

Deep dives

More research, less impact?

Insights from Horizon-funded projects on migration

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The project has established the [Migration Research to Policy Co-Lab](#), which has both a physical and virtual presence and includes a Research Exchange, Engagement Hub, and Training Facility.

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More research, less impact?
Insights from Horizon-funded projects on migration

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Executive summary

This report focuses on research-policy engagement dynamics within EU-funded Horizon projects on migration, mapping how researchers, policymakers, and practitioners view key obstacles and opportunities for improving their mutual collaboration around evidence.

It finds that EU-funded Horizon projects on migration have a proven track record of systematically bringing together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders around shared research and policy questions. The outcomes of their collaboration, however, remain mixed due to diverging objectives, structural problems, and gaps in project design.

Promoting more systematic and structured research-policy engagement in Horizon projects cannot eliminate these tensions, but has the potential to mediate them. Here are four steps based on the insights of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners:

- **Embed engagement as a criterion for Horizon project success.** For project partners and stakeholders, engagement rather than impact is an effective and realistic tool to track incremental progress.
- **Balance research-driven and policy-oriented objectives** since the project design phase, foreseeing more realistic impact objectives in project proposal and integrating engagement tools and resources into project design.
- **Build institutionalised engagement capacity** within project consortia to align their skills set with Horizon requirements and ensure that evidence is presented in an accessible, actionable way.
- **Introduce post-project follow-up tools** in project proposals, including dedicated time for impact evaluation and resources for post-project dissemination efforts.

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Glossary

Engagement	<i>Broad umbrella term that encompasses different forms and methods of connections between researchers and policymakers, from less to more formal, from more targeted ones (aimed at improving the uptake of research) to pure communication performed at different stages of project implementation.</i>
Researchers	<i>Members of project consortia who are academics or research experts, including project coordinators.</i>
Policymakers	<i>Members of project consortia or external stakeholders including officials who decide on policy and policy implementation (e.g. officers from the European Commission, national government ministries etc).</i>
Practitioners	<i>Member of project consortia or external stakeholders including working level people from governmental, non-governmental and international organisations (e.g. representatives of different branches of national/regional/city administrations, civil servants, bureaucrats (including street-level bureaucrats), lawyers and legal practitioners, NGO staff, diaspora organisations, business organisations, trade unions. Think tankers are also included in this category.</i>
Stakeholders	<i>Actors who are not part of the project consortia but are identified as groups on which the project is expected to have an impact, including policymakers, practitioners, public officials, civil society representatives, employers and business organisations, and migrants.</i>
Non-researchers	<i>Term encompassing policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders involved in research projects as partners or target group.</i>

1. Introduction

This research report analyses **research-policy engagement in the context of EU-funded Horizon projects on migration** under two main schemes: Horizon 2020 (Societal Challenges 6, 2014-2020) and Horizon Europe (Cluster 2 and 3, 2021-2027, some projects still ongoing).

The Horizon Programme represents a significant investment by the European Union (EU) and the migration research community to advance knowledge around migration and develop new ideas for evidence-based policies. Despite this, policymakers, practitioners and researchers involved in the Horizon-funded projects continue to face **multiple challenges related to the generation, dissemination and practical implementation of research evidence**. These challenges can be described as a multidimensional engagement paradox.

1.1 The challenge: a multidimensional engagement paradox

The multidimensional engagement paradox relates to the **growing disconnect between investment in research on migration – a highly contested and politicised topic – and the perception of low practical impact on policy and society**. This paradox manifests itself across at least three dimensions of research policy.

1. The **volume** of research **versus** its **influence**. While we see unprecedented levels of academic research, both with respect to quantity and quality, its impact on decision-making is perceived to remain limited.
2. The **scale of investment** versus the **return**. While the EU has made **record investments** in large-scale research projects, policymakers perceive **little return** in terms of actionable findings. Researchers conduct high-level, independent research under funding schemes like Horizon, but their findings are not always immediately translatable into the practical recommendations and action plans that policymakers typically seek.
3. The **quest for facts** and evidence at a time when expertise itself is increasingly **contested**. Policymakers, particularly in contentious areas such as migration policy, have to balance insights from research with political agendas and polarised public debates. Depending on the political context, they can be perceived as either disregarding evidence or favouring alternative narratives that align with political interests rather than research evidence. At the same time, much of the research demand focuses on policies

and practices that many scholars actively oppose, creating a fundamental **misalignment** between research objectives and political and policy agendas.

The engagement paradox in its multiple manifestations leads to a situation where rigorous, well-funded research projects struggle to influence policy, while anecdotal or ideologically driven arguments gain traction in public discourse.

Not only does this paradox raise crucial issues about the role of expertise in governance and policy, but it also brings up the question of **which practices to avoid or pursue to ensure that engagement between research and policy is meaningful** for all actors involved rather than merely symbolic or limited to one-way communication of research findings or policy priorities.

1.2 Brief overview of the literature

The literature on migration-research policy collaboration has extensively addressed elements of the engagement paradox. The growing interest in evidence on highly salient and polarising migration issues has been accompanied by the increasing awareness that the relationship between research and migration policymaking is not linear. Instead, it is shaped by political interests, institutional structures, and public debates which may not be based on 'hard facts' alone (Boswell, Geddes, and Scholten 2011; Ruhs et al. 2019).

Expert knowledge in policymaking, in fact, is not only used **instrumentally** to solve policy problems, but also **symbolically**, i.e. legitimising predetermined policies; or **substantiating** an organisation's or political party's policy preferences (Boswell 2009).

EU public research funding structures and policy frameworks are no exception in this respect, as they prioritise research that aligns with clearly-defined policy objectives (Ulnicane 2023). This, however, may create tensions between research integrity and critical distance, on the one hand, and policy relevance as key to secure funding, on the other (Stierl 2022).

The complexity of research-policy relations suggests **reconsidering simplistic accounts of impact**—how it is defined, measured, and valued. Rather than a 'knowledge shapes policy' approach, the literature on migration research-policy relations has explored alternative and more complex accounts that either question the notion of research impact at its core or support views of impact where knowledge and policy influence each other through diffuse and incremental processes (Boswell and Smith 2017).

The debate on migration research-policy relations has gradually shifted to considering the need for more interactive and iterative relationships, where knowledge exchange is a **dialogical**

process based on co-production, bringing together policy, practice, and lived experiences (Broadhead 2024).

The possibility of meaningful research-policy dialogues raises several challenges. For the research community, it calls for greater **reflexivity** regarding the contribution, role, and position that scholars may take, as well the implications of these interconnections for migration and integration scholarship (Scholten 2018). At the same time, bridging the gaps between research, policymaking and public debates on migration remains of **significant importance for both scientific research and societal change** (Scholten 2018; Ruhs et al. 2019).

The INNOVATE project contributes to bridging migration research to policy through a systematic approach to building more effective engagement.

Engagement is understood as *a broad umbrella term that encompasses different forms and methods of connections between researchers and policymakers, from less to more formal, from more targeted ones (aimed at improving the uptake of research) to pure communication performed at different stages of project implementation.*

INNOVATE's [Migration Research-to-Policy Co-Lab](#) is a specific vehicle for knowledge valorisation and mutual exchanges combining a focus on communication of research evidence with innovation in dialogue-based and participatory methods for more effective engagement.

