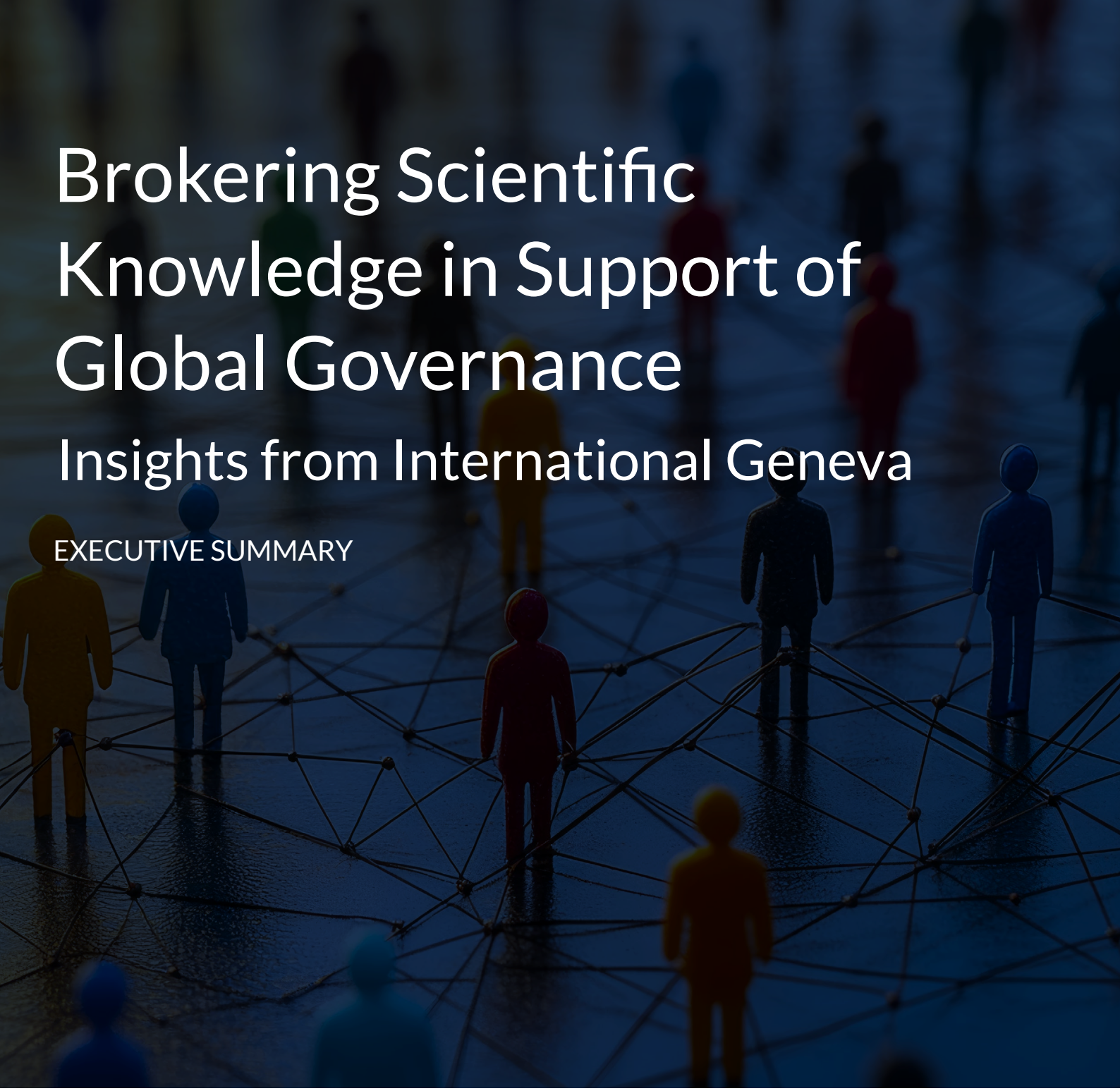

Brokering Scientific Knowledge in Support of Global Governance

Insights from International Geneva

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Authors

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The GSPI conducted this study thanks to the generous support of:

UNIVERSITÉ DE GENÈVE

Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
Confédération suisse
Confederazione Svizzera
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Executive Summary

Science plays an increasingly vital role in shaping policy decisions as governments and international institutions are confronted with increasingly complex, interconnected global challenges. These challenges require interdisciplinary, evidence-based solutions, leading to growing calls for better integration of scientific expertise into policymaking. In recent decades, significant progress has been made to support this integration, including the establishment of science-policy interfaces such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), the incorporation of science in global frameworks like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the creation of platforms designed to improve access to scientific knowledge. Despite these advancements, important barriers remain in ensuring that scientists, policymakers, and intermediaries are effectively connected, incentivised, and supported to harness science throughout the policy cycle. Strengthening knowledge brokering in the context of international policymaking is therefore essential to enhance evidence-based decision-making at the multilateral level.

About the Study

This study explores science-policy engagement within the international Geneva ecosystem, a unique hub where international organisations (IOs), diplomatic missions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), think tanks, and academic institutions converge to influence international policymaking. The multilateral environment in Geneva not only fosters the exchange of knowledge and expertise but also presents challenges in terms of coordinating diverse stakeholders and ensuring that scientific insights translate effectively into policy action. By gathering insights from professionals working at the science-policy interface, this study seeks to enhance understanding of knowledge brokering as a distinct field of practice and to identify ways to strengthen its impact on international policymaking.

The study examines the activities carried out by professionals engaged in science-policy knowledge brokering, categorising their work into five key domains:

1) Producing policy-relevant knowledge;
2) Facilitating access to knowledge;
3) Supporting research uptake in policy work;
4) Shaping sustained relations between science and policy actors; and
5) Building capacity for engagement.

Respondents provided insights into the specific activities they perform within these domains and shared the challenges they face in their work. Additionally, they highlighted the resources, support structures, and institutional changes needed to improve their ability to effectively bridge the gap between scientific knowledge and policy action.

Overview of respondents

The survey targeted over 500 professionals from various sectors, yielding 116 valid responses. The respondents represented a diverse range of organisations, including UN organisations, academic institutions, NGOs, and other types of platforms and partnerships. Most participants held high-level positions (Organisation or Department leadership in IOs and NGOs, Professors and Research centres leadership in Academia). The broad thematic coverage among respondents reflected the increasingly intersectoral and interdisciplinary nature of international policymaking. This diverse representation provides a comprehensive perspective on science-policy engagement within the multilateral landscape of Geneva.

Main Findings

Ambition vs reality: A strategic field with limited resources

All surveyed institutions recognise the strategic importance of science-policy engagement for their mission. Yet they also lack adequate financial and human resources to carry out this work effectively — particularly in academia.

- **Strategic vision:** Most surveyed institutions have formally integrated science-policy engagement into their mandate. They invest core budgetary resources and have dedicated positions to fulfill these functions. In IOs, senior leadership positions are also often directly involved in science-policy work. Academic leadership and researchers also consider these activities part of their professional duties..
- **Policy impact:** Most respondents reported that their science-policy activities have led to direct policy and programmatic outcomes. They cited using science to shape policy agendas, support the adoption of international and national policy instruments, and improve governance practices overall. IOs reported the most direct contribution to agenda-setting and policy negotiations, while NGOs and academics more often engaged in framing policy issues, as well as monitoring and evaluation activities. However, the lack of systematic impact evaluation, makes it difficult to assess the concrete impact of science-policy work and undermines efforts to advocate for more appropriate funding and institutional support.
- **Funding challenges:** Science-policy work remains severely underfunded, with few specialised or flexible funding instruments to support it. For IOs and NGOs, most resources come from government donors. Many academics engage in policy collaboration using research grants or volunteering their time. This lack of sustainable funding limits strategic, coherent and long-term engagement, leading to missed opportunities for more impactful science-policy integration.
- **Human resource gaps:** The survey revealed a widespread lack of expert support for science-policy engagement across all actor categories, despite the complexity of this work and the specialised skills required. Although IOs, NGOs, and think tanks often have dedicated specialist roles, these are generally considered insufficient in both number and capacity. Academics remain particularly underprepared and unsupported in policy engagement, lacking support staff, training, institutional backing, and recognition in career advancement.

