

Conference

SCIENCE-BASED POLICY MAKING

Building a Better Future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Conference | March 2026



TERRA

CHANGE
Global Change and Sustainability Institute

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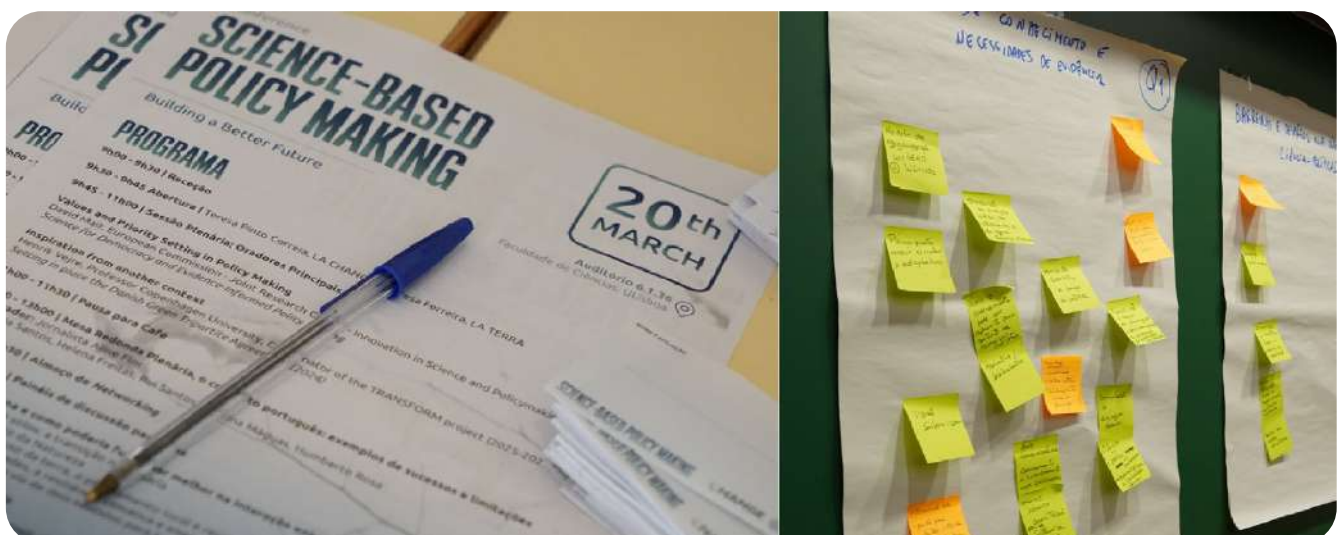
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BACKGROUND

This Executive Summary synthesises the main conclusions of the **Science for Policy Conference**, covering the thematic areas of **Soil and Agriculture, Nature Restoration and Conservation, People and Land Use, Climate and Energy Resilience**, and **One Health**. The central objective was to discuss how scientific evidence can be more effectively integrated into the design and implementation of public policies in Portugal.

CHALLENGES

Regarding the diagnosis of challenges, there is a clear convergence across all thematic areas. The most persistent obstacle is the disconnect between the timescales of science, which require extended periods for research and validation, and those of policymaking, which are shaped by urgency and short electoral cycles. This temporal mismatch is compounded by a linguistic and cultural barrier: the absence of a common language and of effective translation mechanisms capable of transforming technical data into actionable policy recommendations. Furthermore, the fragmentation of information into institutional silos, together with limited data interoperability, prevents the development of a systemic understanding of complex problems. This gap is exacerbated by monitoring systems that are frequently administrative in nature rather than focused on the real-world impact of policy measures.



OPPORTUNITIES

Despite these challenges, several cross-cutting opportunities have been identified to maximise the impact of science. The principal shared proposal is the establishment of formal knowledge mediation mechanisms through roles such as knowledge brokers or dedicated interface structures capable of acting as permanent bridges between academia and government. The promotion of open data policies and the strengthening of technical capacity within the Public Administration also emerged as common priorities. A further recommendation is the transition towards co-design models, in which researchers are involved from the earliest stages of policy development, alongside the establishment of stable funding mechanisms that include mandatory long-term scientific monitoring.

