Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

SCIENCE–POLICY INTERFACE IN ACTION #2

METHODOLOGY FOR BUILDING COUNTRY-LEVEL CAPACITY ON SCIENCE-POLICY INTERFACES IN AGRIFOOD SYSTEMS

Political and economic transition has had a profound impact on the agrifood systems and societies of Europe and Central Asia. To eliminate food insecurity, malnutrition and rural poverty and to ensure that agriculture contributes its full potential to national economies, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) supports Member Nations in the Europe and Central Asia region in strengthening country-level Science–Policy Interface (SPI) capacity. Strengthening science-based decision making helps to realize context-specific and systemic solutions, leading to more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems.

Science is international, but agrifood systems policy is decided at national level. Building and strengthening national-level SPIs is, therefore, a priority.

FAO works to build country-level capacity in SPIs in the region. Here we present a practical guide for countries that seek to establish new SPIs, or to strengthen existing ones.

The value of this guide is that it provides a formula on which countries can model the development of their SPIs. It serves as a country-level instruction manual for building capacity and improving the uptake of science into policymaking.

SPI model framework

SPIs are **mechanisms for organized dialogue** among scientists, policymakers and other relevant stakeholders in support of inclusive science-based policymaking.* The authors have developed a **model approach for country-led SPI mechanisms** with four essential elements.

More detailed information on the SPI concept and mechanisms is contained in the *Science Policy Interface in Action N1*.**

AGENDA

What is our agenda? Do we have a common and agreed purpose? What will be the scope of this SPI? What aspects of this issue are beyond the scope of this SPI? Have we negotiated and agreed upon a written statement of our common purpose (our mission statement)?

SUPPORT

What support do we need? What support do we already have? Where are resources needed? Who will provide them? What is the most suitable format of SPI operation within available resources? In what institution will the SPI be based?

INCLUSIVITY

Whom do we need to include? Who should be represented? How can we foster intersectoral integration and avoid the silo effect? How do we encourage interdisciplinarity?

COMMUNICATION

How do we communicate science and other forms of knowledge? How do we convert this to a policy-readable format? How will this SPI communicate its findings, and to whom? What is the pathway into policymaking?

*For more information on the FAO Science and Innovation Strategy, please visit http://www.fao.org/3/cc2273en/cc2273en.pdf
**Available at https://openknowledge.fao.org/items/9663be5d-b526-4922-80dd-145a4a33587c

Methodology for Science–Policy Interface capacity building

There are two steps to the methodology:

1. Baseline analysis – generate a visualisation of the status of SPIs in the country
2. Training methodology – a practical simulation to establish an SPI

1 Baseline Analysis

WHAT IS THE STATUS OF SCIENCE–POLICY INTERFACE MECHANISMS IN THE COUNTRY?

Gathering data on the status of SPIs across the region helps to identify where the current capacities lie. Two different survey templates may be used to elicit responses from the two main constituencies: scientists (and other knowledge-holders) and policymakers. The aim is to identify the drivers, barriers and attitudes that prevail. Follow-up interviews are useful to improve the level of detail captured in the initial survey data.

Data sourced from the questionnaires and the follow-up interviews can be enriched by a desk review, exploring the following questions:

1. How is policymaking in agrifood systems sectors informed in the country? What is the pathway for science and other forms of knowledge into the policymaking process?

2. What is the added value the SPI brings to policy outcomes?

3. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the existing SPIs, and how can they be improved?

4. What are the obstacles faced by existing SPIs and how can they be overcome?

Survey responses and desk review findings are systematized by mapping and describing existing formal and informal SPI mechanisms via the **SPI model framework**.

STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION: WHICH ACTORS TO ENGAGE?

Survey respondents should be drawn from policymakers, the scientific community and other knowledge-holders. To gain an optimal representative sample, responses should be sought from local and national level actors, and from all (or selected) sectors of the agrifood system in the country, depending on the scope of the SPI.

The definition of "knowledge holder" is intentionally broad. The term encompasses technical experts, directors of research institutes, academics, scientific associations (particularly those that include underrepresented voices, such as young and female scientists), farmers' representatives, private sector actors, civil society groups and other actors throughout the agrifood value chain, including the custodians of traditional knowledge.

Policymakers are a more clearly defined set of actors: those serving in the government departments responsible for policymaking in agriculture and food production, environment, social protection, tourism, trade, industry and others, depending on the scope of the SPI.

2 Training Methodology

The workshop begins with an **introduction to the concept of the SPI**, to ensure that participants are in agreement about the definition and scope. The results of the preparatory analysis on the SPI status in the country are presented. Participants are then engaged in a joint exercise of **mapping the agrifood system SPIs** that currently exist in the country. Participants volunteer information and help to build a **conceptual map of SPIs**, visually represented to the audience. This mapping exercise helps participants better understand what an SPI is, and the diversity of SPIs that exist.

