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BELGIAN PRESIDENCY OF THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

CONFERENCE BRIEF

This conference brief is the result of interactive discussions between policymakers, scientists and knowledge brokers on ways of **Enhancing Evidence-Informed Policymaking (EIPM) ecosystems through better integration of social sciences, arts and humanities (SSAH) expertise in multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches**.

These discussions were organised in the frame of the conference under Belgian Presidency entitled ***#StrongerTogether: social sciences, arts and humanities (SSAH) and the future of evidence-informed policymaking (#StrongerTogether-STEP2024)***.

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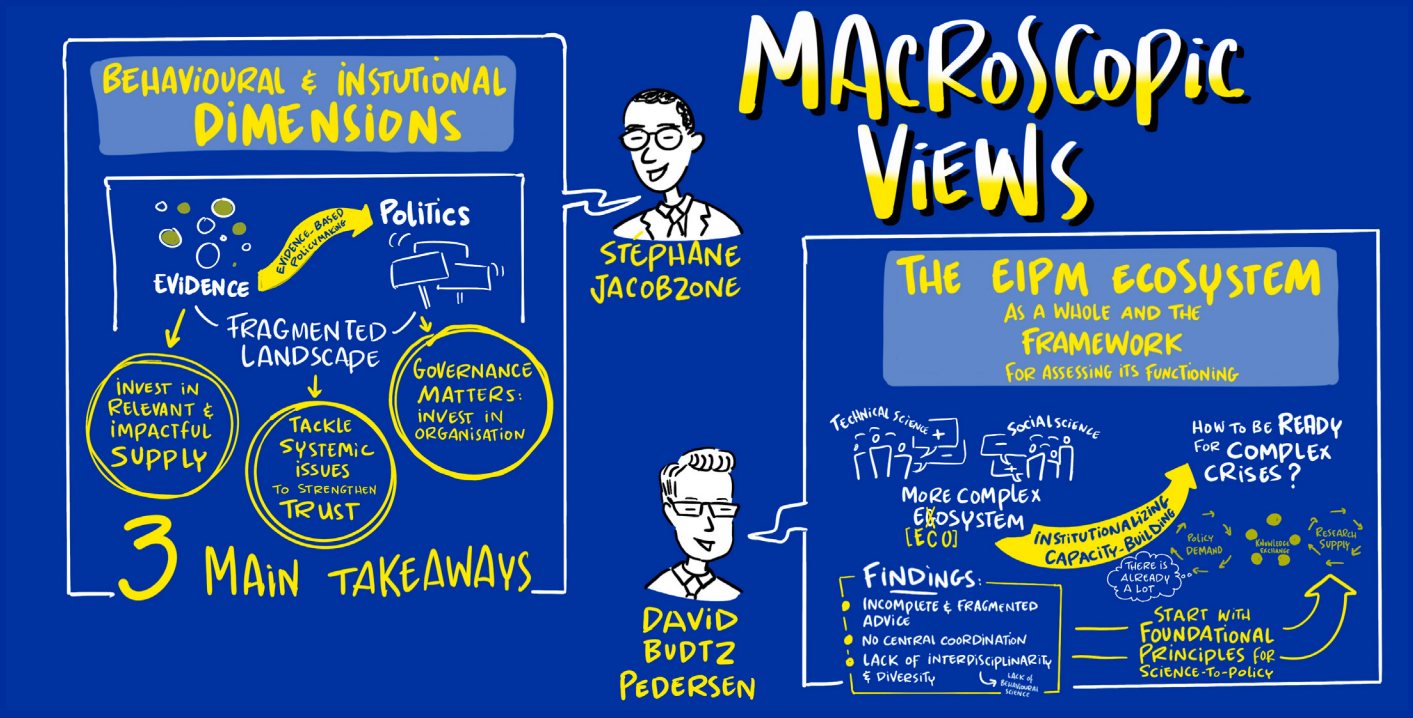
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ***#StrongerTogether: SSAH and the future of evidence-informed policymaking (STEP2024) conference***[1] took place on 6 and 7 May 2024 in the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium) in the frame of a series of conferences and events of the Belgian Presidency of the European Union.

The conference has emphasised the vital role of evidence-informed policymaking (further referred to as EIPM)[2] in addressing societal challenges and highlighted how stakeholders like scientists, knowledge brokers, journalists, policymakers and civil society actors can further work together and contribute to a well-functioning EIPM ecosystem. An overall goal of this collaboration is to better integrate social sciences, arts and humanities[3] (SSAH) with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in the provision of science advice to offer policymakers, and the public, with adequate and multidimensional expertise. This collaboration between disciplines – where SSAH are given a more prominent place – is seen as vital in providing evidence to enable human-centric policy responses to increasingly complex and intertwined problems.

This conference brief is the result of these high-level expert discussions. It provides a comprehensive analysis of current EIPM ecosystems across Europe. It argues that stakeholders should avoid a '*one size fits all approach*', given the diversity of these ecosystems. Instead, they should adopt a '*system of systems*' perspective on scientific expertise to integrate SSAH expertise into EIPM. This approach respects each national ecosystem's unique cultural and regional factors while advancing EIPM across Europe.



1 https://www.belspo.be/belspo/EUBelgium24/2024050607_StrongerTogether_en.stm

2 Evidence-informed policymaking (EIPM) refers in this conference brief to the process of using the best available, high-quality evidence from research, data, evaluations, and expert knowledge to inform decisions about policies, programs, and practices. It integrates scientific findings and robust analysis with political, social, and contextual factors to achieve well-rounded, effective, and practical outcomes

3 By humanities we consider the branches of knowledge dedicated to the study of all languages and literatures, the arts, history, theology and philosophy.