The thematic areas nevertheless differ in terms of their immediate priorities and operational contexts. In **Soil and Agriculture**, urgency lies in establishing a robust regulatory framework—such as a Framework Soil Law—and strengthening enforcement. In **Nature Restoration**, the primary focus is the National Restoration Plan and the need to create incentives for private landowners. The **People and Land Use** panel highlighted the importance of local-scale planning and active engagement with civil society, while the **Climate and Energy Resilience** panel focused on risk management and the protection of critical infrastructure. Finally, the **One Health** approach is distinguished by the challenge of extreme cross-sector integration, requiring the breakdown of traditional boundaries between the human, animal and environmental health sectors.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, future priorities should focus on institutionalising science within policymaking through permanent advisory councils, promoting mutual literacy between scientists and policymakers, and implementing monitoring platforms based on robust biophysical indicators. The success of this interaction will depend on the ability to transform today's sporadic collaboration into a continuous and structured partnership, ensuring that public policies are not only informed by science but are also dynamically adapted in light of the evidence generated through their implementation.

The keynote presentations by David Mair and Henrik Vejre also provided important reflections. The effectiveness of public policy depends upon the institutionalisation of **Evidence-Informed Policymaking**, ensuring that relevant, reliable and legitimate evidence is available at the right moment to address the root causes of policy challenges. This approach strengthens public trust in institutions, although it continues to face barriers such as myside bias and institutional fragmentation. In addition, the example of the Danish Green Tripartite Agreement demonstrates how collaboration between government, the private sector and trade unions can deliver profound land-use reforms capable of addressing both climate and biodiversity crises.

The implementation of these strategies requires knowledge brokers capable of connecting academia with policymakers, ensuring that scientific knowledge supports both the green and digital transitions in a structured manner. Through ambitious objectives—such as achieving a 70% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions and restoring aquatic ecosystems—it is possible to integrate cutting-edge scientific evidence with digital tools, ensuring that land use remains within planetary boundaries while responding to societal needs.

Drawing on the reports from the thematic sessions and the contributions of Dr David Mair and Dr Henrik Vejre, the Associated Laboratories CHANGE and TERRA present a series of recommendations tailored to the scope, challenges and opportunities specific to each thematic area.

The implementation of these recommendations is expected to strengthen the impact of science on public policymaking in the fields of soil and agriculture, nature restoration and conservation, land-use planning, climate and energy resilience, and One Health.



Opening session of the conference and welcome to all participants.



Dr. Henrik Vejre

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SOIL AND AGRICULTURE

Strengthening the Soil Monitoring Law



CONTEXT

Soil is a finite resource under increasing pressure. Portugal lacks a robust regulatory framework capable of placing soil protection on the same footing as the protection of water and air.

CHALLENGES

The low level of effective enforcement under the CAP Strategic Plan (PEPAC), combined with an administrative rather than results-oriented approach, **undermines the effectiveness of soil conservation measures**. There is also a lack of scientific knowledge and data on the impacts of climate extremes on soils, limiting the adaptation of management practices and the proper integration of carbon sequestration into economic markets capable of financing ecosystem regeneration and resilience.

Current **knowledge transfer** and training for land managers and producers require a more effective approach, based on best practices and informed by the social sciences, in order to promote a genuine shift in soil management paradigms. Furthermore, there is no clear distinction between soil literacy strategies aimed at the general public and the technical capacity-building, knowledge transfer and co-creation activities intended for farmers and other land managers.

Portugal does not yet have a **Soil Framework Law** or an equivalent regulatory instrument. Such legislation is regarded as essential for raising the political priority of soil protection, although its development faces challenges at European Commission level and should therefore be considered a long-term objective. Tailored approaches are needed to ensure the effective implementation of the **Soil Monitoring Law**, together with regulatory mechanisms adapted to territorial specificities and better coordination between existing legal instruments to ensure coherent and effective soil protection.

A significant gap remains between **Knowledge and Practice**, with persistent difficulties in translating scientific knowledge into practical tools for decision-making and enforcement. There are currently no local demonstration sites, which are essential for addressing the shortage of practical knowledge affecting both land managers and policymakers. Local and regional associations, together with other sectoral organisations, should play a much more active role in this regard.

The current system, centred on the CAP Strategic Plan (PEPAC), excludes producers who are not registered in the system or do not receive public support. This highlights the need for less bureaucratic solutions for small-scale farmers, alongside rigorous monitoring mechanisms for intensive, short-term operators. At present, there are no **mechanisms capable of combining incentives for good practices with penalties for soil degradation**, while ensuring accountability for soil condition regardless of the administrative framework under which activities take place.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a first step, priority should be given to consolidating the implementation of the **European Soil Monitoring Law**, ensuring that it generates information that is genuinely useful for decision-making.

