

Science for Environment Policy

How can social scientists engage with environmental policy?

Social scientists have been advising on environmental issues for decades, but their contributions to policy remain unclear. This study analysed how social scientists interact with policymakers and provides recommendations for future engagement.

Public debate on environmental issues has characterised recent decades. In the 1950s, localised pollution was an important issue, defined by the mercury poisoning tragedy in Japan's Minamata Bay. Agricultural [chemicals](#) were a hot topic in the 1960s, while nuclear power was a pertinent issue throughout the 1970s and 80s, highlighted by events such as the Chernobyl disaster of 1986. Debate nowadays is focused on more complex, cross-boundary problems such as loss of [biodiversity](#) and [climate change](#).

Alongside these evolving concerns, the environment has become a distinct area of policy, prompted by the [UN Conference on the Human Environment](#) in the early 1970s. Environmental concerns began to be institutionalised as countries developed environmental ministries and passed environmental regulations. In the 1980s, the [Brundtland Report](#) popularised the idea of sustainable development, and policies were established on acid rain and ozone-depleting substances.

It was around this time that social scientists began to engage with environmental policy, generating fruitful interactions that continue today. Researchers from the [Sustainable Practices Research Group](#) have now developed a framework to analyse these interactions.

The researchers set out to answer two key questions: How do social science and public policy interact? And, how can social scientists engage with policy in the future? Both questions were orientated towards environmental problems. The authors say that it is an opportune time to ask these questions, as social scientists are increasingly being asked to advise on environmental problems such as climate change.

The researchers based their findings on a review of literature in policy studies and science and technology studies. By investigating the literature in these two areas, they aimed to understand better how academic research and public policy interact generally, and how social science and environmental policy interact specifically.

Investigations into their first question revealed that politics has become more complex and uncertain over the past 25 years, as new challenges in the environment have emerged. The researchers also identified differences between policy and academic spheres. This can cause problems for social scientists aiming to influence environmental policy. Major changes in policy can take many years, generally much longer than it takes to complete a scientific project. These time commitments, and the need to write for different audiences, conflict with the academic pressures of publishing in peer-reviewed journals.

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(continued)

In answer to their second key question, the researchers highlight five ways in which social scientists can engage beneficially with environmental policy:

1) Providing analysis, evidence and advice on environmental issues from the social science perspective

For example, providing policy briefs, enquiries or taking part in committees, thus integrating the results of social science into environmental policymaking.

2) Encourage more reflexive policy processes in institutions

Reflexive governance involves problem solving by a wide range of stakeholders (e.g. policymakers, scientists and public) and incorporating uncertainty, rather than trying to eliminate it, in order to examine problems and scientific claims more critically. This approach provides a wide range of opportunities for social scientists to contribute to policy, and in less formal ways. Existing institutions should be made more reflexive and new reflexive institutions should be formed, say the researchers.

3) Understanding how policy is made in practical terms

Social scientists should understand the more mundane routines, roles, objects, artefacts and elements involved in making policy. The researchers suggest that this knowledge would make the process more transparent, bolstering the productive reflexivity described above.

4) Carefully analysing policy domains

Social scientists should analyse the areas of policy which they seek to influence. However, the researchers suggest it is 'unclear' whether such enhanced reflexivity results in 'better' or 'worse' (environmental) policy.

5) Considering their broader role in relation to the environment

The authors finally encourage social scientists to think about their role in relation to the environment and sustainability more broadly. They encourage scholars to engage with the public through traditional forms of communication such as lectures, as well as less conventional routes such as conducting co-research with the public (e.g. citizen science). They say that helping to shape the public debate may also effect changes on policy and politics.



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