentives, dedicated platforms, and supportive structures, they not only enable researchers to engage more effectively, but also enhance their own reputation and relevance as contributors to evidence-informed policymaking.

PART C: COMMUNICATING SCIENCE FOR POLICY IMPACT

Part C provides practical guidance for effectively communicating your research findings to policy audiences and other stakeholders. It builds on the training materials and experiences from EfD's workshops and courses on policy engagement and science communication. The goal is to equip researchers with straightforward guidance, key communication principles, and tools to help them reach policy audiences and non-specialist stakeholders effectively.

10. Skills and tools for effectively communicating your research

Effectively communicating your research outside academia is essential to achieving policy impact. As disinformation is increasing in the world, researchers' role is increasingly important to provide society with knowledge to support evidence-based policymaking, and to fight "alternative truths" (see e.g. Iyengar and Massey, 2019).

This chapter provides practical skills and tools for clearly conveying your research findings to policymakers and broader audiences. It covers how to simplify messages, structure content effectively, engage through various formats, and use tools—including AI—to enhance clarity and impact. The chapter builds on earlier training sessions within EfD on Science Communication.

Communication is an entire field of science in itself. **If you have access to communication professionals, don't miss out on the opportunity to team up with them when sharing your research outside of academia.**

Further reading on communicating your research

- Escape from the Ivory Tower - a Guide to Making Your Science Matter. By Nancy Baron (Island Press)
- The Public Professor – How to Use Your Research to Change the World. By M.V Lee Badgett (New York University Press).
- Houston, We Have a Narrative – Why Science Needs a Story. By Randy Olson. (The University of Chicago Press).

10.1. Developing research communication skills

Does your communication pass the grandfather test?

If your science communication is interesting and understandable for your grandfather (or mother, sibling, neighbor, teenager, etc) you have done a good job. Then it will also work fine for an educated, non-expert audience.

Communicating your research to anyone outside the research community comes with different challenges compared to sharing it with your peers. You cannot assume that they are familiar with your research jargon. They have no obligation to listen to you or read your material, so do not waste their time with unnecessary information or complex language that takes time to plow through.

Finally, to capture their attention, you must have a message that they instantly feel is urgent. Such a message should be **simple**, **short** and **relevant** to the audience.

Keep it short and simple

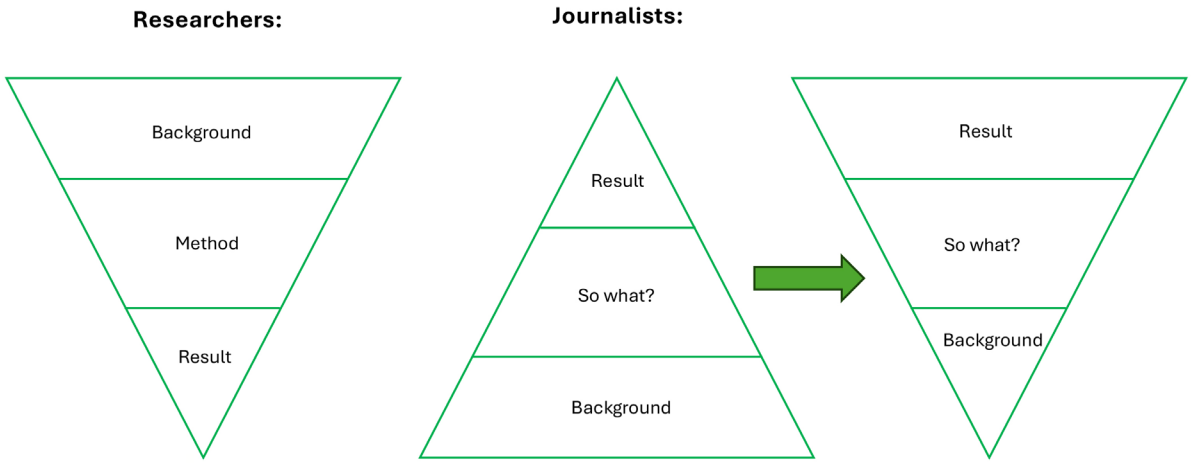
To write short and use simple, non-jargon language, may sound easy, but is in reality very difficult. The only way to learn to do that is to practice, practice, and practice some more. Write and rewrite, scrutinize your work, delete every single word, sentence, and paragraph that does not add anything valuable, and let your non-researcher friends and family give you feedback on how understandable and interesting they find your work.