1.3 Objectives of the report

This report provides insights from Horizon-funded projects into how to strengthen research-policy engagement. To do this, it maps **engagement needs and interests** of project partners and stakeholders in three steps:

1. It examines ***how researchers, policymakers and practitioners conceptualise and perceive engagement within the framework of Horizon-funded projects;***
2. It investigates the ***factors and conditions that these actors see as either facilitating or hindering effective engagement.*** By identifying barriers such as communication gaps, as well as enablers like shared goals and structured interactions, this analysis aims to draw key takeaways on how to address some of the most relevant engagement issues.
3. Lastly, the report focuses on ***what researchers, policymakers and practitioners involved in Horizon-funded projects on migration believe is necessary to strengthen effective***

stakeholder engagement and support evidence-based decision making. This includes exploring potential changes in project structures, knowledge translation mechanisms, and the role of intermediaries who can bridge research and policy.

1.4 Why Horizon-funded projects?

The report focuses on research-policy engagement dynamics in Horizon-funded research projects on migration. While these projects are by no means the only venue for significant engagement around research evidence, **Horizon represents an illustrative example of the potential of research-policy collaboration** given 1) the **extremely significant level of public funding** that has been allocated to migration research since 2014; 2) and the **clear engagement objectives** it sets in its calls for projects.

When it comes to the **funding aspects**, the EU has made migration research a central priority under its Horizon 2020 (2014-2020) and Horizon Europe (2021-2027) programmes.

The Horizon 2020 programme brought migration research centre stage, particularly within Societal Challenge 6, *Europe in a Changing World: Inclusive, Innovative, and Reflective Societies*. It was launched largely in response to the sharp rise in asylum seekers around 2015 and the consequent demand for evidence-based insights to improve governance and policy responses. In that period, the EU allocated over EUR 125 million to fund more than 40 research projects covering key areas such as integration, migration governance, asylum and forced displacement, the migration-development nexus, migration narratives, and forecasting models (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2024).

Horizon Europe continues to fund research on migration, approaching it from multiple perspectives. Within Cluster 2, *Culture, Creativity, and Inclusive Society*, projects examine migration's broader societal impact. Cluster 3, *Civil Security for Society*, addresses external dimensions such as border control and security. Other Horizon Europe clusters also engage with migration-related issues, including health and climate research (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2024).

Taken together, Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe represent **a major investment in research, totalling around EUR 160 million with more than 55 projects funded up to 2024**. Over EUR 125 million has been allocated through Horizon 2020, while nearly EUR 35 million has been invested under Horizon Europe so far to support migration research across a wide range of topics (European Commission, Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2024)..

The second aspect which makes Horizon an extremely relevant case study for research-policy engagement is that **research-policy collaboration is built into the programme**. Each funding call includes clearly defined 'expected impact' objectives, which specify in detail the anticipated outcomes and effects of the projects, guiding applicants toward a strong focus on policy and societal relevance.

Additionally, Horizon-funded projects foster **collaboration across countries and disciplines through a multidisciplinary and comparative approach**. These projects provide researchers, policymakers and practitioners with an opportunity to work within international consortia, gathering comparative knowledge in an interdisciplinary setting.

Over time, Horizon 2020 and Horizon Europe have not only played a crucial role in deepening the understanding of migration. They have also helped build a **community of scholars** and produced **meaningful examples of engagement**.¹

Despite this positive track record and the fact that collaboration and impact are encouraged and structured into the programme, **the multidimensional engagement paradox around the evidence produced by Horizon projects remains evident**. Moreover, **integrating findings** from over 50 large-scale projects on migration involving, in total, hundreds of partners, thousands of outputs and countless days of seminars, meetings, and conferences **represents a significant challenge for funders and prospective research users**.

This research report will take a close look at the factors hampering or facilitating research policy collaboration starting from the perceptions and self-assessment of project partners and stakeholders.

1.5 Methodological approach

The findings presented in this report are based on **a comprehensive analysis of engagement dynamics in projects funded under Horizon migration calls between 2014 and 2024**.

First, a **systematic mapping of 57 Horizon projects** on migration was conducted to identify key themes, objectives, and outcomes. This mapping provided an initial understanding of the scope and focus of EU-funded research in this field. It also forms the basis of **the [Migration Research to Policy Co-Lab's Research Exchange](#)**, a database of large-scale research projects on migration presented in a policy-oriented way.

¹ INNOVATE's Migration Research to Policy Co-Lab has mapped good practices and engagement tools under the [Engagement Toolkit](#) (available as of March 2025).

The study also draws on **70 semi-structured interviews and one group interview with a project consortium**, conducted between June 2024 and January 2025, online or in person. These interviews were carried out across 38 out of the 57 Horizon projects on migration initially mapped and involved a diverse group of participants, including researchers (50) and non-researchers (20), i.e., policymakers and practitioners within research consortia, as well as external stakeholders (see Annex 1).

The projects and interviewees were selected based on the availability of project partners to be interviewed. While it was not possible to speak to a comparable number of research and non-research partners, the insights from the latter ensured a comprehensive understanding of recurring factors influencing research-policy collaboration.

The semi-structured format allowed for in-depth discussions, enabling participants to share their perspectives on engagement experiences, challenges, and potential improvements. The content analysis of the interviews was conducted by analysing recurring topics and most divergent opinions. Rather than focusing on strategies for effective engagement in general, the analysis focused on objectives, motivations, challenges as well as success factors. Results were then aggregated through systematic interview summaries. The co-authors of this report also conducted a cross-validation of the interview data to ensure consistency and accuracy.

Interview data was treated anonymously. Therefore, the report does not include any reference to specific projects.

2. Research-policy collaboration within Horizon-funded projects

Horizon projects on migration have a **proven track record of systematically bringing together researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and other stakeholders around shared research and policy questions. Their assessment of research-policy collaboration, however, remains mixed.**

This section first maps their experiences of engagement, looking at both elements of convergence and divergence around how findings are generated and communicated. It then analyses features of the Horizon research design and other intervening factors that facilitate or hamper engagement. The third part of this section zooms in on the impact objectives foreseen in Horizon projects as key programmatic tools.

2.1 Mapping experiences of engagement

Our interview data suggests that researchers, policymakers and practitioners view improving migration policy through knowledge production as a shared goal and their mutual collaboration as instrumental to achieving it. At the same time, they report ambivalent engagement experiences due to differences in approaches, priorities, and timeframes.

2.1.1 Improving migration policy is a shared goal

"(..) It would be nice if science could help me to check the quality of my work and discover gaps to show me where perhaps my way was not the right way. That's always super important to me. Showing strengths, trying to establish comparability where possible." (Practitioner, Non-Res-13)

"(..) This is [a topic] of which there is quite some intuitive awareness in civil service. But also, the people in those positions need support from the world of research and need to fall back on evidence and point decision makers to [a specific] body of evidence." (Researcher, Res-15)

All interviewed partners in project consortia share the expectation to **advance knowledge** on a specific migration issue and **define concrete directions for policy change**. This provides the basis for their collaboration within Horizon projects.

When it comes to **advancing knowledge**, researchers see their collaboration with policy and practice partners as based on developing knowledge with greater relevance and a more solid grip to real-world problems. Policymakers describe their primary incentive for participation in Horizon projects as having access to knowledge that helps them reflect on their work and consider new, evidence-based, practical improvements to the status quo. For NGOs and practitioners, Horizon projects provide an opportunity to generate or systematise knowledge that they can use for advocacy, creating a broad network of stakeholders, and comparing challenges and solutions across issue areas and geographical contexts.

