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How to promote and assess policy relevance in research projects?

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Preambule

This text should be helpful for both applicants preparing research projects to be submitted to BiodivERsA calls and reviewers mobilized by BiodivERsA to evaluate the submitted projects.

The report has been written as a result of the experiences of the BiodivERsA partner agencies in co-designing, implementing and coordinating a series of joint calls which have aimed to link scientific excellence to policy and practice in the field of biodiversity. It is also based on the experience from the French ministry of ecology and sustainable development, the UK Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, and the Environment Agency.

The following guidance is intended for research which is relevant to policy making and may not be appropriate in all circumstances to more science-driven or "blue sky" research programmes.

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Introduction

Among its major objectives, BiodivERsA aims at supporting pan-European research projects that are both scientifically excellent and have a likely strong societal impact. The better projects are those that take both scientific and societal impact criteria into consideration and thus are ranked higher. This should not be interpreted as any redundancy between scientific and societal impact assessments since it is clearly dependent on the existence of both perspectives. There may be a special case, within the framework of BiodivERsA, and acknowledging the specific remits of some sponsors, to support excellent science that does not have immediate societal impact. The scientific panel could have the opportunity to identify those projects that are of such high quality that they should be funded regardless of the societal impact assessment.

Currently, BiodivERsA uses two sub-panels of experts to evaluate research projects submitted to BiodivERsA calls for proposals: a scientific sub-panel, in charge of the evaluation of the scientific quality of projects, and a second sub-panel in charge of the evaluation of the societal impact of the same projects. Both evaluations are taken into account to decide which projects to select for funding.

In this context, the second sub-panel has to more specifically evaluate the submitted projects focusing on three aspects: (i) policy relevance, (ii) stakeholder engagement, and (iii) European added value. The present report presents what is meant by policy relevance of a research project, and why it is important for BiodivERsA to consider policy relevance of projects during their evaluation. It also provides the criteria used to assess policy relevance of projects, which are thus keys for applicants who want to apply to a BiodivERsA call, and guidelines for evaluators mobilized by BiodivERsA. A companion BiodivERsA Handbook[2] details how to engage stakeholders in research projects and the way to promote and evaluate it: both applicants and evaluators are invited to also consult this report.

[2] Durham E., Baker H., Smith M., Moore E. & Morgan V. (2014). The BiodivERsA Stakeholder Engagement Handbook. BiodivERsA, Paris (108 pp).

Rationale for assessing the policy relevance of research projects

Public policies have to deal with increasing complexity in the relationship between human activities and the environment. Evidence-based policies need strong assessments of the real status of the environment, its short term as well as long term evolution and, last but not least, the effect that different options have on this status. Decision makers are professionals that have the competence and the responsibility of making choices. That means that they have to cope with unknown, uncertain and fuzzy parameters and still be able to act in the interest of stakeholders. Among them, public decision makers have an additional challenge: their stakeholders are the general public, local to global public good, remote populations, future generations...

Increasing their knowledge is therefore a key aspect of sound public governance. The tendency, these days and mostly in developed countries, is to be as protective as possible, using the precautionary principle whenever the lack of information prevents the design of prevention measures.

Scientists are fully involved in the provision of knowledge to policy makers. Scientists have revealed most global threats to the environment so far. The majority of them have also worked very hard to convince politicians and the general public of the reality of their discoveries. In many cases policy makers request also the involvement of science to fill the gaps in knowledge that weaken their decision capacity. It thus makes sense to try to enhance the efficiency of the process that drives research investigations and their results to knowledge for policy makers.

The question is: how to make sure that this process is really efficient? It is generally accepted that only good science can provide good knowledge but that this condition is not sufficient for its ability to meet the policy makers' requirements: the good science might, for example, address an issue that is not immediately relevant to the issues that concern policy makers. The evaluation procedure must therefore address scientific quality as well as policy relevance. Scientists belong to a unique profession

that can only be judged by its peers. This is very specific: although peer judgement exists in many professions, external clients actually evaluate the results.