In fact, there is one more way: Let an AI, such as ChatGPT, help you simplify your text and shorten it! Simplifying and shortening are things that even the simplest, free AI tools can solve well. Just make sure that you proofread everything carefully.

Make it relevant - understand the reverse pyramid

An efficient and widely used tool for translating science papers into science communication, whether it's a press release, a blog post, a research brief, or an oral presentation, is the reverse pyramid, Figure 11.

Figure 11: The reverse pyramid



It is based on the way journalists present a message. It is very efficient when you want to capture the attention of an audience and then keep the interest of the reader/viewer/listener until the end of the story.

As a researcher, you usually start with an introduction including the background, the context, and the research questions. Then you introduce the method, and finally, you present the results. You do not give away your main points in the beginning but save them for last. Other researchers use similar dispositions and find this structure logical. But when you communicate with others than your research colleagues, you will learn that most people are mainly interested in your results and their relevance, not in the methods that you used.

You need to flip your disposition upside down, like the second triangle. Start with the results, then present the "so-what" – why those findings matter. Methods should be kept brief and relevant; for example, if you conducted a survey, a short note on the sample size may be sufficient.

After presenting the results and their significance, provide only the background needed to put them in context. Even when inverting the triangle, it is easy to spend too much time on background. To address this, imagine a third triangle: the largest space is for results, followed by the "so-what," with the background last, using only the space that remains. Keep the context concise and focused.

Capture the attention with a headline instead of a title

You never get a second chance to make a first impression

The reverse pyramid structure also calls for a different mindset on how to label your story. A research study has a title that usually tells us what the study is about (not what you learned). A headline tells us what you have learned, and it should do that in a way that sparks our attention. Here's where you make a first impression, and "sell" your message.

Table 2: Examples of headlines

TITLE	SUGGESTED HEADLINE
Adaptive investment with land tenure and weather risk: Behavioral evidence from Tanzania	Risky weather and insecure land tenure make farmers invest less in climate adaptation
Stated Preferences with Survey Consequentiality and Outcome Uncertainty: A Split Sample Discrete Choice Experiment	Business owners in Tanzania are willing to pay more for an improved electricity supply
Consumer's perception and acceptance of lumpfish used in salmon cages	No need to throw away lumpfish – consumers are willing to buy

A headline should ideally be **5-10 words** long (which can be challenging when writing about research). It should include an **active verb**. And it's more important to make the reader **curious** than to tell everything. Save details for the body text!

Summarize with the first paragraph – the lead-in

A compelling lead-in is the key that unlocks the door to a reader's curiosity

Your first paragraph, the so-called lead-in, is critical. Please do not waste it on less important information or background facts. You should get straight to the point and start with the most important finding from your study. If you have learned several things, choose the most surprising and interesting finding!

The lead-in will ideally answer some of those questions: What, who, how, why, when, and where. But don't start with the date and place because those are hardly the most important facts you can provide. That information can be saved for the body text.

The lead-in shall spark attention. It's perfect if it ends with a cliffhanger that makes us eager to continue reading because its purpose is to lead us into the rest of the text.

Select an angle

The art of boring people is to tell everything (Voltaire)

Journalists talk about choosing an angle, which means choosing one aspect, one piece of news. It's the **thing** or the **hook** that makes your information newsworthy. It does **not** mean to be biased. You can still list pros and cons and let more than one opinion be heard. But if you have made a study and found answers to several questions, then choose one for your piece of communication. If, for instance, two findings are equally important, it is better to write two different press releases, research briefs, or whatever piece of communication you are planning. Deciding on an angle will help you write a headline. It will also keep your story short and stringent.

