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Communications in public processes at the science to policy interface: a focus on communication flows in European Maritime Spatial Planning

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Abstract

Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) has been implemented in most European countries in accordance with the MSP Directive. However, complexities in planning and uncertainties regarding future impacts persist. While public engagement requirements have been met, significant variations exist across countries, revealing areas for improvement. Public engagement is widely recognised as a key driver of policy and service innovation, but its effectiveness depends on clear communication—a crucial factor in MSP due to its complexity and the necessity of co-design. Furthermore, ocean management operates at the science-policy interface, requiring effective knowledge exchange.

This study aims to provide a theoretical foundation for understanding the communication flows underpinning national MSP plans derived from the MSP Directive. MSP Competent Authorities in Spain, England, and Finland were interviewed to examine communication processes across governance levels, research institutions, and stakeholders. The results of the semi-structured interviews describe how communications were managed in these countries, particularly regarding science-policy exchanges and official stakeholder engagement.

The findings show a consistent use of meetings, governmental websites, and social media, with meetings being the preferred method for discussing sensitive matters. Designers and communicators were usually subcontracted to deliver official presentations of the plans rather than being involved in the planning phases. The media were rarely engaged and mainly at the local level or when disseminating the approval of plans.

By examining design-based aspects of science communication, this study seeks to enhance participatory processes and deepen understanding of its critical role in the sustainable management of natural resources and socio-economic assets.

Keywords: Public engagement; communication flows; maritime spatial planning; information design; policy design

1. Introduction

The role of communication in policy design is inherently complex and often lacks structured frameworks that enhance the transfer of research to policy-makers (Barreto et al., 2024). This gap persists despite communication playing multiple roles throughout the design and implementation of environmental and sustainability policies (de Vries, 2019). While studies frequently address communication in terms of public engagement, literature indicates that this represents only a portion of the broader communication dynamics in policy processes.

Indeed, communication in policy-making extends beyond public engagement. The literature identifies several dimensions through which communication—and particularly evidence-based knowledge—shapes policy. Sugimoto et al. (2023) argue for the need to "reconnect science and public interest through strengthening human dimension works and science communication" (p. 201). Earlier, Cvitanovic et al. (2015) referenced Contandriopoulos et al. (2010), who introduced the concept of *interdependency* in knowledge exchange, which highlights the high levels of interconnectedness among actors. Within this model, no single participant retains the autonomy or power to independently translate scientific knowledge into practice—emphasising the complexity of science-policy interfaces.

This complexity reflects a broader shift from a "knowledge push" model to one of "policy pull," wherein policymakers increasingly seek evidence-based input to inform decision-making (Bielak et al., as cited in Cheng et al., 2008). Cvitanovic et al. (2018) also highlight growing demands for scientists to engage more effectively with decision-makers, not only to demonstrate the societal relevance of their research but also to establish innovative mechanisms that facilitate evidence-informed policy. Importantly, as Cairney and Kwiatkowski (2017) emphasise, communication with policymakers entails navigating layers of interpersonal and institutional complexity, recognising that policymakers are individuals with distinct cognitive, emotional, and organisational constraints—not merely institutional actors.

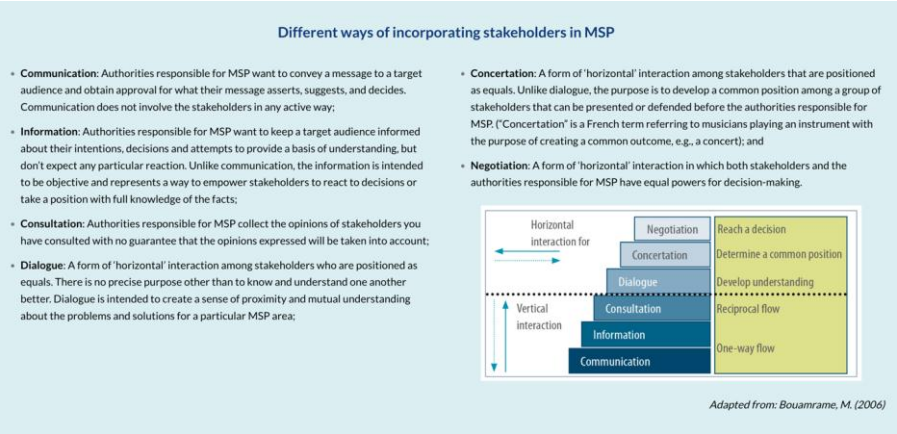
It shall be noticed that there have been practical initiatives to strengthen communication within ecosystem-based management (EBM), including guidance issued by UNEP (Potouroglou et al., 2018), aimed at enhancing communication tools and practices in support of EBM.

