FABLE in-country stakeholder engagement to connect modeling with policy

FABLE Policy Brief
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Contents

Headlines

- This brief presents **insights from five years of stakeholder engagement across 18 FABLE country teams** working in the Science-Policy Interface to develop long-term pathways for sustainable food and land-use systems.
- Based on a survey and in-depth interviews, we found that teams' stakeholder engagement has focused on **improving the FABLE model** to reflect local contexts, **co-designing scenarios, raising awareness** of integrated modeling, and **tailoring the analysis to policymakers'** needs.
- National engagement has primarily targeted **ministries of agriculture and environment**, with one-third of teams also involving regional or departmental authorities.
- **The most common outcomes** include the prioritisation of model improvements, stronger relationships with experts and stakeholders, and enhanced modeling capacity.
- **Main success factors for effective engagement** include trust-building, leveraging partnerships, maintaining momentum, timing consultations, using intermediaries, and leveraging capacity building.
- **Common challenges** include access to decision-makers, insufficient resources, collecting stakeholder perspectives, communicating complexity, demand-supply mismatch, and political shifts.
- **Strengthening future policy impact** will require structured monitoring of engagement, regular training on the model and science communication, broadening engagement using innovative methods, and peer-to-peer learning.

About FABLE

The Food, Agriculture, Biodiversity, Land-Use, and Energy (FABLE) Consortium is a collaborative initiative to support the development of globally consistent mid-century national food and land-use pathways that could inform policies towards greater sustainability. The Consortium brings together teams of researchers from 26 countries and international partners from Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA), the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT, and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK).

https://www.fableconsortium.org/
info.fable@unsdsn.org

1. Introduction

Scientific knowledge often remains at the margins of policymaking.[1] The creation of scientific knowledge and public policy differ in process, pace, and incentives.[2–4] Robust research requires time, rigor, and peer review, while policymaking prioritizes urgent demands, responds to crises, and is shaped by conflicting pressures. Policy agendas can shift following political dynamics, while long-term and complex issues are often sidelined.[3,5,6]

There is a growing expectation for research to deliver policy impact,[7,8] **even if this can take multiple forms**.[9] Policymakers can use research evidence to inform policy decisions, boost their credibility, or justify decisions already made.[10] Researchers can adopt different roles, either by remaining neutral by only answering technical questions and clarifying the implications of different policies, or by advocating for specific policy outcomes.[11] Recently, the Science-Policy Interface (SPI) emerged as a space where researchers, policymakers, and civil society interact in knowledge creation and policy-making.[1,12,13] Today, stakeholder engagement sits between research being 'pushed' into policy and policymakers actively demanding evidence.[14]

Modeling can connect scientific knowledge production with policymaking by translating complex policy challenges into quantitative scenarios. However, this requires researchers to grow a whole ecosystem, understand the political, social, and institutional processes that shape policy outcomes, and where their model fits. Apart from governments, they must involve farmers, local communities, and business actors who are impacted differently by challenges across the food and land-use system and have uneven power. Beyond formal governance, researchers need to understand the social movements, resource flows, markets, geopolitical tensions, and climate events that also influence policy direction.[15,16]

For researchers, stakeholder engagement remains opportunistic and challenging. Even if there is a large body of research that identifies enabling factors to achieve policy impact,[14,17–19] there is little evidence on *how* to achieve it.[20,21] For instance, using typologies to clarify the type of impact sought can provide a more coherent stakeholder engagement strategy in the SPI. At the same time, engagement practices are highly context-dependent, influenced by political and cultural factors. While there is no one-size-fits-all, learning from these experiences can inform adaptive strategies.

This brief shares lessons on stakeholder engagement from the FABLE Consortium, a global network of country-led research teams developing integrated pathways for sustainable food and land-use systems. In line with its decentralized approach, teams designed their engagement strategies, resulting in a vast array of experiences. This heterogeneity has generated common practices that can be useful for other research initiatives and civil society organizations navigating the SPI on food systems. Lessons learnt are based on a 2024 survey and interviews with 18 country teams.