Appeal to emotions

Communication without emotion is like a painting without color;
it may convey the message, but it lacks the depth that brings it to life

Even though many researchers are passionate about their work, they often fail to let that passion shine through when they communicate their research. That's too bad. People take in information that appeals to their emotions way better than just mere facts and figures.

Appealing to emotions helps you build a connection to your audience, find common ground, and contribute to authenticity. This doesn't mean that you should adopt a fictional writing style. But if your research findings can contribute to actual change that people care about - fewer people will starve, children mortality can decrease, fewer forests will be cut down - make sure to emphasize that and don't assume that a reader understands everything that is implied.

More communication skills

A good communicator connects with others through clear, empathetic, and engaging expression.

There are many tools to make your message more appealing, understandable, and memorable. Here are some examples.

- Write straightforwardly, i.e., don't start a sentence with a subordinate clause. Also, use short, direct sentences, in writing and when talking.
- Use active voice, i.e. say "I communicated a message" instead of "A message was communicated by me".
- Use metaphors to illustrate in pictures: Increasing the interest rates to mitigate inflation is like blowing up your garden to get rid of the weeds. Or: Its progress is like a roller coaster.
- Numbers should be easy to understand. It's better to round up than use decimals: Say "one out of ten" rather than 9,457 %. Make comparisons to put the number in context: For a surface say for instance how many football fields that equals.

10.2. How to write a research brief or policy brief

Why write a brief?

Brevity is the soul of wit. (William Shakespeare)

A research brief can be a great tool to communicate research findings to a specific audience, such as decision-makers, civil servants, journalists, practitioners, or the public. A research brief is a document that summarizes a research question, method, results, and conclusions in a concise and clear manner. A research brief can be an effective way to disseminate knowledge, influence policy, and create interest and engagement for a research area or a specific topic. A research brief should be well-structured, easy to read, relevant, and engaging.

Decide if you should write a research brief or a policy brief

They are both documents that summarize and communicate research findings to a specific audience, but they have some differences in their purpose, content, and style.

- A policy brief is usually a **synthesis** of several studies. It outlines the rationale for choosing a particular policy alternative or course of action in a current policy debate.
- A research brief is usually more **descriptive** and objective, presenting the research findings and evidence in a neutral way. A policy brief is usually more **prescriptive** and normative, arguing for a specific policy position and providing evidence to support it.

- A policy brief should have **simple and accessible language**, avoiding jargon and statistics that may confuse or alienate the policy audience. Suppose a research brief is only aimed at an academic audience. In that case, it may have a more technical and scholarly language, using information and statistics that are relevant to the research community. However, if it is intended to be relevant for a larger audience than just academia, then jargon and technical language should be avoided in research briefs as well.

Components in your brief

There are different formats and styles for writing a "research brief", but common elements are:

- **Headline:** A short and catchy title that captures the attention and describes the topic.
- **Summary:** A brief overview of the research question, method, results, and conclusions.
  The summary should be self-contained and contain the main messages from the brief.
- **Introduction:** A background to the research question, and why it is important and relevant for the audience.
- **Method:** A description of how the research was conducted, what data and analyses were used, and what limitations and assumptions exist.
- **Results:** A presentation of the main results from the research, supported by tables, charts or figures if needed. The results should be clear, objective and well-supported.
- **Conclusions:** A summary of the main conclusions from the research, what they mean for the audience, and what recommendations or implications can be drawn.
- **References:** A list of the sources that were used in the brief, with the correct referencing system.

Read a policy brief from EfD Ghana

Suggested workflow for policy brief

Different organizations have different ways of organizing the work with policy briefs. In some, the production of policy briefs is usually initiated by the communications director or managers with a good overview of what policy advice is in demand.

In others, it may be the research team who takes the lead. In either case, we strongly suggest a close collaboration between researchers and communication professionals, to make sure that the message is communicated in a stringent, relevant, understandable, and efficient manner, while also correctly presenting research findings. Here is a suggested workflow.

