# What is an argument?

The Brief in brief

This brief explains how an argument is constructed, and shows how much of an argument can be implied by the context in which it is used. This is illustrated by means of an argument for biodiversity protection. To understand why an argument is effective or fails to convince, it is important to be aware that, to a large extent, its acceptance depends on situation dependent factors such as stakeholder beliefs and interests and their level of understanding of the issue. Knowledge about those is therefore crucial for developing effective argumentation.

Intended audience

The brief is aimed at anyone looking for information to increase his / her general understanding of how arguments work.

Topic: Arguments explained

A common definition of an argument or argumentation is 'a series of statements (also called premises) typically used to persuade someone of something, or to present reasons for accepting a conclusion'. It is important to realize that what we consider to be an argument in normal, everyday use often can only be understood properly within the context of a certain common understanding.
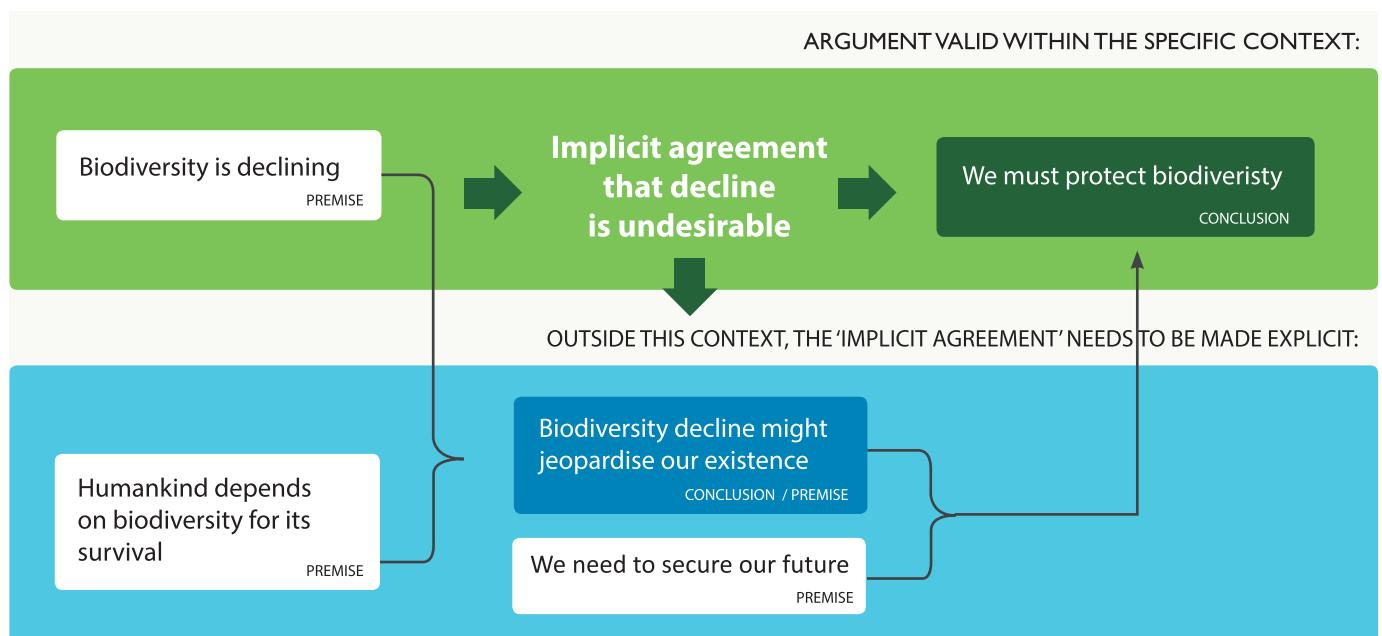
Figure 1. An example of how the structure of an argument for biodiversity is comprised of statements (referred to as premises) and conclusions, with often assumed, but hidden, agreements.

Statements that are in fact part of the argument, but refer to factors assumed to be already clear to or accepted by everyone, are often omitted. For 'outsiders' however, it could be necessary for them to see the whole picture in order to understand the argument properly. This is illustrated in Figure 1 using an argument for biodiversity protection: 'Biodiversity is declining, therefore we must protect it' only

makes sense as an argument when, although not explicitly stated, it is perfectly clear that biodiversity decline is undesirable. Used in a situation where people agree with that, it can be effective. But when the audience does not agree that decline is undesirable, or wonders why they should be bothered by it, the argument will not convince them (i.e. lead to the logical conclusion that biodiversity should be protected) without including the 'missing' part.

