T10P07 / Knowledge and Power in Public Policy: Perspectives from Asia

Topic : T10 / POLICY DISCOURSE, CRITICAL POLICY RESEARCH

Chair : Colette Einfeld (Australian National University)

Second Chair : Ario Wicaksono (Universitas Gadjah Mada)

Third Chair : Hali Aprimadya (Australian National University)

Fourth Chair : Pobsook Chamchong (Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy)

GENERAL OBJECTIVES, RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND SCIENTIFIC RELEVANCE

As a region home to multiple rising global powers, Asia plays an increasingly pivotal role in shaping global public policies. Distinctive patterns emerge in Asian policymaking practices (Mukherjee and Howlett 2015), indicating that Asian public policy warrants focused study. Yet scholars have identified a persistent gap in the engagement with and understanding of public policy dynamics across Asia (Bice et al. 2018).

Studying public policy in Asia extends beyond merely comprehending political systems, governance structures, and administration frameworks. It requires an examination of the unique and complex interplay between various forms of knowledge, authority, and power that inform policy development and implementation (such as Curaming 2020, Nugroho et.al. 2018). Knowledge and power matter in public policy. Knowledge plays a critical role in addressing policy problems, but it is also a way of exerting power, influencing which issues are prioritised and how they are understood (Jasanoff 1987; Fischer 2000; Yanow 2004, Rakhmani and Sakhiyya 2024).

This panel asks how studies of knowledge and power in policymaking in Asia can advance theoretical discourses and/or inform us about distinct methodological approaches and commitments?

Asia may be a site of data collection, but it is not often a source of theorising or knowledge sharing. Theorising and universalities remain largely developed in the West and then applied to the rest of the world, including Asia (Takayama 2016, Santos 2016, Connell 2020). This panel will contribute to broader theoretical advancements in public policy from the region and deepen our understanding of the region's unique policy landscape.

This panel invite papers that investigate the relationship between knowledge and power in policymaking processes in Asia. Topics of interest include, but are not limited to, evidence-based policymaking, knowledge transfer, policy translation, the role of policy entrepreneurs, and the challenges of policy implementation.

This hybrid panel is open to PhD students and early career researchers, as well as more experienced and established academics. Our goal is to create constructive and engaging dialogues. We welcome contributions that are empirical, methodological and theoretical in nature.

CALL FOR PAPERS

This panel invite papers that investigates the relationship between knowledge and power in policymaking processes in Asia. Topics of interests include, but are not limited to, evidence-based policymaking, knowledge transfer, policy translation, the role of policy advisors/experts/technocrats in policy making, the role of policy entrepreneurs, and the challenges of policy implementation. We welcome contributions that are empirical, methodological and theoretical in nature

This hybrid panel is open to PhD students and early career researchers, as well as more experienced and established academics. Our goal is to create constructive and engaging dialogues on how research from the region can contribute to broader theoretical advancements in public policy studies and deepen our understanding of the region's unique policy landscape.

T10P07 / Knowledge and Power in Public Policy: Perspectives from Asia

Chair : Colette Einfeld (Australian National University)

Second Chair : Ario Wicaksono (Universitas Gadjah Mada)

Third Chair : Hali Aprimadya (Australian National University)

Fourth Chair : Pobsook Chamchong (Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy)

Session 1

Thursday, July 3rd 16:00 to 18:00 (B3)

Knowledge, Power and Expertise: Rise of Political Consultancy in India

Ekta Singh (Dr. B. R. Ambedkar University Delhi)

Rise of 'Consultants' performing functions outsourced to them by government has been a global phenomenon. Legitimated by the New Public Management (NPM) school of thought that gained salience since 1980s as the dominant model of governance, the shift has been justified in the name of "efficiency" by promoting "market competition" and "business like models". The growing importance of consultants in policy processes within governments have led some to bemoan effective emergence of "consultocracy" (Hood and Jackson, 1991). As private providers of knowledge and expert services, consultants have brought fundamental changes to the ways in which public administrations handle information and knowledge. When contracting out expert services, publicly owned and available information (or information that could, in principle, be publicly owned) is transformed into a private commodity.

In the Indian context, weak state capacity, corruption and complex policy environment have served as further incentives for sanctioning the increasing role of consultants in policy space. Technical expertise has allowed policy consultants to emerge as a kind of "parallel bureaucracy" (Aiyar, 2022). Concerns have been raised about the implications of the same for state capacity in terms of further weakening state capacity in addition to compromising accountability.

Political parties in India have also come to rely on the "expertise" of a new range of actors such as pollsters, political consultants, spin doctors, 'big data' analysts, social media influencers and public relations (PR) experts, to name a few (L. Price 2015; S. Singh 2019; Ullekh 2015). Politicians and political parties often use knowledge (or sometimes misinformation) to sway public opinion in their favour. Political communication and the way decision making and strategizing takes place within political parties has significantly changed with the rise of political consultants and political consultancy firms helping political parties win elections with far reaching implications for public policymaking in India. This 'backstage' of democracy (Sharma, 2024) is where political consultants as the key players carefully curate the images of politicians, advise candidates on polling and analytics, and shape voters' perceptions through marketing and advertising techniques. Sajjanhar (2024) sees the rise of political consultants as blurring the distinction between 'messy' politics and 'rational' policy.