- **Define the policy issue.** Why is it important, and what is your goal? You should be able to state the problem and objective in one or two sentences and make them clear, specific, and relevant.
- **Identify your target audience and their needs.** What do they already know, what do they want to know, and what actions do you want them to take? This will help you tailor your language, tone, and content to suit your audience.
- **Describe the problem.** What is the background and context? What are the causes, consequences, and current status of the problem? What are the existing policies or solutions, and what are their strengths and weaknesses? You should gather reliable and credible evidence from various studies to support your analysis.
- **Compare policy alternatives or options**. What are the possible ways to solve the problem or achieve the objective? You should present at least two or three policy

alternatives, and evaluate them based on criteria such as effectiveness, feasibility, cost, and inclusion.

- **Propose a solution.** Provide evidence to back up your claim. Anticipate and address potential objections or counterarguments from your audience or other stakeholders.
- **Write and revise your policy brief.** Follow a clear and logical structure. You should include a headline that captures the interest, a summary, an introduction, a research overview, a discussion or analysis of the findings, and a conclusion or a recommendation.
  Use intermediate headings, bullet points, tables, charts, or figures to make your brief easy to read and understand. Cite your sources.
  After writing your policy brief, revise it for clarity, accuracy, coherence, and persuasiveness. Ideally, let someone from your target audience give feedback on relevance and understandability.
- **Disseminate and follow up on your policy brief.** There are many ways to share your brief. Arranging a stakeholder workshop is one efficient way. Other channels include e-mail, publishing it on your website, and including it in a newsletter.
  Monitor and evaluate the impact of your policy brief, and seek feedback from your audience. You should also be prepared to answer questions, provide clarifications, or engage in further discussions about your policy brief.
- **Don't forget to include contact information!**

Writing a research brief can follow the steps above. The main differences are that a research brief doesn't have to include a policy discussion and it is usually based on one single study.

10.3 How to write a press release

Why write a press release?

If you can get media, such as newspapers, TV, or radio to report on your research, you can get a lot of traction in your efforts to reach policymakers and other stakeholders with your message. It's cost-efficient, gives you a trustworthy outlet, and can give you a very broad audience. Making a press release based on your research means turning it into a news story, following the format of news media. It can either be published as it is or can inspire media to make their material based on it.

If you have access to communication professionals, it's a good idea to team up with them to craft the pressrelease since it can be challenging to translate your research into a message that is relevant for media. Below are some guidelines for a successful press release.

Select an angle

If you try to include too much in a press release, the message will be blurred and irrelevant. Stick to the topic and select the most relevant angle, that is the most relevant perspective to highlight. If your research has led to several different conclusions that are all equally important, it's better to split them up into different press releases.

Components to include in your press release

A press release should follow the format of a news article so a journalist or editor can immediately identify how the content can fit into their reporting. It will make it easy to understand the news angle, the relevance for the audience, and the urgency of the message. The recommended length of a press release is one page.
Here are the important components:

- **Formal information**, such as the name of the sender (such as academic institution), a logo (optional), the label "press release" and the release date.
- **A catchy headline** that captures the interest of the audience. It should reflect on the content but doesn't have to tell everything. (see the difference between a title and a headline in 10.1!)
- **A lead-in**, also called a preamble, which is the first paragraph that summarizes the most important message and sparks the curiosity of the reader
- **The body text** provides the context, facts, and figures, is easy to read and understand, short and concise. Recommended length 300-500 words.
- **Quote(s)** from a relevant stakeholder and/or a researcher who has conducted the study that the press release refers to. The quotes should be more personal than the rest of the body text.
- **A fact box** can be a good way of presenting additional facts and figures, so as not to overload the body text.
- **Contact information** is very important! Also, make sure that you are available when the journalists try to contact you.

Make your press release "fly"

A press release is likely to be successful if it follows the logic of media in general:

- It presents something new
- It relates to a trending topic
- There is some controversy
- It's surprising or unusual
- It's relevant to a large group of people

Share your press release

Plan the distribution of your press release carefully. It's worthwhile putting some effort into reaching both narrowly to the most relevant media outlets as well as broadly to get more visibility. Here are some ways to reach out:

- **Press release distribution services.** Many academic institutions subscribe to media distribution services that let you tailor a mailing list that includes the media that are relevant to you. **E-mail** – create a media list yourself, based on what media you want to reach out to.
- **Phone call.** Making a phone call before sending out a press release achieves at least two benefits: 1) You can find the journalist at a specific media that has an interest in your research area and you can send the release to that person directly and 2) The journalist anticipates your e-mail and will not regard it as an unwanted spam. **Websites**. The website of your academic institution as well as other platforms you may have access to are obvious repositories for your press release.