The conference highlighted the conditions under which such a system of systems can become a reality in Europe. These conditions are:

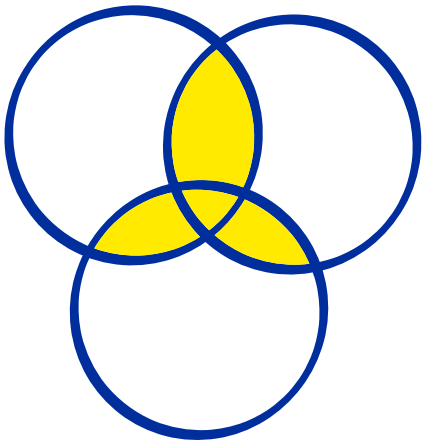
1. **Collaborative EIPM Ecosystems:** Emphasize the importance of mutual understanding, accountability, and active participation from stakeholders via platforms and regular interaction channels where SSAH and STEM experts can co-create policy solutions.
2. **Capacity Building and Skilling:** Promote SSAH-STEM blended curricula and create training programs for policymakers and researchers. Capacity building includes advancing literacy in science and politics, emphasizing the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, and implementing structured interaction cycles within policy processes.
3. **Recognition of SSAH Contributions:** Formalize policy engagement as a valued part of SSAH academic careers, encourage SSAH-inclusive funding mechanisms, and recognize SSAH expertise through awards and research grants.
4. **Enhanced Monitoring and Funding:** Develop mixed-method approaches to monitor SSAH integration, foster interdisciplinary funding, and ensure SSAH representation in long-term EU research initiatives.
5. **Openness and Trust:** Foster transparency and accessibility in policy reports, encourage public engagement, and ensure that policymakers distinguish between values and scientific evidence in their communication.

Implementing these five dimensions and enabling this EIPM "*system of systems*" in Europe will not happen overnight and by itself. It is the shared responsibility of all stakeholders involved at all levels of the ecosystem. More than large budgets, it primarily requires an open mindset, courage, and consistent commitment.

The conference focused on multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary[4] scientific expertise – and specifically the role of the SSAH therein, in conjunction or not with STEM – and on how such expertise can better support decision-making facing the complex challenges of today. Acknowledging disciplinary specificities and recognising that collaborations can be challenging, the conference thereby stepped away from a monolithic vision of science.

Furthermore, the conference deliberately gave the word to the main actors within the 'Science for Policy' ecosystems[5]: scientists, intermediary organisations (knowledge brokers), journalists and policymakers. With due consideration for the diversity of approaches and models that co-exist in different countries, the debates during the conference looked at commonalities within regions and settings to find that enhancing EIPM can never be a one-size-fits-all-approach and that targeted science advice for policymaking requires contextualisation both to governance level and policy domain.

The integration of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary scientific evidence into policy preparation and decision-making processes is essential for designing effective, sustainable, and equitable policies in a transparent and accountable way. Maintaining the objectivity of the scientific approach while acknowledging the political implications of scientific expertise remains a significant challenge which should not be taken for granted. SSAH scholars and their specific methodologies, including qualitative and interpretative approaches, can substantively and critically contribute to such science advice processes. To unleash their full potential to support evidence-informed policymaking, sufficient integration into research funding programmes and multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary research endeavours in support of policymaking need to be assured. Interdisciplinary collaboration itself must be ensured, which might not necessarily come naturally or easy to SSAH researchers, but rather requires due attention and effort, notably regarding the provision of training opportunities.

