

Relighting SPARKE Webinars

Briefing Note

On 19th February 2025, the Hydro Nation International Centre (HNIC) in collaboration with BASEflow and BAWI Consultants held two SPARKE Webinars. The purpose of the first webinar was to reintroduce previously engaged Malawian partners and new Malawian partners to the SPARKE project. The second webinar advanced discussions on overcoming barriers to evidence-based decision-making in Malawi's water sector. Building on insights from the SPARKE Decision-Maker Workshop in 2024, the webinars brought together knowledge-makers and decision-makers to address challenges in science-policy exchange (SPE) and explore solutions for improved data, information, and knowledge (DIK) flows.

Participants included representatives from Scotland and Malawi including research institutions, universities, government agencies, private sector and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) involved in Malawi's water sector. The diverse attendance ensured a broad discussion, incorporating perspectives from both research and policy sectors, with a strong focus on strengthening the science-policy interface for water management in Malawi.

Webinar 1: SPARKE Overview

The first webinar introduced the SPARKE project, outlining its objectives, key activities, and challenges affecting SPE in Malawi's water sector, as identified by decision-makers during the 2024 workshop. A total of 12 participants joined the first webinar.

Scotland's Global Partnership for Knowledge and Expertise in Water and Climate (SPARKE) is a peer-to-peer partnership with the Global South aiming to work in partnership with a wide range of global stakeholders in the water environment to share knowledge and experience of SPE. The Hydro Nation International Centre works with various partners to identify data, information, knowledge, capacity, and skills needed to achieve this objective. It also co-constructs activities to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and, where relevant, data. This aim is underpinned by Scotland's international development principles of partner country-led, demand-driven partnerships and is supported by HNIC's strengths and experience in brokering SPE.

The session also explored Scotland's Hydro Nation initiative, emphasising the critical role of scientific knowledge in shaping adaptable, effective, and efficient policies. This approach strengthens the science community's capacity to engage with external partners, fostering strategic investments and impactful initiatives.

Key Discussion Points

A primary focus of the session was on barriers to effective SPE. Insights from the Decision-Maker Workshop categorised these challenges into three key areas:

- **Individual Barriers:** Limited expertise, weak collaboration, and reluctance to engage.
- **Institutional Barriers:** Bureaucratic constraints, policy misalignment, and inadequate funding.

- **Systemic Barriers:** Lack of political will, restricted access to data, concerns over data security, and misalignment between donor priorities and national needs.

Insights from Scotland's Hydro Nation initiative provided a valuable case study, demonstrating how water governance is integrated both horizontally and vertically in policymaking. A presentation on Scotland's Centre of Expertise for Waters (CREW) illustrated how structured collaboration between researchers and policymakers can improve evidence-based decision-making, increase public trust, and support cost efficiencies. Researchers, in turn, gain greater impact, enhanced collaboration opportunities, and broader public and media recognition.

The discussion also addressed Malawi's [National Research Agenda \(NRA\) 2023](#), which prioritises research areas essential to national development. The agenda is aimed at data generation, innovations, and technologies aligned with Malawi's Vision 2063, providing a guide for researchers to situate their work with national policy priorities and provides opportunities to foster the interface between science and policy.

The webinar underscored the necessity of structured engagement between researchers and policymakers to align scientific insights with policy objectives. According to the Southern African Development Community (SADC), Malawi ranks as the third-highest producer of scientific publications in the region. However, there is a need to link the system to ensure that these publications are helping to shape investment decisions and on-the-ground actions. Addressing the identified barriers requires coordinated efforts, targeted resource allocation, improved data consistency across sources, and stronger institutional frameworks to enhance knowledge exchange and policy formulation. Additionally, achieving a shared understanding of how research can improve quality of life through policy and programmatic interventions, is key. Ownership of this agenda by both researchers and policymakers in Malawi is essential. Participants emphasised the necessity of cross-sectoral coordination, recognising that water governance is interconnected with environmental, health, and economic sectors.

Takeaways

- SPARKE aims to share the ongoing experiences of supporting SPE in water in Scotland, where benefits and barriers are being recognised and documented.
- Despite Malawi's strong research output, scientific findings need better integration into national water policies.
- Effective knowledge exchange and policy-making require coordinated efforts, targeted resources, data consistency, and stronger institutional frameworks.
- Malawi's National Research Agenda (NRA) provides a guide to align research with national priorities, offering opportunities for strengthening the link between science and policy.

Webinar 2: Using science to inform decision-making in Malawi's water sector

The second webinar aimed to bridge the gap between knowledge-makers (researchers, academics) and decision-makers (government officials, policymakers) to enhance the application of scientific research in shaping water sector policies in Malawi. The session provided a platform to identify challenges in integrating scientific research into policy, discuss knowledge needs from policymakers' perspectives, explore mechanisms for effective science-policy exchange, highlight key research areas

and gaps in the sector, and encourage multi-stakeholder collaboration for improved water governance. A total of 13 participants joined Webinar 2.

The webinar was structured into two open discussion sessions focussing on the following guiding questions:

Discussion 1: How does research inform water policy and management in Malawi?

- Based on your experience, how has your research contributed to shaping policies in the water sector?
- Can you share a specific example of how knowledge, science, or research has influenced water policy?
- What factors made knowledge, science, or research effective in shaping water policy?

Discussion 2: What are the research gaps for informing decision-making?

- How can we operationalise the NRA as it provides a framework for SPE?
- What steps should be taken to make that happen?