An ecosystem of complementary actors

Each category of actor plays a distinct yet interrelated role in science-policy engagement, as outlined below.

- **International organisations** act as natural and formal knowledge brokers. They are entrusted with mobilising tailored knowledge, convening dialogues, and overseeing scientific advisory mechanisms. Their proximity to policymakers both facilitates their work and imposes constraints, sometimes limiting their ability to generate and promote innovative or challenging ideas.
- **Academia** plays a distinct role in introducing innovative ideas, concepts, methodologies, tools and research in policy practice throughout the entire policy cycle, drawing on independent, robust, and interdisciplinary research. However, academics often face barriers in terms of direct policy engagement, including limited access to information, insufficient skills, lack of networks, and inadequate career incentives.
- **NGOs and think tanks** often serve as skilled intermediaries between research and policy communities. They facilitate interactions, raise awareness of knowledge gaps and policy needs, advocate for evidence-informed policies, and engage in expert advisory roles. However, they face sustainability challenges due to funding constraints and must carefully balance their credibility as knowledge brokers with their normative agendas.

Enhancing knowledge brokering: practical insights

The survey revealed a strong commitment among respondents to fostering science-policy collaboration. However, a systematic understanding of effective engagement remains weak, leaving many initiatives uncoordinated and lacking essential support structures. Key insights on existing challenges and needs from respondents are outlined below.

1. **Championing science-policy work:** effective engagement requires a shared understanding of its value and a greater appreciation of the nature and scope of this work. Differences in objectives and methodologies between scientists and policymakers often hinder collaboration. Encouraging new mindsets and providing dedicated incentives can help enhance mutual understanding and promote sustained engagement.
2. **Shaping collaborative processes:** scientists often struggle to align research with policy needs, while policymakers may have unrealistic expectations or overlook scientific input. Building productive relationships requires aligning goals, clarifying expectations, developing a shared language, setting realistic timelines, and fostering iterative knowledge exchange. Achieving this requires strong leadership, facilitation, and adaptive management.
3. **Facilitating connections:** Identifying and engaging the right stakeholders at the right time remains challenging, particularly when reaching decision-makers with limited time or interest. Creating goal-oriented networks, dedicated engagement platforms, and structured access to policy institutions (such as regular briefings, fellowships…) could greatly improve collaboration.
4. **Building science-policy ecosystems:** science-policy engagement remains fragmented. IOs struggle to access and integrate new research, while academics underexploit opportunities for co-producting actionable, interdisciplinary knowledge. Both groups tend to focus on unilateral communication over collaboration. Building strategic, issue-based science-policy ecosystems —through mapping actors, roles, and gaps— could strengthen coherence and enhance impact.
5. **Evaluating impact:** most science-policy interactions are not formally assessed. Traditional academic or project-based metrics are inadequate for capturing their complex and long-term impact. Expanding evaluation methods, sharing success stories and building expert knowledge can enhance science-policy practices.
6. **Capacity building and learning:** all actor groups stressed the need to build capacity for science-policy engagement, from improving policymakers' scientific literacy to equipping academics with skills in communication, advocacy, and policy analysis. Expanding training opportunities— such as immersive fellowships, peer exchanges, and practical resources— can foster professional development, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.
7. **Recognising knowledge brokering as a profession:** recommendations converge around the need for greater recognition of knowledge brokering as a professional field that requires specialised intermediaries — whether within institutions or as independent actors— serving as key catalysts to bridge science and policy. Political and institutional support, sustainable funding and professional networks are essential to legitimising and empowering these boundary actors.

Conclusion: Advancing Geneva's Leadership as a Global Science-Policy Hub

This study highlights the existence in Geneva of a **committed community of knowledge brokers** and growing recognition of science-policy engagement as a key feature of renewed multilateralism, while pointing to critical areas for improvement.