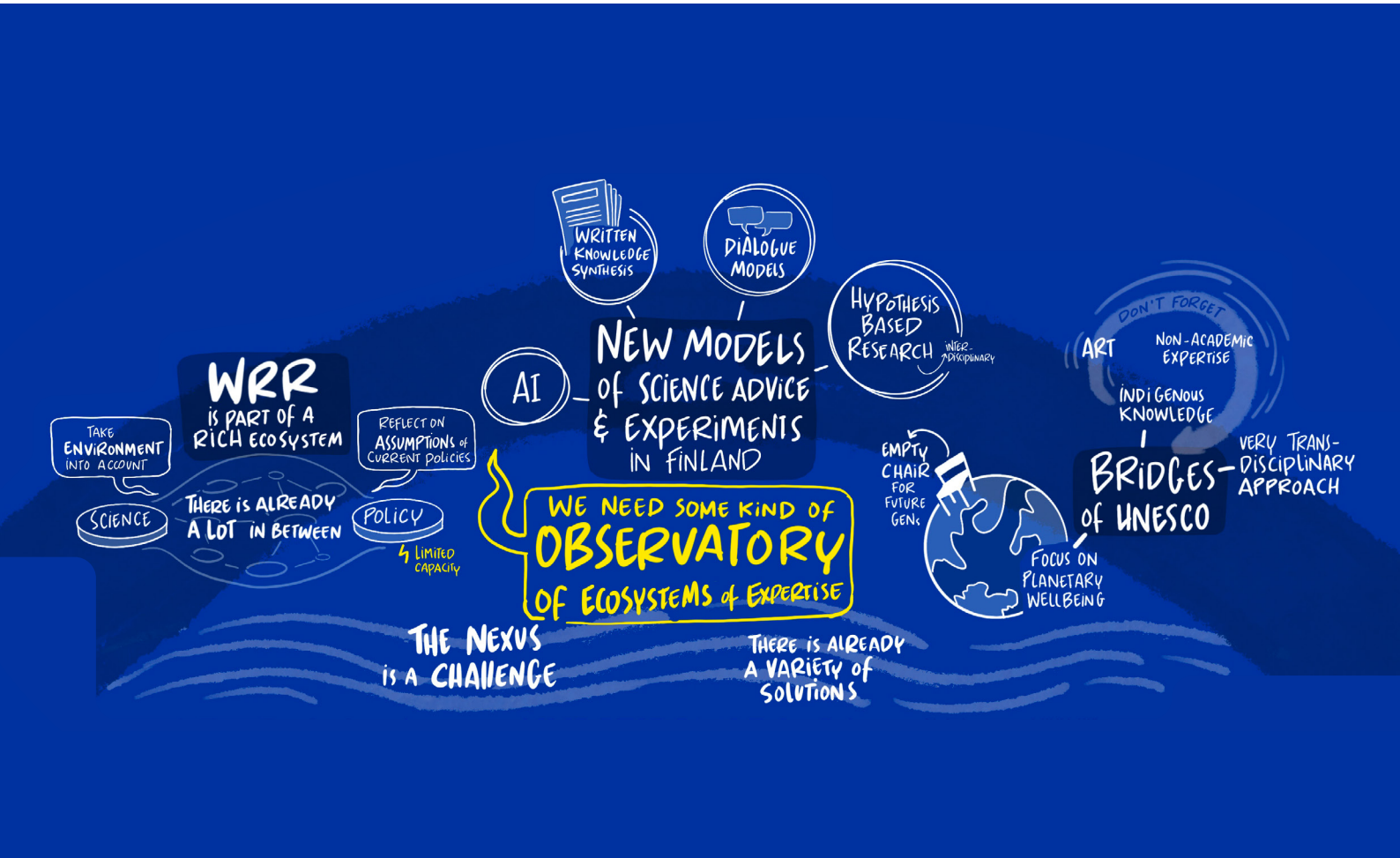


4 The terms interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and transdisciplinary all refer to approaches that involve multiple disciplines, but they differ in how these disciplines interact and integrate. In a multidisciplinary approach, multiple disciplines work on a problem or topic independently. Each discipline contributes its own perspective, but there is little interaction or integration between the disciplines. Interdisciplinary work involves the integration of ideas, methods, or theories from two or more disciplines to address a problem or topic. There's collaboration between fields, and insights from one field can influence or modify the approach of another. Transdisciplinary work goes beyond integrating disciplines; it involves collaborating across disciplines and with non-academic stakeholders (like policymakers, communities, or industries) to create new knowledge and approaches that transcend traditional boundaries.

5 If the concept of ecosystem on which the notion of EIPM is built has been originally developed in the field of ecology—in which it refers to a community of living organisms that interact as a system with the non-living components of their environment —, it is metaphorically used in this conference brief to refer to the set of interactions that individuals have with each other in a (co)creation process, within a certain context.

Such interconnected challenges call for a holistic perspective on the entire EIPM ecosystem rather than a selective focus on its isolated parts. Ecosystem thinking also helps to consider long-term sustainability (rather than short-term gains) and inclusive decision-making, requiring input from the widest possible range of stakeholders as well as a fluid interplay between them. In this sense, ecosystem-based approaches often yield multiple benefits simultaneously, and help connect different systems into a system-of-systems in which stakeholders are mutually dependent while keeping their fundamental autonomy.

The **#StrongerTogether-STEP2024** conference brief draws on insights from the conference to outline the current state of EIPM ecosystems in Europe. It brings forward actionable ideas to fully integrate the expertise from the SSAH and to further enhance the impact and relevance of SSAH in scientific advice for policy. The conference brief does not provide recommendations as such, nor targets specific stakeholders. Instead, it brings to the surface different dimensions of the EIPM ecosystems on which involved parties are invited to work together in a "system of systems" perspective, while each national/regional/ institutional ecosystem keeps its own specificities. Specific stakeholders will be mentioned only if they have a more explicit role to play.



METHODOLOGY

This conference brief is the result of a cocreation effort, at three complementary levels:

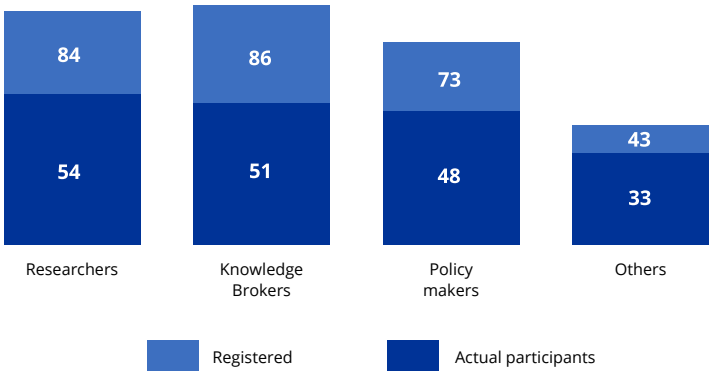
1. ***#StrongerTogether* Conference organised to stimulate interactions and co-creations between participants, keynote speakers and members of the scientific committee (*):**
   - Plenaries, keynotes and breakout sessions (based on case studies);
   - Participative format: online polling tools, work in subgroups with dedicated facilitators, etc.
   - Members of the scientific committee as chairs of nine breakout sessions

2. **Drafting and reviewing process:** the conference brief has been first drafted by BELSPO, and then collectively peer reviewed by the members of the Scientific Committee and Steering Board who assisted BELSPO in organising the Conference

3. **Open voluntary peer review:** once peer-reviewed and augmented by the scientific committee and validated by the Steering Board, the conference brief has been opened to a voluntary peer review by the conference's participants.

