



Good practices

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Understand your audience



Know your audience – understanding policymakers

Contributing INNOVATE partner: ICMPD International Centre for Migration Policy Development

Objectives, basic principles & potential impact

When seeking to bridge migration research to policy, knowing your audience – specifically policymakers – is crucial for effective communication and impact. But who exactly are these policymakers? Are they a homogeneous group? Can they only be found in politics or ministries? What role do stakeholders like think tanks and international organisations play in migration policymaking?

Evidently, migration policymakers are not a homogenous group. They are a diverse group of individuals and institutions that shape and influence policies related to migration, refugees, and border management. They operate at various levels of governance and across different sectors. Key actors include government agencies at national but also regional and local level. Furthermore, European Union institutions – European Commission, Council and European Parliament – and EU agencies exert significant influence on migration policy.

Beyond government bodies, a broad range of stakeholders – including international organisations, think tanks, and civil society groups – play a vital role in migration policy development. These stakeholders influence migration policy through their mandates on migration and asylum, lobbying, advocacy, and engagement with political leaders. In certain areas of migration policy, the private sector can be an important stakeholder, serving as a strategic partner to shape policy through research insights.

These actors interact in complex ways, often balancing national security concerns, human rights obligations, and economic interests when forming migration policies. They also operate in political environments where migration and asylum policies are highly contentious, meaning that their receptiveness to research findings can be shaped by whether the findings align with—or challenge—political agendas.

To effectively navigate this broad network of stakeholders and ensure that research has policy relevance and impact, it is essential to “know your audience”. It is therefore crucial to invest time in 1) identifying the stakeholders for whom the research might be relevant and 2) understanding the environment in which “policymakers” operate, and how to best reach them.



Example

Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA)

This example introduces key tenets and principles from the engagement strategy developed within the framework of international migration research projects. These projects employed the Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA), a methodology that helps develop engagement strategies based on understanding stakeholders' specific interests and influence. ROMA's strength lies in its adaptative approach to engagement modes, effectively leveraging networks to influence policy change.



Engagement steps

In order to define, map, and categorize the stakeholders relevant to a particular research, the following steps were used to "understand the audience," incorporating ROMA's Mapping Approach:

1 Define the target group among policy makers. Early identification of the relevant stakeholders whose work aligns with the focus of the research ensures that their access to information, views, and specific policy approaches could be considered when designing the research. Ideally, this also facilitates early involvement of stakeholders/policy makers in the research process, increasing the likelihood of them being receptive to the results.

2 Conduct a thorough stakeholder mapping. Defining the target group goes hand-in-hand with stakeholder mapping. This helps understand stakeholders' stance on the issues at hand and how their views could either support or challenge the research findings. Mapping consists in identifying key actors in migration policy within the research area and categorising them according to their positioning, priorities, and connectivity to the research. This allows for assessing whether their policy approaches are likely to resonate with the research. Additionally, it allows for assessing stakeholders' interests in the research, particularly why and how they might engage with or use the findings. Mappings are useful to distinguish stakeholders who may support the research findings, from those who need to be convinced of the outcomes first, and to adopt tailored engagement strategies (see Rapid Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA), p. 14).

3 Understand the broader context in which stakeholders/policymakers operate. Once stakeholders are mapped, it is crucial to understand the political and practical environment they work in and how these factors influence their priorities and receptiveness to the research. The political climate and current policy debates should be closely monitored. Knowing the current policy landscape helps understanding stakeholders' stance on the issues at hand and how research might align with or challenge the various existing political narratives and priorities. Timing is another critical factor—

stakeholders may be more open to research during periods when they are seeking new solutions, while there may be less receptivity during times of political gridlock or high pressure in other policy areas. It's also important to assess stakeholder's influence within the political ecosystem or their ability to move others, as this will guide how research findings should be communicated.

Some dos and don'ts

- **Bilateral contact:** Before inviting policy stakeholders for dissemination events it proved valuable to initiate bilateral exchanges upfront to break the ice and to capture their perception on the topic of research while, at the same time creating awareness and above all to get to know each other.
- **Background information:** Researching current programmes, strategies or past public speeches of stakeholder or individual policy makers before interacting helps to understand stakeholders' approaches, their alignment or non-alignment with the research topics and outcomes.
- **Timeliness:** Whether your research is heard also depends on the timing. A research topic that is not on policy makers' desks will hardly be heard, regardless of whether you think it is relevant. Staying alert on policy developments and adapt your programme to current debates (example: adapting more general research on protracted displacement to identify solutions for evolving migration related challenges as a consequence of the covid pandemic or large scale displacement following the Russian invasion into Ukraine provided timely recommendations for current challenges based on broader research.)

- **Time:** Time is a valuable commodity. Be mindful of your audience including policy makers' time and adapt the length of your written papers. (example: a workshop was organised to break down extensive research into a maximum of 10 precisely formulated and actionable key messages that could help to trigger policy makers attention – “elevator pitch”).
- **Language:** Avoid accusatory language when presenting your research (whether in writing or orally). It could well mean your first and final exchange with topical stakeholders. Nobody accepts criticism from outside lightly – and even less if it is presented in an accusatory and partial way.
- **Relation and trust building:** Trust and therefore impact do not come from a one-off interaction. Keep your research in mind of policymakers through regular interaction through regular information exchange (e.g. newsletters, distribution emails), but ideally through personalised ongoing interaction (e.g. via personal emails or regular face-to-face briefing meetings). It also proved valuable for trust building, to include policy makers as speakers during events.