In addition, partners across the research-policy-practice spectrum describe their mutual collaboration around knowledge generation as **a cross-fertilisation dynamic** that can benefit them through the activation of broad stakeholder networks.

Policy change, understood as the improvement of the status quo in a specific migration policy area, is described as the other shared goal motivating engagement within Horizon projects. Researchers and non-researchers generally align on improving migration policies through collaboration. This may involve, for example, isolating problems in the existing policy framework; defining reform actions for a specific domain, such as protection, integration or return; or scaling up good practices into comprehensive policies.

Overall, interviewees see Horizon projects as contributing to dialogue and collaboration around these shared goals because the latter foresee **both research-driven and policy-oriented objectives** (see section 2.2 *Research design and project setup*).

2.1.2 Approaches, priorities and timeframes differ

"So our main interest in participating in this project was because through the project we could get an important tool which is a panel of indicators, to measure integration of migrants at schools that can be used." (Practitioner, Non-Res-3)

"(...) I am aware that we operate in two realities, i.e. there is the decision-making reality of the legislator and the broadly understood state policy, there is the research reality, there is the scientific reality. Unfortunately, these two entities speak different languages, and even if they speak the same language, they do not talk about the same thing and not in the same way (...)." (Practitioner, Non-Res-16)

"Policymakers can be over demanded, over requested on certain topics whereas they're just interested in getting a response to their question or a response to a specific topic." (Practitioner, Non-Res-17)

"Our purpose is to really bring the nuances in our understanding of this migration phenomena, but it's really not easy because the institution itself, our funder (...) has a different perspective." (Researcher, Res-36)

Beyond this shared premise, and in line with the literature on this topic (see *1.2 Research-policy collaboration: overview of the literature*), researchers, policymakers and practitioners experience engagement ambivalently due to divergences in 1) approaches, 2) priorities; and 2) timeframes.

Approaches differ in methods, level of abstraction and focus. Researchers describe their approach as focusing more on conceptual, theoretical and methodological aspects, while policymakers and practitioners are more concerned with practical solutions that could be implemented (including narratives that could resonate with the public).

When it comes to **priorities**, policymakers typically look for **concise, context-specific, and actionable research findings**. In their view, successful engagement focuses on exchanging ideas and developing practical solutions. They often prioritise short-term, pragmatic solutions that match current political objectives and resist or find unrealistic findings which support broader systemic changes.

In contrast, and expectedly, the priorities of research partners in project consortia pertain primarily to **the advancement of theoretical debates and empirical research**, including the production of analytical, evidence-based insights. Importantly, some aim to empower the public with knowledge to foster long-term societal shifts in how migration is understood and hold politicians accountable for migration policies. However, the concrete application of research findings or the implementation of specific solutions deriving from them remain more abstract or secondary objectives.²

Consistent with their different priorities, research and non-research partners have contrasting views on the project **timeframe**. Both share the overarching goal of improving the status quo in a specific domain, even fundamentally. However, researchers focus their engagement efforts on refining policy frameworks, pushing for **long-term, systemic change**. Policymakers, in contrast, describe themselves as operating within **shorter-term, pragmatic and politically charged contexts**. They sometimes prioritise immediate and measurable outcomes, which

² The interviewees' approach to case studies in Horizon projects provides an illustrative example of these differences. Both researchers and non-researchers have great interest in comparing case studies. However, while researchers are primarily interested in gaining comparative insights into factors shaping migration policy making, practitioners hope that case studies will serve as a benchmark to assess their own local migration policy (and practice) and give them access to new solutions for similar problems.

contrasts with the researchers' focus on longer-term impacts and views on what 'improving the status quo' entails.

These divergences are associated with either positive or negative engagement experiences depending on the circumstances. They **may hinder collaboration or provide a basis for synergies and complementary roles** in a project through a mix of short- and long-term objectives.

BOX 1. Engagement experiences of external stakeholders

Like research and non-research consortium partners, external stakeholders tend to see engagement as an opportunity to **participate in knowledge production** and **elaborate concrete policy solutions**.

Practitioners from NGOs, for example, cite as objectives **strengthening their position** vis-à-vis public officials and policymakers. Public officials from local administrations see in Horizon projects an opportunity to **have access to fresh evidence to back up their daily work** and perceive projects as giving them a platform to initiate change in their respective locality.

Other priorities mentioned by these actors include **networking** with national and international stakeholders; giving more visibility to their activities; **comparing their own work with other case studies** based on shared indicators; identifying gaps and **good practices** through the transfer of research findings.

Learning from peers and networking ground also the participation as stakeholders of public officials and policymakers **regardless of the political orientation** of their governments. In fact, interviewees report that a **central 'selling point'** to convince these stakeholders to join the project's activities is **having access to comparative data** and knowledge on, e.g., policies in contexts facing similar migration-related issues.

2.1.3 Pre-existing differences: 'sacrality of evidence' v. 'immunity to evidence'

"Or, for example, to accept that (...) even if you do research and you have the results of the research, *this is not a unique truth*. And you can explain it by *simplifying it*, by making it easier for consumption. And *you're not like throwing your research out*, you know?" (Practitioner, Non-Res-10)

"I mean, it's not entirely a lack of understanding. With this kind of studies, *we have really developed empirical data to show that [policymakers] are probably not very efficient in many cases*. But *that's news that politicians or policymakers don't necessarily want to hear*". (Researcher, Res-20)

"We do our best to communicate and disseminate as much as possible. But at the end of the day, it depends on whether policymakers want to take it or not" (Researcher, Res-35)

In addition to these divergences, engagement experiences are also influenced by pre-existing perceptions about research and policymaking processes. In this case, research and non-research partners are divided over **contrasting views of evidence as 'sacred' or non-negotiable and what role it should play vis-à-vis political agendas**.

Policymakers and practitioners tend to hold the view that **the research process is disconnected from policymaking cycles**. According to them, Horizon projects are based on a simplistic and technocratic understanding of policymaking, whereby generating evidence and disseminating it automatically leads to evidence-based policies. In contrast, non-researchers describe their relation with evidence as constrained by political agendas, institutional priorities, public criticism and media framing. Horizon projects also foresee a high degree of interdisciplinarity and holistic approaches to migration, while the work of policymakers and practitioners is much more limited to narrow political silos and thematic boundaries.³

Researchers, for their part, acknowledge that they generally lack substantive knowledge about what kind of information policymakers need and when. In their experience, this is further compounded by the fact that they receive virtually no substantive feedback from policymakers or practitioners on whether and how they have used project findings, be it for poor mutual engagement or for the lack of dedicated monitoring and evaluation tools (see 3.3 *Uncertain prospects of impact and follow-up gaps*).⁴

Researchers also share the view that policymakers are interested in research findings primarily to back up or cross check political decisions already taken, with no room to potentially reconsider those decisions or adopting systemic improvements. They underline that political decisions appear to be driven by pre-conceptions about public support rather than scientific evidence and objectivity. As a result, **for this group of interviewees, the main issue for research-policy collaboration in Horizon projects is usually not the lack of or difficult access to research findings, but whether those findings align with current political agendas**.

