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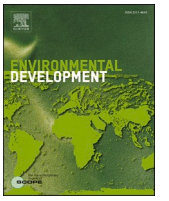

From knowledge to action: Forging a more effective science-policy interface for water and climate security

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A B S T R A C T

Bridging the science-policy divide in peace and climate governance demands more than improved communication. It requires sustained, trust-based collaboration, interdisciplinary integration, and adaptive approaches. This article explores the science-policy interface as a dynamic space where knowledge is co-produced through iterative engagement, rather than linearly transmitted. It argues that institutional support for embedded research roles, long-term relationships, and integrative training is essential to align scientific insight with policy needs. In complex, fragile settings, where uncertainty and political constraints are high, adaptive governance and interdisciplinary collaboration offer more resilient pathways than static, blueprint-based approaches. The article highlights the importance of tailoring outputs, building shared platforms, and investing in trust as foundations for effective engagement. By rethinking how research is generated, communicated, and used, we can transform the science-policy interface into a space that meaningfully contributes to sustainable peace and climate resilience.

1. Introduction

The United Nations' establishment of the Climate Security Mechanism in 2018 illustrates the growing attempt to coordinate policy responses to the security dimensions of climate change. Although it draws on research and technical expertise, it functions primarily as a policy coordination platform rather than a dedicated science-policy interface. More broadly, efforts such as this highlight the persistent challenge of aligning scientific evidence with decision-making in complex and fragile contexts, where environmental, political, and social stressors interact.

Water and climate security challenges have become increasingly urgent as climate variability, water scarcity, armed conflict, inequality, and institutional fragility increasingly interact across scales (Conca and Dabelko, 2024; Leininger et al., 2026; Turley et al., 2025). In fragile and conflict-affected settings, damaged infrastructure, weak governance, displacement, and competing water demands can undermine both the production and use of scientific evidence (Vesco et al., 2025). These challenges are not merely technical questions of resource management. They are also political and social problems involving allocation, legitimacy, uncertainty, and trust. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, damaged infrastructure, weak governance, displacement, and competing water demands can undermine both the production and use of scientific evidence. At the same time, global and national governance frameworks often struggle to reach the local communities where water insecurity is experienced most directly. Water and climate security therefore constitute a demanding test case for the science-policy interface: evidence must be scientifically credible, but also timely, context-sensitive, politically useable, and trusted by those expected to act on it.

In this article, *science* refers to systematic, evidence-based inquiry conducted within academic, governmental, and applied research

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institutions. This includes both fundamental research and policy-relevant applied studies that meet recognized standards of methodological rigor and peer accountability. *Policy*, by contrast, denotes the processes and institutions through which collective decisions are made and implemented. The *science-policy interface* thus encompasses the social and institutional arrangements through which these two domains interact, exchange knowledge, and co-produce evidence for action.

This article proposes trust as the organizing mechanism of an effective science-policy interface. Fig. 1 summarizes the article's core argument by presenting the science-policy interface as an iterative process centered on procedural trust. Rather than treating trust as a background condition, it is understood here as a practice: built, exercised, and sometimes withdrawn through everyday interactions between researchers and policymakers. Trust enables the translation of knowledge across epistemic, institutional, and political boundaries and determines whose evidence is perceived as credible and useable. Our contribution is to present trust as a procedural and institutional practice, not a background interpersonal condition, and to present its implications for climate-security programming.

2. Challenges and opportunities with the science-policy interface

Trust at the interface operates on three interrelated levels: (1) Interpersonal, emerging from repeated, reliable interaction; (2) Institutional, grounded in procedures and norms that guarantee quality and transparency; (3) Political, shaped by power asymmetries and perceptions of legitimacy. Effective interfaces manage all three simultaneously. Technical credibility alone is insufficient if institutional incentives or political hierarchies erode confidence in the messenger.

