

Meeting report - Ghent Group Annual Meeting Paris, 25 & 26 November 2025



Introduction & Programme

Introduction

The Ghent group is an informal community of European institutes and individuals working with science-based advice in the fields of agriculture and environment. The group has a common interest in sharing best practices, learning and teaching. It is named after the first training course in Ghent Belgium in October 2022. On the 25th and 26th November 2025, the annual meeting of the Ghent Group took place in Paris, focusing on Policy engagement in sustainable transitions: cases, methods and tools.



Programme of the annual meeting of the Ghent Group

Day 1 – Tuesday 25 November: Exploring current SPI processes and models to understand how the Ghent group can provide added value

1. « Evidence-to-policy dilemmas: when science advice principles contradict 'insider' strategies in government »

Introduction to some of the current relevant processes at international level

- EC Community of practice: overview of the EC's current work on SPI and the Ghent Group's potential contributions and engagement with the community of practice.
- Mutual learning exercises – Perspective of the EC and the Member States involved to present their experiences
- Montpellier process and FAO-Cirad collaboration on SPI for agrifood system

2. Ghent group as an SPI Actor

Ghent Group: A vision for a joint initiative on SPI: how do we continue the work based on the survey results and the outputs of this meeting?

Day 2 – Wednesday 26 November: Further developing a common SPI typology, principles, framework and building on our SPI experiences

1. Bridging Practice and Theory: a common understanding of current SPI models
2. Bridging Practice and Theory : Confronting case studies and SPI models
3. Bridging Practice and Theory: further elaborating our SPI framework, principles, typology
4. Co-producing typology of SPI with guidelines, principles and frameworks building on survey and previous Ghent group meetings

List of participants

Name	Institution
ABOU HAIDAR Helena	INRAE - DAPP
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FLAMMARION Patrick	INRAE – DGDEAPP
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LOUAFI Selim	Cirad
MARTIN Alexandre	French Ministry of agriculture
MAZZOCHI Giampiero	CREA
MLALA Sofia	French ministry for agriculture

Name	Institution
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RIKKONEN Pasi	Natural Resources Institute Finland (LUKE)
SALEEMI Sundus	ZALF
SCHULZ Etienne	INRAE – DEPE
SKJOLDBORG HANSEN Anja	DCE Aarhus University
STANESCU Lavinia	INRAE – DGDEAPP
THAKKER Hemal	INRAE – LISIS

Day 1: Insights from the speakers

Keynote: « **Evidence-to-policy dilemmas: when science advice principles contradict 'insider' strategies in government** » Paul Cairney, University of Stirling

Why do policymakers ignore my advice?

- they/people have different ideas about what counts as good evidence (policymakers = politicians? civil servants?) -> try to understand who your audience is
- “bounded rationality” prompts 2 shortcuts: 1. to set goals & identify the best sources of information, 2. to use gut-level, habitual, emotional, or belief-driven shortcuts -> frame what your audience believe, tailor your scientific advice to your audience
- they do not control the policy process: it is not a simple circle or set of linear stages - complexity of policymaking systems (even if you talk to the most open, energetic politicians) -> understand the system you engage

Scientific independence from governments (integrity, openness, responsibility, accountability) is less focused on the outcome. Find out where the action is (actors); learn the rules (institutions) & the language/currency (ideas); build trust & form alliances (networks); exploit changing conditions, crises, or events

The European landscape of S4P and Evidence-Informed Policymaking - Overview and insights from recent activities at the EU level, Fara Lledo San Mauro, DG RTD, Elias Kock, JRC [link to ppt](#)

Science for policy (S4P) and Evidence-Informed Policymaking (EIPM) are quite similar, but EIPM is not only scientific, it includes other knowledge as well. Within the political mandate that started in 2022, a number of actors and networks provide scientific advice (SAM, SAPEA, JRC, the JRC Community of Practice, the network of national S4P correspondents). There are other players at the EU level: European Parliamentary Research Service, European Science Advisors Forum, International Network for Governmental Science Advice, European Academies Science Advisory Council). In order to support and connect Member States, there are initiatives and actions such as; the TSI/EIPM ecosystem reform project, mutual learning exercise (MLE) on S4P, HE WIDERA WP5, Coordination and Support Actions (CSA) on S4P. Besides science for policy activities (such as Enlightenment research program), there are also capacity building activities for scientists and policymakers.