³ "Of course, EU-funded research is completely neglecting this premise. They understand policy-science relations based on, you know, the sacrality of evidence, which is not there, not even in Brussels. I mean, Brussels, of course, is a technocracy to some extent, less and less so. But still, there is a complete mismatch between this idea of policymaking prevailing in the Brussels bureaucracy and expressing itself in Horizon calls, and reality. And of course, all Horizon calls ask for recommendations, policy impact, etc." (Researcher, Res-19)

⁴ "I'm not sure to what extent at the end of the day we managed to really put the stakeholders together and what they saw from these results and how they benefited from that, because definitely we didn't receive any feedback." (Researcher, Res-24)

Key findings. Mapping experiences of engagement

- Knowledge production and policy change are shared goals motivating engagement.
- The Horizon project design contributes to collaboration around these shared goals because it incorporates both research-driven and policy-oriented objectives.
- Different categories of project partners experience engagement ambivalently due to differences in approaches, priorities, and timeframes. These divergences may hinder collaboration and frustrate expectations regarding project outcomes; or, conversely, provide a basis for complementary roles and cross-fertilisation.
- Pre-existing assumptions about the role of evidence in research and policymaking also have an impact on engagement experiences.

2.2 Research design and project setup

This section will analyse *what features of research design and project setup, including internal structure and analytical framework*, researchers and non-researchers consider as facilitating engagement. It will also look at what other features and factors amplify existing divergences, ultimately hampering meaningful engagement and the overall success of the project.

2.2.1 Project features and other factors facilitating engagement

"(...) Normally the theoretical and methodological basis of the project and the impact part, the communication part, are thought of as completely independent, autonomous. They are not (...). (...) Maybe one thing that we don't usually think of is that the two are closely connected, because if you have a solid, common conceptual architecture framework, it makes it also easier to distil essentials and communicate essentials." (Researcher, Res-19)

"Well, it is fundamental to involve [policymakers], first of all, to put them into the mechanism, not to invite them after the project starts. (...) Also, because if you put them in the consortium, it means that probably you find the right person to listen." (Practitioner, Non-Res-1)

According to researchers interviewed, the Horizon project design facilitates embedding engagement into research because it is **collaborative** and sets **well-balanced research and policy-oriented objectives**. **Prior experience** with similar funding schemes and **clear and simple communication** strategies are also highly valued.

Collaborative research design

Researchers note that the collaborative design of Horizon projects, i.e. the active participation of multiple stakeholders in shaping the project's objectives, methods, and outcomes, favours embedding the practical application of research findings. For them, distinctive Horizon project features like participation, interdisciplinarity, and the involvement of partners from various sectors and non-migration fields (i.e. employment, education, health, housing, foreign affairs etc.) all contribute to effective engagement.

The demand for and support to **cross-project cooperation**, including the efforts of the European Commission to promote exchanges among **sister projects** on linked themes such as irregular migration or migration narratives, are described as conducive to improving research findings, capitalising on outreach efforts of other project consortia, and developing a **critical mass of knowledge** rather than constantly producing new, overlapping content.

Interviewees in research roles also describe the Horizon research design as ensuring a **good balance** between single work packages, including policy-oriented ones, the project's overarching **analytical framework and methodology, and communication**. The analytical framework, in particular, plays a crucial role in integrating results, stakeholders' interests and communication objectives.

Sustained stakeholder engagement

The deliberate and consistent stakeholder engagement foreseen in Horizon projects is another factor positively assessed by the researchers interviewed. For them, the systematic creation of **stakeholder engagement platforms and workshops** increases the chance that various needs and interests are considered from the outset; they also have positive multiplier effects on outreach and dissemination.⁵

Horizon projects also foresee **flexible societal engagement** with diverse stakeholders, beyond just policymakers. According to the interviewees, this enables them to experiment with innovative formats and involve various audiences, including students, migrants, city administrators and the public.

Stakeholder engagement proves particularly effective when it involves cooperation **across governance levels**. According to the interviewees, exchanges with policymakers and practitioners at **the local level** are very meaningful, especially when they happen **in the context of pilot projects and comparative case studies**. Conversely, practitioners note that EU-funded projects can be challenging to implement if they are not based on a solid preliminary analysis of potential case studies to align with local needs and avoid stakeholder fatigue in over-researched sites.

This underscores the importance of stakeholder participation **in project design** to define mutual gains, build trust, and allocate resources as compensation for their involvement.⁶

⁵ "The participatory approach, to invite politicians to work together. What is not successful is saying: 'I do that, I need money for that. It does not work'." (Researcher, Res-10)

⁶ "The effort that we made is also trying to create more personal ties or informal ties to a project through workshops, but [also by] inviting people to the advisory board or speaking to people on the side of our events about the project and engaging on particular issues. (...) My experience has been that it's often the interest that is sparked on a personal level that also creates, well, the incentive to engage" (Researcher, Res-44).

"We applied this methodology of co-participation (...), we decided together with the actors how these projects should be. That has the positive aspect that all actors have their opinions and adapt to an objective. The objective should be clear. (...) This was very important because they could see that they could get something out of the project and also a space of debate which was lacking in their work." (Researcher, Res-10)

Comparative case study approach

For both research and policy partners, the comparative approach of Horizon projects is another feature of the Horizon project design that facilitates engagement. Researchers consider Horizon projects as a unique opportunity to work together in large international consortia and **gather comparative empirical knowledge**. Policy partners and stakeholders across all governance levels, from the EU to the local one, value the in-depth comparative insights generated by Horizon projects, particularly through case studies, because they assess them as **generally more actionable** than broader theoretical findings. Pilot projects and case studies, therefore, are seen as **instrumental in bridging gaps** between the researchers' and non-researchers' agendas and priorities.

Prior experience

Another significant factor facilitating research-policy collaboration, according to the researchers interviewed, is their **prior experience with similar project formats**. Familiarity with EU-funded projects and active connections with stakeholders involved in previous projects enhances **credibility** and facilitates **access to relevant networks right from the outset**. Conversely, project consortia with limited or recent experience in Horizon projects recognise that prior knowledge of project structures and networks would have facilitated a more structured approach to engagement.

Clear and simple strategic communication

According to the interviewees, a key success factor for engagement is the clear and simple communication of research findings. **Using plain language, varied publication and dissemination formats**, including visualisations or art, projects convey research results effectively. Similarly, **targeted and personalised outreach**, e.g. tailoring invitations to specific stakeholders explaining how they could benefit from participation, favours greater engagement because it demonstrates direct relevance of a project's work to specific contexts. Overall, several researchers describe their projects as **transitioning from traditional dissemination strategies**, such as sending out policy briefs and reports, **to more sustained, interactive, and multidisciplinary approaches based also on targeted and personalised outreach**.⁷

Knowledge brokers

⁷ For an overview of these practices and tools see also the Migration Research to Policy Co-Lab's [Engagement Toolkit](#) (available as of March 2025).

Another element described as key for engagement is the systematic involvement of knowledge brokers within project consortia.⁸ Interviewees recognise that effective engagement requires a combination of academic excellence, institutional partnerships, and strategic positioning vis-à-vis policymakers, including via advanced engagement strategies. These often fall outside the skills set and capacity of academics, who have to juggle multiple tasks in Horizon projects.

Knowledge brokers—such as think tanks or policy research institutes—bring in **professional expertise in outreach and communication and are well-connected within policy circles**. They facilitate the creation of 'brokered' or actionable knowledge that is more likely to remain relevant to policy debates, **mitigating the lack of professional engagement expertise within project consortia**.