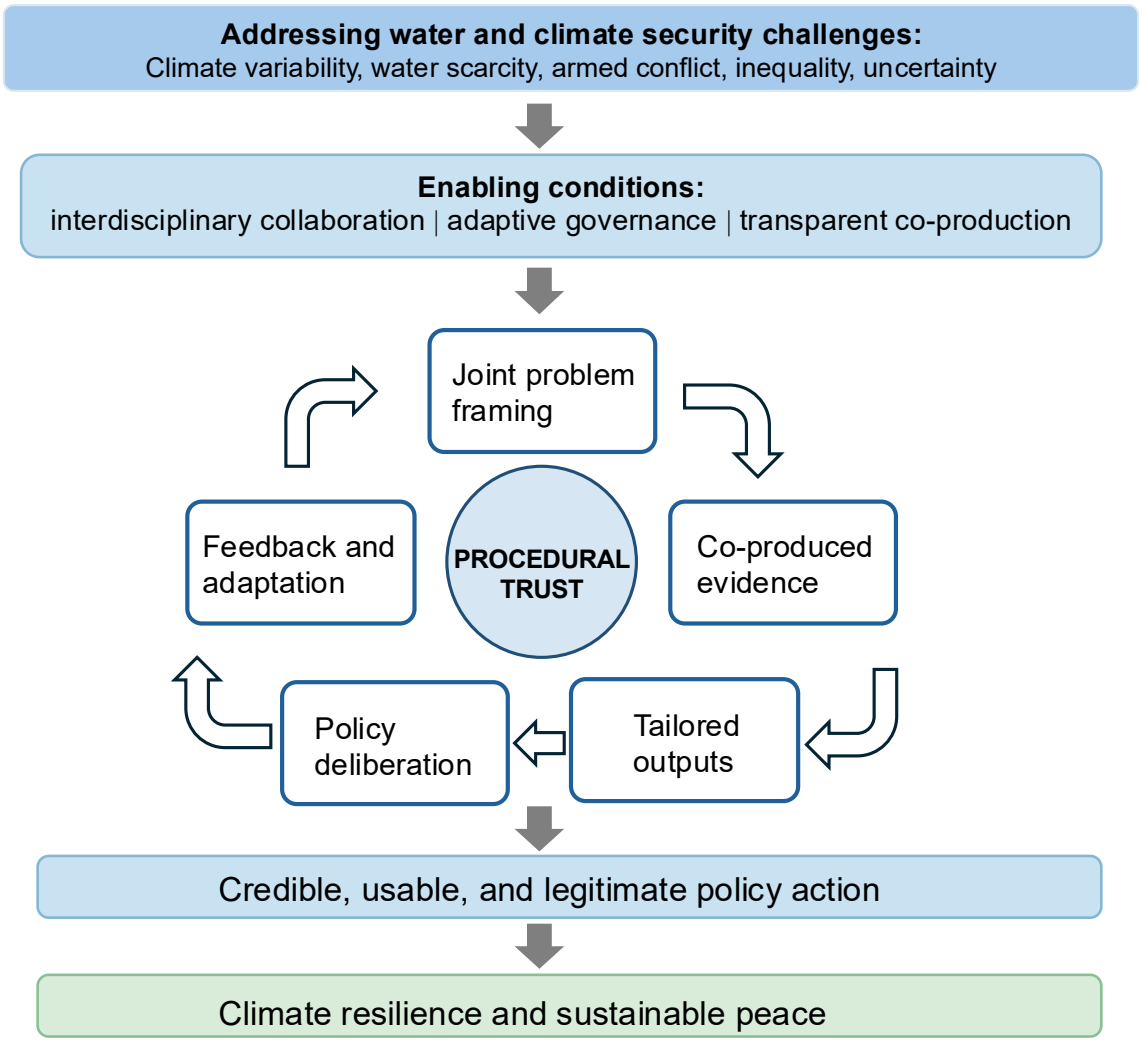

Fig. 1. Trust-centered science-policy interface for water and climate security. The figure presents the science-policy interface as an iterative process through which actors jointly frame problems, co-produce evidence, tailor outputs, deliberate on policy options, and adapt through feedback. Procedural trust sits at the center of this process and is built through repeated interaction, openness, and reciprocity. Interdisciplinary collaboration, adaptive governance, and transparent co-production function as enabling conditions that help translate knowledge into credible, useable, and legitimate policy action for climate resilience and sustainable peace.

