

CREATING A LINKAGE BETWEEN ACADEMIC RESEARCH AND POLICY-MAKING

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*Motto: The relationship between research, knowledge,
policy and practice are always likely
to remain loose, shifting and contingent.
Nutley 2002*

Abstract

There is a consensus in literature that the process of policy-making should be based on strong evidence in order to increase quality, credibility and relevance of a policy. Academic research is one of the most important contributors to the process of collecting, analyzing and providing data for stakeholders.

In this paper I analyze the relationship between research and the process of policy-making, in order to demonstrate that the latter will benefit from academic research. For this purpose, I will divide my analysis in four chapters as following: the first one will contain a short history about the moment when this problem was first brought into question and arguments about the importance of the research for policy-making process, along with the clarification of the main terms that I will use in my analysis.

The second chapter will be dedicated to the main problems that both policy-makers and academic researchers faced when it comes to work together in the decision making process. In describing these constrains I will use a politician perspective as well as a researcher one.

In my third chapter I emphasize some recommendations and actions that can be implemented in order to surmount the limits, and in the final chapter I will try to provide a vision upon the case of Romania and the relationship between academic research and policy-making in our country.

Keywords

Public policy, evidence-based policy-making, decision-makers, academic research, communication, culture.

I. THE IDEA

Emphasising the role of power and authority at the expense of knowledge and expertise in public affairs seems cynical; emphasizing the latter at the expense of the former seems naïve.
Solesbury 2001

The relationship between knowledge, policy-making and power is one of great interest in the public policy field, especially since a large number of actors seek to influence the government (lobbyists, academic researchers, NGOs).

Although public policies continued to gain in importance and visibility, the quality and efficiency of the decision was questionable. Thus, public policy analysis emerged in the United States, in the late 1950s and early 60s, as a “science of action”, focusing on the process of transferring research results from analysts to policy-makers, in order to make the research relevant and useful, facilitating solutions to society’s problems (Almeida and Báscolo 2006, 8).

Steven Dukeshire and Jennifer Thurlow defined policy research as “a special type of research that can provide communities and decision-makers with useful recommendations and possible actions for resolving fundamental problems” (Dukeshire and Thurlow 2002, 9).

In their paper, they also stated four ways in which research can be used within the policy-making process: 1) recognizing problems and identifying issues (can help in identifying issues or problems pertinent); 2) understanding key issues (the information gained can be used to identify key policy issues as well as potential strategies to address them); 3) supporting a selected plan of action (once identified an issue, it is necessary to develop a plan of action to try to influence policy affecting the key issues); and 4) evaluating and monitoring progress, during and after the implementation of an action plan. At this point, research may be used to show how the implementation worked and to refine the solutions in order to increase the impact (Dukeshire and Thurlow 2002, 9-12).

Therefore, research can play a variety of roles in policy: demonstrating how and why actors and institutions interfere given certain conditions, but also “prescribing” solutions to problems of public interest.

Despite of all these opportunities that research can offer, Wayne Parsons pointed out in his paper the fact that policy-making in liberal democracies can

be characterized as "‘muddling through’ rather than a process in which the social or policy sciences have had an influential part to play", and only recently the change of paradigm occurred when the Labour Party in United Kingdom won the elections (1997) under the slogan "what matters is what works", claiming to abandon the ideological influence of policies (Parsons 2002, 43).

This idea is resumed later by David Blunkett, Secretary of State for Education and Employment in the UK, in his speech to the ESRC in February 2000, *Influence or Irrelevance: Can Social Science Improve Government*, when he called for a new relationship between social science and government which would bring to an end the "irrelevance" of social science to the policy-making process. In his vision, public policy had to be driven by evidence and policy research focused on finding out "what works" (Blunkett 2000, paragraph 3).

In this context, the concept of "evidence-based policy-making" (EBPM) has arisen. G. Marston and R. Watts argued that it was inspired from the term "evidence-based medicine" (EBM), a process of systematically finding, appraising, and using research findings as the basis for clinical decisions (Marston and Watts 2003, 146).

For these authors, the meaning of EBPM is self-explanatory, having an intuitive and common sense logic. The term is based around two assumptions: (1) way in which policy is made and (2) the evidence nature of social itself - nature of the policy process, foundations of evidence-based claims (Marston and Watts 2003, 144).

Wayne Parsons considers that EBPM involves two forms of knowledge: academic research and institutional experience.