The Montpellier Process and FAO-Cirad Collaboration on Science-Policy Interfaces for Agrifood System Transformation, Sélim Louafi, Cirad [link to ppt](#)

The Montpellier Process is a collective learning, community-owned initiative convened and curated by an alliance of partners committed to redefining how we model effective, more iterative, and better coordinated Science-Policy-Society Interfaces (SPSIs) across scales, sectors and knowledge systems.

SPSIs are critical for the transformation of agrifood systems. Transforming agrifood systems requires reimagining how we connect science, policy, and society—building iterative, inclusive, and integrated interfaces that bridge multiple scales, sectors, and knowledge systems. The FAO-Cirad collaboration on SPIs for agrifood system transformation took the form of practical guidance, national workshops and an assessment framework.

And now what? Toward an SPI on SPIs: a new narrative for the science–policy–society interface and how knowledge informs action.

Day 1: Ghent Group - A vision for a joint initiative at the SPI: how do we continue the work based on the survey results and the outputs of this meeting?

Informal -> formal

The group can serve as a structured platform for collaborative knowledge exchange, supporting community building and strengthening engagement within the SPI. Should it become institutionalized, clear arrangements will be required to identify responsibility for financial support, secretariat functions, and overall governance to ensure sustainability and impact.

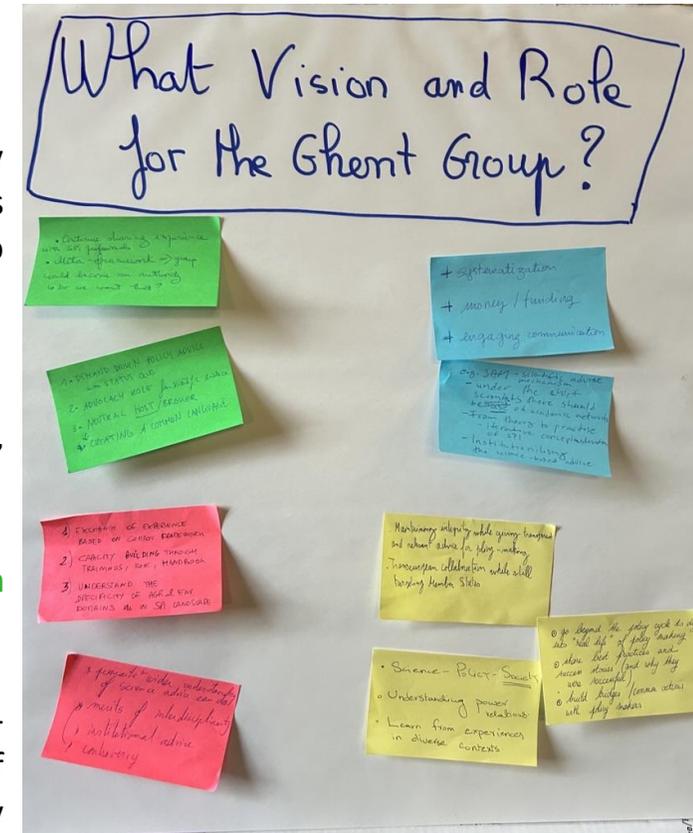
National -> international

Do we aim to move beyond internal use by ensuring that outputs are reusable by a wider range of stakeholders, while supporting the national implementation of EU and international regulatory frameworks?

Determine whether the Ghent Group aims to **build understanding and capacity around SPI**, or to **function directly as a Science for Policy Interface**.