2. Overview of past engagement

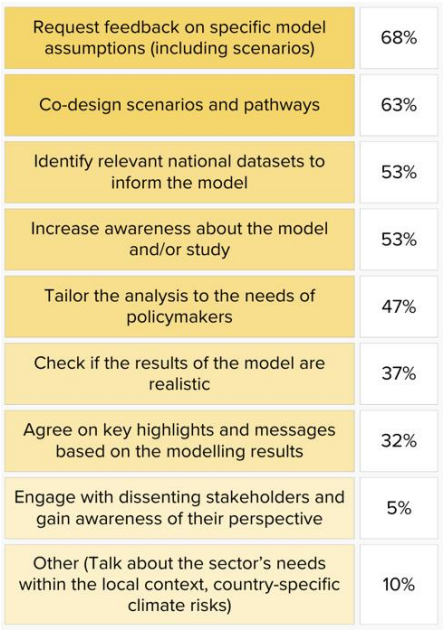
Past stakeholder engagement's most frequent initial objectives were model improvement and the co-design of scenarios. Outcomes were broader, including new collaborations.

Initial objectives

For more than half of the FABLE country teams, the initial purpose of their stakeholder engagement was to improve the model and co-design scenarios and pathways (Fig. 1). Nearly half of the survey respondents used consultations to raise awareness of the modeling process and tailor the analysis to policymakers' needs – for example, policy prioritization, identification of trade-offs, and target-setting applied to emission reduction, dietary guidelines, or specific crops or agricultural practices.

About one third of the respondents engaged stakeholders *after* model results were generated, to assess how realistic the model results were or to agree on key messages for dissemination. Only one country team's objective was to gather diverse perspectives among stakeholders.

Figure 1. FABLE country teams' stakeholder engagement objectives



Source: Authors, based on survey results (18 country teams represented). The table shows the share of total respondents who chose each option. Respondents could select more than one option and add new options in "other".

Type of stakeholders

Based on survey responses, FABLE country teams mostly engaged the **Ministry of Agriculture,** followed by the **Ministry of Environment**. A third of the respondents involved regional or departmental public administration officials in their past engagement. Most teams have consistently engaged researchers and experts from universities, research institutes, NGOs, and international organizations. In contrast, the Ministry of Health, Economy, or Finance, farmers, and agri-food businesses, including both large and small, were less involved.

External impact

FABLE country teams defined *a successful* engagement as one that leads to building relationships and trust and contributing to policymaking. Using a research impact framework,[22] we identified three main types of external impact that most FABLE country teams' stakeholder engagement has achieved: **Conceptual,** as raising awareness and increasing understanding about model results, adding nuance, or redirecting debates; **Enduring Connectivity,** as building or strengthening relationships of knowledge exchange between researchers and stakeholders based on trust and transparency; and **Capacity Building,** as developing the technical skills of stakeholders through model training and scenario design. Instrumental impact, defined as direct influence on policy, was limited among most country teams.

3. Factors for successful engagement

Build trust

Long-term collaborations and trust increase policymakers' engagement and uptake of research.[6,23,24] This depends on demonstrating reliability and transparency in methods and data, integrity in the evidence, and ensuring clarity in the outputs.[20] The Finland team achieved this by capitalizing on the credibility gained from consultations to co-design scenarios as part of previous FABLE Scenathons.[a] In Colombia, the team's strong relationship with the Ministry of Environment allowed them to co-organize consultations, leveraging the ministry's convening power to attract broader participation. For other teams, initially engaging informally has helped stakeholders feel more comfortable sharing their feedback in consultations, especially on politically sensitive issues.[25] As local researchers, FABLE teams bring cultural awareness and existing networks that facilitate these kinds of relationship building.

Leverage partnerships

Partnering with like-minded organizations helps overcome resource constraints and increase outreach. Forty percent of respondents partnered with other research institutes or think-tanks to host consultations. In Ethiopia, the team partnered with internationally renowned organizations, leveraged their own institutional networks to co-organize workshops, achieving higher attendance at lower cost. In Germany and Denmark, joint consultations with other institutes reduced the number of workshops and the risk of stakeholder fatigue. In Canada, partnerships secured free venues to host workshops, often the highest cost of stakeholder engagement. Indirect engagement can also reinforce influence. In Norway, the team collaborated with non-traditional actors outside FABLE's predominant stakeholder type, such as journalists, chefs, or industry leaders, broadening public understanding of sustainable food system issues and creating conditions for research uptake.