This specificity explains why the scientific quality needs to be assessed by a scientific committee, using peer reviewing. However, as good as a project can be on a scientific perspective, its policy relevance is not guarantied as such. The use of a single evaluation scheme based on pure scientific criteria lacks evaluation of the policy relevance. Thus the evaluation procedure should deal specifically with policy relevance[3]. Such an evaluation needs to be carried out by those people that are involved in policy making in order for them to assess the likely benefits of projects results for policy making. They should be given an opportunity to examine the projects submitted to BiodivERsA calls to sort them for policy relevance. The dedicated panel in charge of the evaluation of policy relevance should include relevant policy makers. Ideally they should be selected amongst those policy makers that have a good knowledge of what a scientific project is. A minimum scientific background is therefore necessary. Another requirement is that they represent the appropriate subsidiary level of policy making which for many environmental issues is national.

With such a project evaluation process, projects within a programme are coherent with the needs expressed by policy makers that research should aim at developing knowledge for decisions. It also maximizes the chance that good science is being delivered for good decisions. The evaluation process is key for that purpose but is not sufficient. A programme should also organize workshops amongst the scientific community to help trans-disciplinary discussions to occur and address complex issues at the borders of different disciplines. Dissemination of results is also a key for making sure that results are known, with the hope that they are subsequently applied. Linkages between policy makers and scientists need also to be organized, for

[3] Note that stakeholder engagement and European added value are also evaluated in BiodivERsA, in addition to scientific quality and policy relevance of research projects

instance when results are available[4]. The overall research programme including the set of funded projects, the governance system, the evaluation rules and processes, the dissemination activities should be evaluated after completion or after several years of activity. Such an evaluation should not focus on scientific quality but on the overall ability of the programme to meet its objectives. The management of the programme should include a minimum level of quality assurance in order to ease the evaluation phase.

Criteria for assessing policy relevance

To demonstrate policy relevance, project proposals submitted to BiodivERsA should contain the following elements:

1. ***A clear statement of the policy application***

Any proposal must contain details which cite the relevance of the research to policy instruments and current legislation. It should also highlight the importance of this work for solving pressing societal issues related to the details of the joint call. This information is essential in demonstrating the science-policy credentials of any application for funding.

This should include references to the following information:
- Relevant EU, national or regional policy statements, legislative frameworks or management plans, including for example:
- EC Biodiversity Communications
- EU Directives: Habitats, Birds, and/or Water Frameworks
- Other European agreements e.g.: OSPAR, ASCOBANS etc
- National or regional biodiversity action plans and strategies implementing CBD
- National or regional legislative frameworks implementing EU Directives
e.g. Natura2000

[4] In this context, BiodivERsA can help some funded projects, or bundles of funded projects, to produce policy briefs targeting European policy makers (see www.biodiversa.org/559)

- Other relevant national or regional policy statements or plans.
- Specific national and/or regional policies or plans which will benefit from application of the research results should be identified in each country included in the proposal.

2. ***Clearly identified policy makers who are end users of the research results and ways to engage them***

The proposal will be expected to identify specific end-user organisations, and, if possible, to name individuals within these organisations. As much detail as possible should be included on targeted policies and policy makers and ways to engage them in order to make clear that the link between applicants and end-users is credible. Generic references to 'end users' or policy makers, which are 'in the spirit' of the research call, will not be sufficient to secure a high evaluation score. There will be an expectation that engagement with any identified end-users (policy makers and other stakeholders) will be built in the communications plan and the project description of work.

This should include the following information:
- statements from named individuals within policy development, implementation or advisory agencies at national and/or regional levels describing the anticipated uses of the research results within their organisations.

3. ***Arrangements for knowledge transfer***

The proposal should detail the arrangements for efficient knowledge transfer to policy makers (and other stakeholders). This should be the subject of a detailed communication plan, which is embedded into the project description of work.

This should include:
- An external communications strategy with details of reporting and dissemination of results and any planned publicity;
- Details of arrangements for data sharing and data access and post-project data archiving;
- Any plans for commercial exploitation of results.

4. ***European added-value***

The proposal should contain an overview of the outcomes which it seeks to achieve. These can be outlined in terms of socio-economic impacts or direct effect on biodiversity. There should be clear evidence of added-value, either directly within the European Union or within EU dependencies overseas, or indirect value accrued as a result of, e.g.:
- learning from models applied countries outside of the EU;
- a reduction in risks, for instance the risk presented by an invasive species which has not yet entered the EU.

This should include:
- An outline of European added-value provided by the proposal
- Ideally, following delivery of the main project outputs, an evaluation of the use and uptake of results and expected impact in Europe or European regions should be undertaken.