

SAEON Guidelines for Advocacy

SAEON recognises that it is the responsibility of its scientist to conduct and apply science with integrity in the interest of society and the environment, for well-being and with respect for human rights. SAEON further recognises the value of science as a tool to monitor, analyse and respond to environmental, social and economic challenges for the public good. SAEON's vision of providing “World-class environmental research platforms for a sustainable society” speaks to the NRF Vision 2030 on research impact and supports knowledge production for the improvement in the quality of people’s lives.

SAEON also recognises that scientific knowledge is increasingly confronted by opinions and beliefs based on distrust, insufficient science literacy and poor communication of science to the public and policy-makers. Scientists are therefore encouraged to engage in science-based advocacy to ensure that the decisions that are made are based on scientific method and facts. Science-based advocacy is the provision of information on a topic that has societal and environmental value and/or providing recommendations for policy or management actions (Parsons, 2016). SAEON nevertheless acknowledges that scientific knowledge is socially constructed and therefore cannot be entirely free of distortion or misrepresentation due to political or ideological influence.

1 Key principles guiding advocacy at SAEON

1. Academic freedom and the freedom of scholarly research are guaranteed by the South African Constitution of 1996 under the “freedom of speech” clause. Researchers within HEI’s and research entities should be free to follow their own ideas, insights and findings, without fear or favour on any topic, conditional only on the avoidance of scholarly misconduct (ASSAf, 2010). However, this freedom does not protect the researcher from the consequences of his/her discourse.
2. The responsibility for the provision of a safe and healthy environment is outlined in a range of legislation and different sections of the Constitution. Section 24 of the Constitution provides that “everyone has a right to an environment that is not harmful to their health and well-being; and to have the environment protected for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures that prevent pollution and ecological degradation; promote conservation; and secure ecologically sustainable development and use of natural resources while promoting justifiable economic and social development.” It is, therefore, a scientist’s duty to appropriately inform the public of any threats to the environment.
3. The National Environmental Management Act (NEMA), 1998 (Act No. 107 of 1998) states that everyone has the right to report risks (Section 31) to the environment, and that this person may not be held liable or be disciplined for reporting what is honestly believed to be an environmental risk to a public interest. NEMA further states that everyone has the right to demand that the environment is taken care of (Section 28). Any person who harms the environment must take reasonable measures to avoid / minimise such harm, even if it was authorised by law. A responsible environmental officer may order any person who harms the

environment to take remedial measures. If a responsible officer does not do so, any member of the public may make a court application to enforce the duty of care.

4. It is well known that conclusive evidence of harm to the environment usually only becomes available once the damage has been done (Harremoës et al. 2001). Some evidence (even with low confidence), together with a science-based scenario of the possible harm being significant, difficult to contain and irreversible, requires the application of the Precautionary Principle to guide decision-making (Kraayer von Krauss et al. 2005).

2 Ways in which SAEON staff can advocate to prevent/reduce environmental or societal threats

1. Include policy statements in peer-reviewed papers. SAEON scientists should include management and/or policy statements in their manuscripts to highlight the impact of their science on society.
2. Education, outreach and engagement with the public. The public is often incapable (either from lack of understanding or online obfuscation) to discern opinion from facts (Parson, 2016). SAEON scientists are therefore required to communicate their science with a clear message to as wide an audience as possible. This can be done through science engagement with the public (public talks), local communities, learners and educators (educational outreach). SAEON is well-positioned to influence the public through the Science Engagement team and activities.
3. Advocate an appropriate government agency to act against perceived threats. Uncertainty is a phenomenon inherent to science that is exacerbated by natural variability in both physical and biological processes that will be further intensified by environmental change. Decision-makers, therefore, need to base their decision making on the characteristics and relevance of all the available information through extended peer-review by specialist scientists, environmental practitioners, government entities, other interest groups and the public. SAEON can play a significant role in this field, but care should be taken that the advice is provided honestly and in good faith.
4. Advocate policy-makers to enact appropriate regulation. It is essential to regulate potentially threatening activities, and SAEON scientists should engage in this advocacy by working closely with policy-makers, recognising that some kinds of scientific knowledge can carry far-reaching political consequences. This can be done through releasing data specifically for improved governance and policy development or through an invitation to provide policy advice to government, e.g. the Public Sector Policy Development and Research Network.

3 Procedure to follow

Advocacy, being a strategic process that potentially impacts organisational reputation, must either be peer-reviewed (in the case of manuscripts) or agreed to by the designated representative of the organisation, i.e. the Managing Director. The reason is that no scientist can genuinely be neutral or wholly objective, and there should be checks and balances in place against our own personal biases.

The response of the organisation to a particular cause may also be different from an individual within the organisation. The MD can delegate this authority to Node Managers in his absence.

Staff interested in advocating a specific cause (or responding to requests to provide legal evidence) should do the following:

1. Provide your line manager with the background to the cause that you feel strongly about
2. The line manager requests permission from the Node Manager who identifies the risk to the organisation and either approves the activity (low to no risk) or submits a request to the Managing Director (medium to high risk)
3. The Managing Director considers the potential cost and benefits of this action and decides whether to advocate as SAEON, or as the individual with support from SAEON, or as the individual in their private capacity.

If the staff member is in the field and time is of the essence, then attempts should be made to contact the line/Node manager by phone. Failing that, act in your private capacity as a concerned citizen and report the activity to your manager upon your return to the office.

4 References

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