Based on existing literature, the science-policy interface (SPI) is a critical framework for understanding the complex interactions between the domains of science and policy-making (Van Den Hove, 2007; Watson, 2005; Wesselink et al., 2013). These interactions are often mediated by epistemic communities, i.e., networks of professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain, who share normative beliefs, causal understandings, and policy goals (Haas, 1992). While the examples discussed include applied research and policy programs, the analysis treats them as empirical illustrations of broader interface dynamics, not as endorsements of any single institutional model. We understand SPI as a set of social processes which encompass relations between scientists and other actors in the policy process, and which allow for exchanges, coevolution, and joint construction of knowledge with the aim of enriching decision-making (Spangenberg, 2011; Ide et al., 2023). This means we assume repeated interactions between scientists, policymakers, knowledge brokers, and stakeholders. SPI operates across a spectrum, ranging from informal personal exchanges to formalized institutional structures, highlighting its inherently social and emergent character.

We acknowledge that the boundary between science and policy is not demarcated by rigid institutional lines, but rather constitutes a dynamic, often contested space of negotiation, translation, and mutual adaptation. Rather than knowledge being simply "applied" to policy, interactions within the SPI involve the iterative co-production of knowledge that is both scientifically credible and socially and politically meaningful and resonant. Over time, the understanding of SPI has evolved from linear, technocratic models of knowledge transfer toward more reflexive and relational models that recognize interdependence and difference across epistemic cultures (Hope et al., 2024; Juhola et al., 2024). This evolution underscores the importance of engaging not only the distinct epistemological foundations of science and policymaking, but also their institutional logics, what kinds of knowledge are valued, how legitimacy is constructed, and what organizational constraints shape evidence use in decision-making.

Research and practice in areas such as environmental peacebuilding illustrate these dynamics vividly. Here, scientists often work in close proximity to implementers and decision-makers, co-producing evidence on sensitive issues like water scarcity, displacement, or climate vulnerability, while also negotiating institutional expectations, donor pressures, and local political realities. This trust is not only interpersonal but institutional-it depends on repeated engagement, aligned incentives, and mutual recognition of professional standards and constraints. Effective SPI thus requires more than technical skill: it involves *relational labor*, deep contextual knowledge, and the ability to engage multiple forms of expertise, including local and experiential forms of knowledge. In fields such as water, health, and peace, this need for interdisciplinary engagement is particularly pronounced because technical, political, public health, and conflict-related risks are tightly connected (Abbara et al., 2024; Conca and Dabelko, 2024). However, the very policy frameworks meant to guide these interactions can inadvertently reinforce power inequalities. Research on UNEP's environmental peacebuilding programme, for instance, reveals a consistent framing that favors international ownership and expertise. In these key reports, domestic actors, both state and non-state, are overwhelmingly portrayed in negative terms, seen as lacking capacity, being corrupt, or constituting a risk to be managed. This creates a dynamic where international technical solutions are privileged over contextual domestic knowledge, potentially undermining the very trust and local agency essential for effective co-production. It also demands recognition that policymaking is not always rational or evidence-driven. In some settings, evidence can be mobilized selectively to support pre-agreed positions rather than to determine them.

Boundary organizations play a critical role in facilitating these interactions by acting as mediators or knowledge brokers between the worlds of science and policy. Research institutes that operate at the boundary between scholarship and practice exemplify this mediating role, combining peer-reviewed analysis with concise, policy-oriented communication. Similarly, initiatives such as the UN Climate Security Mechanism illustrate how policy institutions seek to incorporate scientific analysis into coordination processes on climate and security, even if they are not themselves designed as science-policy interfaces.