Success factors

Stakeholder mapping is a key element to strategies and target stakeholder engagement, particularly in larger research programs such as Horizon research projects which usually address a broad variety of stakeholders. Investing time to thoroughly conduct a comprehensive stakeholder identification and mapping can greatly enhance the inclusion of stakeholders and policymakers early in the process and encourage their input. But then it is all about ways of maintaining regular communication to build trust and keep stakeholders informed.

One common pitfall in research projects is that stakeholder interaction or mapping is often seen at the start of a project but then left untouched throughout its implementation. However, as the research progresses, new stakeholders may emerge, while previously identified ones may become less relevant due to a variety of reasons. Therefore, stakeholder mappings should be viewed as a dynamic and valuable resource, both at the outset and throughout the entire process of stakeholder engagement and dissemination.



Learn more

[ROMA: A guide to policy engagement and policy influence \(2021\)](#)



Understanding the knowledge needs of diverse policy stakeholders

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Objectives, basic principles & potential impact

Understanding your audience also means getting to know the knowledge needs of stakeholders. So, what drives political decision-makers and practitioners to collaborate with scientists? This good practice focusses on a practical example of science communication and the involvement of stakeholders in knowledge transfer. Dialogue formats between scientists and practitioners open up the possibility of reflecting on and contextualising specific needs and contributing to the development of adapted solutions, which are difficult to discuss in day-to-day political and administrative processes. The example illustrated below shows the great importance of the involvement of practitioners and lower-level administration officials. Although they usually have little room for manoeuvre to influence political decisions directly, they do have detailed process knowledge. The exchange of knowledge with this group can be of great importance, as their needs and concerns may be given greater legitimacy through the support of scientific based knowledge.



Example

Understanding knowledge needs at grassroots level

Last year, I was invited by an integration officer from a district in the far south-west of Germany to give a keynote speech at a stakeholder meeting in the district. As the date of the stakeholder meeting was not feasible for me, I initially declined. However, the integration officer told me that it was particularly important to her to get me to give this keynote speech and, in consultation with the district administrator, she even suggested a new date for the stakeholders' meeting, which I was able to attend. This made me curious about the district and the reasons why I was so strongly desired as a keynote speaker.

In a preparatory meeting, the integration officer explained to me that the previously very committed volunteers had lost some of their momentum during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic and that the issue of refugee admission was no longer receiving the necessary attention at a political level. The stakeholders' meeting was a new opportunity to raise awareness of the issue and, above all, to give new impetus to the volunteers. Myself as a keynote speaker would be particularly interesting because of a previous research project in which I focused on the role of the host society in the reception and integration of refugees.

This sounded convincing to me, and I ended up traveling to this district, gave a keynote

speech, then moderated a workshop and took part in a final panel discussion with political leaders in the district. I received very positive feedback from the volunteers in particular. They emphasised how important it is that their own experiences about what hampers integration is validated by the voice of science. This, they argued, is the only way to get sufficient attention at the level of political actors and thus solve existing problems.



Engagement steps

Preparatory meeting: In a preparatory meeting, I asked about the objectives and the outline of the event and clarified what role I should play in it.

Planning availability: At first, I wanted to cancel the appointment as I couldn't afford the long journey to the planned date. But then the appointment was rescheduled according to my wishes. So, I travelled there. As it was such a long journey, I didn't just stay for the keynote, but actively took part in the entire symposium. In retrospect, this was very important, as I was able to have many informal discussions with stakeholders in this way.

Offering different formats: As I was available for the whole day, I not only gave the keynote, but also moderated a workshop and then took part in a panel discussion. In this way, I encountered many different players in different roles, which increased the output effect.

Illustrative keynote: As I knew that many (voluntary) actors with a lot of personal experience in the field of refugee integration were taking part, I designed my keynote with many concrete examples and quotes from qualitative interviews. This story-telling approach is very suitable for activating links to the actors' own experiences. Even for political actors with less direct experience, appropriately prepared information remains in the memory for a long time.

Mutual learning: As I was also moderating a workshop, I was able to switch roles: while during the keynote, I was giving information, as a workshop moderator I could ask questions and listen to the expertise of actors in the field. This was particularly valuable for me, as I wanted to know from the participants what they wanted from science, which communication formats they find useful and how they could be reached through communication formats. The answers of the participants were very helpful for better tailoring my research to policy output in the future.



Success factors

- **Commit according to your expertise:** Check if communication requests meet your expertise. If they strongly do, go for it, as you might be just the perfect communicator for the event.
- **Tailor your contribution to the specific needs of your audience:** Find out which stakeholder groups will attend the event and anticipate which communication strategies are the most relevant and effective for them.
- **Use a story telling approach to make your research output as illustrative as possible:** As stakeholders draw from their direct experiences in the field of practice, you should echo these experiences with a story telling approach. This makes it easier to memorise the information you provide, as with storytelling you can contextualise and generalise information and illustrate it with particular case stories.
- **Be aware that your output may reach the intended audience in a second step:** Knowing that policy makers are difficult to reach, you should consider that empowering other stakeholders, such as volunteers, by ways of knowledge transfer, can be a very effective indirect way to finally reach policy makers as intended audience.