40% of country teams partnered with other organizations to host stakeholder consultations. This strengthened political engagement and reduced costs as well as the risk of stakeholder fatigue.

Maintain momentum

Iterative scenario modeling creates opportunities to deepen stakeholders' understanding of the modeling tool and results, while maintaining momentum despite shifts in policy priorities or stakeholder turnover. When time and resources allowed, follow-up consultations or consecutive meetings helped teams strengthen relationships and increase stakeholder ownership of FABLE results, as seen in the UK (c.f. 5. Success Stories). The iterative approach sustained the involvement of government actors across different stages of policymaking. In Denmark, the team stayed in regular contact during and between policy windows, attending government events, inviting policymakers to their own, and gradually co-designing projects over time.

Find the right timing

Securing stakeholders' involvement depends on carefully timing consultations. Workshop preparation often begins several months in

[a] Scenathons are iterative collective modeling exercises in which FABLE country teams explore future food and land-use scenarios aligned with national and global sustainability goals and ensure global trade consistency.

advance. Half of the survey respondents reported sending invitations one to three months ahead of the workshop. To ensure critical policymakers attended the workshops, teams avoided busy political periods or budget seasons and adapted to their schedules. For example, senior ministry officials often have highly variable agendas and may not commit to a workshop until close to the date, while technical staff may often be more available but need to schedule their attendance at least a month in advance.

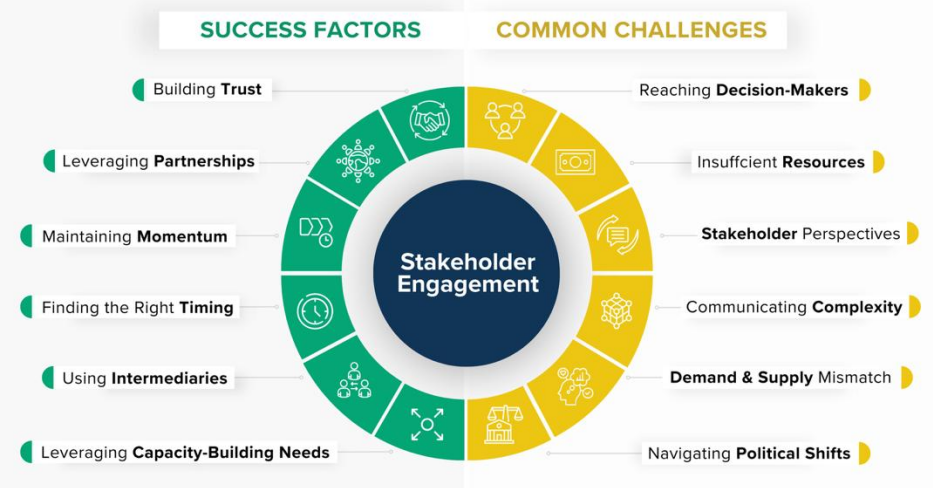
Using intermediaries to reach policymakers

Expert committees or government research institutes advising policymakers can be an entry point for researchers. Engaging with these entities has proven to be an effective way to reach policymakers who may be difficult to contact directly. A key advantage is that these committees include experts with deeper technical knowledge than politicians, enabling more in-depth discussions of modeling results. They can also signal current government priorities, helping frame consultations and research to respond to policymaking needs. In Brazil and Greece, teams found that working through these entities also helped identify specific ways the FABLE team could address capacity or knowledge gaps within the ministry—gaps that policymakers themselves might not always recognize.

Leverage capacity-building needs

Strengthening capacity within ministries through training has offered a practical avenue for achieving impact. Aligning stakeholder engagement with capacity needs makes it more practical and useful for policymakers. In Mexico, the team found that capacity building went beyond teaching stakeholders how to use the model; it promoted the uptake of a holistic approach to agrifood and land-use systems, helping break down policy silos (c.f. 5. Success stories). Teams engaged in these trainings have built longer-lasting, stronger interpersonal and institutional relationships with government staff, maintaining the engagement through political shifts, while increasing understanding, trust, and demand for the tool's results.

Figure 2. Success factors and challenges in engaging stakeholders



Source: Authors.