- * Academic / research evidence - knowledge produced by academics which offers knowledge about a certain policy in order to be utilized by policy-makers;
- * Professional and institutional experience - knowledge about 'what works' in practical policy-making.

This author is pessimistic about the evidence-based policy-making. He refers to it as to "a missed opportunity for improving government that has only served to make the relationship between knowledge and policy-making in a democratic society more muddled rather than less confused", and that the problem with EBPM is "uncertainty, flux, unpredictability and change in human affairs, therefore the impossibility of knowing very much". Still, he

recognizes the desirability of a policy driven by evidence, rather than political ideology or prejudice: “better policy-making was policy-making predicated on improvements to instrumental rationality” (Parsons 2002, 44-47).

G. Marston and R. Watts have also a critical approach on “evidence-based policy-making”. They see no relevance of it if one argues that EBPM means that policy-making can be reduced to the technical calculations on effectiveness and costing of well-defined policy options.

Furthermore, they question the transferability of the principles of evidence-based medicine into the human services, the latter being more difficult and complex: “what works here is often not a question of facts or evidence so much of values” (Marston and Watts 2003, 158).

On the other side, there are some authors very optimistic about EBPM. Sandra Nutley and Jeff Webb noticed a significant improvement in interactions between research and policy-making in the UK, as the government expands its ability to provide information for research to academic institutions (Nutley and Webb 2000, 14).

Also, Steven Dukeshire and Jennifer Thurlow, analyzing the situation in Canada, consider that there is a true interest in using the research to inform policy decisions and to provide citizens the information for informed decisions. They argue that governments are recognizing the important role that research can play in policy development, Therefore, in 1996, the Policy Research Initiative was created by the Federal Government to develop a research strategy for Canada (Dukeshire and Thurlow 2002, 2).

Interested in debate about the way research was used in last century in UK, Marson and Watts argued that there are two views to explain it: (1) rational actor model of policy – research plays a major role in policy development at one end *vs.* (2) political model – research is just one input in the policy process, and often not the most influential. The two authors chose the middle way, by considering a third and more realistic option, called “evidence aware”.

A similar perspective has Lars Calmfors, in his analysis upon the role of research in economic policy-making, in Sweden. For this author, there are two polar views to explain the relationship between research and policy. The first, called the “idealistic economist’s view”, assumes that politicians aim to maximize social preferences, so they want to get all the relevant knowledge from researchers, and researchers deliver the knowledge managing to separate their own value judgments from the analysis.

The second view is “the cynical economist’s one”, according to which politicians have no interest in research, having as main goal to maintain the “balance between their preferences and the desire to get re-elected”. They need the research results in order to support the policies they have already decided. Finally, the author comes with a third option: “cynical politician’s view” that assumes that economics is not really a science (Calmfors 2008, 3).

Calmfors's preference for the first option is visible later on when he compares the decision-making in Sweden and Finland about these countries joining the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU). In first case, to prepare the decision, the Swedish government appointed a commission, consisting only of academic researchers (including Clamfors) to analyze the pros and cons of EMU membership. Based on that, the government took the decision not to join the EMU in 1995. Instead, Calmfors argue that the political process in Finland was much closer to the cynical economist’s view: “economic analysis was to a large extent used by politicians to justify a decision taken for other reasons” (Calmfors 2008, 4).

The relationship between universities and government decision makers is now one of great importance considering the fact that universities are the main providers of data for stakeholders. Therefore, many authors focus their work on this topic. For example, Semali and Maretzki argued that it is the role of colleges and universities to *build from within* by utilizing their scholar to bridge the gap between those two worlds. Boyer also claimed that colleges and universities remain centres of intellectual and civil progress advocating for a equal treatment as partners in answering the main social problems.

Quoting Parsons (2001), G. Marston and R. Watts concluded that “evidence-based policy as a way of bringing social science research and researchers much closer to governmental decision-making processes” (Marston and Watts 2003, 147). But as I will argue later in this paper, these new partnerships are not without difficulties, caused mainly by the many differences that remain between the two worlds.

II. PROBLEMS

The political and academic environments are completely different cultures. Such differences are reflected in history, operational structure, and leadership style.

LaVerne Williamson Hill 2006

Trying to establish the main problems that occur when it comes to utilization of research in decision-making is a difficult task to accomplish. There are many causes and reasons for it and also many perspectives to look at.