The limited representation of policymakers within the Group may constrain its ability to operate as a fully-fledged Science–Policy Interface, regardless of the role it seeks to assume. Define the appropriate level of political engagement, including whether the Group should engage in advocacy in support of the Science–Policy Interface.

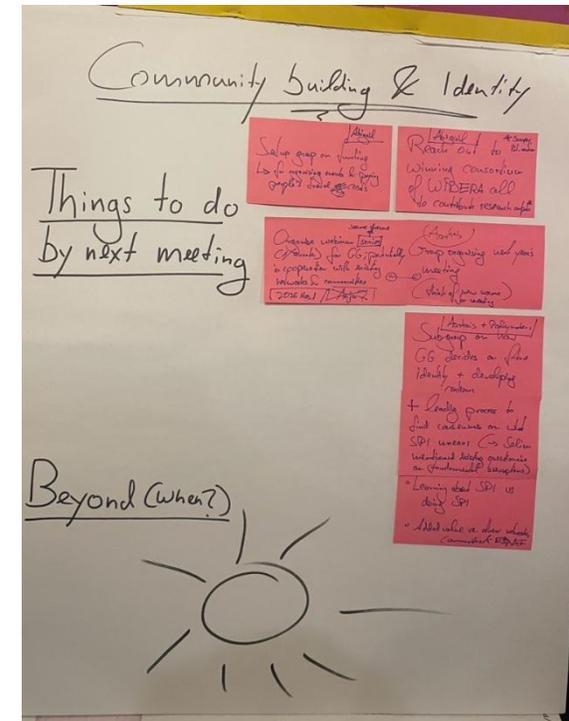
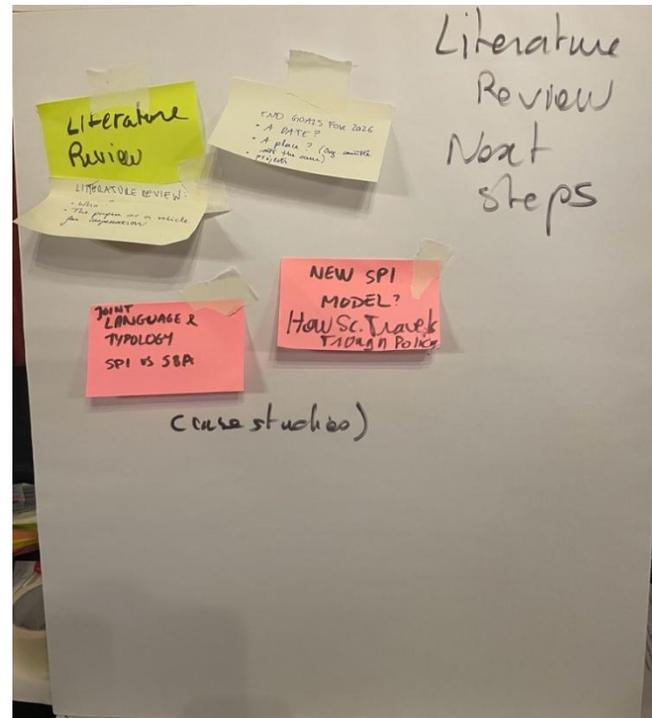
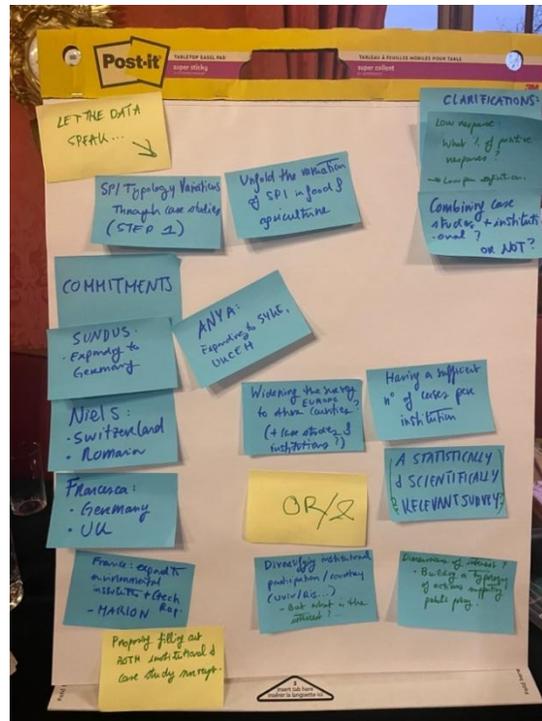
Could the Ghent Group be the governance support for ESAAF (European Science Alliance for Agriculture and Food involving AU, WUR, INRAE, JKI, Warsaw U)?