Despite these mechanisms, practical challenges persist and incentive structures of different sectors prioritize different factors. Scholars often face difficulties in translating their research into actionable policy insights, partly due to differing priorities: academics prioritize theoretical innovation and methodological rigor, whereas policymakers demand practical solutions, timely decisions, and clear recommendations (Busby, 2021; Jagannathan et al., 2023; Van Den Hove, 2007). For instance, the disconnect between comprehensive scientific assessments and the operational realities of policymaking is often visible in the water governance field. Recent calls to integrate socio-hydrology with peace and conflict research similarly emphasize that water problems cannot be understood through hydrological or technical models alone, but require attention to institutions, conflict dynamics, and social relations (Döring et al., 2024). Policy-oriented science may produce robust evidence at the national or regional scale, such as assessments of transboundary water risks or modeling of resource flows, but these are not always suited to the institutional constraints or decision-making timelines faced by policymakers on the ground. Efforts to address conflicts over irrigation or resource access, for example, frequently show how technocratic outputs fail to resonate with local governance challenges, especially when framed outside the policy logics or problem definitions recognized by decision-makers (Swain, 2025). This illustrates a broader friction within the SPI, where knowledge must be not only credible and salient but also compatible with existing institutional and policy mechanisms. Furthermore, the technical and often complex language used in scientific research can create an additional hurdle, making it difficult for policymakers to quickly grasp key findings and their policy implications.

3. Operationalizing collaboration across knowledge domains

Translating scientific insight into policy action depends less on the volume of available evidence than on the quality of trust that binds those producing and using it. Trust is not a given outcome of communication; it is a practice built through reliability, openness, and reciprocity. In fragile and conflict-affected settings, armed violence can disrupt infrastructure, health systems, livelihoods, and governance capacity, making the translation of evidence into policy especially difficult (Turley et al., 2025; Vesco et al., 2025). For scientists, this means presenting findings transparently and acknowledging uncertainty; for policymakers, it involves engaging with

research beyond instrumental or symbolic use. When either side defaults to strategic selectivity, i.e., using evidence only when it aligns with pre-existing agendas, trust erodes and the interface collapses into advocacy or public relations.

Interdisciplinary collaboration functions as a mechanism for cultivating such trust. Complex peace-climate challenges cut across hydrology, political science, economics, and law; no single discipline holds epistemic authority. Joint framing of problems compels participants to negotiate assumptions and evidence standards, generating a shared vocabulary that underpins credibility. Interdisciplinary work, when well managed, replaces rhetorical calls for "integration" with procedural habits of listening, iteration, and translation. Co-authored studies, joint data platforms, or mixed advisory panels signal reliability precisely because they expose research to multiple forms of scrutiny. This relational transparency strengthens legitimacy in the eyes of decision-makers who must weigh conflicting claims.

Operationalizing collaboration also requires boundary work: institutions and routines that make engagement predictable. Boundary organizations, science-policy platforms, and embedded researcher arrangements translate across professional languages while maintaining independence. Their function is less to "bridge" a gap than to stabilize expectations about what evidence can deliver. When interactions are continuous rather than episodic, through regular briefings, shared fieldwork, or co-developed metrics-trust becomes procedural rather than personal. Over time, these micro-practices generate reputational capital that allows sensitive or uncertain findings to be received as constructive input rather than criticism.

Yet trust is never neutral. It reflects and reproduces power asymmetries: whose expertise is considered credible, and whose experience is discounted. In international peacebuilding, domestic actors are often portrayed as lacking capacity while external consultants are assumed impartial. Such framings distribute trust unequally and undermine co-production. Recognizing this political dimension means treating trust not as moral virtue but as governance currency: allocated, earned, and sometimes withdrawn. A reflexive interface acknowledges these hierarchies and builds procedural safeguards (open review, transparent data access, local authorship) to prevent credibility from mapping exclusively onto Northern or donor institutions.

Practical collaboration thus depends on institutionalized reciprocity. Researchers must design outputs that are responsive to policy rhythms–brief, visual, and timely–without sacrificing methodological rigor. Policymakers, in turn, should create spaces where inconclusive or inconvenient evidence can still inform deliberation. In this mutual accommodation, trust acts as the hinge between epistemic quality and political feasibility. Where it is strong, co-produced knowledge can withstand the contestation inherent to climate-security governance; where it is weak, even robust science remains inert.