Celia Almeida and Ernesto Báscolo, in their paper, *Use of research results in policy decision-making, formulation, and implementation: a review of the literature*, made a general classification of these barriers, including:

- a) ideological problems that constrain the formulation of reform agendas, “in addition to a lack of political will or an inability to formulate and implement more integrated, interactive policies”;
- b) historical separation between researchers and policy-makers characterized by a “mutual intellectual disdain”;
- c) uncertainty caused by scientific divergences among researchers on any given problem and by fragmentation of information on the important problems;
- d) different conceptions of risk at the individual or collective level;
- e) media interference, by misinterpreting the results and exploit divergences rather than clarifying them;
- f) communication: researchers using impenetrable language; inappropriate means;
- g) research process timeframes out of step with those of the decision-making process.

Another barrier is the political, economic, and institutional context of the decision-making process that shapes the range of available options and affects decision-makers’ choices. In this perspective, “the main challenge for applying research results to policy is to learn to create or recognize such moments of opportunity, and then to act effectively to take advantage of them” (Almeida and Báscolo 2006, 12-14).

Among all these explanations, authors argued that each concrete case involves different explanatory variables.

Meredith Edwards, director at National Institute of Governance form University of Canberra, goes beyond this classification and search deeper for causes, arguing that there is a political perspective as well as there is a researcher one to look at the problem.

For the first perspective, she quotes David Blunkett's speech on *Influence or irrelevance* of social science in decision-making process. Although Blunkett admit that "decisions on Government policy ought to be informed by sound evidence" and that "social science should be playing a key role in helping us to decide our overall strategies", he express his government's frustration about the tendency of the researcher to address issues irrelevant for the political debate or people's live or about the perverse results driven by ideology (Blunkett 2000, paragraphs 5-7). He also deny that founding can be an issue for researchers, firstly because more doesn't mean necessarily better and second because "this Government is spending more on research in key areas" (Blunkett 2000, paragraphs 17-18). More, David Blunkett argues that another problem is linked to the way in which results of a research are communicated, asking for "a bolder and more creative approach to accessibility and dissemination". For this reason, "researchers and research funders need to recognize that effective dissemination is crucial" (Blunkett 2000, paragraphs 28-29). In the end, the politician urges "to change the focus of our research to anticipate and address newly emerging issues" (Blunkett 2000, paragraph 30). Opposed to this perspective is the researcher view. It may be argued that the main problems are caused by the lack of government interest in knowledge of research that is available and relevant; impediments to researchers accessing data held within bureaucracies; insufficient effort by government in identifying and publicizing policy priorities; an anti-intellectual approach adopted within government; short time-frames under which governments operate, resulting in a preference for immediate instrumentalist policy advice; and a lack of incentives for researchers to produce policy-relevant material. Summing up all these complains, Meredith Edwards establish four problems on the *demand side* and four on the *supply side*:

- *awareness problem*: the lack of awareness among politicians and bureaucrats concerning the existence of policy-relevant research;
- *anti-intellectualism in government*: the policy process is driven by an ethos that militates against the use of research in policy-making – a fear of the critical power of ideas;

- *government capacity to absorb research*: policy-makers and leaders being dismissive, unresponsive or incapable of absorbing research; and
- *politicisation of research*: lack of objectivity of many policy-makers and researchers.
- *public goods problem*: an inadequate supply of policy relevant research through lack of government funding;
- *access problem*: lack of access to research, data, and analysis for both researchers and policy-makers;
- *comprehension problem*: poor policy comprehension among researchers of both the policy process and how research might be relevant to this process; and
- *communication problem*: ineffective communication by researchers of their work. For M. Edwards “communication as well as culture could be expected to be at the heart of any divide between the world of the researcher and policy practitioner” (Edwards 2005, 68-69).

Communication seemed to be the main problem also for the researchers and policy-makers who participated at a workshop on trade policy analysis, Geneva, 11 - 15 September 2006¹. They suggested that both actors have difficulties in surmounting this lack of communication: on the one side “policy-makers are not always informed about ongoing research”, and on the other side “researchers often lack knowledge of the most pressing policy questions that they would need to make their research more relevant”.

LaVerne Williamson Hill considers this frequent lack of reliable official records as factors that can be discouraging for the researchers.