2.2.2 Project features and other factors hampering engagement

"I think that they produced too much in the sense that I don't know if all these papers are going to be consumed. And the way it is produced is only for academia. It's true that the project was designed this way, but I think [some partners] wanted to build these bridges they talk about. The fact that they needed to produce all this research didn't give them enough time to do this work." (Practitioner, Non-Res-10)

"I think 'reach this people', but there are just too many projects, and they have no time to read all this. At least, we published a short policy brief hoping that it would reach them." (Researcher, Res-36)

"We are really stretching our resources to make these commitments. I mean, it is realistic in the sense that we can achieve them, but it is still overcommitment because [to do that] we really have to stretch our capacities." (Researcher, Res-35)

While researchers assess positively the research design and project setup foreseen in Horizon projects, many policymakers and practitioners feel that, **in the course of the project, the balance between academic and practical elements becomes skewed in favour of the former**.

Final project outcomes are seen as **predominantly serving an academic audience**. They address a wide range of topics and policy areas or governance levels, but do not formulate actionable recommendations for specific policy issues. Practitioners also report that the lack of

⁸ "The heart of the engagement strategy was that people who are doing this professionally for years already knew the pathways, the networks, and what works or not. That made a world of a difference. So the professionalisation of outreach and engagement activities was one key point. Co-production, to use the buzzword, was another. Involving the stakeholders in the outputs." (Researcher, Res-15)

common language makes knowledge exchange more difficult, and that this problem persists also during the final dissemination of the findings, which remain unsuitable for a larger, non-specialised audience.

Importantly, the tendency of favouring academic outputs rather than balancing them with policy-related findings appears to be **closely associated with time management and funding allocation issues**.

Time management

Project consortium members report recurring time management issues which have direct impact on engagement and stakeholder relations. Specifically, researchers describe themselves as having to **juggle multiple roles**, including those of scholars, policy advisors, and communication experts. They report facing **workload pressure** from analysing data, producing preliminary results, i.e. in the form of policy briefs, and handling communication tasks as promised in the project proposal, with the risk of undermining scientific rigour.⁹ Recurring understaffing issues within research teams and their involvement in multiple projects further exacerbate these problems (see Box 2. *Time management issues in context*). As a result, some researchers report being able to carry out **fewer knowledge transfer activities or more limited comparative analysis of country data** than originally planned.

The **size of project consortia** may also contribute to time management issues according to researchers.¹⁰ Our interview data suggest that interdisciplinary collaboration brings added value to research-policy collaboration but that large groups of contributors require substantial resources and time-consuming exchanges to make sure everyone is aligned with the project's objectives and intended outputs.

For practitioners and policymakers, too, time management issues negatively affect engagement. They tend to agree with research partners that the project timeframe ends up being too short to effectively disseminate results to diverse target groups. Practitioners emphasise the need for greater focus on sustainability, urging **more time for dialogue, participation, and local-level dissemination of research findings**.

⁹ One major issue, for example, is the pressure to produce policy briefs before sufficient data has been collected. In particular, researchers interviewed underlined the concern that rushing to produce the policy briefs promised in the project proposal may compromise the quality and integrity of the findings and highlighted the need to prioritise scientific rigor over rapid dissemination.

¹⁰ "It's very difficult if you have a lot of consortium members to have a coordinated outreach and ensure that engagement is, on the one hand, professional, but also that you target the right people in the right way. You need a coordinated approach." (Practitioner, Non-Res-2)

BOX 2. Time management issues in context.

Time management problems should be read **in the context of the highly competitive Horizon tendering process and prevalent reliance on project-based funding models.**

These structural issues expose **consortia to the risks of overpromising**. Specifically, they may create incentives to over **commit to a high number of deliverables**, including policy briefs. The same goes for **pilot projects and case studies**. Their use is generally assessed positively; however, it also creates challenges in coordinating the project and integrating results from various actors working independently. Pilots also demand significant resources, sometimes at the expense of strong relations with local stakeholders, ultimately affecting the project's overall impact.

Finally, project-based funding models like Horizon also lead organisations to quickly finalise outputs and **move on to new projects to secure future funding**, limiting opportunities for researchers to revisit past work and leverage findings in a more continuous, impactful way. Researchers who are heavily reliant on short-term, project-specific funding often face **significant barriers in terms of continuity, cumulative learning, and long-term engagement** with research findings. This can result in valuable insights being lost or not fully utilized after the project concludes.

Funding allocation

Like time management, researchers flag challenges with the way consortia allocate funding to engagement activities. Some, for example, note that, despite ambitious commitments regarding dissemination and knowledge transfer, the funding allocated to these activities in the project design phase **ultimately proves insufficient** and undermine their execution. Like for time management issues, this suggests the need for consortia to balance the budget so that all objectives, including those related to stakeholder engagement can be met.

Others also note that that fact that consortia do not always foresee any **compensation for stakeholders**, particularly NGOs and migrants, negatively affects their motivation and commitment to engage.¹¹

¹¹ "We would love to have more structural cooperation, but this depends on finances often. (...) If [there are] many projects, it's not so easy to find money for the working hours NGOs spend. So, we have to be kind of more picky than

High competition, staffing costs, and the risks of overpromising (see BOX 2. *Time management issues in context*) may exacerbate these budgeting issues despite the significant amount of resources allocated to each project. This highlights that considerations about **dissemination costs** and compensation for stakeholders should be factored into the project's design and included in the financial commitments of the Horizon programme.

Limited professional engagement capacity

Researchers acknowledge gaps in their knowledge and capacity to establish meaningful collaboration with different stakeholders at local, national, and global levels. This involves network-building efforts, solid knowledge of policy needs and agendas, and comprehensive and tailored engagement strategies based on solid knowledge of policy needs and agendas. While Horizon projects foresee and promote collaborative and interdisciplinary design, **consortia may not always include engagement professionals or knowledge brokers; researchers, at the same time, may not always have the necessary engagement skills prior to starting a project.** Interviewees, for example, also cite differences between engaging EU actors or international organisations, for example, which calls for professional approaches and insights that are **not normally part of the academic skill set.**

Another aspect of engagement that requires professional expertise is the **clear definition of what policymakers and practitioners can gain** from their involvement in a research project. The application of a pragmatic 'give and take' approach requires specific mediation skills, appropriate knowledge of policy implications in a given area, and the systematic co-design of the project concept and activities with stakeholders and partners.

More broadly, some interviewees recognise that projects would benefit from **a more targeted and timely approach to current events**, but lack of expertise and competing project commitments make it hard or impossible to follow the policy cycle.

Practitioners echo these concerns, noting that researchers often struggle with effective communication. They cite overly complex reports with lengthy and abstract recommendations, or the lack of common understandings of key concepts like 'integration' and 'migration' as barriers to transferring solutions from local contexts to higher governance levels and vice versa.

we would like to be actually with agreeing to cooperate because it's time consuming, and we don't have many funding resources that will fund this. (...) But it's a pity sometimes that we have to selective, impact wise and energy wise and focus wise." (Practitioner, Non-Res-20)

The presence of knowledge brokers is perceived to be essential to at least partially fill these gaps in capacity, but on its own it is unlikely to be sufficient to keep up with dissemination requirements let alone effective engagement objectives.

Conflation of engagement with one-way communication

The lack of professional engagement capacity, combined with time management and funding allocation issues, also lead to **conflating engagement with one-way forms of communication or dissemination**. Researchers and non-researchers alike criticise the mistaken but widespread assumption that research results can be seamlessly or automatically integrated into decision-making by simply being presented and publicised.

