

Trends in evidence-informed policymaking: political and institutional limitations

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A REPORT ON EXPERTS BY A PANEL OF EXPERTS PREDICTING A LEAN YEAR AHEAD FOR EXPERTS HAS BEEN SLAMMED BY EXPERTS



A crisis for evidence-informed policymaking? – challenges to best use of expert advice

- Democratic countries of the OECD group have shown strong interest in using evidence to improve policy and regulatory programs:
 - especially in stable periods of moderate economic growth.
- But this tendency has been strongly challenged by regional and global disruption – political, economic, military...
 - highly polarised debates based on identity politics and cultural values (“fear & emotion” vs “reasoned problem-solving”);
 - tendency toward populist leaders claiming to protect “national” interests against perceived internal and external threats.

Making best use of expert advice?

- Does the use of expert evidence and rigorous research really help governments make better policy decisions?
- Key ‘evidence-based policy’ (EBP) proposition is that:
 - systematic use of best-available evidence is crucial for improved policy and program outcomes.
- Critics of these EBP aspirations tend to emphasise two very different political factors:
 - highly selective and politicised use of evidence in real policymaking (“policy-driven evidence”)
 - Un-democratic tendency toward technocracy (to the extent that experts dominate policy advisory processes, displacing community and lay groups).

Institutionalising evidence, democracy & persuasion

- What processes would simultaneously promote both:
 - policy process legitimacy and
 - good policy outcomes?
- An important aspect is to find an appropriate ‘balance’ between the legitimacy of science-based expert advice and the legitimacy of democratic debate and persuasion, while taking account of diverse forms of knowledge and interests in each situation.

Institutionalising evidence, democracy & persuasion

- In terms of finding a realistic middle ground, both the advocates of EBP and critics of EBP might support **institutionalising some key features** of the policy process in order to strengthen evidence production & use.
- This would take different forms in various countries, depending on political & institutional context.
- In principle, these factors could be mutually supportive.

In generic or schematic terms, this might require long-term commitments in six closely-related dimensions.

<i>DATA COLLECTION</i>	<i>ANALYTICAL SKILLS</i>	<i>PERFORMANCE INFORMATION</i>	<i>EVALUATION & REVIEW</i>	<i>EXPERT BODIES</i>
<i>OPEN POLITICAL CULTURE</i>				

Building the evidence infrastructure

- The **first** is substantial public investment in long-term data collection on key social, economic and environmental phenomena.
- The **second** is public investment in the analytical skills required to manage and analyze these data collections, ensure quality control, and provide useful information for managers and diverse stakeholders.

Analytical and evaluative skills

- **Third** is developing capacity to provide performance information for policy options analysis and to use expert information drawn from a variety of internal and external sources.
- **Fourth** is the extensive use of evaluation and review mechanisms, with clear processes for assessing the impact of various programs and interventions and feedback into the policy development process.

Expert bodies and political culture

- **Fifth**, expert advisory councils or standing committees might be valuable for considering matters where evidence is complex and issues are contentious. In some cases they can act as a filter for the mass of evidence-informed claims from lobbyists, think-tanks and stakeholders.
- **Sixth**, political leaders and legislators need to be supportive of open debate, sharing of knowledge, and multiple sources of advice freely circulating. Championing policy summits and Citizens Juries would be helpful.
- In principle, these six elements allow for improved understanding of trends and issues, together with focused deliberation on the merits of various options for action.

Example: expert advisory bodies

- The international literature shows there is still a role for traditional, independent, technical advisory councils within the government sector
 - Generally a focus on medium to longer-term issues
 - Many different domains – from technological to environment to health and human services.
- Expert advisory councils today are under great pressure to adapt to changing contexts and expectations.
- In **some** policy areas, they are not only expected to provide the best available expert advice to government, but to do so in ways that engage with broader policy contexts and inter-related issue domains.

Expert advisory bodies (2)

- There is growing evidence that **some** expert councils are taking on some of the features of “boundary organisations”. They do this by:
 - engaging with a range of perspectives across broad policy domains, and
 - harnessing not only scientific knowledge but also lay knowledge and explicitly value-laden perspectives.
- Those expert advisory councils that engage with sectoral interests and value-based groups are, furthermore, likely to be better placed to leverage support and policy traction on difficult issues.
- Some cross-over with role of Citizens Juries?

Institutionalising evaluation

- Evaluation **≠** performance monitoring (Heinrich 2007)
- Use of evaluation is arguably one good proxy measure for the strength of evidence-informed policymaking.
- Program evaluation techniques developed in 1970s, and evaluation soon became a professionalised area.
- Evaluation needs to be embedded and costed as part of policy design, rather than being an after-thought.
- Majority of evaluation is managed “internally”, but growing trend toward externally-contracted evaluation to improve credibility/independence.
- ‘Nudge’ and ‘Behavioural Insights’ can provide more ideas for program refinement and improved design.

Institutionalising evaluation? (2)

- Within government, who has an interest in encouraging thorough and professional evaluation?
- Central agencies generally control the public budget process. “Bean-counters rule!”
- Central policy agencies (e.g. Departments of Treasury, Finance, Prime Minister, etc) generally like to ensure that programs represent good value for money.
- Increased requirements are placed on “line agencies” (e.g. health, education, social security) to demonstrate that their spending programs and proposed initiatives are evidence-based and effective.

Institutionalising evaluation? (3)

- Political executive (e.g. Ministers) and legislatures (MPs) also have major interests in information about effectiveness and value for money. Examples:
 - Numerous statements from US Office for Management & Budget on the need for rigorous evaluation of federal programs, most notably in human services (see Haskins & Margolis 2014, *Show Me the Evidence*, Brookings).
 - Establishment of a S&B Science Team for pilot schemes in the OMB 2015-16.
 - Growing number of US State legislatures are now requiring rigorous evaluation as part of annual budget process; coaching assistance available from the Pew-MacArthur Results First Initiative.

Politics of competitive values and the ultimate need to exercise public authority

- However there are also political limits on how far “evidence” can persuade governments to change direction in heavily contested and value-laden areas.
- Indeed, policy debates can be characterised as competitions between value positions, all of which are likely to be underpinned by various forms of “evidence”.
- Governments are often tempted to impose an authoritative solution to shut down the conflict and to deny alternative “realities”.