At the same time, further work should be undertaken towards a **future regulatory framework for soil** based on a territorial approach, aligned with existing policy instruments and supported by incentives that deliver tangible improvements in soil health. Achieving this objective will require significantly more high-quality scientific data, together with harmonised parameters, long-term monitoring and an agreed set of indicators applied consistently over time. The scientific community should play a leading role in defining these approaches and indicators.

Soil must be recognised as a **strategic resource** and placed at the centre of public policy and territorial management. This requires elevating soil protection to one of the highest priorities in all public policy decisions. At the same time, enforcement should be strengthened, outcomes measured more robustly, incentives for good practices expanded, and cooperation between science, public administration and land managers reinforced within a more coherent and effective legal framework. The urgent harmonisation and standardisation of monitoring protocols is therefore recommended.

Evidence of soil degradation, its consequences, and the positive outcomes associated with good management practices should continue to be communicated. Agreement should be reached on common protocols for data production and sharing, thereby improving the availability of high-quality, harmonised datasets and facilitating the implementation of the **Soil Monitoring Law**.

Cooperation between science, public administration and land managers should be strengthened through clearer communication, practical exchange of experience, and the creation of common platforms and standardised glossaries capable of supporting a robust national strategy for soil health.

To support the **regulatory** framework governing soil protection within public policy instruments, new mechanisms should be developed together with appropriate indicators and thresholds. These mechanisms should adopt a cross-sectoral approach and be shared across different branches of public administration, helping to overcome the current regulatory silos that can sometimes undermine effective soil protection.

New compensation and accountability mechanisms should also be designed to ensure that all land managers — including those who do not receive agricultural subsidies—are subject to appropriate regulation.

Finally, new **training programmes and technical support** initiatives should be developed to improve farmers' knowledge of soil management, while broader soil literacy should be promoted across society. A single **national glossary** should also be created to ensure consistency and harmonisation of terminology relating to soil and agriculture.

EXPECTED IMPACT

Land-use planning, public funding mechanisms and enforcement processes will become better aligned with local needs and territorial contexts, promoting soil regeneration and the wider adoption of sustainable management practices. Strengthened **cooperation** between the scientific community, the different sectors of public administration and land managers is expected to enhance knowledge exchange and the dissemination of good practices. This will be supported by the establishment of shared knowledge platforms and harmonised glossaries underpinning a coherent national strategy for soil health.

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NATURE RESTORATION AND CONSERVATION

Implementing the National
Restoration Plan



CONTEXT

Following the adoption of the EU Nature Restoration Regulation, Portugal is currently preparing its **National Nature Restoration Plan**. Its success will depend on the ability to move beyond ecological theory towards effective implementation at the territorial level.

CHALLENGES

Challenges at the science–policy interface include ineffective **communication**, differing timescales and the absence of a shared language. In terms of **societal engagement and funding**, key obstacles include limited public awareness, low visibility of restoration issues and insufficient financial resources. Regarding knowledge, **data and monitoring**, major challenges include the lack of available data—or access to existing data—as well as significant gaps in ecological knowledge. In relation to implementation and **governance**, the principal barriers are excessive bureaucracy, policy inconsistencies across different governance mechanisms, and insufficient coordination and institutional capacity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Scientists should receive training in effective communication tools for engaging with policymakers, including the preparation of executive summaries and policy briefs.

Regular **“science-for-policy dialogues”** should also be promoted, bringing together researchers and public administration stakeholders in order to build trust and long-term relationships. At the same time, tools should be developed to harmonise concepts and establish a **“common language”**, while recognising contributions to public policymaking within academic career assessment.

Applied research programmes should also be promoted, focusing, for example, on ecological thresholds, restoration trajectories, the long-term effectiveness of restoration measures, and the ecological, social and economic costs and benefits of restoration.

Promote initiatives to **raise awareness and inform civil society**—and, in particular, key stakeholder groups such as farmers—about the importance of nature restoration and its multiple co-benefits for socio-economic sustainability, climate risk mitigation, food security, quality of life and other societal objectives.

Integrate data relating to restoration implementation and its impacts, making these data publicly available through dedicated platforms, such as a Nature Restoration Portal.

Strengthen education, **training and technical capacity** in ecosystem restoration, including the development of demonstration networks showcasing successful case studies and best practices.

Ensure stable **funding** by integrating monitoring and evaluation into funding programmes, facilitating access to financial resources, mobilising private investment, harmonising policy frameworks, and promoting incentives and solutions for privately owned land.

