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Factors influencing Environmental Social Science inclusion in policy and practice

ACCESS interview report

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Introduction

Advancing Capacity for Climate and Environment Social Science (ACCESS) is an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded project, which aims to champion and coordinate social science research, to build capacity and promote and enhance the value of environmental social science in research and practice to address key environmental challenges.

ACCESS's first step is to learn from the past experiences of social scientists in climate and environment training, research, policy and practice through various research activities. This report summarises the key findings of one of these activities: exploratory interviews with participants from academic, governmental and non-governmental sectors to explore the impact of UK-based Environmental Social Science (ESS) into policy and practice. Specifically, this report focuses on participants' experiences of the factors hindering or enhancing the integration of ESS into policy and practice. The aim of this research is **to provide evidence to promote greater inclusion of ESS into policy and practice by outlining the key factors influencing its impact**.

To achieve these wider project aims, findings presented here will be combined with evidence emerging from other activities conducted within the ACCESS project to inform a broader set of recommendations to enhance the inclusion of ESS into research, training and policy and practice. This is with the wider ACCESS goal of supporting and building capacity for ESS in the UK. Findings presented in this report, and subsequent reports of this nature, can be applicable for those working in academia, the government agencies (intermediates), non-governmental organisations, and the policy makers wanting to understand current and future ways in which UK-based ESS can be integrated into research, training, and policy and practice. It is important to note that *perceptions* of enhancing and hindering factors were collected through the interviews; assessing the extent of their reality in practice would require other observatory methods that were not undertaken in this study (see Newman, 2023).

Methodology

To achieve our research aims, we conducted 18 exploratory interviews with participants from academic, governmental and non-governmental sectors. These participants came from a range of professional backgrounds, including executive agencies and non-departmental bodies within the UK government, local government, universities, and NGOs. No participants working in industry were interviewed. The participants held various levels of seniority within these organisations, and almost all were classed as holding social science expertise. Many participants also held natural science experience and training alongside social science expertise. All participants had, either previously or currently, engaged with interdisciplinary projects involving social science to address environmental problems. Participants were recruited through the ACCESS network, prior connections and external groups.

The interviews were conducted by two social scientists within ACCESS via Microsoft Teams between December 2022 and May 2023, and took an average of 41 minutes. Respondents were asked about

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their perspectives on a set of definitions relevant to ESS, their experiences of working in interdisciplinary settings, their experiences of factors hindering or enhancing greater ESS impact in research, training and policy and practice, and any recommendations for greater ESS impact. For specificity, this report analyses the response to one question within the interview, exploring the factors affecting the influence ESS has on policy and practice: "**What according to you are the factors that contribute to, or hamper, the impact that environmental social science research has on policy, practice, business and other types of environmental practices and decision making?**".

Interview discussions were subsequently transcribed and analysed using thematic methods as outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), identifying key themes and codes relevant to the study's aim. The project received ethical approval from the Research Integrity and Governance Office at the University of Surrey (Ref: FHMS 22-23 013 EGA).

Summary of results

Overall, participants outlined a series of thematic groups, of which the most commonly cited by participants are presented here. See Appendix 1 for a full list of all themes raised by participants. Four of these themes were identified by participants as being both barriers and drivers to greater integration of ESS into policy and practice, namely (1) Perceived value; (2) Accessibility; (3) Problem Framing, and (4) Networks (see Figure 1):

What factors influence the integration of social science into policy and practice?

Perceived Value
- Recognition of the importance of ESS in addressing environmental problems
- Lack of perceived value of ESS, compared to other disciplines, methods and how to measure value

Problem Framing
- Providing clear problems definitions, unable 'answers', and ensuring policy relevance
- Mismatch between policy and practice desires and social researcher offerings

Accessibility
- Open access of evidence, accessible writing and language, summaries and conclusion
- Evidence being too complex, too lengthy, or not being publicly available