For example, they cite the **setting of final project conferences** as being recurrently adopted as an example of engagement. However, they consider it to be largely ineffective in terms of genuine exchange on the results and their concrete implications. Policymakers and practitioners tend to be particularly critical about this format as the presentation of results is usually one-way and highly theoretical or fragmented.

One-way forms of communicating results are often prevalent in interactions between researchers and EU policymakers, prevailing on co-creation or other forms of mutual exchanges. In contrast, the **exchange with national or local partners and NGOs usually goes beyond the mere presentation of results and is more strongly characterised by mutual learning and co-creation**.

Complex stakeholder involvement

While sustained stakeholder engagement is consistently described as key for the success of Horizon projects, its perceived outcomes remain inconsistent.

Researchers note that stakeholders are often **not involved to the extent desired in the project's design phase due to limited opportunities for co-designing solutions or discussing results**. This is due, for example, to case studies being selected by researchers beforehand or independently. It can also depend on the composition of project consortia. The project partners' lack of previous experience and/or existing networks at various governance levels may represent an obstacle or delay access to relevant stakeholders.

For the participation of some target groups, e.g. grassroot organisations and undocumented migrants, budgeting and administrative requirements can pose challenges to providing

compensation, thereby limiting their participation.¹² **Low expected benefits from project participation and fatigue**, particularly among frequently involved stakeholders, also discourage active involvement.

Engagement at later stages of Horizon projects can also present issues for stakeholder engagement due to the **lack of effective and regular exchange formats**. One practitioner interviewed, for example, describes stakeholder participation during the project as 'fake' because activities and outputs did not capture local needs and perspectives, and were therefore largely irrelevant and inconsequential for their work.

Another issue contributing to limited or problematic stakeholder engagement is the inevitable importance of the **partners' and stakeholders' positionality** vis-à-vis the topics proposed. Some interviewees note, for example, that the predisposition of external stakeholders to the project's themes and results significantly influences the effectiveness of engagement. For others, it is easier to involve EU-level decision-makers who are critical of current migration policies, while conservative ones are much harder to reach. On the other hand, academics focused solely on advocacy or highlighting deficiencies are often perceived as intrusive, potentially undermining stakeholder engagement and the communication of results. In this respect, engagement can be a way to reduce divides or bring together differing perspectives, but it cannot remove the basic tensions that can exist.

The outcome of outreach efforts to the European Commission as a key stakeholder remains mixed. Engagement is strong at the level of project management and coordination, while substantive dialogue on content and results varies depending on consortium members' personal connections, the level of politicisation of specific migration topics, and the scope for action within the ongoing political agenda.

¹² "With the whole participatory action research approach, (...) it's very difficult to fit into the requirements, depending on the funders. (...) For example, I think that the main one that comes up all the time is the expert fees or the compensations for participants in the cases in which they are still undocumented. That may not be feasible regarding the requirements by the Commission on the conditions for subcontracting. That's just one example. But there are a lot of bureaucratic challenges (...)." (Practitioner, Non-Res-19).

Key findings. Research design and project setup

Facilitators of engagement

- Horizon projects are designed to promote collaboration and balance research and policy-oriented objectives.
- Cross-project cooperation and interdisciplinary work enhance knowledge sharing and engagement.
- Strong stakeholder engagement strategies, including local-level cooperation, clear communication, the involvement of knowledge brokers, and prior experience in EU-funded projects facilitate research-policy collaboration.

Barriers to Engagement

- Final project outputs often prioritise academic audiences, while practical policy insights are sidelined towards the end of the project.
- Difficulties in time management and funding allocation create workload pressure and hinder policy outreach activities.
- Lack of professional communication skills and engagement capacity weakens research-policy dialogue.
- Participation from external stakeholders is uneven and depends on the presence of co-creation activities, a clear "stake" in the project.

3. The Impact Section in Horizon project proposals

"In terms of the logic of the calls for proposals, under Horizon Europe the impact is much, much more important. Now it is perhaps almost too important. Don't get me wrong but if I can't do any research that is supposed to have an impact but only have an impact without having done research that is also difficult. From that point of view, I think the balance between research and impact was better in Horizon 2020." (Researcher, Res-23)

"We did a lot of great research. We have a lot of papers. But outside of academia, I don't know (...). There are some measures, but whether this leads to changes in policy decision making...it doesn't seem so." (Researcher, Res-45)

Our interview data suggests that the Impact Section of Horizon project proposals can serve as a useful programmatic tool, but that the partners' assessment of impact as a metric of success for their projects is mixed.

In particular, 1) **the concept of impact is contested**; 2) **perceived impact is closely associated with engagement activities** rather than with policy change or other quantitative indicators of evidence uptake; and 3) **the projects' prospects of impact beyond completion are perceived as highly uncertain**, also due to the lack of follow-up or monitoring tools in the post-project phase.

3.1 The concept of impact is contested

Interviewees from research and policy or practice backgrounds tend to hold **different understandings of impact**, largely matching their different objectives and approaches to Horizon projects.

Policymakers and practitioners tend to understand impact as the ability to produce implementable insights for policy, focusing on **societal and policy impact** objectives. As discussed in previous sections, these are assessed as generally not fully met during the projects. Researchers' understanding of impact is generally associated with quantitative indicators of **scientific impact**, i.e. assessing the creation and diffusion of high-quality knowledge via the number and downloads of publications linked to the project. Beyond that, this group questions the notion of impact at its core and challenge the possibility of demonstrating tangible, direct effects on policy.

Specifically, **researchers question the feasibility of tracing specific outcomes, like shifts in discourses or initiatives, or attribute policy changes directly to their projects and its activities**, citing as reasons the complexity of knowledge ecosystems and the presence of multiple contributors to any given idea.

In their view, the tendency to use the concept of impact at face value and formulate often unrealistic impact objectives has gained momentum with **the transition from Horizon 2020 to Horizon Europe**.¹³ For researchers, there is now additional pressure to deliver non-academic outputs which are often out of the researchers' skills set (see 2.1 *Mapping experiences of engagement*), exacerbating perceived trade-offs between research and policy objectives, and pushing applicants to overpromise to secure funding.

When it comes to the value of the research vis-à-vis migration policy making, **researchers also question that their role should be to generate 'impact' or influence policy or see their opportunities to do so as extremely limited**. They share a general understanding that Horizon projects have the goal of contributing to improvements to the status quo of migration policy (see 2.1 *Mapping experiences of engagement*). However, they describe their research work as a catalyst for reflection to encourage better-placed stakeholders to reassess existing policies and practices.¹⁴ Beyond that, they see the possibility of shaping the design of migration policies as falling outside their responsibilities and highly dependent on the will and room for action of decision makers.

3.2 Perceived impact results depend on the collaborative nature of the engagement process

Beyond conceptual disagreements, the interviews indicate that **perceived impact**, i.e. project outcomes, outputs, and engagement efforts around them, **strongly depends on the engagement process** itself.

Practitioners evaluate positively the activities carried out during the project to achieve 'impact', like those which allowed them to compare their own work with other practitioners and

¹³ The latter has introduced a new methodology in the Impact Section based on a detailed description of a project's pathways to impact. The latter are based on the definition of short-term results, expected medium-term outcomes, and wider, longer-term impacts on society, science and the economy. These pathways should correspond to the scope, expected outcomes, and expected impacts set in the relevant Horizon call.