4. Adaptive governance: sustaining trust through iteration and learning

In volatile political and environmental settings, trust between scientific and policy communities cannot remain static. It must be renewed through adaptive governance, the set of institutional arrangements that enable actors to learn, adjust, and respond to changing circumstances. Adaptive governance emphasizes flexibility, feedback, and iterative learning rather than rigid adherence to pre-set plans (Folke et al., 2005; Moore et al., 2024). It turns trust from a fragile interpersonal asset into an institutionalized practice sustained by transparency, responsiveness, and accountability.

Traditional policy frameworks often assume that evidence use follows a linear trajectory from research to implementation. In fragile contexts, however, conditions shift faster than policy cycles can accommodate. Adaptive governance accepts uncertainty as a structural feature, not an obstacle, and organizes decision-making around continuous experimentation. This approach mirrors iterative peacebuilding, where feedback and reflection are central to process-oriented intervention (Döring, 2025; Ide et al., 2021; Krampe, 2021). Through iterative cycles of assessment, implementation, and revision, both researchers and policymakers demonstrate reliability-reinforcing trust even when outcomes fall short of expectations. Field-based collaboration illustrates how adaptive systems can institutionalize trust through roles and routines that make engagement regular, reviewable, and accountable. Embedded researcher roles, secondments, and co-designed monitoring frameworks allow scientists to contribute evidence in real time while maintaining analytical independence (Baylis et al., 2025). These arrangements transform the researcher from external evaluator to participant observer, capable of identifying early signals of success or failure. When paired with internal review mechanisms, such as independent oversight panels or "red teams", they protect methodological rigor while preserving confidentiality and openness to critique. Such safeguards convert trust from a matter of personal rapport into a reproducible institutional norm.

Adaptive governance also requires donor and policy flexibility. Many funding models reward compliance with predefined outcomes, discouraging mid-course corrections. In contrast, adaptive programs create space for failure and revision, signaling trust in implementers' judgment. This cultural shift, from accountability as control to accountability as learning, aligns with evidence from peacebuilding and climate programs that link open reflection to improved effectiveness (Baylis et al., 2025; Krampe et al., 2024). Where institutions can publicly acknowledge uncertainty, they build reputational credibility; secrecy or performative success narratives, by contrast, erode it.

For researchers, adaptive governance means designing engagement strategies that anticipate change. Rapid feedback loops, short analytical notes, policy briefs, or real-time data summaries, allow decision-makers to act on partial knowledge without waiting for final publications (Dabelko, 2005). Responsiveness signals respect for policy constraints and reinforces perceptions of reliability. For policymakers, reciprocating this trust involves granting researchers access to decision processes and being transparent about how evidence is ultimately used. Mutual openness converts what are often transactional interactions into iterative partnerships. Adaptive governance is thus best understood as trust management under uncertainty. It does not guarantee consensus, but it keeps disagreement productive by maintaining confidence in procedures. When failures or knowledge gaps occur, and they inevitably do, the presence of transparent mechanisms for review and adaptation prevents erosion of credibility. This procedural resilience is crucial in the climate-security field, where both evidence and politics evolve rapidly.

Ultimately, adaptive governance operationalizes the ethics of co-production: iterative learning, shared responsibility, and humility in the face of complexity. By embedding these principles into institutional routines, agencies and research organizations can sustain trust even amid political volatility. The capacity to learn publicly-to revise strategies without reputational loss-becomes the hallmark of a mature science-policy interface. Adaptive systems, in short, make trust durable by ensuring that it is continuously practiced rather than presumed.

5. Implications for policy

Building and maintaining trust at the science-policy interface should be treated as a policy objective in its own right, not an intangible by-product of good communication. Institutional design can foster or erode that trust depending on how it allocates time, incentives, and accountability. Three interlocking strategies (long-term engagement, structural flexibility, and transparent co-production) translate the preceding analysis into actionable reforms.