Day 2: Further developing a common SPI typology, principles, framework and building on our SPI experiences

Advancing the work based on previous meetings (and results of day 1) and co-producing SPI framework and guidelines/tools.

- Further develop the paper on SPI framework/guidelines
- Provide participants with information about the initial results and have their feedback
- Further develop these SPI framework & guidelines by confronting them with our practices



Day 2: Further developing a common SPI typology, principles, framework and building on our SPI experiences

Institutional and case surveys

Aim: to gain a deeper understanding of the GOVERNANCE structure and PROCESSES underpinning the science-to-policy interface for research institutions in the fields of food, agriculture, climate, and environment in EU Member States.

Presentation of 4 cases and group discussions

Illustrate SPI practices based on co-creation, institutionalised science-based advice, and the integration of scientific expertise into policy processes, with early and continuous involvement of scientists.

Main challenges: the complexity of agri-food systems, the translation of scientific knowledge into actionable policy, policy silos, and the management of uncertainty and trade-offs.

Solutions adopted: structured participatory arrangements (policy labs, tripartite agreements, actor networks), the use of boundary objects (scenarios, maps, recommendations), and strong institutional anchoring of science.

Implicit principles : independence, transparency, and credibility, with few shared, formalised SPI frameworks.

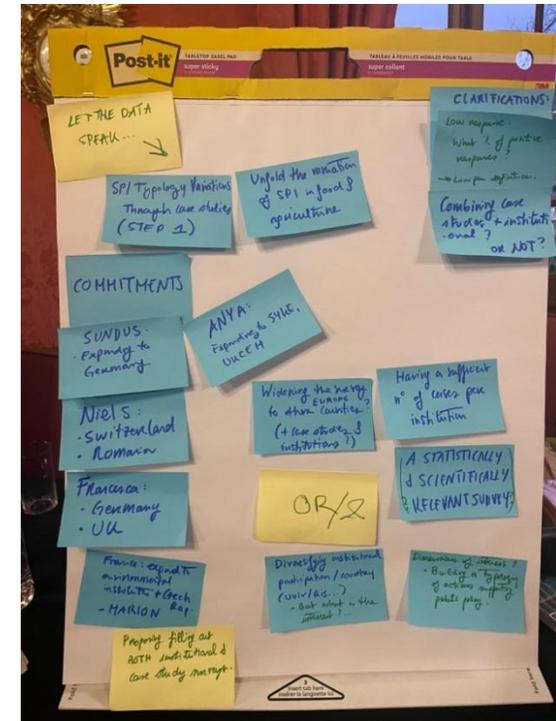
The presented cases highlight the **need for common SPI guidelines**, clearer role definition between science and policy, and **dedicated quality assurance mechanisms**.