The paper locates itself within the critical policy studies to question 'evidence based policymaking' and 'expertise' as an impartial source of objective truth, drawing attention to the "politics of expertise" by contextualizing the rise of political consultants and political consultancy firms in India. Given the interlocking nature of institutions and practices, emerging relationships between political parties and political consultants in India has implications for policymaking landscape in India. Rather than seeing political consultants as outside the policymaking process, the paper seeks to investigate the implications of their increasing role for policy processes in India. In drawing interconnections between 'political consultants' and 'policy consultants', the paper seeks to problematize the relationship between knowledge and power within the policymaking processes in India.

Keywords: policy process, political consultancy, knowledge, power, expertise

Can Asia lead a paradigm shift in how power and knowledge are used in public policy design and implementation?

Naresh Singh (Jindal School of Government and Public Policy)

Devesh Gupta (Emerge, India)

Abstract Title: Can Asia lead a paradigm shift in how power and knowledge are used in public policy design and implementation?

Naresh Singh and Devesh Gupta.

Public policy design and implementation have long been influenced by a zero-sum conception of power, in which one party's gain is seen to necessitate another's loss. This adversarial mindset arises from the identification with a thought or idea, leading to an illusion of separateness, which frequently encourages division, conflict, and short-term thinking instead of promoting inclusive or sustainable outcomes. At the same time, the dominant reliance on objective data in policymaking, and overuse of linear logical decision making, while valuable, has overshadowed the importance of humanistic and holistic dimensions of knowledge. This frequently results in fragmented solutions that fail to address the deeper, systemic nature of many societal problems.

Asia, with its extensive heritage of wisdom traditions, encompassing Jainism, Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta, Confucianism, and Daoism offers an alternative framework for understanding and wielding power in public policy. These traditions emphasize interconnectedness, compassion, and the idea that well-being is not solely an individual pursuit but a collective endeavour. By moving beyond the zero-sum paradigm, policymakers can shift from competition to collaboration, designing interventions that serve the broader common good rather than the narrow interests of specific factions.

This paper explores how Asia's historical and cultural insights can be integrated with modern scientific perspectives to create more nuanced policy relevant knowledge frameworks. Recent advancements in quantum thinking and complexity theory challenge linear cause-and-effect assumptions and highlight the web of interrelations that shape societal outcomes. Similarly, insights from neuroscience and consciousness studies reveal the importance of empathy, emotional intelligence, and subjective experience in decision-making. By blending these approaches with Asia's time-tested wisdom, public policy can become more attuned to human and ecological realities.

A critical element of this proposed paradigm shift involves the inclusion of marginalized voices. These communities often bear the greatest burden of policy shortcomings and possess invaluable lived experiences that can inform more equitable and context-specific interventions. Addressing their suffering is not merely a matter of social justice, it is also a strategic and moral imperative for ensuring that policies are relevant, resilient, and responsive to the needs of diverse populations. Past attempts at inclusion relying on quantitative data and logical framework designs have largely failed. The paper will show how complementing these traditional approaches with narrative policy analytical frameworks will likely provide better results.

The paper posits that Asia has both the moral authority and the intellectual resources to spearhead this global transformation. However, this role cannot be fulfilled through mere imitation of Western models. Instead, Asia must first harness its indigenous strengths and cultural capital and apply them to contemporary policy challenges such as climate change, social inequality, and economic instability. By doing so, the region can set an example of leadership that reconciles technological and economic progress with ethical considerations, and data-driven analysis with deep-rooted wisdom.

Root of Wisdom: The Production of Traditional and Local Knowledge in Agricultural Land Management in Southeast Asia

Selvi Stephany (University of Groningen)

Ethemcan Turhan (University of Groningen)

Stefan Verweij (University of Groningen)

Traditional and local knowledge of agricultural land management has been practiced by Indigenous peoples and local communities for centuries. This knowledge is deeply rooted in the local environment, reflecting generations of experience with the land and ecological balance. However, the rapid advancement of agricultural modernization has marginalized this knowledge, often deeming it outdated and irrelevant in contemporary discourse. Conversely, a growing body of research underscores its continued relevance and utility, particularly in promoting sustainability. This study investigates the foundational processes behind the production of traditional and local agricultural land management knowledge, focusing on the complex