This study explores communication practices within ecosystem-based policies, focusing on Maritime Spatial Planning in national contexts. The 2014 MSP Directive (Directive 2014/89/EU) established a framework for EU Member States to develop maritime spatial plans that balance maritime uses with marine environmental protection. Although based on shared principles, implementation has been tailored to national priorities and assets (Zaucha et al., 2025, Casimiro & Guerreiro, 2019).

The Directive acknowledges the complexity of managing marine space, requiring coordination among multiple authorities, stakeholders, and economic actors. It mandates early-stage public and stakeholder consultation as fundamental to the planning process. Stakeholder engagement is not only a legal requirement but also integral to ecosystem-based management, as outlined in *Marine Spatial Planning: A Step-by-Step Approach Toward Ecosystem-Based Management* (UNESCO-IOC, 2009). While early guidance

used terms such as information, consultation, dialogue, concertation, and negotiation to describe communication (Ibid., detailed in Figure 1), this study adopts a broader perspective. We propose the concept of *communication flows*—to encompass multidirectional, permeable, and multichannel exchanges—as described by Bielak et al. (in Cheng et al., 2008).

Figure 1: Stakeholder engagement in MSP



Source: (UNESCO-IOC, 2009)

In fact, effective stakeholder engagement depends on successful communication strategies, as discussed in the European Commission's (2020) *Communicating MSP: An Inspiring Era of Cooperation between Institutions*. This publication and its accompanying event highlighted practical aspects of communication, including event organisation, press engagement, visual storytelling, stakeholder engagement, media interaction, and online presence.

The rationale for the present study arises from the background outlined above and is informed by a recent review of visual tools used in Marine Spatial Planning, which identified varying levels of advancement among countries in the use of visual communication and data visualisation for the dissemination of MSP processes (Soffietti et al., 2024). These findings gave rise to a set of research questions, notably: What have been the characteristics of communication flows within national MSP processes? And what role has communication—particularly the exchange of information—played in shaping and delivering Marine Spatial Plans in the European context? The main objective of this study is to advance understanding of the contribution of communication and visual design to ecosystem-based management, with a particular emphasis on the facilitation of policy design and policy dissemination. By examining these aspects, the study seeks to inform the development of more effective, inclusive, and dynamic communication strategies within MSP frameworks. Developing expertise in this field aims to enhance understanding of the nexus between communication and public policy, thereby benefitting not only policymakers but also communication professionals and media actors. Despite the rich, yet distinct, contributions of political communication, public policy, and political behaviour research, these domains often remain siloed, lacking meaningful interdisciplinary dialogue. There is a pressing need to examine, from a scientific standpoint, how governments communicate policy in the digital age. As Grossman (2022) observes, the hybrid media system is multilayered, allowing multiple, and at times contradictory, policy narratives to unfold concurrently.

The following sections outline the methodological approach adopted in this research, after which the results of the conducted interviews are presented. A critical discussion then

follows, aimed at contextualising the findings and enabling their comparison across different national settings.

2. Methods

This study is based on three semi-structured interviews conducted with policymakers responsible for national Marine Spatial Plans (MSPs), officially referred to as Competent Authorities. The selected interviewees included: (a) a Senior Marine Planner at the Marine Management Organisation (England)[1], (b) the National Coordinator from the Regional Council of South West Finland (Finland), and (c) a *Técnico Facultativo Superior* from the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (*Ministerio para la Transición Ecológica y el Reto Demográfico*) in Spain.

The primary objective of the interviews was to map and analyse the communication flows underpinning the development and implementation of MSP in these three countries: England, Finland, and Spain. The interviews were conducted online using video conferencing platforms, primarily Zoom and Google Meet. Each session lasted approximately one hour and followed a one-to-one format. All interviews were conducted in English, recorded with the interviewees' consent, and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

The questions were slightly tailored to account for national specificities and administrative contexts, however, they were structured around three core thematic categories—Communication process, Visual and digital tools, and visualisation choices—as presented in Table 1.