¹⁴ "So another objective of all these collaborations and is to keep the issues on the agenda and having data on what is going on. Because if you want to perform any kind of policy, you will need to support it with information. So I think this is mainly our role, not to provide this information even if there is no policy in the short term in the pipeline (...)." (Practitioner, Non-Res-3)

policymakers, establish joint objectives, and work collaboratively towards them. In contrast, they often find final products, including policy-oriented ones, like toolboxes, to be of limited practical use.

Researchers make a similar assessment of overall impact and single outputs respectively. They tend to associate project impact with the publication of academic outputs and policy recommendations. They are generally highly satisfied with the level of the former, while remaining uncertain or sceptical about the uptake of the latter. Co-creation activities, like workshops, are viewed as facilitating dialogue between stakeholders, mutual learning and – at least from the point of view of the researchers – to further develop final project outputs. Beyond that, the researchers report no concrete signs that specific research results are implemented or lead to any concrete improvement.

Even an understanding of impact as directly correlated to the engagement process, however, appears controversial. The success of participatory activities, in fact, is described as dependent on the availability and interest of policymakers in participating in co-creative or less structured discussion. Continued engagement, in addition, is described as causing fatigue both to researchers and policymakers, leading to diminished interest or reduced participation in knowledge exchange activities over time.

3.3 Uncertain prospects of impact and follow-up gaps

When it comes to prospects of impact, **the higher the governance level engaged in the project, the lower the impact expected by project partners**. At the EU level, for example, project findings are regularly presented and sometimes discussed with policymakers, particularly in the context of final project conferences, but interviewees are doubtful about whether and to what extent project findings are useful for this target group. Researchers assess more positively the prospects of impact at the local level. Here, however, they refer mostly to greater awareness among the public or local actors about specific issues or challenges, but do not cite any further measure or criterion of impact.¹⁵

In all cases, in fact, interviewees report the **lack of instruments or dedicated project phases** to measure and track the uptake of research findings or maintaining new tools and instruments,

¹⁵ "One example I have seen of impact is on displacement, about imaging a settlement between host communities and refugees. They had the community members develop it, designing the space that they want." (Researcher, Res&Non-Res-1).

after project completion.¹⁶ Common measures of engagement or impact used across projects are event attendance, feedback and evaluations, or monitoring of website activity. However, the occasions to collect substantive feedback on project outputs from partners and stakeholders are viewed as limited except for co-creation and co-design activities explicitly foreseen in the project design. Some projects pilot long-term impact tracking, but these are still in the implementation phase and remain isolated cases.

Challenges to **sustainability** and difficulties in securing follow-up funding also hamper implementation or engagement around the project's findings, limiting these activities to the project's timeframe.¹⁷

¹⁶ "It's not enough to involve policy stakeholders from the very beginning (...). It's not enough to meet all the demands that we have collected and translate them into a technical functionality. (...) Having check-marked all these things, (...) who puts fresh developments into this solution? There come all these new demands, new ideas. People want to have new functionalities. It's a living thing. If the solution is good, every half a year there's a new feature, a new functionality, etc.. It must be clear who actually is keeping the solution fresh, who is developing the next version? (...) Finally: resources. Somebody has to pay for it." (Researcher, Res-10).

¹⁷ "We have no scope for follow up funding, for proof of concept etc. Projects say how they will try to be sustainable but there is no funding to do that." (Researcher, Res-1)

Key findings. The Impact Section

- Researchers perceive Horizon Europe as placing greater emphasis on impact. They view this as potentially exacerbating a trade-off between the scientific research cycle and policy relevance.
- The perceived impact of project outputs is strongly associated with the engagement process itself, particularly co-creation.
- Policymakers and practitioners value interactive engagement activities but find final research products, like toolboxes, of limited practical use if not co-designed or agreed upon in the early project phases.
- Researchers are highly satisfied with the level of academic output of their projects but remain sceptical about its actual uptake by policymakers.
- There is a general lack of systematic mechanisms to track research uptake post-project, making it difficult to assess long-term impact, particularly at the EU level.

4. Strengthening engagement: key takeaways

"We should focus more strongly on this final third [part], on sustainability, on how to transfer these scientific results and transfer them locally to the cities that took part" (Practitioner, Non-Res-13).

"What we should have thought about before developing the grant agreement is definitely to also have a dedicated tasks for impact assessment and monitoring, because if you have for example a website, you can just look at the download rates and stuff like this. However, to really have an impact strategy in place and also a budget allocated towards that is very important and we did not sufficiently do that at the start of the project." (Practitioner, Non-Res-2)

"It's good to think together about how to share the findings and also perhaps find some people who are more specialised in sharing them in a more appealing or more simplified way [for your] target group. So spend enough on communicating what you did and found." (Practitioner, Non-Res-20)

To conclude this self-assessment of research-policy collaboration, this section summarises insights from research and non-research partners to improve engagement.

4.1 Embed engagement as a metric

The interviews reveal a significant **gap between partners' and other stakeholders' expectations regarding impact objectives** in Horizon-funded projects. On the one hand, practitioners, policymakers and other stakeholders expect projects to facilitate the joint development of practically adaptable solutions. These expectations are generally not met and the uptake of evidence remains limited. Researchers, on the other hand, tend to be more satisfied with the projects' academic outputs, but are sceptical about whether their findings have the potential to facilitate policy changes.

Moreover, interviewees have highlighted that, **in project proposals, impact is either oversimplified, assuming a linear relation between evidence production and policy uptake; or defined in terms of unrealistic impact objectives, plausibly to make proposals more competitive.** These tendencies appear to exacerbate rather than address expectation gaps and difficulties in research-policy collaboration.

The evidence gathered also highlights that the perceived success of Horizon projects for both researchers and non-researchers is closely associated with individual engagement activities and varies depending on the governance level involved. Beyond this general assessment, however, **interviewees find it difficult to evaluate engagement, citing lack of feedback structures and tools to assess the practical usefulness or policy relevance of activities and findings.**

- **Embedding engagement in the Impact Section as an Horizon criterion for project success can be a promising strategy to enhance the projects' value for science, policy, and society.** For project partners and stakeholders, impact remains a limited metric of success due to the challenges in attributing concrete changes to generated evidence or specific activities. Instead, they suggest that engagement serves as a more effective and realistic tool.
- **An adaptative, iterative monitoring approach to research-policy engagement could help.** This approach could be systematically embedded in project proposals through feedback tools and continuous monitoring of small activities. that can be more easily tracked over time.

4.2 Balance research-driven and policy-oriented objectives since the project design phase

Interview data indicates that **while projects initially aim to balance research and knowledge transfer objectives, various factors during project implementation often lead to a dominance of academic findings in dissemination activities.**

Challenges related to time management and funding allocation significantly contribute to this shift. Interviewees pointed to contradictions between, on the one hand, the call for excellent research; and, on the other the need to develop implementable solutions and carry out ambitious dissemination plans. These challenges also reveal that, in the highly competitive Horizon tendering process, where research organisations heavily rely on project-based funding, there is tendency to overcommit and set unrealistic impact objectives. This can create trade-offs between core research activities (i.e. analysing, publishing etc.) and knowledge transfer efforts.