Therefore, to be able to tell why arguments work (when they have apparently done the job of convincing) and, hence, to be able to predict if the same arguments will work in a different situation, it is important to identify on which conditions and which assumptions their acceptance rests. A detailed analysis of arguments and the context factors influencing their acceptance can, for instance, be carried out by argument mapping, which entails the drafting of elaborate schemes (much like the one in Figure 1, but far more extensive), including all premises, conclusions and common understandings for a specific situation.

Usefulness

Being aware of how arguments work, that they are only effective when they are accepted by the people they are aimed at, is useful for anyone using arguments, especially in any situation where people need to be convinced. Awareness of the way in which the effectiveness of arguments depends on context should then lead to analysing which parties need to be convinced, what is their level of understanding of the subject, and what are their beliefs and interests. This information could then be used to customise arguments to individual decision-makers, and to tailor combinations of arguments to the composition of the groups of stakeholders involved in a particular decision-making situation.

A BESAFE study of different perspectives on the rationale for biodiversity conservation showed how knowledge on what different groups of people value can be useful (see Deliverable D4.1, Part II). The study found that, irrespective of their perspectives on whether or how biodiversity can be valued, most stakeholders acknowledged the ethical importance of biodiversity protection. At the same time, they rejected the concern that the valuation of ecosystems is likely to provide a justification for its destruction, i.e. the 'nature for sale' argument. This result shows that the neglect to check assumptions about what stakeholders will value, –e.g. the assumptions that decision-makers will only respond to financial arguments and NGO representatives only to moral and ethical arguments, would for both groups lead to the discarding of arguments that would have helped in convincing them.

Another example can be drawn from the BESAFE case studies (see Deliverable D2.3), where we found that the use and role of ecosystem services arguments varied with the level of understanding stakeholders had about them, as well as the dependency of the different stakeholder groups on ecosystem services. There is evidence from the case studies that better communication with stakeholders about the importance of ecosystem services, and the way in which they depend on underlying biodiversity, can enhance the value stakeholders place on lesser-known services. Another finding from the case studies was that ecosystem service arguments were never used as a single argument, but always in combination with other types of arguments. Evidence like this illustrates that for the development of effective argumentation it is extremely important to have enough knowledge of the situation to know which arguments stakeholders will understand, and how they should be framed and combined to be effective.

The overall lesson to be drawn is that insight into how arguments work, and in particular how factors like the beliefs and interests of the different parties involved in the decision-making process influences their acceptance, is a crucial factor in developing effective argumentation.

Transferability

This knowledge about the general structure of arguments, the need to understand the effects of context and general methodology to analyse argumentation is generally valid, applicable and widely transferable. That, however, does not apply to the arguments themselves. Arguments are only readily transferable between (very) similar situations. As the context of decision-making situations is usually very specific, this means argumentation usually will need to be tailored specifically to that situation.

Transferability of arguments does, however, also depend on the policy stage and governance level. For example, our results show that at the first stage of the formulation of the present biodiversity policies in the 1990s, the arguments used at both the global and European level were very generic and interchangeable between the two levels (see Deliverbale D3.1). Since then the argumentation has become more tailored to specific needs, with general ES and (macro)economic arguments appearing at both levels but social arguments, such as the role of biodiversity in poverty reduction and enhancing the position of women only being used at the global level. At the European Union level, Member States tended to copy the ES and economic arguments used in EU biodiversity strategies and directives and used legal obligation as a main argument at the policy adoption stage. At the stage when actual policy measures were to be implemented regionally and locally, however, the need to convince a multitude of stakeholders with very different views, knowledge and interests led to the development of very situation specific argumentation lines with only a few inherited generic arguments from the preceding levels in common.

Lessons learned

- **Knowledge about how arguments are structured and how argumentation works is useful and applicable in any situation.**

- **Particular arguments are usually very situation specific, and knowledge about situation-linked factors and the way they influence the people in a particular decision making situation is, therefore, crucial for the development of effective argumentation.**

- **Combinations of arguments are often more effective than single ones because decisions are taken by groups of people not necessarily sharing the same knowledge and beliefs.**

- **The combination of arguments used, must be tailored to the audience being addressed.**

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.

Results refered to in this brief can be found in the BESAFE deliverables D2.3, D3.1 and D4.1 part II. All BESAFE deliverables are available from http://www.besafe-project.net/deliverables.php?P=4&SP=32.
This brief is a result of research carried out under the BESAFE project. This brief was written by **Rob Bugter** (rob.bugter@wur.nl).