Also, keep track of where your press release has resulted in media coverage. It's easy if your institution subscribes to a media monitoring service. If not, it will require a bit more work, but it's still worthwhile since referring to media coverage can be valuable for you as a researcher.

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Box 27: Example of press release.

This press release based on a research publication was published in some different media channels, in most cases without much editing. It has already the format of a news article which increases the chances of getting published.

10.4. Prepare for a media interview

Many researchers are reluctant to be interviewed by journalists and are afraid to be misinterpreted. But having an opportunity to talk about your research for a broad media audience has many advantages. With the right preparations, you can also minimize the risk of getting misunderstood.

Check out the media

If you have set up an appointment with a journalist, you should take the opportunity to find out as much as possible about that media in advance:
Who is their target group? What is relevant for that target group? What angle of your research would be most relevant for them?
You can ask if you can get the questions before the interview. If they agree to do that, you will get an idea of what they are interested in, but be prepared that they may ask other questions when you meet.

Remember that it's a dialogue

The interview is a dialogue, not a lecture.

- Make sure to make many pauses and check if the journalist understands everything. Embrace follow-up questions, don't see them as interruptions.
- Always speak in complete sentences. Otherwise, the journalist will (maybe unintentionally) fill in the blanks with guesswork.
- Try to be structured, don't jump randomly from one topic to another.

The journalist will write what you said, not what you meant to say!

Focus on what's valuable for the journalist

- **Facts** that are relevant and understandable
- Striking **numbers** (put them in a context, make comparisons)
- **Metaphors** that illustrate your point
- Interesting comments from you that can be used as **quotes**

What should you not say in an interview?

- **Off-the-record information**. If what you say off-the-record is more interesting than the rest, why shouldn't the journalist publish that instead?
- **Information that can be misunderstood**. If a statement can be misunderstood when it's taken out of its context, then it's better to find another way to say it.
- **What you don't know**, such as inconclusive results.

Anticipate the questions - prepare your messages

Regardless if it's possible to get the questions in advance, it's very helpful to try to anticipate what kind of questions you will have and prepare good answers to them. Ask for help from people around you – what would they have asked? What do they think that a journalist would ask?

Practice your answers so you don't get tangled up, even if the questions would come in an unexpected order.

10.5. Write blog posts

Why write a blog post/have a blog?

It is not difficult to start your blog using platforms such as WordPress, HubSpot, Web.com, Wix, Weebly, Squarespace, etc – there are many tools and some of them are free. A quicker and even easier way is to contribute blog posts to an existing platform, such as the website of your academic institution or a social media platform such as LinkedIn.

There are many good reasons for you to write blog posts:

- **Knowledge dissemination**: A blog post allows you to communicate your findings in a more accessible and understandable language compared to academic papers. This helps in disseminating knowledge to a broader audience, including policymakers and the general public.
- **Reach broader**. Blogs have the potential to reach a larger audience than academic publications. This can include students, professionals in related fields, policymakers, and the general public.
- **Engage with the public**. Blog posts can help raise awareness about important research topics. Blogging can also allow you to connect with the readers, which can lead to valuable discussions, feedback, and collaboration opportunities.
- **Build a personal brand**. Writing blog posts can enhance your visibility in their field. It can establish you as an authority. It can also facilitate networking with peers.
- **Skills development:** Writing for a general audience will enhance your communication skills, which will be valuable in many contexts, including grant writing, teaching, and even academic writing.
- **Appeal to funders.** Many funders and institutions increasingly value researchers who can communicate their work to a broad audience.

Structure your blog post

Blog posts have a very free format. However, looking at the structure of a news article is helpful. Start with an exciting headline, and summarize your message in the first paragraph without giving away everything. Build up a structure that provides context, explain why your topic is important, and finish off with something that the reader will remember.

