From Evidence to Engagement: A Toolkit for Working with Policymakers

Good evidence does not always speak for itself.

Across GCBC programming, experience shows that whether research informs policy depends as much on relationships, trust, timing, and communication as on the quality of the evidence itself.

The GCBC Theory of Change recognises that policy action rarely follows a linear path from research to uptake; instead, change emerges through ongoing engagement, demonstration, and learning within complex systems where political will and coordination cannot be taken for granted.[1]

This toolkit brings together grantee reflections on a simple but critical question:

> **What ways of sharing your work or building relationships have helped to engage policymakers? What made it easier -or harder - for policymakers to use your project's ideas or evidence?**

Drawing on experience across diverse contexts, this toolkit situates policy engagement within both direct and indirect spheres of influence, focusing on intermediate outcomes such as stronger networks, greater salience of evidence, and better positioning of solutions for use.

In doing so, it reflects GCBC's role as a knowledge and network mobiliser, helping evidence travel from projects into the systems where decisions are made.[2]

[1] GCBC Theory of Change, August 2025, p.3 & 5

[2] GCBC Theory of Change, August 2025, p.4

1. Start where you are: Engagement doesn't require finished results or formal influence goals

Across projects, policymakers were often engaged early, including during design, inception, or initial implementation. Early engagement helped build awareness, align expectations, and ensure that research questions and methods reflected policy realities.

In several cases, policymakers valued being involved from the outset, even when evidence was still emerging, as this allowed their priorities, institutional constraints, and governance realities to shape the work.[3]

For example, in a fisheries research project, policymakers helped co-design the study by identifying priority management issues and staying involved in planning fieldwork, ensuring the data collected was directly relevant to policy needs.[4]

Sharing interim findings, draft ideas, or early observations reduced the sense that research arrives as a finished product and instead positioned engagement as an ongoing conversation. Some projects noted that policymakers were not yet using their evidence but framed early engagement as laying the groundwork for future uptake rather than as a failure to influence.[5]

One project highlighted that not engaging formally with policymakers at certain stages can be a deliberate and legitimate choice.

In this case, the research was still testing whether approaches – such as restoration practices and local production systems – would work in practice, so the focus was on learning and building local evidence before moving towards formal policy, reinforcing that engagement timing should be driven by local priorities rather than external expectations.[6]

Reflect on

- What can you share now that helps policymakers understand your direction, even if results are incomplete?
- Where might delaying or sequencing engagement better serve community or project goals?

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[3] Birmingham University; International Council for Research in Agroforestry (ICRAF); University of Leeds; Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (RBG Kew) – RGC1

[4] Birmingham University

[5] World Wildlife Fund (WWF); Lancaster University

[6] Tropenbos

2. How Engagement Works in Practice: Trust, Relationships and Practice

Grantees consistently described effective engagement as relational and sustained. Trust was built through regular contact, follow-up, and responsiveness, often using a mix of formal meetings and informal communication.

In-person meetings, field visits, and shared workshops were widely regarded as especially valuable, despite the time and coordination they require.[7]

Low-burden interactions, such as short technical check-ins, messaging platforms, or side conversations during events, helped maintain momentum and reduced the perceived cost of engagement for policymakers with limited time.

Informal communication channels often enabled more candid discussion than formal policy settings and supported continuity between meetings.[8]

Field-based engagement and community participation played a central role in building credibility. Policymakers found it easier to engage with evidence when they could see activities on the ground and hear directly from communities.

In contexts involving Indigenous governance, territorial planning, or community-led instruments, legitimacy was strengthened when evidence was clearly rooted in local decision-making systems rather than framed as external advocacy.[9]

Several projects also highlighted the importance of building relationships with technical staff who remain in post longer than politically appointed officials, helping sustain continuity amid institutional and political turnover.[10]

Reflect on

- Which ways of working have helped build trust in your context?
- How are local or Indigenous governance systems recognised within your engagement approach?

[7] International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED); ICRAF; Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT); University of Leeds

[8] IIED; Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS); Sokoine University of Agriculture; Lancaster University

[9] CIASE, IIED; ICRAF; University of Lincoln

[10] IIED; ICRAF; RBG Kew – RGC1

3. Entry Points: There is no single pathway

Projects engaged policymakers through multiple entry points rather than a single route. These included advisory boards, consultative meetings, public participation processes, technical committees, formal submissions, field-based events, and participation in national and international policy forums.

Responding to existing policy calls or embedding engagement within established governance processes proved to be a practical way to connect evidence to decisions already underway.[11]

Several grantees emphasised the importance of sequencing engagement across governance levels. Local, sub-national, national, and international arenas each presented different incentives and constraints, and preparing actors at one level before convening multi-level discussions helped ensure more productive dialogue.

In some cases, gaps between governance levels constrained uptake, reinforcing the need for shared understanding. Such gaps included limited awareness of relevant regulations or policy instruments.[12]

Some projects identified entry points by aligning directly with national commitments and implementation responsibilities. By working through partner institutions responsible for delivering Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), project evidence fed into active government programmes rather than relying on future policy uptake moments.[13]

Projects working in Indigenous or territorial contexts highlighted additional entry points, including Indigenous-led policy instruments and plans that function simultaneously as governance tools and advocacy mechanisms.