Networks
- Having allies in different social research areas, and have leaders who act as champions for ESS inclusion
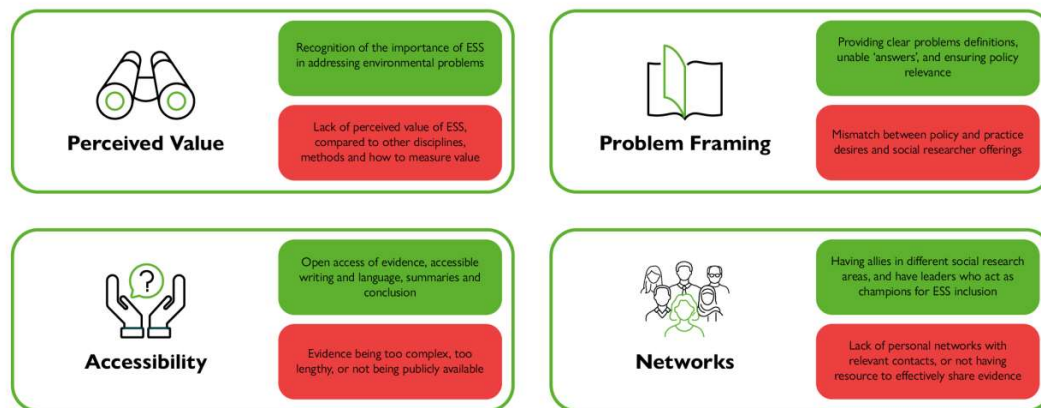- Lack of personal networks with relevant contacts, or not having resource to effectively share evidence

FIGURE 1. DIAGRAM SHOWING FACTORS INFLUENCING THE INTEGRATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL SCIENCE INTO POLICY AND PRACTICE, WITH GENERAL THEMES IN WHITE WITH BLACK BORDER. WITHIN EACH THEME, DRIVERS ARE PRESENTED IN GREEN, AND BARRIERS IN RED.

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The following sections outline the factors enhancing and hindering integration of ESS into policy and practice separately, alongside a fifth factor commonly cited by participants as hindering integration but not as commonly acting as an enhancing factor, namely: timings and relevance.

Factors hindering integration of ESS into policy and practice

When considering the factors hindering the integration of ESS into policy and practice, five main themes were identified in the discussions by participants:

1. Perceived lack of value of social sciences among those in government or the civil service

Perceived lack of value, negatively influencing the impact of ESS in impacting policy and practice, was seen by participants in three main ways:

(1) **Social science's perceived value compared to other disciplines:** Some participants outlined how, in policy and practice circles, evidence from certain disciplines, such as economics or behavioural science held more weight than others, such as social science more generally.

(2) **'Value' from the inclusion of social science took time to be measurable:** Participants outlined a mismatch existing between those requesting evidence and social science knowledge brokers in terms of how quickly evidence and 'value' arising from social science interventions could be observed, with those requesting evidence often expecting results from any research or intervention to appear much faster, and clearer, than was deemed feasible.

(3) **Preferential treatment for some methodologies over others:** Participants described how evidence carried more or less weight in decision-making dependent on the methodological approach taken when it comes to researching, creating policy, or administering interventions. This was particularly unfavourable to qualitative research methods and researchers.

> *"When you advise ministers, it's very common to put the economics case, but at the policy [level], it's not so common to put [forward a] social science point of view."*

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2. Timings and relevance

Here, participants saw ESS as having less impact on policy and practice if there were **incompatible timelines**, such as differing expectations of timelines for undertaking research and creating actionable evidence; that evidence was offered at an **incorrect or inappropriate time** when it may not be required, or may be only picked up at a later date rather than when most relevant; if the evidence is **irrelevant,** namely that findings are not relevant to the problem being faced by those in government departments, agencies, or arms-length bodies, or that the research findings and conclusions arising from ESS research are seen as **politically unacceptable** at the time they are offered, or that the perspectives are deeply politically challenging.

"I think timeliness is a classic [example]. If [the evidence] lands a bit too late or a bit too early, it might not get used immediately, but it might get a resuscitated at a later date when people are starting to think about something."

"[There needs to be a recognition] about how deeply politically challenging a lot of the social sciences' perspectives can be when they're brought to a policy table."

3. Lack of networks, or resource or ability to engage with policy-facing groups

Participants raised that a lack of personal networks with relevant contacts was likely to hinder the extent to which ESS has impact on policy and practice. It was underlined that this problem was particularly common for researchers in academic institutions aiming to engage with those in policy and practice. In addition, not having the resource within a group to effectively share evidence with the correct groups in government departments, agencies or arms-length bodies was seen as a factor potentially reducing the amount of ESS evidence reaching those making environmental policy decisions.