4. Common challenges

Reaching decision-makers

Senior officials, though influential, often lack time or technical expertise to engage meaningfully.[17] Teams found that mid-level technical staff are more accessible and receptive to participating in scenario design workshops, consultations, and meetings to share scientific findings, but lack authority and may hesitate to speak openly.

When new central administrations deprioritize the sustainability agenda, targeting regional administrations is an effective strategy.

Insufficient resources

Inadequate dissemination or insufficient resources are often primary barriers to the uptake of research in policy.[6] Many teams reported that limited time and funding prevented them from prioritizing stakeholder engagement, hiring policy engagement, communication experts, and workshop facilitators, or renting spaces for in-person consultations. In some countries, government officials also require financial compensation to participate in consultations during work hours.

Incentivizing and collecting stakeholder perspectives

Online surveys provide a low-cost method for collecting stakeholder input, but response rates have been low, especially when they are used as standalone tools with long questionnaires covering multiple topics. Teams have reported higher response rates when surveys narrow their thematic scope and are used as part of an ongoing engagement process; for example, when they are used as follow-up tools after workshops to capture additional feedback among an already-engaged stakeholder group.

Communicating complexity

Communicating academic findings to non-experts is one of the most challenging tasks for researchers.[16] Even though the FABLE Calculator is more user-friendly than other models, stakeholders still struggled to understand the results. In the UK, the team distributed preparatory materials in advance to ensure the right experts attended the consultation and ran the workshops in two phases: first explaining the model logic, then presenting results. In Canada, the team used storytelling to communicate narratives that were easier to grasp.

Demand and supply mismatch

Managing expectations is critical when engaging stakeholders. Teams should clarify early what the model can and cannot achieve. A common challenge is that stakeholders tend to expect sub-national details that the FABLE Calculator did not initially provide. In the UK and India, teams addressed this by adapting the model to the sub-national scale, whereas in Colombia, they used multiple models to produce spatially explicit results.

Navigating political shifts

Rapid political changes can erase carefully built relationships and funding opportunities. When new administrations deprioritize climate and sustainability agendas, as happened in Brazil, Argentina, and the US in recent years, even research discussions can become politically sensitive and even dangerous. In response, the Argentina team adopted a provincial engagement strategy, targeting regional administrations that remained committed to sustainability.

5. Success stories

FABLE Mexico

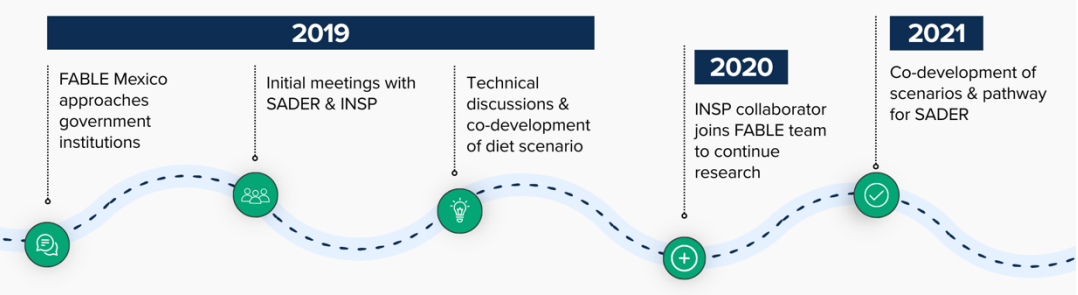
The FABLE Mexico team has contributed to greater coherence between health, agriculture, and environmental policies, working with an intersectoral task force composed of ten ministries.

Context: Since before 2018, Mexico has sought to integrate its land and food systems policies by aligning objectives across sectors and recognizing environmental protection as an essential pillar of national resilience to climate change. Policies aimed at improving nutrition and food production consider the country's cultural diversity and seek to consolidate food security and self-sufficiency through agroecological practices, while protecting and restoring ecosystems.

Approach: FABLE Mexico adopted a pragmatic, relationship-based approach to build trust with key institutions and understand their needs. Personal connections enabled entry points to government institutions, identifying policy gaps and collaboration opportunities. The team approached individuals from several institutions, following up with short concept notes and in-person meetings to present the FABLE framework. They focused on the Secretariat of Agriculture and Rural Development (SADER) and the National Institute of Public Health (INSP) and identified analytical needs within the new Department of Public Policy Prospection. They proposed organizing model trainings, produced video tutorials in Spanish, and adapted the FABLE Calculator to use local data and include local crops.