This methodological approach, supported by the high number and diversity of conference participants (*) as well as the rich material and bold ideas emerging from the discussions, provided a multidimensional and trustworthy perspective on challenges and opportunities of SSAH integration into evidence-informed policymaking.

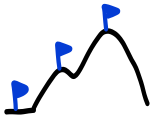
(*) All **186** attendees (including participants and speakers and organisation team, attendance voluntarily limitedto enable interactivity) by affiliation:



Section III identifies the **key challenges** and implications of current EIPM ecosystems, while Section IV explores the **five essential dimensions** of what integrative ecosystems should ideally be, drawing inspiration from exemplary practices observed today. Interested readers who wish to learn more can be guided in the bibliography to inspirational references.

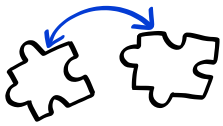
Scientific objectivity and political impacts of research

Challenges:

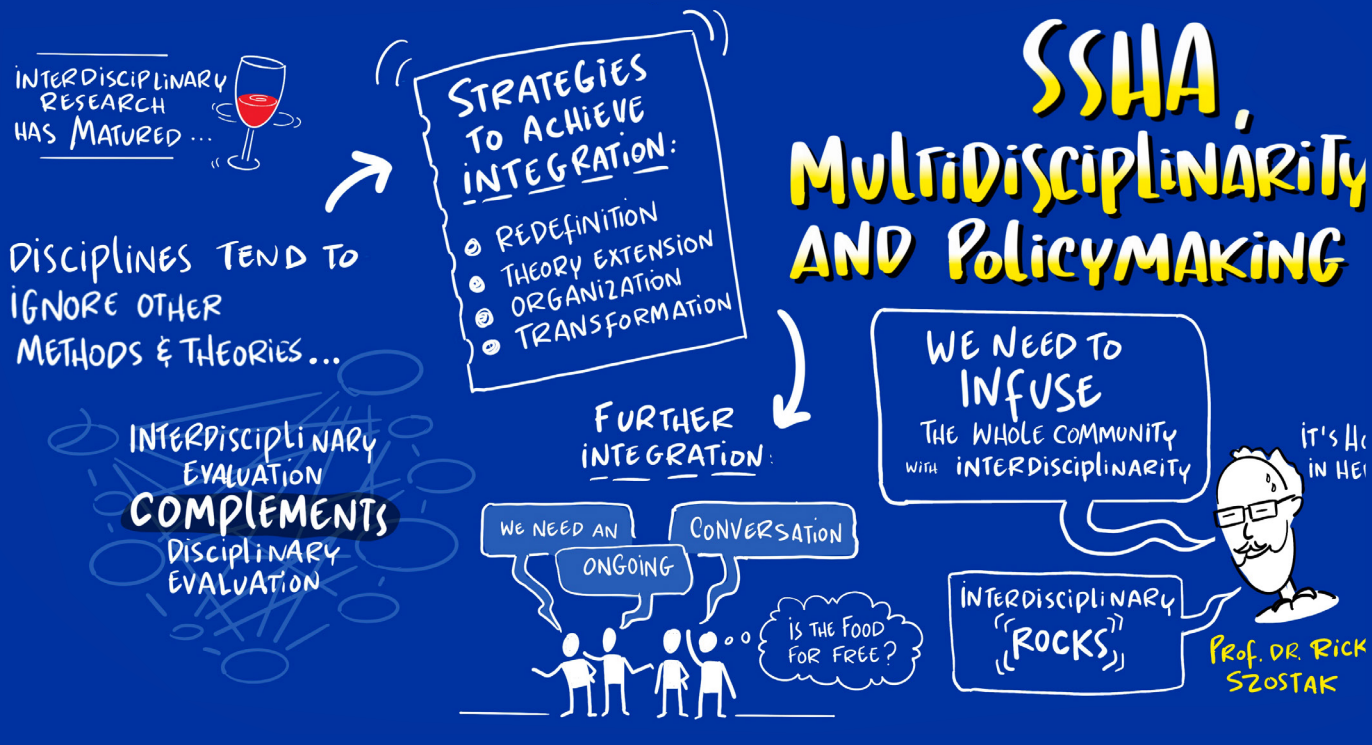


- Scientists, including SSAH researchers, must be sufficiently politically literate to navigate the delicate balance between providing research-based advice and acknowledging the potential political effects of their findings. A key case in point is the 'decision function' of evidence in politics, that is the selection and use of scientific evidence by politicians to justify pre-existing decisions.
- Current political culture, "post-truth politics", increasingly threatened by a distrust in expertise and a preference for opinion, values, and emotions over evidence.
- Policy-makers may have expectations about the role of research in solving problems that are not in line with what researchers are able to offer.

Implications:



- This undermines the perceived specificities of scientific advice in terms of objectivity and neutrality, potentially leading to the politicization of research findings. This in turn may lead to distrust in science, research and academic expertise.