Key Discussion Points

The initial part of the discussion focused on whether research has directly shaped policy formulation or mainly informed decision-making. While specific examples were highlighted, such as for water supply management and the development of water quality guidelines, there was a consensus that a structured mechanism for systematically integrating research into policymaking is lacking. Furthermore, in some instances, research may have indirectly shaped policies through information drawn from previous studies, though this influence was not always intentional or direct.

A significant challenge identified is the absence of structured engagement between policymakers and researchers. For instance, there are limited opportunities for researchers to engage directly with policymakers to discuss the type of information and data required for policy decisions. This gap contributes to the underutilisation of research findings in policy development. Additionally, there is a need for a clearer understanding of who qualifies as a policymaker and how policy is conceptualised within the country's development context to facilitate a structured and effective policy delivery process. While research findings are often shared with parliamentarians, technical experts within Ministries may play a more substantial role in shaping policies. Moreover, cross-sectoral discussions on water resource management remain limited, hindering integrated planning efforts. The lack of clarity regarding key policymakers and the absence of direct communication channels between researchers and decision-makers further obstruct knowledge exchange.

Although policy exchange is often perceived as an interaction between academia and government, an example from the Ministry of Water and Sanitation (Water Quality) demonstrated that data is sometimes generated internally and utilised to inform management decisions. However, academic research outputs, often published in journals, may not be the most effective means of communicating findings to policymakers. Some academics engage through policy briefs and consultations, providing an opportunity to leverage their research, but no formal mechanism currently exists to facilitate this knowledge transfer.

An essential aspect of the discussion revisited Malawi's National Research Agenda (NRA), introduced in Webinar 1, which aligns with the Malawi 2063 vision. This agenda aims to establish a knowledge-based economy and promote sustainable development. The NRA addresses water research across

multiple sectors and identifies universities and think tanks as key stakeholders. Priority research themes include agricultural productivity, water governance, climate resilience, and cross-border water resource management. Operationalising the research agenda can be a means to developing a SPE, but this requires systematic collaboration between government institutions, researchers, and funding agencies. Establishing structured platforms to align research with national policy priorities and track its impact on policymaking is essential.

Challenges Hindering Effective SPE in Malawi

Several challenges hinder effective SPE in Malawi. Poor coordination among government bodies responsible for generating and utilising data leads to redundant efforts. A key solution identified was for government institutions should play a proactive role in commissioning and funding research that aligns with national priorities. However, research funding is often dictated by external donors, whose priorities may not always align with local needs. This underscores that a mitigation measure is developing domestic funding mechanisms. Additionally, the absence of consistent platforms for ongoing dialogue between scientists and policymakers, coupled with limited capacity and resources within government institutions, weakens evidence-based decision-making processes.

Mitigation Measures

To address these issues, strengthening institutional mechanisms for research coordination within the National Planning Commission (NPC) is crucial to align research with policy objectives. All government-generated data should be integrated into the national research agenda and made accessible to decision-makers. Expanding cross-sectoral engagement, including agriculture, energy, and tourism, in water resource planning is essential for holistic policy development. Policy briefs should be mandatory for all research outputs to translate complex research findings and facilitate quick assimilation into decision-making processes. Universities should encourage research ethics committees to ensure studies align with national policy needs and are shared with relevant government bodies. Establishing a centralised digital repository for research data, policy briefs, and related documents would further enhance accessibility. Moreover, hosting regular multi-stakeholder workshops to review research findings and their relevance to policy formulation, alongside developing long-term domestic research funding strategies, would help reduce dependence on external donors and ensure sustainability.

The webinar underscored the urgent need for structured science-policy engagement in Malawi's water sector. Moving forward, stakeholders must align research priorities with policy demands, improve coordination mechanisms, and establish sustainable funding models to ensure that research effectively informs decision-making. By operationalising the NRA, Malawi can take a significant step toward evidence-based policymaking that supports sustainable development and effective water resource management.

Takeaways

- A structured system for integrating research into policymaking is lacking, with few opportunities for researcher-policy maker engagement to identify the type of information and data required for policy decisions.
- Limited cross-sectoral discussions, lack of clarity regarding key policymakers, and weak communication channels hinder integrated water management and planning efforts.
- Journal publications may not effectively reach policymakers; mandatory policy briefs can simplify research findings and facilitate quick assimilation into decision-making processes.

- Government institutions should proactively fund research aligned with national priorities, as reliance on external donors may not always align with local needs. Limited dialogue platforms, capacity and resources weaken evidence-based decision-making processes.
- Operationalising Malawi's NRA requires structured collaboration among government, researchers, and funders to align research with policy and track its impact.

Next Event: Hybrid Workshop (March 12, 2025)

As an outcome, it was proposed that exploring ways to operationalise the NRA to strengthen SPE should be discussed at the upcoming follow-up workshop on 12th March. The event will take place at the Golden Peacock Hotel in Lilongwe, with virtual participation options for broader engagement. Expected participants are in the order of 20–30 key stakeholders, such as policymakers, researchers, water sector specialists, and representatives from donor agencies and NGOs.

The workshop will focus on:

- Finalising steps for integrating scientific research into policy frameworks
- Strengthening cross-sectoral coordination and knowledge-sharing mechanisms
- Developing a roadmap for operationalising the NRA and strategies for securing financing pipelines to support future research
- Identifying key research themes requiring urgent attention
- Addressing institutional barriers hindering effective policy implementation

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