- Interviewees suggest that **a more pragmatic approach to project objectives would be beneficial.** This includes foreseeing in project proposals more realistic data collection and dissemination methods, reducing the number of work packages, keeping case studies to a more manageable number, and limiting the size of project consortia to enhance efficiency and coordination.
- The findings also **emphasise the need to integrate engagement considerations into project design, particularly regarding the systematic participation of stakeholders, time and capacity for engagement, and associated dissemination costs** (e.g., stakeholder compensation). To achieve this, project proposals should anticipate time management and funding allocation issues, ensuring that sufficient resources are dedicated to transfer activities and stakeholder involvement from the outset.
- **Other key considerations include the cost and resources required for a more sustained and personalised outreach approach.** This involves targeted relationship-building, crafting research into compelling narratives, and the preliminary or in-progress dissemination of findings. While interviewees acknowledge the challenges of such efforts, they highlight their benefits—particularly in engaging policymakers early on and making research visible to key stakeholders from the start.

4.3 Build institutionalised engagement capacity

The interviews point to a **general overestimation of dissemination capacities relative to the resources, time, and capacity foreseen for engagement**. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners stress that effective collaboration requires dedicated time and resources, which they often do not have at their disposal due to project design and time or funding allocation issues. While they see interdisciplinarity and knowledge brokers as essential within consortia, they also acknowledge the need for a more advanced understanding of successful engagement strategies and target audiences.

Another central insight from the interviews is the **complexity of how evidence is processed in decision-making**. A major concern raised by interviewees is that the Horizon programme implicitly assumes a linear relationship between evidence and policy. They challenge this assumption, emphasising that political decisions are shaped by multiple factors and that policy change is a gradual, incremental, and uncertain process. This consideration underscores a deeper understanding of how evidence can be conveyed and what long-term objectives it can realistically achieve.

- These findings suggest a **strong need for systematic capacity building within project consortia to align their skills set with Horizon requirements and ensure that evidence is presented in an accessible, actionable way**. These efforts, combined with the presence of knowledge brokers, are fundamental to ensure that project partners can work with each other in synergy to achieve both individual and shared objectives. In addition to practical training, capacity building should also involve a focus on how knowledge is processed by different target groups and the cognitive aspects of narrative building.
- **Given the resources and time required, embedding capacity building efforts within each Horizon project may be unrealistic and inefficient**. Facilities like the Migration Research to Policy Co-Lab could play a key role as they seek to integrate lessons learned on engagement into training and other resources. This would help incentivise engagement with evidence in the project design phase, as well as monitoring and evaluation that support learning and adaptation.

4.4 Introduce post-project follow-up tools

Interviewees report that **follow-up activities to maintain and build on engagement achievements—such as sustaining stakeholder networks and discussing the implications of findings—are often constrained by systemic challenges, particularly around sustainability**.

As a result, valuable insights and networks may be lost or not fully utilised after the project ends. This impacts research-policy collaboration, as partners miss the opportunity to learn from each other and other stakeholders about what worked and what didn't in their engagement strategies.

- Structural changes are needed to **support long-term engagement, ensuring that project teams and stakeholder networks have the time, resources, and institutional support to stay engaged with the practical implications of their work beyond the project's conclusion.** Maintaining some degree of continuity is important for keeping research findings relevant to policy and fostering meaningful interactions between researchers and policymakers.
- Interviewees emphasise the **importance of foreseeing post-project follow-up instruments to prevent engagement from becoming a one-off activity.** This could include introducing dedicated time for impact evaluation in project proposals, such as an additional year dedicated solely to assessing long-term project effects. Post-project follow-up could also maximise the cumulative impact of cross-project collaboration with sister projects, as dialogue on findings often occurs only after their completion.
- **Allocating resources for post-project dissemination and advocacy efforts** would help ensure that project findings continue to be at the centre of meaningful research-policy exchanges beyond the project timeline.

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ANNEX. List of interviews

	Code	Type of interviewee	Thematic area
1	Res-Non-Res-1	Group interview (consortium)	Drivers
2	Res-1	Researcher	Inclusion
3	Res-2	Researcher	Inclusion
4	Res-3	Researcher	Inclusion
5	Non-Res-1	Non-Researcher	Inclusion
6	Res-4	Researcher	Inclusion
7	Res-5	Researcher	Returns
8	Non-Res-2	Non-researcher	Returns
9	Res-6	Researcher	Inclusion; education
10	Non-Res-3	Non-researcher	Inclusion; education
11	Res-7	Researcher	Inclusion
12	Res-8	Researcher	Inclusion
13	Res-9	Researcher	Inclusion
14	Res-10	Researcher	Inclusion; housing
15	Res-11	Researcher	Inclusion; housing
16	Non-Res-4	Non-researcher	Inclusion; housing
17	Res-12	Researcher	Inclusion; IT
18	Res-13	Researcher	Inclusion; IT
19	Res-14	Researcher	Inclusion; education
20	Res-15	Researcher	Drivers
21	Non-Res-5	Non-researcher	Drivers
22	Res-16	Researcher	Inclusion; education
23	Res-17	Researcher	Inclusion; children
24	Non-res-6	Non-Researcher	Inclusion; children
25	Non-res-7	Non-Researcher	Inclusion; children
26	Non-Res-8	Non-Researcher	Inclusion; children
27	Non-Res-9	Non-Researcher	Inclusion; children
28	Res-18	Researcher	Inclusion; children
29	Res-19	Researcher	Governance
30	Res-20	Researcher	Governance

31	Non-Res-10	Non-Researcher	Governance
32	Res-21	Researcher	Governance
33	Res-22	Researcher	Governance
34	Non-Res-11	Non-Researcher	Governance
35	Res-23	Researcher	Inclusion
36	Res-24	Researcher	Inclusion
37	Non-Res-12	Non-Researcher	Inclusion
38	Res-25	Researcher	Inclusion
39	Res-26	Researcher	Protection
40	Res-27	Researcher	Protection
41	Non-Res-13	Non-Researcher	Inclusion
42	Res-28	Researcher	Inclusion
43	Res-29	Researcher	Inclusion
44	Res-30	Researcher	Protection
45	Res-31	Researcher	Protection
46	Res-32	Researcher	Governance
47	Non-Res-14	Non-researcher	Protection
48	Non-Res-15	Non-Researcher	Governance; development
49	Res-33	Researcher	Inclusion
50	Res-34	Researcher	Governance; protection
51	Non-Res-16	Non-Researcher	Governance
52	Res-35	Researcher	Governance
53	Res-36	Researcher	Drivers; inclusion
54	Res-37	Researcher	Inclusion
55	Res-38	Researcher	Inclusion
56	Non-Res-17	Non-Researcher	Governance; drivers
57	Non-Res-18	Non-Researcher	Drivers; inclusion
58	Res-39	Researcher	Governance; drivers
59	Res-40	Researcher	Governance; protection
60	Res-41	Researcher	Governance; development
61	Res-42	Researcher	Inclusion
62	Non-Res-19	Non-Researcher	Governance; protection
63	Non-Res-20	Non-Researcher	Governance; protection

64	Non-Res-21	Non-Researcher	Governance; drivers
65	Non-Res-22	Non-Researcher	Governance; drivers
66	Res-43	Researcher	Inclusion
67	Res-44	Researcher	Irregular migration
68	Res-45	Researcher	Governance
69	Non-Res-23	Non-Researcher	Irregular migration
70	Res-46	Researcher	Inclusion
71	Res-47	Researcher	Data