# Walking in policymakers' shoes – Using role-play to foster better research/policy relations

*Researchers and policymakers have long been seen as two communities, which although dealing with similar issues, have distinct institutional norms and bounded rationalities.* **Lucile Maertens, Audrey Alejandro** *and* **Zoé Cheli** *suggest roleplay can be a useful tool in reducing these differences and creating more productive interactions between research and policy.*

How can we facilitate constructive dialogue and exchanges between policymakers and researchers on complex and pressing issues such as climate change and global pandemics? Whilst it might sound like the makings of an awkward departmental away day, role-play simulations can have a useful role in creating common ground between these two groups.

Role-play simulations refer to games in which participants adopt the roles of others based on characters and scenarios designed by the organisers. For a half-day event at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, we thus invited 22 local scientists and politicians to play each other's roles in a pilot simulation focusing on negative emissions technologies, during which political actors role-played scientific experts and vice-versa. Our goal was to facilitate mutual understanding and cooperation between these professional fields and bridge the gaps between their respective logics and perspectives.

Drawing on this experience we developed a detailed [step-by-step methodology](#) for anyone interested in setting up similar role-play simulations outside the classroom. We also tried to resolve some of the awkwardness and developed strategies to mitigate the [specific challenges faced in carrying out this kind of work with elite participants](#).

As we found role-play simulations are time-consuming–the organisation of one event requires weeks of designing characters and scenarios and carefully selecting participants. In a context where many academic and non-academic actors do not take

creative and/or game-based methods seriously, are they worth the effort? We think they are, and in particular through their ability to: encourage social learning, foster a reflexive process and provide informative ice-breaking experiences.

## Encouraging social learning

Role-play simulations are increasingly appreciated as effective tools for social learning, and as "[a process of collective and communicative learning, which may lead to several social outcomes, new skills and knowledge](#)". By flipping the script and exchanging their roles, participants get a peek into their counterparts' professional routines, specific constraints, and temporalities. Our post-event questionnaires revealed that most participants felt they understood the other group's daily life better (*rather agree,* 41%; *totally agree,* 36%).

Political actors learned that scientists often juggle media requests, even before their research is done. Scientists, meanwhile, got a first-hand look at the multitude of stakeholders political actors must consider. They also got a taste of each other's power dynamics. Scientists learned about the hierarchical relations between elected politicians and high-level civil servants, and the often-messy consensus-building process in politically diverse groups. Political actors, on the other hand, discovered the complexities of interdisciplinary collaboration (participants were particularly surprised by how siloed scientific production can be) and how a scientist's career situation, such as their status or type of employment contract, temporary or permanent, can influence their behaviour. Finally, participants commented that the differences between the paces and working timelines of the two groups were striking. Political actors were surprised by the long duration of research projects, while scientists were taken aback by the urgent time constraints political actors face.

## Fostering a reflexive process

Simulations create a controlled environment where participants can step out of their comfort zones and reflect on their perceptions, assumptions, and biases toward the other group. For example, one scientist initially thought the simulation would be more instructive for political actors, but later realized that the scientific group had also learned a lot about political actors' challenges.

Additionally, participants get a glimpse of how the other group represented them, leading to reflections on how to better communicate about their activities and constraints in the future. For instance, when scientists role-playing politicians asked questions about negative emissions technologies, political actors role-playing scientists were surprised (if not outraged) that the questions focused mainly on the potential economic gains, at the expense of social and environmental concerns. This highlighted a gap between their own perception of their professional activities and the other group's impression.

As the project steering committee, we, too, benefited from the reflexive dimension of the exercise. Beyond the boost in [transversal skills](#) from diving into a simulation project and engaging in a creative academic activity, we had to critically examine our own practices and biases. Crafting realistic scenarios with partners meant ensuring that both the scientific and political sides were portrayed with equal complexity and avoiding oversimplifying political processes, as most of us come from scientific backgrounds.

## Breaking the ice

Finally, role-play simulations create playful environments that can break the ice between actors who might not be familiar with their counterparts' world and initiate honest serendipitous conversations about the daily challenges of understanding and managing public problems. Beyond a meet-and-great, participants network in an environment where they have to cooperate by addressing challenges and learning about a new topic.

Indeed, as the literature on the use of simulations in pedagogical settings shows, role-play simulations help [playfully introduce complex issues or concepts](#), in our case negative emissions technologies. Participants discovered the ongoing high degrees of uncertainty regarding these technologies and how such uncertainty affects scientific production and political decision-making. The same goes for the legal framework and local politics which were represented realistically so that participants can learn about the political context, including region-specific issues.

In the meantime, scientists and political actors got to mingle, share ideas, and build a common understanding with colleagues who do not share the same backgrounds – disciplinary, professional, or even institutional affiliations. Participants had the opportunity to interact not only during the simulation, but also throughout the entire event, which provided space for informal exchanges. Media coverage can boost the

visibility of the participant institutions (including the organising ones), making the dialogue between science and policy more mainstream and legitimate. As such, participants get to show they are open to dialogue and ready to improve science-policy cooperation. This isn't just profitable for them; it sends a broader message [that normalises and legitimises the need for better cooperation and more democratic participation](#).

While establishing the protocol for role-play simulations at the science-policy interface is undoubtedly demanding, the potential benefits are significant. Our experience suggests that these simulations foster mutual understanding, bridge the gap between scientists and policymakers, and encourage participants to critically reflect on their own and others' professional practices. By developing methodological strategies and frameworks, such as those detailed in our published work, we can facilitate the broader use of these simulations. Additionally, integrating observation protocols and participant questionnaires allows for a robust assessment of the simulations' impacts, enriching the action research toolbox. Role-play simulations therefore not only serve as [effective educational tools,](#) but also act as interventions in their own right, promoting transdisciplinary collaboration and learning from the outset. Simulations are valuable avenues to enhance dialogue and cooperation, ultimately contributing to more informed and effective decision-making.

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*This post draws on the authors' published articles, [Designing role-play simulations for climate change decision-making: A step-by-step approach to facilitate cooperation between science and policy](#), published in Environmental Science & Policy and [Role-Play Simulations for Decision Making in Contexts of Uncertainty: Challenges and Strategies When Engaging Elites as Participants](#), published in PS Political Science and Politics.*

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