Make your blog post relevant and interesting

You have a good chance of attracting followers if you address trending and/or urgent topics. Use simple and straightforward language, avoid jargon.
Be personal and informal. A blog is a place where you can voice your opinions and call for action.

Share your blog post

It's not likely that people will spontaneously go to your blog site and check in to see if you have posted something lately. You have to alert your audience.
Use social media every time you share a post.
If the platform you use has a subscribe function – encourage people to subscribe
And investigate whether your blog can be included in a newsletter.

10.6. Use social media

Social media are powerful tools to reach a large audience and to interact with other people. It's not possible to make general recommendations as to what platforms to use, since it differs greatly from country to country what social media are popular. Some are even forbidden or blocked in some countries. Common options include professional networking sites such as LinkedIn, short-form messaging platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Bluesky, visually oriented platforms such as Instagram, and region-specific tools like WeChat, WhatsApp, or Telegram. The best choice depends on your target audience, communication goals, and the norms in your policy or research community. Many researchers find it effective to combine platforms, for example, using LinkedIn to connect with policymakers and professional peers while using Instagram or Facebook to reach a broader public audience.

Some general advice can be summarized as follows:

- **Be social!** Be generous to other people, interact, like, share and comment on accounts that you find relevant and interesting.
- **Prioritize:** It's better to be on one or a few platforms and do it well rather than trying to be everywhere and do it poorly.
- **Post often,** daily or at least weekly.
- **Use hashtags** (#). Many people use hashtags to search for specific topics. If you add tags like for instance #sustainability #economics or #biodiversity, then your page may appear as a suggestion for people who are searching for content on those topics.

10.7. Make your oral presentations more effective

As a researcher, you may be asked to present your work in many different situations. Talking to other researchers may be the situation that feels most comfortable, while speaking to people who are not researchers and/or do not already have an interest in your topic may be more challenging.

Capture the audience:

- **Tailor your message** to the audience, which in most cases means keeping it **short**, **simple**, and relevant from their point of view.
- Appeal to **feelings**. Let your passion show - it will rub off on the listeners.
- Find the **"wow-factor"** of your work and focus on that
- Use your **voice and body language** to create variation and emphasis in your presentation.

Structure your presentation

Whether you're making a long presentation or a very short, for instance, if you get the opportunity to present your research for a group of civil servants, there is a general structure that can be applied with minor modifications for most situations:

- **Start** with something exciting! (You don't even have to introduce yourself first, you can do that after the first sentence). A bold statement, a rhetorical question, something that surprises and captures the listeners is an effective start.

- **Lead in** - We use the same terminology as in previous chapters, lead-in, for the one or two sentences that summarizes your main message in an exciting way, without giving away everything. This should make the listener anxious to hear the rest.
- **Conflict** - this is where you introduce the problem, contradictions, obstacles. For instance, why hasn't your suggested policy solution been implemented already?
- **Build up** - you present more facts and context, more arguments for your case. Metaphors and striking numbers can be useful here.
- **Conclusion** - this can be a summary and a call for action.

10.8. Communicate uncertainty and limitations

When communicating research findings, there is a risk that the audience will want to extrapolate and (unintentionally) draw conclusions that are not supported by evidence. To avoid this, make sure that you:

- **Clarify the limitations** of the findings and the conclusions that can be drawn.
- If you must include uncertain research results, ensure that this **uncertainty is clearly communicated**.
- You are clear about the **difference between causation and correlation**. A common source of misunderstanding and misinterpretation is to mistake correlation for causation. If some factors correlate, they may all be caused by an external factor.

In a news article or press release, it's better to exclude findings that are so uncertain or inconclusive that there is a risk of being misunderstood and misquoted. In a research brief it can make more sense to include research results that are inconclusive, to suggest further research.