The subgroups' brainstorming identified the need for further discussion of the survey:

- ❑ How to work on the surveys: Open existing surveys? Designing a new one?
- ❑ Continue with the survey combining both case studies and institutional survey
- ❑ Link the 2 surveys
- ❑ Need to broaden input, engage more contributors, and widen participation - including proposals from several participants to open the survey to additional countries.
- ❑ Analyse across different dimensions

In addition 2 new activities were mentioned:

- ❑ How to identify and challenge our own framing of questions
- ❑ Addressing the evaluation gap: the Ghent group's role in testing and evaluating tools



Day 2: Further developing a common SPI typology, principles, framework and building on our SPI experiences

Literature review

Background: knowledge gaps and assumptions; link to institutional and case study surveys; collate ideas from previous editions of Ghent Group

Purpose: Closing/addressing the impact gap; Address theory-practice gap; Provide evidence-based, theoretically rich Analytical Framework

Type: conceptual review, empirical review - both focus broadly on agriculture (food, etc) and environment (climate, biodiversity, etc)

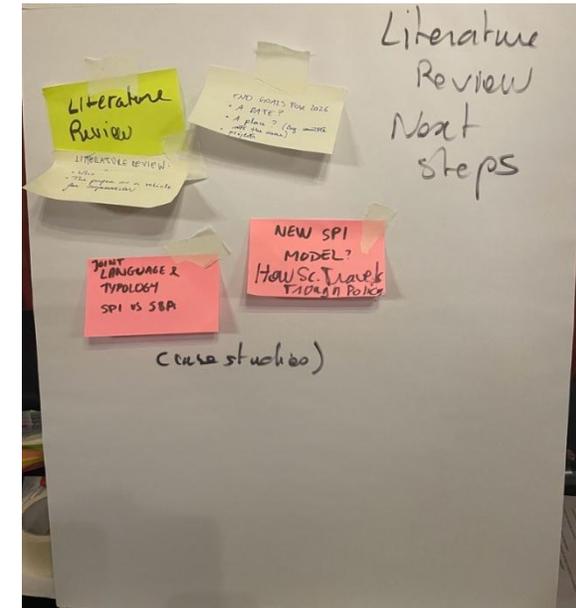
Early observations:

Conceptual review: the literature shows a limited use of robust conceptual or theoretical frameworks, with most studies relying on case studies or comparative analyses embedded in existing frameworks. Research predominantly focuses on environmental themes—especially climate change and coastal-marine issues—while biodiversity and agri-food topics receive considerably less attention. The disciplinary landscape is largely shaped by policy sciences, environmental studies, and planning or geographical sciences, with economists, particularly agri-food economists, being largely absent. Overall, the science–policy interface is mainly examined through lenses of trade-offs, change, conflict, and issues of (in)coherence.

Empirical review: the literature is predominantly European in scope, with many cross-regional and multi-country empirical studies. It covers a wide range of themes and disciplines, including environment and climate, food systems and agriculture, health and social well-being, governance, policy and institutions, as well as socio-economic, behavioural, and methodological or disciplinary approaches.

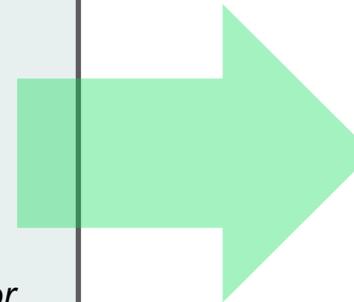
The subgroups' brainstorming identified the need for further discussion of the literature review:

- ❑ Keep working on practical aspects of the literature review
- ❑ Activity until next meeting: Decide on the approach and number of papers to review
- ❑ Literature review - spring meeting





- *Training material on SPI based on experience - how can it be extended?*
- *Partnerships ?*
- *How to build a Ghent Group community ?*
- *How to advise ? what work on SPI ?*
- *How to build common understanding of SPI ? -> existing questionnaire on assumptions*
- *The Ghent Group as a space for learning on SPI for research organisations on agri/food/environment*
- *Funding for next year to attend meetings ?*
- *Identity (current vs. future) structure*



Suggestions

- Group funding sources (philanthropy, calls...)
- Next year's meeting
- Typical webinars during the year (webinar series, study cases...), other communities (thematic series)
- Literature review - spring meeting
- New name for annual meetings
- Subgroup working on identity (involve policymakers), charter
- Contact the WIDERA winning consortium
- Write a proposal together (new call)