I think it would be very hard for [social scientists in academic institutions] to go and talk to DEFRA about flooding and place attachment if [they] thought it was important. You know what I mean? So, there isn't a clear pathway for all of this."

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4. Mismatch between policy desires and social scientist offerings and inappropriate problem framing

There was a perception among participants that incorrect problem framing could result in reduced impact of ESS knowledge on policy and practice groups. This was typified through:

(1) **The mismatch between policy desires for simple recommendations and 'answers'**, while findings emerging from social science research can often be complex and imbued in uncertainty. This is despite an enduring public expectation that science-based evidence is clear, fixed and 'black and white'.

(2) **Policy desire for techno-optimistic and individual-level solutions to environmental problems** that risk sidelining social science perspectives in favour of other disciplines, such as behavioural sciences that may prioritise individual-level interventions rather than societal-level circumstances when addressing environmental issues. This has been particularly popular in recent years with policy makers in the UK, according to participants.

(3) **Policy maker desire for simple, clear, and isolated problem-based evidence** and the often politically challenging nature of many social science perspectives put forward.

> *"I had a phrase: 'soft science, hard policy decisions'. So, [because] people think it's hard science and the policy situation is quite messy and soft, but actually science is usually very uncertain, and you have to make discrete decisions."*

5. Accessibility of evidence

Evidence deemed inaccessible to policy makers was also deemed an important factor that could hinder the extent to which ESS could be impactful on policy and practice. ESS evidence could be inaccessible in three main ways: That communication to relevant policy stakeholders being too complex; that documents to relevant policy stakeholders being too lengthy, or not including a summary, and that evidence is not accessible due to publication in an academic journal, restricting the extent to which is it publicly available. Participants often stated that this factor was of particular relevance to social scientists in academic institutions who aim to engage on environmental policy and practice issues.

> *"It shouldn't have to struggle to find [our evidence]. I think academia should be available and open and relevant, and we should be pushing them."*

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Factors enhancing integration of ESS into policy and practice

Regarding factors enhancing integration of ESS into policy and practice, four main themes were raised by respondents. These are elaborated upon below:

1. Recognition of the importance of social science in addressing environmental problems

Engaging with scientists who study interactions between humans is fundamental to building an appropriate base of evidence from which decisions aimed at addressing environmental issues and crises can be approached. The perceived, and real, importance of including the public in environmental policy and practice was seen by participants as an effective driver for some organisations to engage more with environmental social scientists.

> *"I think the recognition that you can't look after the environment without engaging with people and understanding people [is an important factor]."*

2. Accessibility of evidence

Ensuring that evidence created by environmental social scientists and researchers is accessible to those in policy and practice was seen as another way in which impact of ESS could be enhanced. While making evidence accessible will be beneficial to all those aiming to ensure that academic knowledge is translated into practice, for example, it also has relevance for increasing the ESS evidence base specifically. Despite the fact that ESS integration can be viewed as a mutual activity between research and policy & practice actors, most respondents viewed accessibility of evidence through the prism of unidirectionally integrating academic research into policy and practice outputs & outcomes. This enhancing factor was conceptualised by participants in three main ways:

(1) **Physical accessibility of information:** Ensuring that research produced is easy for those in policy and practice roles to access, whether presented to them directly, openly available on the internet or through other preferred media was deemed beneficial to impact.

(2) **Clarity and simplicity of writing and language used:** Keeping information provided to policy-facing groups in clear, understandable and tailored language was seen by participants as crucial to enhancing ESS integration into modes of thinking.

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(3) **Length of writing and use of summaries:** There was an implicit acceptance among participants that those who could benefit from engaging with ESS to enhance policy and practice outcomes had limited time or capacity to engage with their findings or recommendations. This was generally expressed in the desire for short, brief reports that prioritised certain parts of the output, for example a summary of findings and conclusions, over others, such as the methodology. Executive summaries were also deemed popular to those in government.

