

## **Asia-Pacific: Putting Science Into Policy**

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<http://www.asianscientist.com/features/scientists-policy-makers-asia-pacific-analysis-2012/>

*AsianScientist (Apr. 30, 2012)* - As governments seek to steer a course through the nuances of genetically modified crops, nuclear reactors, and environmental degradation, policy decisions are often made by bureaucrats with little background in science.

How to increase the likelihood that their decisions are evidence-based is a challenge for developed and developing countries alike - but none more so than the science-deprived countries of South-East Asia and the small island nations of the Pacific.

### **Not enough scientists**

The science policy establishment is dominated by lawyers and politicians - competent people who, for the most part, have never been involved in science. As a result they have a limited ability to understand the science that underpins their policy decisions.

In 2006 I was involved in a campaign to get a scientist elected onto the Philippine Congress. We were defeated at the polls, partly because our candidate, an award-winning geneticist, lacked the political savvy to win voters. This is not unusual in the Asia-Pacific scene.

One problem is that we do not produce enough scientists. As the former president of Thailand's National Science and Technology Development Agency, Sakarindr Bhumiratana, said, "Thais are better at producing artists and poets than scientists and researchers." This can be said for most, if not all, of the countries in the region.

And increasing technical complexity, along with the convergence of multiple disciplines such as nanotechnology and biotechnology, make it harder for policymakers to fully understand scientific developments.

### **Growing interest**

The good news is that many science and technology issues have moved to the forefront of policy debate and the front pages of press coverage. Yet awareness of the importance of science is still low among the general public.

We need to invest more in communicating about science. An educated public would force policymakers to try to understand the scientific basis for legislation affecting the environment, for example.

This creates a new imperative for scientists to engage in policy; not to make technical experts out of

policymakers, but to give them the background information they need to make good decisions.

In recognition of this imperative the Inaugural Asia Pacific Science Policy Studies (SPS) Research Conference was held earlier this year (February 8-10, 2012) in Wellington, New Zealand, a country with strong ties to the Pacific nations.

The conference stimulated discussions between science policy researchers, government officials, industry and professional associations, as well as M?ori scientists and those possessing indigenous knowledge.

We need to follow this up, perhaps by forming a network of interested stakeholders to lobby for scientists to have more involvement in government.

### **Strengthening influence**

Good, old-fashioned lobbying is the most effective way of making a difference.

But most scientists, especially in Asia-Pacific countries, are preoccupied with developing their own research instead of considering its impact on society. It is time that national scientists' organisations, such as the Philippines National Academy of Science and Technology, add lobbying to their agenda.

Scientists and the mass media must also engage more intensely in science communication to make science more accessible, understandable and usable not only to the public, but to policymakers too.

It is worth considering introducing a course and career option in science policy advocacy alongside our university science courses. Related to this would be science policy internships in government offices for graduate science students.

In Canada, the Canadian Policy Research Awards honour the contributions of the country's top academics, journalists and institutions to the formulation of science policy.

And in the U.K. the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology employs scientists to advise members of parliament on science and technology related to policy issues.

These advisors give briefings and prepare reports - which are also made available to the public - and organize seminars to bring parliamentarians together with academics, the media, nongovernmental organizations, other interest groups and the public.

In the Philippines, lawmakers sometimes hold public hearings on key science issues that affect pending legislation, but they are few and far in between.

We must make more effort to strengthen scientific input into policymaking, to make it more consistent and better organized.

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Source: [Science and Development Network](#).

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