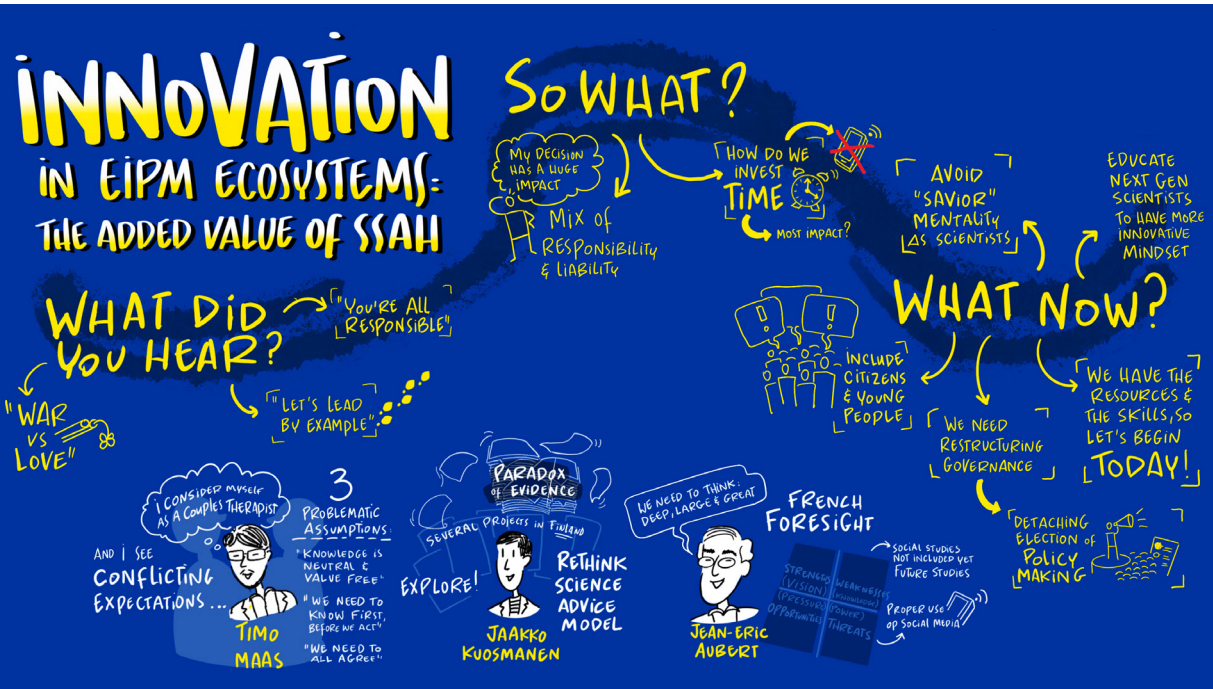
Integration of SSAH and STEM in research funding programmes

Challenges:

- While a human-centric approach to complex problems is widely acknowledged and calls for more input from SSAH, these disciplines often remain underrepresented in research funding programmes. The latter too often largely support STEM fields and build on a narrow conception of innovation which mainly focuses on technological solutions. This lack of SSAH and STEM integration hinders the development of comprehensive and inclusive, evidence-informed policies.
- Lack of adequate, commonly supported methodologies to effectively monitor interdisciplinary collaboration and SSAH integration within research projects and programmes.
- Peripheral role of SSAH in research projects: SSAH researchers are often only included in research consortia for tasks like social acceptance of innovations and communication, rather than being an integral part to the core research approach of a project with their methods, data, and analysis.

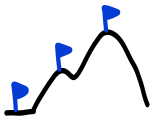
Implications:

- Although some analysis can already be based on available metadata, there is currently no satisfying methodology or comprehensive data collection to assess and monitor the level of integration of SSAH in research programmes.
- SSAH uneven participation and contribution in the outcomes to interdisciplinary research projects.



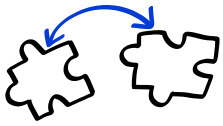
Policy engagement of the humanities

Challenge:

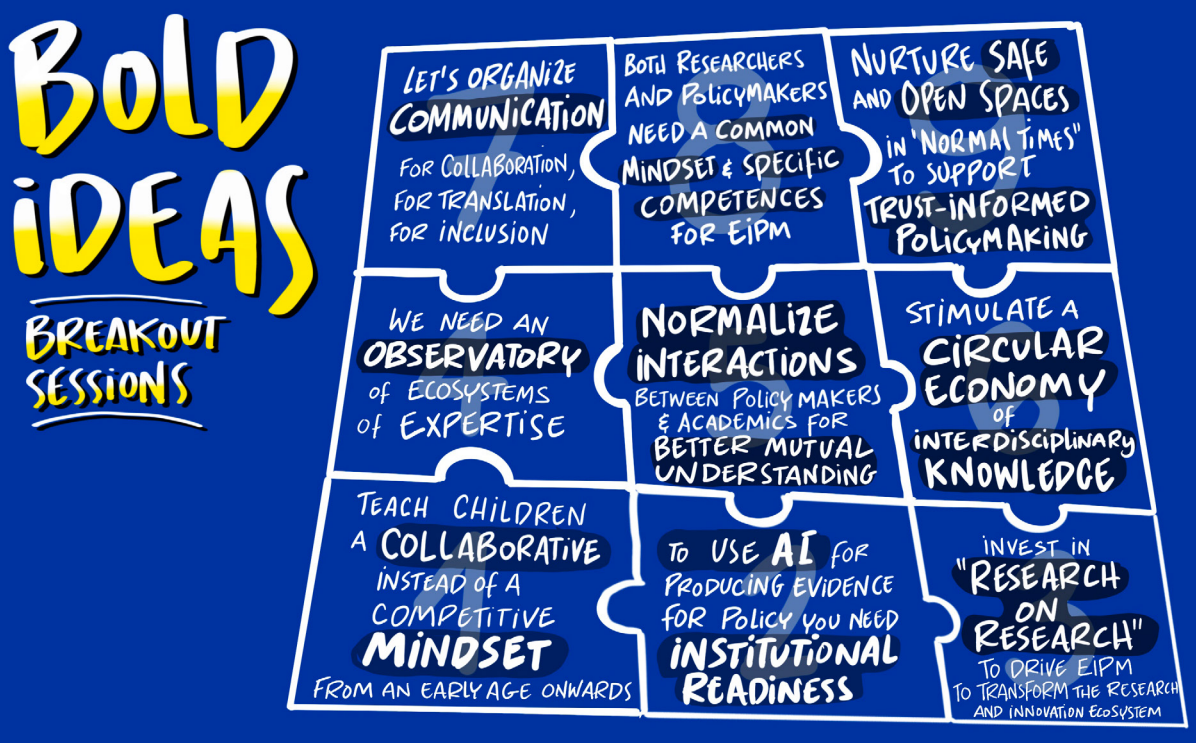


- Academics in the humanities frequently use qualitative methods and are therefore often subject to scepticism by policymakers who prefer to rely on quantitative data (seen as the sole tangible evidence-basis for decision-making), even more so when these disciplines adopt a critical epistemological viewpoint (often considered as biased by policymakers). This leads to a situation in which the richness and breadth of their contribution is overlooked and neglected in informing policy, leading in turn to the common perception within the humanities fields that policy engagement is not part of their academic roles.
- Humanities scholars, just like most social scientists, are not incentivized enough to communicate beyond their peers' disciplinary networks and create impact on policymaking.

Implications:



- Underutilization of valuable insights from humanities research in policy formulation, notably regarding the understanding of societal values and representations, but also in terms of future narratives and foresights helping policymakers to think long-term.



DIMENSIONS OF INTEGRATIVE EIPM ECOSYSTEMS

The following five dimensions of integrative EIPM ecosystems – that is, ecosystems that fully integrate SSAH expertise – emerged from the STEP2024 conference. They are not described in their current stage of development, but are rather depicted, using the present tense, as an "ideal" scenario in which SSAH expertise is integrated as good as possible into policymaking.

In function of the country, region or institution, some of the dimensions may be more relevant and/or already implemented than others. However, we believe that it is by working collectively on each of them, considering them as being systematically interconnected and complementary, that EIPM practices around Europe can be enhanced, and become more relevant, for all stakeholders involved.

1. EIPM ecosystems as collaborative environments

- **Leaving the comfort zone and "breaking the silos":** Actors involved in EIPM must step outside their professional comfort zones, actively and humbly listen to one another, and leverage the support of skilled knowledge brokers.
  - Policymakers co-create research questions with researchers and are held accountable for their use of scientific evidence as, indeed, facts do not speak for themselves.
  - SSAH researchers together with colleagues from the STEM disciplines support the strategic imagination of possible futures within academic research and are openly discussing the possible breadth of implications of their research. They systematically consider what alternative theories and methods might have achieved, analyzing why results may vary across disciplines.
- Researchers engage collectively in the use of **frames and narratives** that contribute to the effective communication of the evidence they produce to policymakers.
- **Opportunities for co-creation:** Regular transdisciplinary matchmaking events and online platforms where policymakers and researchers from various disciplines can collaborate with confidence and trust, in a non-judgemental but structured manner, are established. These facilitate the formulation of relevant policy questions and the search for common grounds between policy formulation and research evidence, grounded in the current state of the art of the available knowledge, with due attention to the research gaps that call for future studies.
- **Due allocation of time, space and structure:** The different cycles of policy and research are duly recognized by all stakeholders and allow adequate time for meaningful collaboration. This involves integrating regular interactions and formalized feedback loops throughout the policy process.
- **Interactions are normalized**, in non-crisis times, between policymakers and academic associations and networks, now seen as "one stop shops" for policymakers. Therefore science-policy literacy and

mutual understanding, as well as expectation management are enhanced on both sides, while the roles and responsibilities of each party are explicitly delineated. This also means there is a clear switch from a deficit and unidirectional model of expertise – based on a demand from the policymakers answered by a punctual offer from the researchers – to a more conversational and interactive approach, that integrates feedback loops with the stakeholders. Continuous engagement between stakeholders is likely to increase sustainability and trust.

- **Policy-relevant definitions of evidence:** Characteristics of 'good evidence for policy-making' are defined across academic disciplines from an outcome perspective, i.e. by taking the functions of evidence in policymaking into account.
- **Policy-relevant definitions of innovation:** Policymakers frame innovation as encompassing a broad understanding of societal progress that involves a clear social and cultural dimension rather than focusing on technological advancements alone.
- **Interdisciplinary research councils and funding instruments are established,** comprising representatives from various academic disciplines, including the SSAH, policymakers, civil society actors and industry experts, to oversee and promote multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary research initiatives, ensuring alignment with policy needs and societal challenges.

Inspirational practices

Existing cross-disciplinary and experimental structures such as UNESCO-MOST Bridges or inspiring practices by knowledge brokers like the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters.
https://bridges.earth/
https://acadsci.fi/en/science-and-policy/

The Policy Lab of the Université libre de Bruxelles is a research-intervention structure dedicated to public action. Its mission is to generate and interpret knowledge to connect public services to the needs of their stakeholders, in order to improve their quality, coherence and effectiveness.
https://policylab.ulb.be/a-propos-de-nous/ (*only in French*)

2. EIPM ecosystems as enabling environments for capacity-building and skilling

- **Curriculum Development:** Interdisciplinary curricula, combining courses in SSAH and STEM, are promoted at an early stage and interdisciplinary efforts in research and science advice are duly rewarded in professional promotion schemes and systems, notably through the valorisation of publications in multidisciplinary Open Access quality journals.
- **Training Programmes:** Existing relevant programmes are supported, promoted and attended. New training programmes for both policymakers and researchers are further developed and implemented by universities and intermediary organizations, to foster mutual understanding of roles, responsibilities, and the importance of multi-, inter- and transdisci-

plinary research for policymaking. These programmes are tailored to the needs of the different stakeholders and include modules on scientific and political literacy, communication, interdisciplinary collaboration, elements of scientific methodologies and the practical application of research findings in policy contexts. Academic knowledge brokers do play a role in the promotion and provision of adequate training to all stakeholders, with a dedicated attention to early career researchers, whose eagerness to engage in EIPM is no longer hindered by career-related constraints.