[1] Now a former EU member state, England had, however, to implement the MSP Directive ahead of Brexit.

Table 1. Questions table.

C1	Communication process
Q1	Description of scientific knowledge flux and process
Q2	Possible improvement of scientific knowledge exchange
Q3	Scientific knowledge more helpful for policy makers and planners in making the plans
Q4	Scientific knowledge more helpful for policy makers and planners to engage stakeholders
C2	Visual and digital tools
Q5	Digital form, reasons behind this option. And needed resources
Q6	Visualizations, design/creative process
Q7	Stakeholder feedback on interactive assets and maps, infographics
C3	Visualisation choices
Q8	Visual identity choices
Q9	Underrepresentation of data/ data gaps in visualization (maps and other assets)
Q10	Symbols useful in promoting MSP at national level

The key results were organised in an Answer Table (Table 2), corresponding to the Questions Table (Table 1).

3. Results

The results are presented by country. A comparative overview is provided in Table 2 within the Discussion section to support a broader reflection on emerging trends from the interviews.

3.1 England

The Marine Spatial Planning process in England is led by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO), which oversees four marine sub-regions. Public engagement began with a Statement of Public Participation, outlining when and how stakeholders will be involved. This included a Call for Evidence and Issues, inviting scientific, policy-based, or anecdotal input, provided it meets quality assurance standards. The MMO curated this evidence to shape the planning process.

Scientific knowledge was incorporated throughout the planning cycle. Early-stage input informed policy options, while later public consultations require evidence-backed feedback. Dedicated MMO sector leads monitor relevant research, and a publicly accessible Marine Planning Portal hosts spatial data, which is regularly updated—even post-publication.

The portal sources data from agencies like the North Sea Transition Authority and Natural England and has received positive feedback. It was promoted through emails, newsletters, social media, and local engagement. Nonetheless, stakeholder awareness remains an area for improvement.

For the second planning cycle, the MMO is improving internal processes and developing a more user-friendly online consultation portal. While environmental data is abundant, a lack of repeated studies limits long-term monitoring. Social and economic data, especially on tourism and recreation, are notably lacking and have become a focus area.

Sensitive data is managed through the use of open sources when possible. Classified information, such as military zones, is governed by formal agreements and appropriately labelled to prevent misuse.

Looking ahead, the MMO aims to create a more spatially-focused marine plan, potentially through a digital twin model. High-level materials, such as fact sheets and animations, have been well-received but are limited in detail. Visual tools—diagrams, videos, and real-life examples—have proven effective in improving engagement and will continue to be developed to balance general overviews with detailed information.

3.2 Spain

In Spain, scientific knowledge was central to the development of Maritime Spatial Planning, informing both environmental and socio-economic aspects. This evidence base was critical for zoning, defining criteria, and developing management measures. Institutions such as the Spanish Institute of Oceanography (IEO) and the Centre for Ports and Coastal Studies (CEPYC-CEDEX) provided data on the condition of marine environments and socio-economic activity, as well as restrictions due to Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

Scientific integration was supported by coordination meetings and sustained institutional dialogue. Still, data gaps remained—particularly for under-researched habitats or maritime uses such as recreation and tourism. Key datasets included spatial distributions of environmental features, human uses, and their interactions and impacts on biodiversity. These were commonly shared with stakeholders via overlapping maps, which helped clarify trade-offs and synergies. Stakeholders, especially fishers, also contributed experiential knowledge, enriching the final plans.

CEDEX's geoportal served both technical and communicative functions, maintained by two systems engineers and two environmental scientists. During consultations, stakeholders used geoportal maps to support their input, highlighting its accessibility. Plans exist to develop a more user-friendly app to serve broader maritime audiences (MSP-8).

While no direct feedback was received on the national MSP logo, some autonomous communities called for stronger involvement, driven by concerns about centralised control rather than visual branding. Visual design was outsourced to a private firm, indicating efforts to enhance accessibility, although further improvements—especially for socio-economic data—are still needed. A new measure (OEM-7) aims to develop a stakeholder engagement strategy to support this goal.

Reactions to visual tools varied. Fishing communities responded strongly to wind farm symbols, while environmental NGOs focused on representations of cetacean habitats. Information was mainly shared through PowerPoint presentations and maps during online workshops. A video explaining MSP has been produced, and new infographics and flyers are underway, many as part of the MSP-OR project, particularly targeting the Canary Islands.