A different approach of this issue comes from G. Marston and R. Watts. By quoting Perri (2002), they suggest that “the major problem in policy-making is not whether there is enough evidence, but of managing the excess of information and possible players” (Marston and Watts 2003, 145).

Another issue discussed by the group of the experts at Geneva was the mistrust in the quality of internal research reflected mainly in the fact that

¹ The session related to research-based policy making brought together researchers and policy makers to discuss ways in which information-based research can best be utilized in policy making. The workshop was attended by 20 participants from 16 countries (Bangladesh, Barbados, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, China, Costa Rica, Gambia, India, Jordan, Nigeria, Russia, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, Togo, and Uganda).

policy-makers turn primarily to international organizations, international research institutes or their own technical experts to obtain information and analysis as policy inputs instead. Local universities and research institutes may have the capacity but are often not able to engage in cooperation with policy-makers. Credibility is a key requirement for cooperation.

Using the term *ivory tower*, LaVerne Williamson Hill argue that the unproductive distrust is a result of the belief that the other can never truly understand the foundation and function of his/her world.

Not denying the possibility of *perverse* results of a research, the author exposes an interesting perspective upon this problem: academic researchers can faces the possibility of losing control of the research agenda under influence or pressure from external actors to omit or reinterpret findings. Furthermore, it is more likely that information to be misused by policy-makers to promote a personal political agenda, particularly if the media are involved (Hill 2008, 228).

A problem upon all the experts agree is related to the moment of delivery the results. Policy-makers are interested in issues in the near future, looking for quick answers to complex social and political problems. This puts pressure on academic researcher, discouraging them in their endeavours.

More, as G. Marston and R. Watts suggest, "long time frames involved in empirical research, which can limit the potential impact of research on immediate policy problems" (Marston and Watts 2003, 146).

Concluding on the actual situation regarding the relationship between research and policy-making process, Wayne Parson consider that policy is guided by "dogma", instead of knowledge of "what works and why" (Parsons 2002, 46). Also, Sandra Nutley and Jeff Webb, quoting Stoker, agreed to the fact that society is guided by politics rather than science, and that policies have an electoral character rather than rational one (Nutley and Webb 2000, 13).

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

The task of improving policy-making was fundamentally to do with improving communication and reducing distortions rather than improving control through better use of evidence.

Parsons 2002

Quoting David Blunkett' speech, Sandra Nutley and Jeff Webb consider social science as "the heart of policy-making", pleading for "a revolution in relations between government and the social research community", so that social scientists help to determine what works and why, and how effective are some policy initiatives (Nutley and Webb 2000, 13).

After identifying the main constrains that affect the relationship between academic research and policy-making process, Meredith Edwards also offered a *Catalogue of suggestions*, which focus on building internal and external capacity of government aiming to overcome these problems.

In order to build internal capacity she referred to the process of *sharing data* between agencies, setting up a system of *peer review* of best practices, providing *research funds*, and *use experts and specialists* in the government committees and problem-focused taskforces to increase capacity to absorb research, set up *policy evaluation units* in-house.

For the external capacity, Edwards advocates for *sharing data* with researchers, encourage *policy practitioners to join university*, offering incentives for researchers (e.g. through changing university promotion criteria, awards for excellence in policy research), conditional the use of research funding that encourage more interaction with users in government and industry, produce a *better practice guide* that refers also to the relationships with researchers (Edwards 2005, 71-72).

The experts from Geneva workshop were also concern in offering some recommendations, both for researchers and policy-makers, focused on four main issues: establishing contacts, applying research results, communications, funding research.

On the one hand, researchers should focus on developing a strategy of data dissemination through conferences, specific events, notes and abstracts sent to relevant ministries and establishing contacts with policy-makers, including involving policy-makers in research. More, it is preferable if they would focus their researchers on issues relevant for policy-makers. Finally, when it comes

to communicate research findings, the researcher has the responsibility of being honest about assumptions and methodologies used in his work; he has to explain the results in an accessible language, provide concise abstracts or summaries, make sure that data sources are credible and verifiable, pointing out the weakness of the analysis when presenting its strengths. The experts underlined that this last point is crucial "because if you do not point out the weaknesses of your advice, someone else will, so you will have destroyed your chances and, perhaps, the potential benefit from the application of what would have been good advice" (UNCTAD-WTO-ITC workshop 2006, 4-6).

