

Selecting the right frame for your goal



The Brief in brief

It is crucial to understand that the way in which an issue is presented matters. This brief focuses on **framing** which is a central concept in understanding and interpreting actors' efforts to define and construct political issues. It defines the **framing effect** and explains how the effectiveness of arguments depends partly on how they are framed. In particular, positive framing (emphasising benefits) is often more effective than negative framing (focusing on threats and problems), especially when the framing is aligned to match the goals and interests of the target audience. The concept of ecosystem services is useful for framing arguments in a positive way, by emphasising the benefits of biodiversity conservation for humans.

Intended audience

This brief is helpful for policy-makers, decision-makers and anyone interested in making more effective arguments for biodiversity conservation.

Usefulness

This brief can be used to understand how the way an issue is framed affects the effectiveness of arguments. Frames are used to define issues, shape what action should be taken and by whom, justify a stance taken on an issue, and mobilize people to take or refrain from action on the issue.

Transferability

The effect of framing is general and well documented in many policy domains.

The framing effect

Framing refers to the process through which people express how they make sense of the world around them. Through the process of framing, actors highlight different aspects of a situation as relevant, problematic, or urgent. A framing effect in a decision task is said to occur when logically equivalent descriptions of a decision problem lead to systematically different decisions depending on the way in which the problem is framed. Framing can significantly change what citizens think about an issue and it can also change the level of policy support.

Positive and negative framing

Framing can be construed in either positive or negative terms. Negative framing implies that something is wrong and should be prevented. It may also involve blaming an individual or group for a negative

outcome, which can be seen as a manipulative strategy. However, the same argument can often be phrased in a positive way, highlighting the benefits and opportunities, e.g. 'this alternative is better, more profitable and more sustainable'.

Studies have shown that positively framed messages are more effective than negative frames, despite their equivalent content. Positive framing can be used to emphasise the benefits for the relevant stakeholders, and focus on the achievement of common goals, often offering the appeal of a 'win-win' strategy.

Biodiversity-related arguments are often framed in a negative way, referring to legal duties and obligations to protect some particular elements of biodiversity, or as threats and problems to be overcome. For example, in a case study on Białowieża forest in Poland, the framing was sometimes negative (economic gain from logging spoils unique biodiversity), where it could have been positive (unique biodiversity brings economic gain through tourism). The case study on the Biodiversity Action Plan in the UK, gives many examples of positive and negative framing of arguments. Sometimes the same issue is framed both positively and negatively (e.g. recreation can be a threat to biodiversity, but also an opportunity to increase public awareness and engagement with wildlife).

The concept of ecosystem services is particularly useful for the positive framing of arguments, as this focuses on the benefits of nature for humans. This can often be linked to arguments about the benefits of biodiversity for livelihoods.

The preference for positive arguments also makes it easier to counter negatively-framed arguments against conservation, such as assumed high costs or fear of particular species (e.g. re-introduction of wolves), by using positive arguments that focus on the benefits of biodiversity.

Framing to reflect different stakeholder views

Often the same issue is framed differently by different stakeholders. For example, in the case study on the Białowieża forest, foresters interpreted the concept of "balance in nature" to mean that the forest needs to be managed by humans, while for environmentalists this concept meant that the forest would find a natural balance if left without intervention. Similarly, in the case study on invasive species, one set of stakeholders argued that alien species are "innocent until proven guilty", and the opposing set argued that they are "guilty until proven innocent".

To make arguments more effective, it is important to frame them in a way that is relevant to the decision-maker being targeted. This may mean moving beyond biodiversity-related arguments (e.g. the need to conserve a threatened species or habitat) to include wider economic, social and environmental arguments. Examples are given in the Policy Brief on "Tailoring to the audience".

Lessons learned

- Different stakeholders use the same types of arguments but they interpret them differently.
- Issues can be framed both negatively as problems and positively as benefits and opportunities. Biodiversity-related arguments are often framed negatively, but positively framed arguments which emphasize an alignment with some of the relevant actors' goals and interests can be a more effective strategy to persuade them to act.

- For example, coupling livelihood or ecosystem service arguments with biodiversity-related arguments can increase the effectiveness of conservation, by allowing more dialogue between different types of actors.
 - People often understand local environmental issues as being related to a way of life, which connects them to strong issues, such as social identity and citizenship.
 - Linking and presenting bundles of positively framed arguments can increase their effectiveness.
 - Public opinion depends on how a given issue is framed, but also on who presents the issue, as well as how the frames and arguments fit people's pre-existing beliefs.
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Looking for more information on effective arguments for biodiversity?

For more BESAFE results, including separate briefs focusing on other case studies and various aspects of argumentation, see <http://www.besafe-project.net> and BESAFE toolkit <http://tool.besafe-project.net>.

This brief is a result of research carried out under the BESAFE project. This brief was written by **Eeva Primmer**, **Pekka Jokinen** (pekka.t.jokinen@uta.fi) and **Malgorzata Blicharska**. Further information is available in Deliverable 2.3 of the BESAFE project (<http://www.besafe-project.net/deliverables.php?P=4&SP=32>).

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