3.3 Finland

Finland's small population and decentralised governance structure supported a bottom-up approach to MSP, with communication anchored at regional and local levels. The Ministry of the Environment delegated coordination to the Regional Council of South West Finland. Strong collaboration was established with municipal councils, planners, and national ministries, while early workshops helped identify key stakeholders—particularly from maritime sectors. The planning process progressed through collaborative scenario building, thematic workshops, and formal approvals, with stakeholder networks growing through snowball sampling.

Scientific knowledge informed planning through widespread use of open-access data and a culture of direct communication. Research funding enabled tailored data production, including socio-cultural datasets, while workshops facilitated data exchange and feedback. Planners—many trained in geography—placed strong emphasis on data use. Challenges remained in validating complex datasets and engaging stakeholders, particularly on sensitive topics, such as confirming fishing grounds through dialogue. Stakeholders were motivated by policy recognition and funding prospects, especially with an eye toward influencing future development.

Finland's decision to digitise the MSP plan reflected high digital literacy and enabled the integration of maps, text, and policies in an interactive format. The effort—costing around €30,000—ensured harmonisation across three planning regions and included translation into Swedish and English to support cross-border cooperation.

Visual materials, such as infographics and motion graphics, were co-developed by scientists, designers, and stakeholders based on input from workshops. The visuals aimed to reflect stakeholder perspectives while reducing friction between technical and lay language. Visioning sessions featured isometric visuals as participatory tools, allowing stakeholders to place ideas directly onto the imagery. Despite efforts to balance accuracy and simplicity, some sectors—like fisheries—critiqued the use of generalisations, prompting revisions to improve acceptance.

A dedicated visual identity, including a distinct logo and colour scheme, unified communication across planning cultures and helped enhance stakeholder ownership. While effective at the international level, awareness of MSP among the general public remained limited. Visual elements rooted in local culture and landscapes helped build trust, but needed to accurately represent stakeholder realities to maintain credibility. For the second planning cycle, a visual rebranding has been commissioned and subcontracted to be undertaken ahead of the inception phase.

Table 2: Comparative answer table – Key findings

	England	Finland	Spain
A1	Inputs from stakeholders: evidence and issues. Preliminary research carried out by MMO (mainly desk). Information was retrieved from other institutions. Open-source data.	Aim at diversification of tools in function of the audience. Initial mapping of stakeholders. Workshops with them to agree on how to proceed and receive suggestions on who to engage according to professional networks. (Snowball effect). Free to access and Bottom-up. Use of open data. Direct contacts. Funds allocated to research centres to develop or revise data, including socio-cultural one. Regular workshops.	Transversal consideration of scientific information for main planning outputs. Involved centres: IEO, CEDEX, CEPYC (spatial distribution and socio-environmental analysis). Continuous meetings.
A2	Updated during 2nd cycle.	Data according to what planner's value, according to their background. It is challenging to receive data from stakeholders. Experts and sectors may have different views on potential and existing areas.	Information regarding spatial distribution, habitat distribution and activities. Interactions between uses.
A3	Environmental data is available, but difficult to monitor its modification over time. There are socio-economic gaps and limits to the use of sensitive data.		Interactions between uses and environment. Information coming from Ministry of Fisheries. Shown to stakeholders by means of overlapping maps to have their feedback.
A4	Prioritisation may be an issue. Sensitive data needs modification to make it public.		Geoportal managed by CEDEX. 4 permanent experts (2 IT engineers and 2 Environmentalists) MSP and MSFD.
A5	Resources: Two people, over two months. Upgrade of a previous service. Via subcontracting.	Population with high level of digital literacy. Strategic document allows it. Other countries had large PDFs difficult to consult. Expert hired for the realization (30.000€). Centralised harmonisation of three areas contents. Translated in Swedish and English.	NO feedback, we explained how to use, and stakeholders used it. A dedicated measure (MSP-8) will ensure development of mobile app or web app.
A6	Subcontract.	Infographics: Consultant hired. Stakeholders asked to ensure their content and language were represented. Script for videos checked by Head of Planners but content comes from stakeholders. Give visibility and reduce language conflicts. .	Subcontracted to an agency. During stakeholders' meetings slides with images and maps. Video developed for future uses. Infographics created during a EU project (MSP-OR).
A7	General positive feedback but will need improvement in 2nd cycle.	Feedback during meetings: difficulty of stakeholders in understanding generalization and non-realistic representations. Outputs were revised when possible, to find an agreement	It depends on the specific stakeholders and their sensitivity to specific issues.
A8		Long coastline with cultural differences and many planning needs. Innovative planning systems with three regions coming together and working with the Ministry. Different sources of fundings. A need for commitment and purpose. New logo and visual identity to avoid a national (top-down idea). Sense of belonging. Renovated at the beginning of the second cycle: updated to address policy makers and other countries. It works well at international level; at local level the concept and people are not yet well known.	Government branding can help understand who is responsible for specific aspects.
A9			A measure OM-7 will develop a stakeholder engagement plan. It depends on the specific stakeholders and their sensitivity to specific issues.
A10	National branding generally well perceived. The issue is the alignment with Wales and Scotland, in terms of resources and responsibilities.	There are national assets that are key cultural heritage. Stereotypes may be helpful, but stakeholders may feel not represented and this can cause a lack of trust.	It depends on the specific stakeholders and their sensitivity to specific issues.