Framing engagement around these instruments helped reposition evidence as an expression of self-determination rather than external lobbying.[14]

Reflect on

- Which existing policy processes or forums could provide entry points for your work?
- How do opportunities differ across governance levels in your context?

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[11] WWT; Nature Kenya; International Potato Center (CIP); WCS

[12] IIED; BirdLife; Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh (RBG Edinburgh)

[13] Royal Botanic Gardens Kew (RBG Kew) – RGC2

[14] CIASE

4. Engagement Across the Lifecycle: *Different stages, different interaction*

Grantees described policy engagement as evolving over the project lifecycle.

Early stages focused on awareness-building, alignment, and co-design; mid-stages emphasised sharing interim findings, testing ideas, and refining questions; later stages prioritised synthesis, translation, and engagement timed to policy windows.

Continuous engagement reduced reliance on end-of-project dissemination alone.[15]

Training events, workshops, and early-stage demonstrations—particularly at local or county levels—were noted as effective ways to introduce ideas and build familiarity, even before results were final.[16]

However, mismatches between research timelines and policy cycles sometimes limited immediate uptake.

Staff turnover, administrative delays, and shifting political priorities required engagement strategies to remain flexible and adaptive.[17]

Reflect on

- How might your engagement approach need to change as your project progresses?
- What policy timelines or windows shape when evidence is most usable?

[15] University of Leeds; WWF; Birmingham University; Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS)

[16] Bangor University; Council for Scientific and Industrial Research - Crops Research Institute (CSIR-CRI)

[17] ICRAF; RBG Kew – RGC1; Birmingham University; CIP

5. Making Evidence Usable: *Translation, format, and decision-readiness*

Policymakers were more able to use evidence when it was presented clearly, concisely, and in formats aligned with decision-making needs. Short evidence briefs, executive summaries, visuals, and structured synthesis documents reduced the time required to engage with complex findings.[18]

Visual and accessible communication—such as clear summaries, maps, and other decision-ready formats, helped strengthen trust and made evidence easier to apply in practice.[19]

Evidence grounded in lived experience such as community case studies, participatory research outputs, territorial mapping, and field observations, was often more compelling than abstract analysis alone.

In several cases, ensuring evidence was grounded and presented in context of social, economic, and governance realities increased its usability within planning and regulatory processes.[20]

Evidence was also more usable when it directly supported implementation decisions, such as identifying viable management approaches and strengthening local capacity in ways that ministries could scale through existing programmes.[21]

At the same time, technical language, methodological complexity, and differences in institutional timelines could limit uptake if not carefully managed. Balancing scientific rigour with clarity, timeliness, and policy relevance was described as an ongoing learning process rather than a one-off task.[22]

Reflect on

- What is the most decision-ready version of your evidence right now?
- How could your outputs better align with policymakers' information needs?

[18] SAMS; CIP; EMPRESA PUBLICA DE SERVICIOS ESPOL-TECH E.P. (ESPOL)
[19] Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute; CSIR-CRI
[20] CIASE; IIED; ESPOL; University of Aberdeen
[21] RBG Kew – RGC2
[22] BirdLife; University of Sussex; Lancaster University

6. Constrains and trade-offs: *Barriers are structural, not failures*

Grantees consistently noted that limits to policy uptake often reflect structural conditions rather than shortcomings in project design.

Common constraints included limited time and capacity within government, competing priorities, lengthy policy revision processes, constrained budgets, political sensitivities, and frequent staff turnover.[23]

Differences between research and policy expectations also posed challenges. Policymakers often require clear operational guidance—such as defined targets or decision rules indicating when and how to act—while research evolves iteratively and highlights uncertainty.[24]

At the same time, shifting political priorities and institutional turnover can disrupt continuity and require projects to repeatedly adapt engagement strategies.[25]

Recognising these constraints helped projects avoid framing delayed uptake as failure, instead focusing on maintaining relationships, preserving institutional memory, and positioning evidence so it can be mobilised when conditions become more favourable.[26]

Reflect on

- Which barriers in your context are structural rather than within your control?
- How can your project remain useful despite uncertainty or delay?

[23] IIED; ICRAF; Birmingham University; CIP; University of Education Winneba
[24] Lancaster University
[25] CIP; University of Leeds
[26] CIP; WCS; IIED

Practitioner insight: *What works in engaging policymakers?*

Experience from policy settings suggests that research is most influential when it is both **clearly communicated** and **closely connected to the realities of decision-making**.

Researchers can engage most effectively in two complementary ways:

- First, by investing in clear and strategic communication that makes research accessible and compelling to decision makers. This includes translating complex findings into user-friendly messages, highlighting key insights, and using strong evidence or headline statistics that can directly inform policy processes.

- Second, involving community-based organisations and working closely with traditional or ethnic authorities can significantly strengthen the policy influence of research. Grounding research in lived experience and ensuring the support of trusted local actors helps build legitimacy, relevance, and uptake among policymakers.

In practice, combining close engagement with communities, assertive and well-tailored communication, and a research purpose that clearly responds to policy needs is often the most effective pathway to influence policy outcomes.

Insights shared from The British Embassy, Colombia