- **EIPM approaches are endorsed** by top managers within administration and members of government, while at the same time civil servants are empowered to access and use interdisciplinary scientific evidence of various provenance to inform actionable policy recommendations. Furthermore, departments with analytical and evidence capacities are established in ministries and administrative services, wherever relevant.

- **AI for EIPM:**
  - AI is leveraged in the production of evidence for policymakers, notably in the production and update of literature reviews. Human responsibility is maintained though in an open and transparent way, bringing to light and addressing the diversity of biases linked to the material on which AI is trained (in terms of language, discipline, geography);
  - SSAH expertise is requested to analyse AI impact on EIPM and better understand interactions between AI and humans, including the ethical concerns relating to AI-based knowledge creation, as well as (re)define concepts such as authorship, responsibility, ownership, accountability, etc.

Inspirational practices

The Model of the Competences Framework developed by the JRC can serve as a good example.
https://knowledge4policy.ec.europa.eu/projects-activities/competence-frameworks-policymakers-researchers_en

The Finnish Academy of Science and Letters has a great handbook for researchers who want to have policy impact.
https://acadsci.fi/en/academy-publications/tools-to-support-knowledge-brokers/researchers-handbook/

3. EIPM ecosystems as environments within which SSAH researchers can thrive

- **Policy advisory activities are duly recognized and valorised in SSAH researchers' career evaluation.** This is notably achieved by including policy engagement as a criterion in performance evaluations, promotions, and grant applications.

- **Prizes and awards** are created to reward researchers from all disciplines who engage into EIPM. SSAH researchers are the subject of specific rewards.

- **Scientific research on research** as well as the dedicated research field of 'Science of science' are further supported in the SSAH to drive evidence-informed science policymaking and research programmes.
- SSAH researchers, SSAH disciplinary expertise and methodological approaches are duly integrated into **strategic foresight activities.**

Inspirational practices
Through the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), more than 700 research organizations, funders, evaluation bodies, professional societies, and their networks have united around shared goals and guiding principles to drive reforms in the assessment of research, researchers, and research institutions. These principles are detailed in the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment, published in July 2022, which serves as a framework for reform and implementation.
https://coara.eu/

4. EIPM as ecosystems in which interdisciplinary research is duly funded and monitored

- **Funding programmes are designed** according to a holistic and systemic approach and drafted in such a way that SSAH expertise is explicitly mentioned and requested. Whenever relevant, SSAH expertise and participation is considered mandatory in interdisciplinary calls.
- **SSAH expertise is valued** and requested in long-term EU R&I funding schemes like partnerships or "missions".
- **Inclusive expert selection:** A diverse representation in expert panels in charge of evaluating the proposals is ensured by considering gender, geography and disciplinary backgrounds. Experts in interdisciplinary evaluation are integrated into evaluation panels. Best practices are shared in this regard.
- **Mixed-method approaches to the monitoring of SSAH integration in funding schemes are further developed:** The use of mixed methodologies (such as textual analysis combined to bibliometrics) is promoted in the assessment of SSAH integration within funding programmes, funded projects and project outputs, with due consideration for the nature of the involvement of SSAH researchers as well as the disciplines involved.
- **Scientific research on research** is supported and produces the qualitative and quantitative data that is needed for the monitoring of SSAH integration.
- **Intermediate results monitoring:** Research projects systematically undergo continuous monitoring and evaluation mechanisms. This approach allows for real-time adjustments and improvements, enhancing the relevance and impact of research outcomes.

Inspirational practices
EASSH is a membership organisation made up of scientific networks, a ssociations, disciplinary groups and universities. The main purposes of EASSH are to promote learning and research in the social sciences and humanities (SSH) as a resource for Europe and the world, and to engage with policymakers and research funders in support of the social sciences and humanities.
https://eassh.eu/About/Mission

5. EIPM ecosystems as environments based on openness, trust and transparency

- **An observatory of science for policy initiatives and institutions across Europe** is set up to map, navigate and share existing solutions for inter- and transdisciplinary expertise. The science for policy observatory compares EIPM ecosystems and practices, develops instruments for the translation of solutions into different contexts and resources for rapid scientific policy advice. It operates in close collaboration to the JRC's Knowledge4Policy (K4P) platform.
- **Connections between EIPM-related initiatives across Europe** allow for and enable peer review and mutual learning activities, as well as exchanges of best practices in terms of how they could be translated from one ecosystem to another.
- **Open access** to policy reports and other relevant grey literature allows a 'circular economy' of policy relevant research which contributes to disentangling the existing knowledge and ensures its potential reuse. Access to a centralized repository of data, research findings, and policy recommendations is available and open to all stakeholders.
- **Public Engagement:** Researchers do actively explain research processes, uncertainties and conditionalities of their results to the public, framing societal questions based on evidence and ensuring public understanding and participation in the research process. Outreach activities contribute to the fostering of a collaborative spirit between scientists and the public, based on long-term and mutual trust.
- **Policymakers are sensitised to the role and impact of science advice in politics.** They are transparent about decision-making processes and communicate the underlying values and preferences clearly. Tools to analyse and debate values are also developed as new EIPM tools, clearly distinguishing between scientific evidence, values and opinions. Engaging with scientists and citizens on value questions helps policymakers to both reflect upon and articulate the premises and preferences underlying the generation and selection of evidence.