The collaboration with the INSP evolved from meetings to gather feedback on a "healthy diet" scenario to regular technical discussions aimed at understanding the ministry's priorities and how FABLE could support them. INSP designated a dedicated collaborator to adapt national dietary data within the FABLE framework, who later joined the FABLE team to continue the research beyond the initial collaboration. Partnering with the INSP was strategic to engage the Ministry of Health. Together, FABLE and INSP co-developed a diet scenario that is both healthy, environmentally sustainable, and culturally appropriate for Mexico.

Policy impact: Through its collaboration with SADER, FABLE Mexico developed a tailored version of the FABLE Calculator that directly informed the policy scenarios that SADER aimed to explore. SADER invested in training a dedicated staff member to use the model, creating in-house expertise. Although she has since moved to another department, she retains the full capacity to resume work with the tool, ensuring continuity and long-term value for policy planning.



FABLE United Kingdom

The FABLE UK team supported the Welsh Government in aligning local policy priorities and context with UK Net Zero targets.

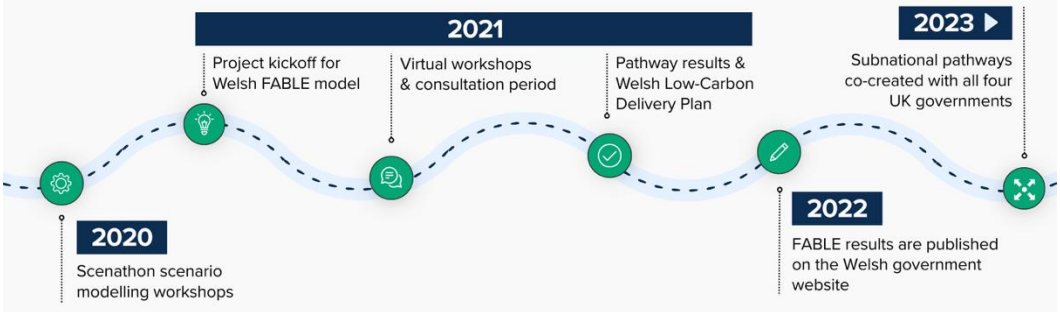
Context: The UK committed to achieving net-zero GHG emissions by 2050. The Net Zero Strategy is UK-wide, but devolved administrations develop their own climate mitigation, agriculture, and forestry policies, with energy and trade remaining under central UK authority. After leaving the EU, devolved regions needed new food and land use policies aligned with the 2050 net-zero target.

Approach: The UK team first engaged with the Welsh government through scenario modeling workshops at the 2019 and 2020 Scenathons. These workshops demonstrated how integrated models could inform land-use policy through participatory processes, leading to a follow-up project commissioned by the Welsh government to develop a FABLE model for Wales. The UK team and government partners jointly defined the project's scope and pathway narratives. Using a template provided by the team, they collaboratively outlined assumptions and data to parameterize each pathway, aligning government needs with the model's capabilities. This iterative process over seven meetings clarified the FABLE model's requirements and enhanced understanding of its potential applications.

Co-creating the pathways brought together stakeholders from departments that typically work in silos, promoting dialogue and alignment on assumptions. It also highlighted adaptations to the FABLE Calculator that could better represent the subnational Welsh context.

Building on these relationships, stakeholder engagement was widened to encompass all four UK devolved administrations in co-creating the pathways for the 2023 Scenathon. Two one-hour virtual workshops using interactive tools for polling and feedback, leaving adequate time for discussion, encouraged active engagement and enabled broad UK participation without major time commitments. Following the consultations, one organization offered to host the next hybrid workshop at no cost to continue the discussions.

Policy impact: The pathway results provided compelling evidence for promoting dietary shifts in the Welsh population for both health and environmental benefits. This finding was reflected in the Welsh Government's Low Carbon Delivery Plan, which committed to aligning national diets more closely with the Eatwell Guide over the next 20 years and established a dedicated policy group. Following this collaboration, the team developed calculators for other devolved administrations to co-create subnational pathways through stakeholder workshops.