On the other hand, policy-makers should assure that communication flows go both ways, by establishing channels to inform academia of major policy questions and to facilitate the access to relevant data. This would also help making research more policy relevant. They have to involve researchers in policy consultations and the policy-making process through partnerships, multi-sectoral committees, etc. to make them aware of specific country needs.

In order to build a sustainable capacity for research, the government would have to fund properly national research as well as dissemination of data.

As stated above, communication is one of the main issues that need to be solved in order to make the relationship between researchers and policy-makers work. LaVerne Williamson Hill also stated that dialogue needs to continue to ensure that academic research is received with respect and professionalism and used as intended - as a decision-making tool in public policy.

Based on his personal experiences, Lars Calmfors offered some recommendations both for researchers and policy-makers. He advised academic researchers to pay attention in their work on drawing a clear line between value judgments and analysis they make, and to offer a clear-cut conclusion. If not, their analysis might not get the proper attention.

For the government, Calmfors suggested to establish proper institutions and norms, with clear responsibilities in policy-making, responsible of communication and cooperation with academic institutions. Also, the author asked for "independent bodies for public evaluation of policy by researchers who then influence policy not directly, but indirectly via the public debate" (Calmfors 2008, 12).

Given all these recommendations, one can conclude that both parties have responsibilities in creating a linkage between research and policy-making. That

is why the government should not be the one who decide what works, but the one with an open attitude regarding sharing data and receiving recommendations about policy-making process from researchers. Also, the academics should be concerned about the quality of their work and have to make sure that their research is relevant for the society' needs. In order to do so, communication between those involved must be treated with seriousness.

IV. ROMANIAN CASE - some conclusions

In an ideal world, uncontaminated by partisanship and political agendas, academic researchers have much-needed qualifications and skills that can contribute to rational decision-making.
Frieden 2008

In Romania, Government Decision no. 775 from July, 14th 2005 for approval of the Regulation regarding procedures of developing, monitoring and evaluation of public policies at central level is the one that standardize this process for every ministry.

This normative act settles, at institutional level, six authorities involved in the process of formulation of public policies: the *Parliament* as legislator; *Legislative Council*, as structure of the Parliament in charge with managing legislative projects; the *Office of Prime-Minister*; the *General Secretariat of the Government*; *Policy Units* in ministries as well as *Inter-ministerial Councils* responsible of substantiating and implementation of policies (Profiroiu and Iorga 2009, 113).

Further, Government Decision 755/2005 states as main sources for identifying problems of public concern the following: governance programs, strategies of the central public administration authorities as well as problems that occur during governance and have an economic, social or environmental impact (Article 6). Those problems are identified by experts from specialized directorates from institution which initiate the public policy only under coordination of the Policy Units and after consulting NGOs, social and private partners directly concerned with the problem (Article 8).

The consulting process of other actors beside government is called into question only in the second Annex of the Decision, stating the purpose of it increased transparency in decision and accumulation of information about the issue.

The policy proposal will contain an inventory of consulting and the form in which they were held as well as the options of solving proposed by each institution.

As one can see, Government Decision 755/2005, regulatory text of fundamental importance for public policy in Romania, refers only marginally to the involvement of other stakeholders in the consultation process, without a clear reference to the role of academic research. From this point of view, the government seems to be the only authority that has a say in the design, monitoring and evaluation of public policies.

Moreover, a research conducted by the Institute for Public Policy in Romania highlights the fact that in the process, there are not considered several options to solve the problem, and after the adoption of a law, Parliament has not the resources to do monitoring and impact assessment measures.

The experts from this Institute have some recommendations for the Romanian Government to respect the following parameters:

- *focus toward future and have a long-term vision* - projects based on statistical trends and forecasts of the impact of the policy;
- *innovation and flexibility* - to encourage new ideas and be open to comments and suggestions from other institutions;
- *identify relevant information and their optimal use* - to use the best available information and analysis;
- *institutional cooperation* - creating teams of policy-makers covering the entire field of the policy;
- *management of relationships* with key players, abandoning the mentality according to which the government must command and control everything.

To conclude I will like to quote G. Marston and R. Watts. They believed that “research evidence potentially has the most impact when there is sufficient political will and an organizational culture that values all form of evidence, but many policy case studies attest to the fact that policy-making is rarely a case of rationally identifying a policy problem and using research evidence to develop and implement a policy solution”. (Marston and Watts, p.159)

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