10.9. Use AI to support research communication

Artificial Intelligence, AI, can be a valuable tool when communicating science. It can be used to summarize large amounts of text, to check spelling and grammar, to simplify your text and adapt it for the reader's level of knowledge, and serve as a creative sparring partner when producing communication material. While ChatGPT may be the most well-known, there are numerous others for content production, such as Hubspot, Grammarly, Copilot, and specific tools to create images, film and sounds.
Some examples when it can save a lot of time to use AI:

- Turning a research publication into a research brief
- Crafting a news article or press release based on a research publication
- Make a pod based on research
- Make a chat bot where the reader can ask questions and get answers about a topic
- Create illustrations and films

The results you get will depend on how well you prompt, that is, give instructions/ask questions to the AI. You can write very long prompts to get as specific output as possible. The way to get what you want is to practice, prompt and re-prompt, and of course learn from others.

The options are seemingly endless. However, as many people have experienced, the output from an AI is not always correct, and not always based on the material you feed it with - some things are completely made up. When using AI, you will always have to be in the driver's seat. Check the content carefully - are all facts correct? Consider the audience - do you have the right content and tonality?

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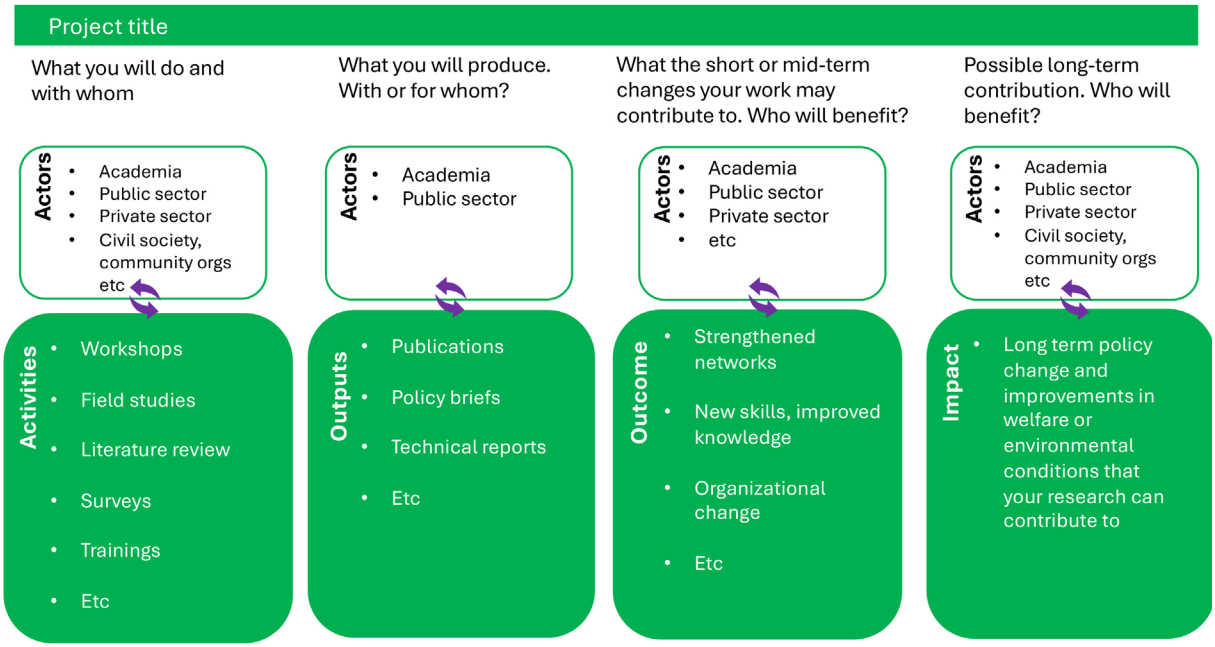
Appendix