6. The way forward

Despite a lack of dedicated resources, most teams organized consultations that led to co-benefits for both modeling teams and stakeholders. These include model improvement, co-designed scenarios, and fostering knowledge exchange between researchers and stakeholders based on trust and transparency. This provides a strong basis for future engagement. Teams have resorted to creative solutions to challenges such as political shifts, limited budgets to convene stakeholders, and communicating the complexity of modeling.

FABLE should adopt an approach based on coordinated, systematic monitoring and partnership engagement. Effective engagement begins with setting clear, realistic objectives. Starting with a strategy, including stakeholder mapping, and following simple practices, such as maintaining a stakeholder log and tracking interactions and lessons learned, can strengthen institutional memory and improve future engagement (c.f., Annex). For monitoring, gathering feedback from stakeholders to evaluate consultations is also crucial to ensure that the objectives of policy impact are reflected in engagement outcomes. In cases where resources are limited, partnerships and leveraging existing networks have proven to be critical to achieve greater impact at low cost. The FABLE Secretariat can provide country teams with stakeholder engagement strategies and monitoring templates.

Several FABLE country teams now bring together researchers and policy experts to map influence within agrifood systems, understand how and why policymakers seek information, analyze policy cycles, and identify when policy windows open for scientific contributions.

Researchers in new FABLE teams and countries with low modeling capacity need accelerated training on the use and communication of the FABLE Calculator. To build trust and lasting relationships with governments and stakeholders, all teams must develop modeling expertise and the ability to explain the results and disentangle complex underlying mechanisms captured by the model. They also need the capacity to improve the model to reflect stakeholders' recommendations to enable iterative scenario modeling. In 2026, FABLE and the *Institut des hautes études du développement durable* (IHEDD) will launch a comprehensive online course on the FABLE Calculator. Members of the FABLE Secretariat can also join stakeholder workshops to support country teams in answering highly technical questions.

Strategic partnerships between researchers, policy institutes, and facilitators can be resource-efficient and more impactful. Understanding who holds influence within agrifood systems, how and why policymakers seek information, how policy cycles operate, and when policy windows open often requires time and expertise. Several FABLE country teams already reflect this reality by collaborating with institutions focused on policies and advocacy. While many teams report challenges in coordinating and facilitating workshops, identifying and approaching strategic partners ahead of key moments or events could enhance engagement outcomes.

FABLE teams should develop a clear Theory of Change and communications strategy before engaging stakeholders. If the target is policymakers, they require simple and concise summaries, whereas other stakeholders would require a

different approach. Training by science communicators could help teams avoid jargon and deliver clear messages through engaging presentations, storytelling techniques, such as the Narrative Policy Framework, [26] data visualizations, and other communication tools.[8,20,24,27–31] The FABLE Secretariat could organize knowledge share sessions with communications experts to support country teams in translating model results into messages tailored to each audience.

While Ministries of Agriculture and Environment have been often the primary target, FABLE country teams should aspire to broaden their engagement. For instance, they could involve more ministries of planning, which tend to appreciate more integrated assessments. Recent collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee, particularly its NAT section, illustrates the value of engaging a wider set of societal actors. Through contributions to EESC workshops and a study on the future of Europe's agrifood system, FABLE has been able to bring evidence closer to farmers and other actors across supply chains.[32] Working with such varied groups naturally brings more disagreement, but this can improve the overall quality and legitimacy of the results, enhance the policy relevance of the results, reduce bias, and raise awareness of system complexities. Collecting input anonymously in early stages[33], adopting Chatham House rules, or using innovative methods like design thinking, foresight techniques, and Policy Labs [34,35] can ensure more inclusive and constructive contributions. Moving in this direction, the FABLE Secretariat is developing serious games and simplified interfaces to test with country teams.

Engaging stakeholders and informing policy are a complex task that depends on factors beyond researchers' control. FABLE will continue to use diverse approaches for stakeholder engagement under the leadership of country teams, with additional support from the FABLE Secretariat and strategic partners. Peer learning among Consortium members, and with the broader research community working on the SPI, will remain critical.