4. Discussion

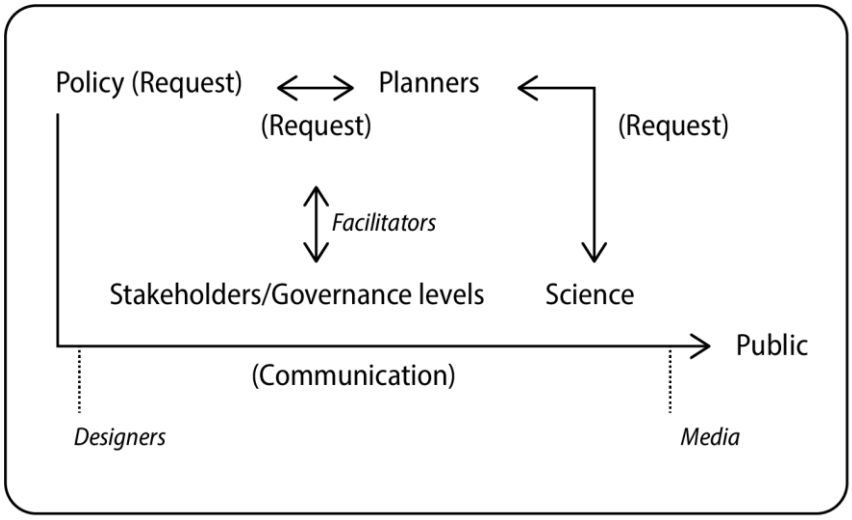
The comparison of MSP implementation in England, Spain, and Finland reveals a diverse landscape of communication strategies, shaped by institutional frameworks, stakeholder dynamics, and national planning traditions. While all three countries emphasised the integration of scientific knowledge, the modalities through which this knowledge was translated into planning processes and communicated to stakeholders varied considerably.

In England, communication followed a centralised model coordinated by the Marine Management Organisation (MMO). The use of formal mechanisms such as the Statement of Public Participation and a dedicated online planning portal ensured procedural transparency and consistent engagement. Nevertheless, the reliance on digital tools exposed limitations in public reach, as awareness of the portal remained uneven. In Spain, a more technically driven approach was adopted, with scientific data funnelled through institutions like the Spanish Institute of Oceanography and CEDEX. Maps were the dominant communication medium, supporting stakeholder understanding and participation. However, persistent data gaps, especially in socio-economic dimensions and certain maritime uses, revealed the challenges of generating holistic, up-to-date knowledge. Finland's case stood out for its decentralised and participatory structure, enabled by regional planning mechanisms and a culture of inclusivity. The MSP process benefited from a strong digital infrastructure and frequent stakeholder workshops, which fostered trust and co-production of knowledge. Visual and interactive tools, co-designed with scientists and stakeholders, played a central role in making complex data more relatable. However, even in this progressive setting, some friction emerged, particularly from stakeholders uncomfortable with the level of generalisation required by infographic tools, revealing an ongoing negotiation between clarity and representational accuracy.