EXPECTED IMPACT

The implementation of these measures is expected to facilitate the development and effective delivery of a **National Nature Restoration Plan** tailored to the Portuguese context while fully complying with the **EU Nature Restoration Regulation**.

This approach is expected to optimise science–policy interface mechanisms, specialised training, the harmonisation of concepts and terminology, communication strategies, public awareness initiatives and stable funding mechanisms. The establishment of interoperable platforms, monitoring networks, sustained long-term investment, administrative simplification, stronger institutional coordination, appropriate incentives and targeted training will all be essential for the successful implementation of the National Nature Restoration Plan.



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PEOPLE AND LAND USE

Local and Regional Planning



CONTEXT

This thematic area focuses on the interactions between social dynamics and land use, with particular emphasis on the challenges and opportunities associated with planning at local and regional scales, including the green transition and the circular economy.

CHALLENGES

Significant gaps remain in the **generation and integration of knowledge** to support decision-making, particularly regarding assessment, monitoring and evaluation systems capable of producing robust evidence under conditions of uncertainty and complexity. There are also persistent difficulties in introducing a **systemic and cross-sectoral perspective** into planning processes, with sector-based and poorly integrated approaches continuing to predominate.

A marked disconnect also persists between the timescales of science, policymaking and society, limiting the **incorporation of scientific evidence** into decision-making processes. The absence of a shared language (information lost in translation) and insufficient knowledge exchange (information lost in circulation) further widen this gap.

In addition, **the complexity of territorial challenges** is seldom addressed through systemic, multi-scale and cross-sectoral approaches, while institutional and interdisciplinary coordination remains insufficient.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these challenges, greater emphasis should be placed on **strengthening the production and harmonisation of knowledge** that is directly applicable to territorial planning, particularly at local and regional levels, thereby increasing its usefulness for planning processes.

Investment should also be made in **science–policy–society interface mechanisms**, including dedicated roles and structures responsible for translating scientific knowledge into formats that are accessible, relevant and actionable. This also requires careful consideration of who should be engaged, how scientific knowledge should be communicated, and what information is most useful for different audiences.

Promote more inclusive and continuous **participatory processes** by involving citizens, local stakeholders and policymakers from the earliest stages of planning.

Develop and test **collaborative governance models** based on shared responsibility and the distribution of decision-making power among different stakeholders, while maintaining alignment with top-down initiatives. Experimental approaches and pilot projects should be encouraged to test innovative solutions under real-world conditions and facilitate collective learning—for example, in defining territorial development objectives.

Strengthen the **technical and institutional capacity** of municipalities to enable the more effective integration of scientific evidence into land-use planning and decision-making.

Improve **monitoring and evaluation systems** through the use of clear indicators and effective feedback mechanisms, allowing policies to be reviewed and adapted in a timely, flexible and evidence-based manner.

EXPECTED IMPACT

These measures are expected to strengthen the integration of scientific knowledge into policymaking for land-use planning, resulting in **more adaptive, evidence-informed and effective public policies**. They should also improve the capacity to respond to uncertainty while promoting more sustainable, integrated and coherent territorial planning across local and regional scales.



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CLIMATE AND ENERGY RESILIENCE

Risk Management



CONTEXT

Extreme events, such as storms and wildfires, expose the vulnerability of critical infrastructure and highlight the lack of immediate institutional coordination.

CHALLENGES

Key challenges include overcoming the shortage of actionable, consistent and interoperable data, the **weakness of long-term monitoring systems, institutional fragmentation**, and the **limited human, financial and technological resources** available within both central and local government. There is also a need to improve the translation of scientific knowledge into operational decision-making tools, address the weak coordination between sectors such as energy, water, land-use planning, mobility and communications, and mitigate the discontinuity of public policies resulting from short political cycles.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A **shared agenda** for climate and energy resilience should therefore be established, centred on actionable scientific knowledge capable of supporting public decision-making before, during and after extreme events.

An **operational framework of indicators** and minimum data requirements should be developed, integrating monitoring, risk mapping, vulnerability assessment, the analysis of interdependencies between critical systems, and the evaluation of policy measures.

Regular **science–policy interface** mechanisms should be strengthened through instruments such as policy briefs, workshops, applied training programmes, territorial living labs, and feedback mechanisms that demonstrate how scientific evidence has informed decision-making.

Greater integration is also needed between climate adaptation, spatial planning, water management, energy policy, biodiversity conservation and civil protection, giving priority to **nature-based solutions** and strengthening the resilience of critical infrastructure networks.