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This brief was prepared by Maria Diaz,[1] Irene Perez Beltran,[1] Rachel Collie,[1] Aline Mosnier,[1] and Katia Michalopoulos. [1]

Contributors include Charlotte Gonzalez Abraham[2], Paula Harrison,[3] Guillaume Lafortune,[1] Bob van Oort,[4] Anne Sophie Daloz,[4] Adrian Monjeau,[5] Hisham Zerriffi,[6] Anton Strokov,[7] Yonas Getaneh,[8] Zeynep Tacer Caba,[9] Heikki Lehtonen,[10] Vartika Singh,[11] Grace Wu[12], Sarah Sinclair,[3] Konstantinos Dellis,[13] Wanderson Costa,[14] John Chavarro,[15] Simone Hojte,[16] Fivos Papadimitriou,[13] and Federico Frank. [17]

External reviewers: Bram Peters[18,19] and Selim Louafi[20]

[1] Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)
[2] Independent consultant
[3] UK Centre for Ecology & Hydrology
[4] CICERO Centre for International Climate Research
[5] Fundacion Bariloche
[6] University of British Columbia
[7] Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration (RANEPA)
[8] Alliance Bioversity International – CIAT
[9] Istanbul Technical University
[10] Natural Resources Institute Finland (Luke)
[11] International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI)
[12] UC Santa Barbara
[13] Athens University of Economics and Business
[14] University of Lisbon
[15] Javeriana University
[16] CONCITO
[17] International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA)
[18] University of Oxford
[19] Foresight4Food
[20] Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement (CIRAD)

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Annex

Method

This analysis is based on an online survey conducted among FABLE country teams. The questionnaire (available here: https://forms.gle/95cjJPqAwuXnvPNX6) collected information on stakeholder engagement practices, success factors, and challenges. We received 18 responses between 27 June 2024 and 18 July 2024. In addition, 13 follow-up interviews were conducted with a subgroup.

Country	Survey	Interview
Argentina	✓	✓
Brazil	✓	✓
Canada	✓	✓
China	✓	–
Colombia	✓	✓
Denmark	✓	✓
Ethiopia	✓	✓
Finland	✓	✓
Germany	✓	✓
Greece	✓	✓
India	✓	✓
Ireland	✓	–
Mexico	✓	✓
Norway	✓	✓
Russia	✓	–
Turkey	✓	–
UK	✓	✓
US	✓	–
Total	**18**	**13**

Recommendations for effective engagement

Box 1. Recommendations for effective stakeholder engagement

Tools to direct efforts where they will have the greatest impact:

- Stakeholder and power mapping to identify influential actors, including advisory systems and multi-stakeholder platforms.
- Stakeholder typology by role in the modeling process (expert, participant, observer, partner).[36]
- Define the desired type of impact: instrumental, conceptual, capacity building, cultural or changes in attitudes, or enduring connectivity.[22]
- Map policy processes (issue identification, policy analysis, consultations, development or selection of policy instruments, coordination building, policy implementation, evaluation) and engagement channels.
- Horizon-scanning and policy calendars to anticipate key events, align research outputs with policy cycles, and provide timely insights during policy windows.
- 'Evidence-gap mapping' to identify supply and demand of knowledge [5]

Good practices for workshops

Before:

- Identify data gaps, potential areas of disagreement
- Thoroughly analyse the results.
- Clearly define the context and objectives of the workshop.
- Select participants based on the objectives and in accordance with the resources available.
- Send 'briefing packs' in advance so everyone starts with a shared knowledge base.
- Timely sending of invitations and agenda.

During:

- Use an experienced facilitator.
- Avoid too many/too lengthy presentations and ensure enough space for discussion.
- Use interactive methods, e.g., Data Gallery Walk, to display different kinds of data to get participants to check and challenge their own assumptions. [34]
- Check if objectives were met and ask for feedback from participants

After:

- Add informal discussions and/or online surveys after the workshop to deepen dialogue.
- Communicate the workshop results in accessible formats (i.e., policy brief, pamphlet) and plan follow-up meetings.
- Keep a tracker of participants, their organization, and contributions.

Use an **evaluation framework** [22] with the following guiding questions:

- What has changed?
- Who changed?
- How do we know?
- Why and how did changes occur?
- So what? Next steps.

Assessing impacts

Figure 3. Framework to evaluate stakeholder engagement impact

Source: Adapted from Edwards and Meagher (2020).