Across all three countries, the first cycle of MSP was perceived as a foundational phase—a moment to establish legal, procedural, and communication cornerstones, with the expectation of refinement in subsequent cycles. This "learning phase" perspective may have tempered investment in more robust communication strategies, particularly in terms of broader public engagement. Another commonality across the cases was the limited integration of the public and communication professionals in the early stages of MSP. The primary actors in communication exchanges were government officials, planners, and selected stakeholders, with the public and communicators typically involved only at later stages—primarily during consultation events or for the facilitation of meetings. Media engagement was modest and generally confined to promoting local events. Communication specialists and designers were, in most cases, subcontracted for final dissemination outputs rather than embedded throughout the process. Government branding played a relevant communicative role in all three contexts. The presence of official visual identities and logos helped to convey the formal status of the MSP plans and clarify the authority responsible for their drafting and implementation. This branding not only legitimised the process but also enhanced recognition and ownership, especially in multi-level governance settings.

Figure 2 summarise the policy-pull and the role of planners in engaging with scientists and stakeholders to retrieve the needed knowledge, while communication professionals and designers had a role as final disseminators.

Figure 2: Key actors in MSP communication flows



These findings highlight the need to approach communication not as a peripheral or final element of marine spatial planning (MSP), but as an ongoing, multidirectional process embedded within ecosystem-based management. Future planning cycles may benefit from the earlier and more substantial involvement of communication professionals, strategic media planning, and tools for public engagement. Such integration can enhance transparency, inclusivity, and the co-construction of maritime futures. In Spain, for example, a dedicated planning measure includes the development of a stakeholder engagement strategy, reflecting an understanding of communication as a socially constructed process. This requires a tailored, dynamic, and audience-centred design—one that considers messages, methods, and meanings (Walker et al., 2023).

Moreover, several countries possess institutional or non-profit assets that can support such initiatives. In England, for example, the Government Communication Service, the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE), and the Design Council could provide valuable expertise. Engaging communication professionals from the earliest stages of planning may enhance national-level coordination, alleviate pressure on competent authorities, and promote more effective knowledge exchange (Barreto et al., 2024).

Finally, it is noteworthy that policy makers interviewed for this study did not mention the evaluation of engagement and communication processes. While incorporating such evaluations would undoubtedly add complexity to an already demanding process, it remains a crucial aspect of policymaking involving experts, as emphasised by Fisher et al. (2014).

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to contribute to the understanding of communication and information flows in environmental policy design, with a particular focus on Maritime Spatial Planning. By examining three national case studies—England, Spain, and Finland—through semi-structured interviews with competent authorities, we explored how communication mechanisms support the design, dissemination, and implementation of MSP processes.

While the findings cannot be generalised to all national contexts, the selected countries provide a rich comparative base due to their diversity in population size, governance structures, and legal traditions. The originality of this research lies in its focus on

governmental communication processes from within, not only considering stakeholder engagement, which is already well documented (Pomeroy & Douvere, 2008; Twomey & O'Mahony, 2019) but extending the analysis to the roles played by communication professionals and visual designers.

The inclusion of communicators and designers as analytical categories offers a novel framework for future policy design. While some examples, particularly from Finland, reflect the influence of modern public sector innovation and human-centred design principles (see Bason, 2014), overall, the systematic integration of such approaches in MSP remains limited. This suggests an untapped potential to enhance policy communication through more strategic, participatory, and visually engaging methods. The first-cycle nature of the MSP plans in all three countries appears to have shaped communication priorities. Authorities viewed this phase as a foundation-setting opportunity, which, while understandable, may have led to a reduced emphasis on robust and forward-thinking communication strategies.

This may be one of the causes that determined the limited involvement of media in MSP processes. As in earlier research (Wolfe et al., 2013), this study confirms that the link between media and policy remains weak, with media engagement generally restricted to promoting local events. Communication experts and designers were typically subcontracted only for the final stages of dissemination, rather than being embedded in the process from the outset.

There are numerous avenues for further research. In addition to broadening the scope to include more national contexts, future studies could explore behavioural aspects of policy communication, as suggested by de Vries (2019). Moreover, comparative studies with other policy fields may yield valuable insights. Lessons from effective communication strategies in non-environmental policy (e.g. Funk et al., 2021) could inform improvements in environmental governance, including MSP.

Overall, this study reinforces the need for a more integrated and professionally informed approach to communication within environmental policy processes. Communication should not be treated merely as an auxiliary function, but as a core component of sustainable and inclusive policy design.

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