EXPECTED IMPACT

These actions are expected to strengthen the capacity to anticipate, respond to and recover from extreme events, enabling public decision-making to become increasingly risk-informed, efficient and cost-effective.

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ONE HEALTH

Integrating Human, Animal and Environmental Health into Public Decision-Making



CONTEXT

The One Health approach recognises that human, animal and environmental health are inherently interconnected and must therefore be addressed through an integrated approach to public policymaking.

The increasing frequency of zoonotic diseases, the impacts of climate change on health, ecosystem degradation and the growing threat of antimicrobial resistance demonstrate that isolated sectoral responses are no longer sufficient. Despite Portugal's strong scientific and technical capacity, significant structural weaknesses remain in cross-sector coordination, data integration and the translation of scientific knowledge into public decision-making.

Strengthening the operational implementation of the One Health approach is therefore a strategic priority to enhance the State's resilience to future public health, environmental and socio-economic crises.

CHALLENGES

Current governance models remain fragmented and organised into institutional silos—namely Health, Agriculture and Environment—with limited interoperability between information systems, insufficient interministerial coordination and the absence of permanent mechanisms for integrated decision-making.

Significant obstacles also remain in the **transfer of knowledge** between science and policymaking, exacerbated by the lack of a common language, the shortage of hybrid knowledge-brokering profiles, and funding mechanisms that remain excessively sector-specific.

The chronic **underfunding** of the environmental dimension of health policy, combined with the predominance of reactive rather than preventive approaches, limits the country's capacity to respond effectively to complex and systemic risks.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Institutionalise **permanent** One Health **coordination mechanisms** involving ministries, public authorities, the scientific community and territorial stakeholders, with clearly defined responsibilities, objectives and monitoring indicators.

Establish the role of the **One Health Knowledge Broker**, responsible for scientific and technical mediation, evidence translation and facilitating communication between researchers, policymakers and public administration.

Develop multiannual, interministerial **funding programmes** that require multidisciplinary teams and promote integration between human health, animal health, environmental sciences, social sciences and data science.

Strengthen interoperability between **national monitoring and surveillance systems** by developing integrated real-time data platforms linking the health, environmental and agricultural sectors.

Invest in **national predictive models** integrating epidemiological, climatic, environmental and socio-economic indicators, making use of artificial intelligence and geographic information systems to support **risk anticipation** and evidence-informed decision-making.

Embed the One Health approach within **advanced public administration training** and higher education programmes, fostering competencies in cross-sector collaboration, science communication and integrated governance.

Explicitly recognise the environmental **dimension within public health policy** by acknowledging natural capital and ecosystem health as fundamental determinants of human health.

EXPECTED IMPACT

Effective implementation of the One Health approach will **strengthen** the State's **capacity to anticipate and respond** to zoonotic diseases, antimicrobial resistance, extreme climate events and other emerging public health threats.

Greater integration between sectors and information systems will improve the efficiency of public decision-making, reduce institutional duplication and promote more preventive, sustainable and cost-effective public policies.

Over the medium and long term, this approach will contribute to a more resilient healthcare system, a better coordinated public administration and stronger protection of both population health and ecosystem health.



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CROSS-CUTTING CHALLENGES

CHALLENGES	1. Soil and Agriculture	2. Nature Restoration and Conservation	3. People and Land Use	4. Climate and Energy Resilience	5. One Health
Legal and regulatory framework					
Monitoring and enforcement					
Data and knowledge gaps					
Funding and resources					
Knowledge transfer and technical capacity building					
Legal and institutional coordination					
Incentives and accountability mechanisms					
Science-policy communication					
Sectoral and fragmented approaches					

The figure above provides an **overview of the cross-cutting challenges** identified across the five thematic areas. Challenges addressed during the thematic sessions are highlighted in dark blue, while light blue indicates additional relevant challenges.

CROSS-CUTTING RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS	1. Soil and Agriculture	2. Nature Restoration and Conservation	3. People and Land Use	4. Climate and Energy Resilience	5. One Health
Strengthen regulatory frameworks					
Science-policy communication and collaboration					
Monitoring and data interoperability					
Stable long-term funding					
Promote literacy and technical capacity building					
Compensation and accountability mechanisms					
Institutional coordination					
Participatory governance					

The figure above provides an **overview of the cross-cutting recommendations** identified across the five thematic areas. Recommendations discussed during the thematic sessions are highlighted in dark green, while light green indicates additional relevant recommendations.



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