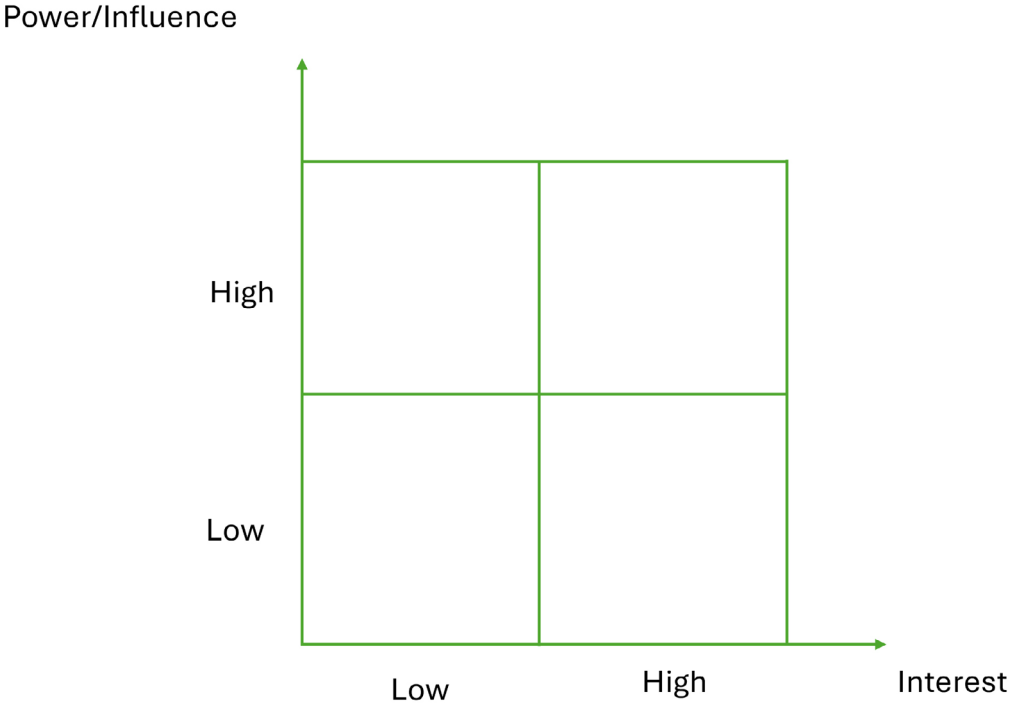
Appendix 1: Theory of change illustrated



Link to a template you can use when preparing your research proposal, get it here

Appendix 2: Stakeholder identification and analysis

Power–Interest Grid Template



Guiding questions when filling out the matrix:

- Avoid blind spots. Think across sectors, levels (local to international), and social dimensions such as gender, age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Have you included women's organizations? Youth groups? People with lived experience of the issue? etc
- What gives this actor power or not?
- What shapes their interests?
- Are they likely allies or blockers?

Appendix 3: Engagement and communication matrix

Prioritized Stakeholders (name of organization, group, individual)	**Type of interaction** (face-to face meeting; trainings; workshops; policy brief etc)	**When interact?** (specific time period; link to policy windows?)	**Contacts** (specific people to interact with)	**Comments / Issues to consider** (e.g. Why is the stakeholder prioritized? Risks or opportunities of engaging)

Appendix 4: Impact stories template

1. Describe the research and the specific objectives!
Note: It does not need to be based on one specific research project but can also be accumulated research. Describe the key research insights that underpinned the impact & key outputs.

2. How did the research lead to/contribute to the impact?
Note: Describe the process on how your research was picked up beyond academia. Explaining the context. To make your impact story understandable, you have to explain the background, why the issue is relevant, and underline the urgency.

3. What was the impact? Who benefited and what changed?
Note: Impact can come in many forms not only changes in specific policy instruments, but also changes in practices, behaviors, or organizational processes.

4. How was the impact measured?
Note: Often, impact occurs due to multiple interventions. How is the impact you described above linked to your research efforts and how has it been measured? Try to be as specific as possible when you describe this. Several methods can be used to gather data such as interviews, focus groups, surveys, observation, desktop review etc.

5. How can it be verified? Who can verify the impact/vouch for the results?
Note: Here you can add references that verifies the link between your interventions and the claimed impact.

Appendix 5: EfD policy engagement & impact chatbot

The EfD Policy Engagement & Impact Chatbot turns this handbook into an interactive tool. Use the chatbot to get step-by-step guidance, tailored examples, and ready-to-use templates for your policy engagement and science communication work.

Try it here

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