First, long-term engagement: one-off consultations or workshops rarely generate the continuity required for trust to mature (Juhola et al., 2024; Lacey et al., 2018). Instead, programs should institutionalize recurring points of contact: embedded researcher positions, staff secondments between research and policy institutions, and advisory boards that include both scientists and implementers. Such arrangements enable the gradual accumulation of reliability and shared vocabulary. When researchers participate in policy cycles rather than episodic projects, they learn the constraints of decision-making while retaining methodological independence. Conversely, policy actors exposed to research processes develop more realistic expectations of evidence and uncertainty.

Second, structural flexibility: funding and evaluation frameworks should reward adaptation rather than strict adherence to project blueprints. Donors can institutionalize iterative review processes that allow mid-course corrections without penalty, signaling trust in implementers and analysts (Krampe et al., 2024; Baylis et al., 2025). Where uncertainty is high, as in climate-security programming, learning-oriented accountability produces better outcomes than control-oriented monitoring. Periodic joint reviews between researchers and policy teams help sustain this openness. The procedural message is simple: responsiveness builds credibility.

Third, transparent co-production: shared boundary spaces, for instance co-creation workshops, advisory fora, and open data platforms, make collaboration predictable and equitable (Hope et al., 2024; Van Den Hove, 2007; Wesselink et al., 2013). They also mitigate asymmetries that often privilege external expertise over local or experiential knowledge. This is largely a call to make existing platforms more iterative and open to domestic actors, not to create parallel structures. Procedural safeguards such as joint authorship, data-sharing agreements, and clear attribution of uncertainty ensure that trust is distributed rather than monopolized. In politically sensitive environments, transparency about authorship and evidence provenance helps prevent perceptions of advocacy disguised as science.

Finally, trust also depends on communication design. Outputs must align with the time horizons of decision-makers without sacrificing rigor. Short-form materials such as policy briefs, fact sheets, and digital dashboards should be backed by peer-reviewed research. This dual-track dissemination strategy sustains both credibility and usability: concise enough to influence decisions, robust enough to survive scrutiny. This aligns with evidence that the binding constraint is attention, not information, so formats must match the 3-to-5-minute decision window (Dabelko, 2005). Furthermore, cultivating trust requires reflexivity. International and donor institutions should acknowledge how their own frameworks can reproduce hierarchies of credibility. Mechanisms such as participatory review and local authorship counterbalance these tendencies. The objective is not to eliminate asymmetry but to make it visible and manageable.

Taken together, these measures convert trust from a moral ideal into a governance practice, codified through roles, routines, and review mechanisms. When institutions invest in long-term relationships, flexible funding, and transparent co-production, the science-policy interface becomes capable of learning and adapting alongside the challenges it seeks to address.

6. Conclusion

Bridging research and policy in peace and climate governance is not primarily a matter of communication but of trust as practice. Trust links epistemic credibility with political usability and determines whether knowledge circulates or stalls. It is generated through continuity, openness, and reciprocity, and sustained by institutions that learn and adapt. Viewing the science-policy interface through this lens clarifies three essentials. First, interdisciplinarity builds trust by creating shared problem frames and exposing assumptions across domains. Second, adaptive governance institutionalizes trust through iterative feedback, transparency, and tolerance for revision. Third, policy design that prioritizes long-term engagement, structural flexibility, and transparent co-production turns trust into a reproducible norm rather than a personal attribute.

The implications are straightforward. Research organizations must reward collaboration and reflexivity alongside publication output. Donors and policymakers should measure credibility by responsiveness and openness to uncertainty, not by conformity to plans. Universities and training programs need to prepare scholars for sustained interaction with decision systems where politics and evidence co-evolve. When practiced this way, trust becomes the connective tissue of adaptive governance which can link scientific integrity with policy relevance under conditions of uncertainty. In a world shaped by accelerating climate risks and fragile institutions, cultivating this form of procedural trust is less an ethical aspiration than a practical requirement for effective, legitimate, and sustainable decision-making.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Stefan Döring: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Funding acquisition, Conceptualization. **Florian Krampe:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors have nothing to declare.

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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