networks through which this knowledge is generated, shared, and maintained. We explore how its origins across different regions converge or diverge over time. Employing an explorative case study approach focused on four countries in Southeast Asia, this research seeks to answer the question: How are traditional and local agricultural land management knowledge produced and mobilized in Southeast Asia? We employ a qualitative content analysis, analyzing the primary and grey literature on the region to uncover how Indigenous peoples and local communities generate, transmit, and preserve this knowledge. As such, we situate our findings within the broader socio-cultural and environmental contexts, capturing the intricate interplay between knowledge systems, local traditions, and ecological practices. We argue that traditional and local agricultural knowledge is not merely a repository of historical practices but a dynamic and essential resource for addressing contemporary sustainability challenges. Ultimately, this paper advocates for the recognition and potential integration of traditional and local knowledge into public policy, particularly in sustainable agricultural land management. Such integration would promote more adaptable, culturally sensitive, and contextually appropriate policies. By understanding the processes of traditional and local knowledge production for land management, policymakers and researchers can better harness these systems to develop inclusive, adaptive, and contextually relevant strategies for sustainable development in Southeast Asia and beyond.

Co-evolution of learning in designing nudge initiatives for health policies in Thailand

Pobsook Chamchong (Chiang Mai University School of Public Policy)

This study investigates the co-evolutionary nature of learning in the design and implementation of nudge approaches within Thailand's health promotion policies. Using the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth)'s nudge initiatives as a case study, it highlights how decision-making processes for designing nudge initiatives have evolved over two decades—from an initial focus on moralistic narratives rooted in Thai traditional culture and beliefs to a balanced integration of scientific, health-focused strategies.

Drawing on qualitative data from in-depth interviews with key informants, this research explores how ThaiHealth's application of nudges reflects a unique adaptation shaped by cultural values, local knowledge, and community-driven initiatives. The findings unpack how ThaiHealth actors have engaged in co-learning processes that integrate diverse forms of knowledge, including scientific evidence, cultural practices, experiential insights from communities and stakeholders, and reflections from epistemic communities. These iterative, collaborative processes have enabled the development of context-sensitive nudge initiatives that balance evidence-based policymaking with cultural sensitivities.

This paper contributes to the discourse on knowledge and power in policymaking by demonstrating how co-evolutionary learning shapes policy adaptation in dynamic contexts. It positions co-learning as a critical framework for understanding how actors refine and adapt policy tools such as nudges, beyond merely transferring or replicating best practices from other settings. This case study offers broader theoretical implications for advancing the study of policy learning and adaptation in Asian public policy, highlighting the distinct interplay between knowledge, authority, and cultural contexts in shaping public policy in the region.

Public servant education and knowledge transfer from Asia

Avery Poole (The Australia and New Zealand School of Government)

Contemporary public servants need to be 'public servants for all places' (Bice & Coates 2020). The transboundary nature of many if not most public sector challenges and interests means that public servants must draw on a range of diverse international sources of knowledge. In Australia, however, public policy education does not tend to draw on learnings from immediate neighbours in the Indo-Pacific region. This reflects the broader problem of limited knowledge transfer from Asia to the West (Bice, Poole & Sullivan 2018). There are certainly many public servant exchanges and international executive education programs within the region. But the approach by Australian providers of public service education tends to have a capacity-building orientation through outward knowledge transfer, rather than seeing the potential to learn from Asia. While there are examples of knowledge exchange with some institutions, particularly in Singapore, this is limited. What are the obstacles to greater engagement with public policy perspectives from Asia by Australian providers of public servant education? What does this tell us more broadly about knowledge transfer in public policy education across state, cultural, linguistic and historical boundaries? This paper will explore these questions and set out some suggested ways forward for public policy education in the West.

The Use of Knowledge in Policymaking: Exploring the Epistemology of Behavioural Insights in Indonesia's Health Sector

Hali Aprimadya (Australian National University)

Colette Einfeld (Australian National University)

Ario Wicaksono (Universitas Gadjah Mada)

Knowledge is fundamental to policymaking, yet its role has become increasingly dynamic and complex. The growing recognition of local and indigenous knowledge challenges the longstanding dominance of Global-North research-based knowledge, requiring policy actors to navigate multi-layered knowledge landscapes. While existing scholarship highlights the fluid and flexible use of knowledge—instrumental, political, and conceptual—conditions under which specific knowledge types gain traction into policymaking remain underexplored.

This paper investigates how diverse forms of knowledge are utilised in Indonesia's health sector, with a focus on behavioural insights and nudge-related initiatives. Drawing on interviews with nine policy actors, it explores the circumstances and mechanisms through which knowledge informs policy formulation and implementation in a fragmented and contested policy arena shaped by colonial legacies, authoritarian practices, global influences, and diverse local knowledge systems.

The findings reveal that the use of knowledge in policymaking is deeply political, pragmatic, and contextual. In Indonesia, Global-North-produced knowledge dominates many nudge-related initiatives due to high reliant on international funding. Meanwhile, policy actors also navigate the plurality of local knowledge and practices. This paper suggests that factors such as the involvement of insider actors and familiarity with data sources become critical in the utility of knowledge, overshadowing the intrinsic merit of the knowledge itself. These insights underscore the dynamic interplay between knowledge, actors, and political contexts in policymaking.