> *"[T]he civil servants started saying, 'actually, you need an executive summary or no one's going to read it. You need 2 pages.'"*

3. Appropriate problem framing, and focusing on solutions and impact

Here, clear definitions of the problem and ensuring policy relevance were seen as paramount. Providing usable 'answers' to questions asked by those in government, agencies or arms-length bodies was also seen as more likely to ensure the inclusion of ESS. Applying this instrumental approach to research and evidence gathering could ensure more sustainable future collaborations between in government, agencies or arms-length bodies and social scientists in academic institutions.

> *"We can take the research and put it into bullet points […], then policy teams will understand and see the connections between the questions that they're trying to answer and what this research is saying and […] they learned a huge amount about [the topic] that I don't think they had [before]"*

4. The importance of networks

Having an effective network of allies and champions was also valuable to increasing ESS impact, according to participants. This was seen in two main ways: (1) having 'allies' among social scientists in academic institutions and government, agencies or arms-length bodies and those involved in policy development, and (2) having leaders within environmental social scientists' organisations who act as champions for the inclusion of social science research or perspectives in the evidence building, policy development, or implementation of environmental programmes, either because these leaders are social scientists themselves, or because they understand the value of social science in addressing environmental problems and so advocate for its inclusion.

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"I think I do it collectively, but it's an informal network. […] So I think having 'allies' distributed across different places to be able to [have an impact is important]"

Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, we have distilled four themes that could influence ESS impact on policy and practice in both positive and/or negative ways from the interviews presented above, namely (1) Perceived Value; (2) Accessibility; (3) Problem Framing, and (4) Networks. In addition, Timings and Relevance was a fifth thematic factor elicited by participants as hindering further integration of ESS into policy and practice. Arising from the findings presented above, the following recommendations are put forward to those engaging with ESS in academic institutions and policy and practice:

- Continue championing the value of ESS, and understanding of what it is, to non-social scientists in academic institutions and within policy and practice entities.
- Ensure that ESS evidence is accessible to social researchers, knowledge brokers and policy makers in policy-relevant organisations.
- When aiming to have specific policy impact, environmental social scientists should consider undertaking instrumental research, or ensuring that their research agenda aligns with policy and practice priorities of key stakeholder organisations.
- Build networks across the wide gamut of institutions and organisations that have environmental social scientists or researchers working for them and promote social science through leadership.

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References

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology, Qualitative Research in Psychology, 3:2, 77-101

Newman, J. (2023). Promoting Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration: A Systematic Review, a Critical Literature Review, and a Pathway Forward. *Social Epistemology*, 1-17. https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2023.2172694

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Appendix 1 – Full list of factors influencing ESS impact on policy and practice arising from interviews

Factors hindering integration of ESS into policy and practice
- Perceived lack of value of social sciences among those in government or civil service
- Timeliness
- Differing timeline expectations
- Wrong time
- Lack of relevance
- Politically unacceptable
- Lack of access to or relationships with policy makers
- Policy preoccupation with quantitative data
- Policy preoccupation with direct, incremental and individual change over long-term, large-scale transformations
- Work is not accessible to policy makers (behind paywalls or length/wording)
- Lack of resource
- Mismatch between policy desire for simple, clear answers and complexity of findings
- Lack of relevance to current problems
- Difficulty of successfully engaging with a wider audience (linked to resource)
- Inclusion of ESS in name only in projects
- Lack of drive amongst researchers in engagement with policy makers
- Lack of openness (linked to inaccessibility of work)
- Policy desire for techno-optimistic non-social science solutions to environmental problems (linked to mismatch)
- Politically challenging nature of a lot of social science perspectives in current political climate (linked to mismatch)
- Privilege (race, gender or class-based) narrowing the lens of social science research
- Resistance to change from non-academic partners

Factors enhancing integration of ESS into policy and practice
- Recognition that social sciences are needed to address major environmental problems
- Accessibility of findings for policy makers
- Appropriate problem framing
- That the approach is solutions and impact-focused
- Having 'allies' from different government departments or local stakeholders
- Having leaders who are social scientists, or champion social science from within government or civil service
- Engaging with research groups more naturally inclined to speak more to policy makers
- Focusing on important factors e.g. health
- Having good data
- Having enough time
- Being interdisciplinary in one's approach

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