Inspirational practices

European Commission's Joint Research Centre's Ecosystems of Science Advice in Europe workshop series

European Parliament's Science meets Parliament initiative
https://ec.europa.eu/newsroom/eusciencehubnews/items/637748/en

Extracurricular activities like the European University Institute's Engaged Academics
https://www.eui.eu/ServicesAndAdmin/ExtracurricularActivities/Ponte-Europa

Brussels Studies is an Open Access interdisciplinary scientific journal on urban issues specific to Brussels. It publishes research on the realities of Brussels that are of significant importance to the city and its region, across all disciplines. In order to ensure wider dissemination, each article is published in three languages: French, Dutch and English.
https://journals.openedition.org/brussels/

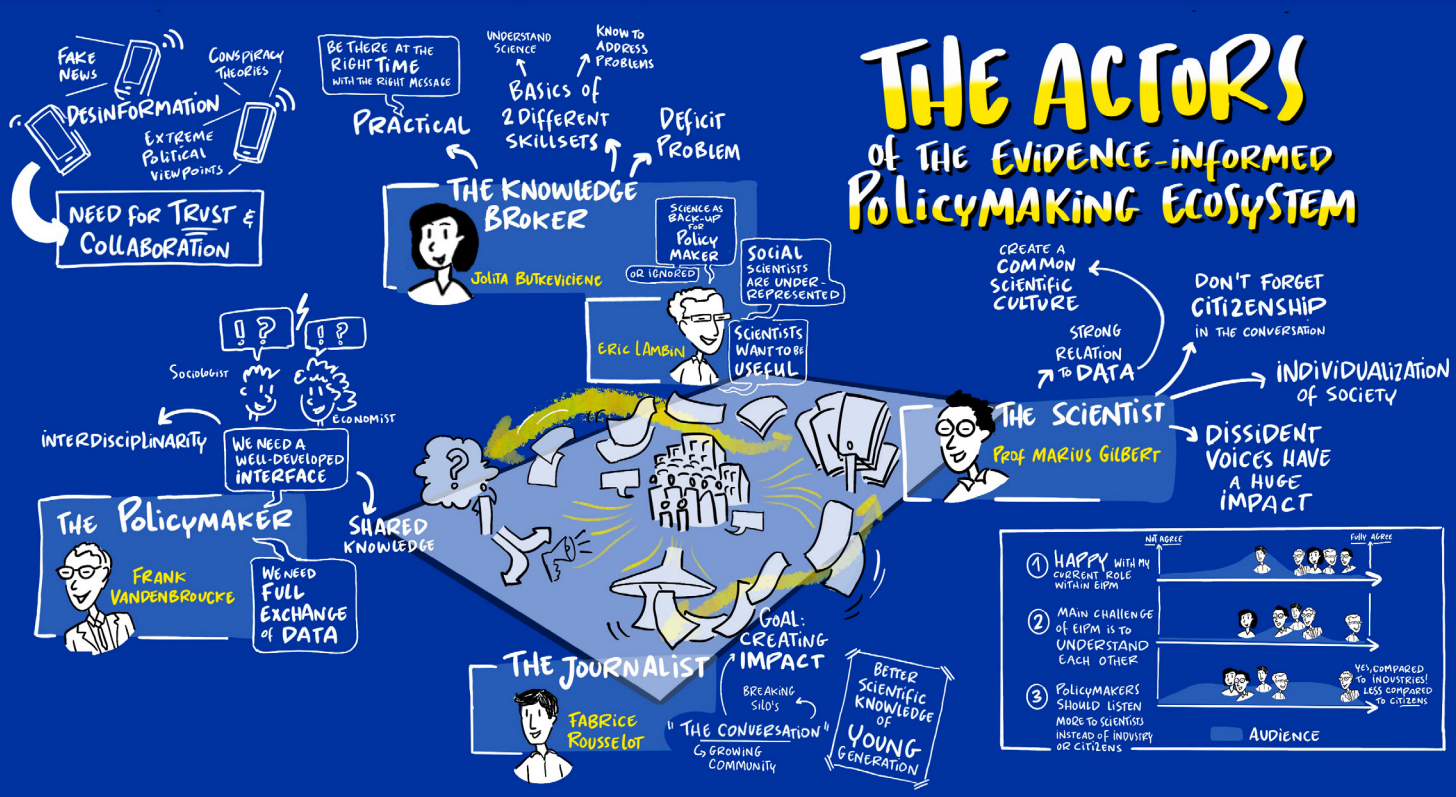
CONCLUSION

This Conference brief has shown that enhancing the evolution of EIPM ecosystems, and particularly the contribution of SSAH therein, requires a conscious and concerted effort from all stakeholders involved to foster interdisciplinary collaboration, build capacity, work together on the improvement of communication practices, and the enhancement of trust, openness and transparency in cocreation. By collectively and systematically addressing the challenges and by working together on the different ecosystem dimensions outlined in this conference brief, the robustness, inclusivity and impact of evidence-informed policies can be ensured.

As a next step, the following actors are therefore encouraged to gain ownership of this conference brief and advocate to turn EIPM ecosystems into policymaking reality in their own contexts:

- policymakers;
- SSAH and scientists of other disciplines (including STEM);
- knowledge brokers;
- journalists;
- communication offices of research institutes;
- training and curriculum developers of (science) communication;
- research program managers;
- funding bodies.

Making this EIPM ecosystem a reality is every actor's responsibility. Rather than high budget lines, it mostly requires an open mindset, courage and daily engagement.



Evidence-Informed Policymaking (EIPM)

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