

Talking round in circles... or a shift towards evidence-informed policy?

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Recent research indicated that much upland ecology experimentation carried out by academics has little effect on policy. Further research indicates that there are particular problems getting evidence-based data into policy in the area of urban transport. There is an urgent need for high quality, reliable and socially-robust data (after Nowotny *et al* 2001), yet generation and appraisal of policy options is still largely an ad hoc affair. This poster abstract reports on recent attempts to revisit the science & the public and science/policy relationships to bring the two spheres together to form a science/public/policy relationship to ensure policy relevance and scientific excellence. It is based upon UK studies attempting to endorse evidence-based approaches to policymaking in the apparently relatively non-contentious science issues of upland ecology and urban transport and offers a temporal perspective on the movement towards evidence-informed policy making.

In the 1980s in the UK it would be true to say that policy making could be characterised by one word: 'expertise'. Policy was largely made by expert policymakers who invited scientific and technical experts as and when they saw fit to advise them on matters of a technical nature. Members of the public engaged with policymakers through elections and as the recipients of publicity campaigns but were largely seen only as the beneficiaries of policy outputs which were designed by experts to meet public needs and the common good. 1985 saw the publication of the Royal Society *The Public Understanding of Science* by Sir Walter Bodmer in which scientists were encouraged to engage more with the public. The Bodmer Report was instrumental in giving rise to the academic discipline of the Public Understanding of Science (PUS) which has contributed greatly to what has come since and has fostered many beneficial projects to increase communication between scientists and the public and latterly between scientists and policymakers.

By the year 2000 we have moved on a lot: there have been many initiatives to foster communication and even dialogue between different publics and various expert communities. These initiatives can be characterised by the title of the House of Lords select committee report *Science and Society*. The importance of 'lay' knowledge is now recognised and much effort has been expended in engaging 'publics'. But the results vis-à-vis engagement in policy has been, at best, patchy:

- Foot & Mouth – good scientist to policy communication – relatively poor public communication.
- Urban transport – relatively good public to policy communication. Relatively poor expert to policy communication.
- Upland Ecology – relatively good scientific to policy dialogue. Some increasingly good public engagement but rarely linked to policy.
- Pollutants and Health – relatively poor communication all 'round.

Despite the best efforts of many, almost every project, initiative and practical example can be characterised by single or at best asynchronous two-way communication

between the three major spheres of actors of the policy making community, the scientific and other expert communities, and various 'publics'. There are some examples of good practice:

- the RELU-funded *Sustainable Uplands: Managing Uncertainty in Dynamic Socio-Environmental Systems* is certainly moving in the right direction;
- so too is the Science in Society (ESRC) project *Divided we Stand: Bridging the Differential Understanding of Environmental Risk* that is looking to create dialogue between the three spheres.
- the UKPopNet-funded Centre for Evidence Based Conservation (CEBC) in Birmingham has the goal of supporting decision making in conservation and environmental management through the production and dissemination of systematic reviews on the effectiveness of management and policy interventions;
- initial reports on the work around diffuse agricultural pollution (especially phosphorous) point to barriers being overcome.

However, the important point is that even where engagement is good, the fact remains that it rarely influences policy decisions. All of this (good) work and good engagement currently, we contend, simply increases dialogue around the outside of a circle comprising experts, public and policy maker.

If the UK policy community now had the strength to move the policy making process into the centre of the circle, we would have a real possibility to move towards a situation where expert knowledge can be acknowledged and we will have a socially robust endorsing of evidence-based approaches to policymaking. We strongly contend that this process of colonizing the centre of the circle should still be controlled by the policy-making community, but it must have a legitimated input from public and from experts. So far, very few initiatives have entered the middle of the circle and 'crystallised' successful scientific-evidence-based and socially robust policy. Some projects and initiatives are currently setting out the ground rules for bringing together science-based and experience-backed policy formulation in the emerging concept of what we refer to as "evidence-informed" policy. They include:

- the RELU-funded *Sustainable Uplands: Managing Uncertainty in Dynamic Socio-Environmental Systems* which has identified little contact between groups but shared interests and
- some UKPopNet-funded projects are further exploring methods for bringing all three groups of stakeholders together.
- the EPSRC Sustainable Urban Environments programme, DISTILLATE, is bringing together engineers, social scientists and policy makers in novel ways.

We certainly have the foundations laid to make a similar leap between 2000 and 2015 as we have already made in the 15 years between 1985 and 2000. However, there are still barriers to be overcome and concentrating on talking around the outside of the circle alone will not let us make this jump. Evidence from Scotland and other countries in Europe where this approach has been explored suggests that the benefits of this model of operation must be sold to the policy makers.

Reference

Nowotny, H., Scott, P. and Gibbons, M. 2001 *Re-Thinking Science: Knowledge and the public in an age of uncertainty*. Polity.