Participants are asked to engage in an **SPI roleplay simulation**, taking on a role different than the one they have in their everyday lives. Scientists take on the role of policymakers, and vice versa. Participants are tasked with having a front-to-front pitch on a given topic, with a "scientist" presenting the research findings/information in a manner that convinces a "policymaker" to use that in policymaking, and a "policymaker" providing feedback on why it can or cannot be integrated. This forces a change in perspective among participants and helps them understand their counterpart's position.

GROUP WORK

This activity creates a microcosm of the real world situation in which policymakers, scientists and other key stakeholders interact on an issue relevant to their work area.

Participants are grouped, according to the part of the agrifood system they work in (e.g. crop production). A maximum of 12 participants is optimum.

The **first group assignment** is to discuss the predefined questions (listed below) in the context of transitioning to more sustainable agrifood systems. Organizers may choose to attribute one priority to one group, or to mix the priorities and questions to better adapt to the training needs.

For each group, either a facilitator among the organizers is assigned, or a rapporteur is selected by participants to take notes and communicate the group work findings.

Upon completion of the assigned timing for the exercise, the main findings are shared with other groups in a subsequent plenary session.

Guiding questions for group work:

- As a scientist, what action can you take to communicate your research findings into the policymaking process?
- As a policymaker, what action can you take to increase the engagement of science in the policymaking process?
- From your perspective, when trying to incorporate science into policymaking, what are the most significant obstacles?
- What institution should host an SPI mechanism (government, research institute, university, United Nations agency, other stakeholder)?
- As a policymaker, scientist or other stakeholder, what is the value that having a formal SPI would bring?
- In your opinion, how would a formal SPI mechanism improve the policy outcomes?

DESIGN YOUR SPI

The objectives of this third element of the training are twofold:

1. to enhance the capabilities of participants to understand the SPI process from an alternative viewpoint; and
2. to familiarize participants with the SPI model for creating a national-level SPI mechanism on an agrifood system challenge in their country.

Each group is given a collection of badges containing various stakeholder roles (for example, "*Policymaker in the Ministry of Agriculture*", "*Farmer and Leader of the National Farmers' Association*", "*Senior Scientist in a Public Research Institute*", etc.).

Each participant in the group is invited to select a role to play, choosing a role other than the one they currently hold (scientists choose the role of policymaker or a representative of the private sector, and vice versa). Alternatively, participants can be given an opportunity to select a badge randomly without seeing the role it contains. It is important that each group contains a balance of perspectives.

Each group is then tasked with designing an SPI that is ready to address a specific challenge relevant to the agrifood systems (for example, "Your task is to create a national-level SPI mechanism on more affordable and accessible healthy diets for rural youth and women"). The SPI model framework is provided to guide them.

The group appoints a Chair and spends one hour (recommended) designing their SPI, **guided by the questions on the right**. To ensure the group discussions cover all four aspects of the SPI mechanism, participants are advised to allocate a portion of their time to each segment. They nominate a rapporteur to take notes and monitor timing.

The groupwork concludes with each Chair presenting their group's SPI design. As a practical hands-on exercise, this is often the most valuable step. Participants learn from the process of designing an SPI, and they learn to identify the pitfalls and difficulties that they may encounter in SPI design and development.

AGENDA

What is our common and agreed specific purpose? What aspects of this issue are within and what are beyond the scope of this SPI?

SUPPORT

What resources do we need to establish and run this SPI? From whom? What is the most suitable format for SPI operation? What institution should host this SPI?

INCLUSIVITY

Who should be included in this SPI? Can we identify any key stakeholders who are absent?

COMMUNICATION

How will the science that is on our agenda be communicated to policymakers? What is the route into policymaking?

The closing remarks provided by the organizers can summarize the learnings that were highlighted during the presentations. The context-specific nature of the SPI mechanisms in the given country should be emphasised. Ways in which SPIs can be adapted to country-specific needs are revealed through the exercise. Although the context may change, the basic model to design an SPI can be applied in any setting. New learnings uncovered during the group work can be highlighted and shared with all participants.

The authors developed this methodology by investigating examples of the best global SPI practices, combining them with techniques from the disciplines of organizational psychology and behavioural science, and enriching the process with a methodological approach for analysing SPI statuses in specific countries and throughout the region.

It was then validated for its practical utility with a broad group of national-level SPI stakeholders – scientists, knowledge holders and policymakers – who took part in the first **Regional Science and Innovation Week for Europe and Central Asia held in October 2023**.

Seventy in-person and 20 online participants were engaged in the SPI capacity-building workshop, including policymakers, representatives of research institutes, academia and civil society, leaders of agritech startup companies from more than 20 countries in the region, and FAO technical staff from regional, subregional and country offices. Four in-person groups contained 16 to 17 participants each, with a balance of role, geographical and gender representation. The online group engaged more than 20 participants.

Through this training module, participants learned the key elements necessary for a successful SPI mechanism. They acquired practical skills in negotiation and had the opportunity to play the role of a stakeholder different from their usual role. Workgroup exercises familiarized participants with the work of establishing an SPI on topics within the **four FAO Regional Priority Areas for Europe and Central Asia**. They also served to validate the usefulness of the SPI model framework and the feasibility of the training approach for strengthening SPIs in the agrifood systems area.

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