Most respondents recognise international Geneva as a **positive environment for science-policy engagement** due to its dense network of IOs, NGOs, and diplomatic entities, as well as its accessibility and neutral reputation, which foster trust and dialogue. While networking and collaboration opportunities are abundant, challenges remain — namely high costs, information overload, actor fragmentation and bureaucratic barriers. Greater efforts are needed to reduce silos and integrate scientific knowledge into policymaking, which could strengthen Geneva's role as an international science-policy hub.

Beyond the scope of this study, further reflections should include **broader systemic trends** such as the rising influence of private actors - which bring both opportunities and ethical challenges - the critical role of the funding community, and geopolitical shifts such as political polarisation, the erosion of multilateralism and distrust in expertise.

The current crisis also presents opportunities for renewal by encouraging more **agile collaboration models** that combine academic credibility with policy responsiveness. With adequate support and incentives, Geneva could leverage its global convening power and emerge as a **leader in reimagining science-policy relations for a more legitimate, inclusive, and resilient multilateralism.**

List of participating institutions in the survey

International organisations

- World Health Organization
- World Meteorological Organization
- International Labour Organization
- UN Environment Programme
- UN Development Programme
- UN-Habitat
- UN Institute for Training and Research
- UN Institute for Disarmament Research
- UN Economic Commission for Europe
- UN Commission on Science & Technology for Development
- UN Conference on Trade & Development
- UN Office at Geneva
- UN Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
- International Organization for Migration
- Ramsar Convention on Wetlands

NGOs, think tanks and platforms

- ACAPS (initially known as the Assessment Capacities Project)
- Biovision – Foundation for Ecological Development
- Child Rights Connect
- DCAF – Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance
- Drugs for Neglected Diseases Initiative
- Foundation for Innovative New Diagnostics
- Geneva Academy of International Humanitarian Law and Human Rights
- Geneva Environment Network
- Geneva Health Forum
- Geneva Science and Diplomacy Anticipator
- Geneva Science-Policy Interface
- Geneva Water Hub
- Global Antibiotic Research & Development Partnership
- Global Commission on Drug Policy
- Group on Earth Observations
- Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies
- Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre
- International Committee of the Red Cross
- International Council of Voluntary Agencies
- International Crisis Group
- International Environment Forum
- Kofi Annan Foundation
- Ouranos
- PoliSync Centre for International Policy Engagement
- Save the Children
- Simon Institute for Longterm Governance
- Women at the Table

Academic institutions

- University of Geneva
- Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies
- ETH Zürich
- University of Lausanne
- University of Cambridge
- Haute École de Travail Social (University of applied sciences for social work)
- Swiss Academy of Sciences
- CERN (European Organization for Nuclear Research)

Acknowledgements

Contributors

Kathryn Oliver, Professor of Evidence and Policy at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, provided guidance on the methodology and feedback on the initial conceptual framework for the study.
Nicolas Seidler, Director, **Mialy Rann**, Science-Policy Officer, provided substantial comments on both the methodology and analysis and reviewed the report content, and **Mélissa Gomis**, Science-Policy Engagement Officer, at the GSPI, reviewed the report content.
Jamilah Bahay, from PoliSync supported the development of the stakeholder contact database.
Arantxa Cedillo, Communication & Outreach Manager, at the GSPI, facilitated the formalisation of the report, and designed the visuals as well as the layout of the report.
Cristina Agrigoroae, from the GSPI, supported the dissemination of the survey.
Martin O'Neill, copy-edited the entire report.

The GSPI would like to express special thanks to:

All 119 survey respondents, who took the time to share their insights ; and for their support and their endorsement of this initiative;
Ambassador Alexandre Fasel, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs;
Samir Yeddes, Permanent Mission of Switzerland to the UN in Geneva; and,
Olivier Coutau, Canton of Geneva.

This Executive Summary is extracted from the full 2025 Brokering Scientific Knowledge in Support of Global Governance: Insights from International Geneva. Led by the Geneva Science-Policy Interface at the University of Geneva, this study explores how scientific knowledge is mobilised in support of multilateral policymaking across the Geneva ecosystem. Based on survey data from professionals working in intergovernmental organisations, academia, NGOs, platforms and think tanks, it offers a snapshot of current practices, institutional roles and shared challenges in science-policy engagement.