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SHIFTING THE TIPPING POINT ON ACHIEVING REALISTIC OUTCOME PARAMETERS FOR HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT AID

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ABSTRACT

The generation of scientific evidence through standardised (and often perceived to be esoteric) methodological procedures does not guarantee the actual application of such evidence in policy formulation, in practice, or the implementation of policies into practice. This chapter reviews the nature of evidence as a socially constructed reality in which many stakeholders have interests in furthering or limiting the generation and application of evidence. Six models are described to explain the interface between research, policy and practice. These models are derived from a review of the literature which yielded over thirty different theories from fields as diverse as health, medicine, education, nature conservation, water management, economy, sociology, pedagogy, and international aid. A shrewd and skilful combination of these models would generate opportunities to apply effectiveness measures to humanitarian aid and disaster relief in more appropriate, responsive and relevant manners.

INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most interesting phenomena in measuring the effectiveness of humanitarian and development aid is the invariably high level of scrutiny applied to evaluation outcomes. While other areas of human endeavour and public policy can justify interventions ‘on a hunch’ or driven by media releases, the aid industry seems to be forced to subject itself to more rigorous assessments of resource effectiveness and efficiencies than others. Understandably, accountability for an industry that generally relies on donations from the public should be a prime consideration. But the outcome parameters that are applied in
such accountability mechanisms should be just and transparent, as just and transparent as accountabilities of other public or corporate sectors should be. In this chapter we will therefore reflect on the nature of evidence of effectiveness, its role in politics and policy making, and ways in which the generation of evidence, the process of policy development and implementation, and the role of the practitioner can be more effectively connected.

THE NEED FOR EVIDENCE: JUSTIFIED DECISION-MAKING

A range of stakeholders concerns itself with measuring effectiveness in various realms of human endeavour. In most fields, including the humanitarian and emergency aid and relief area, stakeholders are typically grouped into academics, policy-makers, and practitioners. Obviously, communities, clients and direct recipients of aid are supposedly closely tied to considerations these professionals may have on the development, implementation and assessment of operations. Rather naively it is assumed that these actors would pursue broadly shared objectives, goals and ideals in measuring the effectiveness of efforts: to amass and assemble a rich array of indicators and parameters that would demonstrate that some actions are more effective than others, and subsequently develop procedures and protocols (sometimes leading to longer term policies) that incorporate and reflect the newly generated wisdoms.

Regrettably, romantics that believe in such an ideal and ‘do-good rational’ perspective will have to wake up to a more realistic – some would call it a more cynical – world view. Certainly, measures of effectiveness, leading to evidence of effectiveness, are direly needed to support our actions. In a landmark publication on the evidence of effectiveness in health promotion, McQueen and Anderson (2001) quote Butcher:

"A piece of evidence is a fact or datum that is used, or could be used, in making a decision or judgement or in solving a problem. The evidence, when used with the canons of good reasoning and principles of valuation, answers the question why, when asked of a judgement, decision, or action."

Surprisingly, in some policy areas the tiniest shred of evidence can lead to multi-billion dollar interventions. A well documented point in case is what Ron Suskind has called the ‘One Percent Doctrine’ for foreign policy of the United States of America (Suskind, 2006). The doctrine is supposedly based on a statement by Vice-President Dick Cheney, outlining the level of evidence required for decisive policy action:

"If there was even a 1 percent chance of terrorists getting a weapon of mass destruction – and there has been a small probability of such an occurrence for some time – the United States must now act as if it were a certainty." Cheney reportedly strengthened his rationale by continuing; “it's not about our analysis, it's about our response.” Suskind then observes the following: “this conviction effectively sidelines the traditional policymaking process of analysis and debate, making suspicion, not evidence, the new threshold for action.”
A similar but less obvious argument was recently made by Potts et al. in the reputable British Medical Journal (2006). They suggest that if a limited number of randomised controlled trials indicate that an intervention might be effective, the full application of Cochrane Collaboration review protocols would become superfluous. The rationale for the preliminary application of not yet fully conclusive evidence, they feel, is dependent on a type of ‘meta-cost-effectiveness’: “During the exponential growth of a new HIV epidemic a modestly effective preventive intervention introduced early will save more lives than a highly effective method introduced 10 to 15 years later” (p. 702). They seem to argue for an approach to evidence that in a way mirrors recommendations (for instance, by the US Food and Drug Administration) for clinical trials to be stopped if the experimental treatment is excessively more effective over the control treatment in life-threatening conditions. The article stirred considerable controversy: orthodox hard-liner evidence-based medicine proponents felt that there is only one decisive form of evidence of effectiveness: that which is produced following internationally agreed upon Cochrane protocols (which, by the way, do support alternate forms of evidence generation beyond the randomised controlled trial, cf. Rychetnik et al., 2004).

Returning to the One Percent Doctrine, the perspective changes entirely if we paraphrase Cheney’s comment as follows: “If there was even a 1 percent chance of events generating mass destruction – and there has been considerable evidence that poverty and inequity cause such destruction – the United States must now act as if it were a certainty.” Although the statement follows precisely the rationale of the ‘weapons of mass destruction’ pronouncement, this sentence clearly is ridiculous: what apparently can become a logic of foreign policy is far from being the logic of international aid. Fidler (2004) has made the point that (global) health will only become the domain of foreign policy if it is considered a serious foreign relations security threat, and this perspective is of course easily translated into the arenas of emergency and disaster management. Thus, Suskind’s belief that policy-making is the result of rational analysis and debate is blatantly naive. Effectiveness and evidence is the domain of political premises which do not necessarily follow the ratio that has been the default in scientific circles.

This phenomenon has been labelled the Policy Paradox by Deborah Stone (1997): policies often are internally inconsistent, and invariably inconsistent between policy domains. For instance, what is good for the economy is not necessarily good for the ecosystem, in spite of all the best efforts to demonstrate that the two can be supportive of each other (Labonte, 1991a, 1991b). Another Stone (2002) argues from a development aid perspective that adequate knowledge generation and application, nevertheless, is a critical component in improving development and humanitarian aid performance and effectiveness.

**KNOWLEDGE: PHRONESIS, EPISTEME, AND TECHNE, BUT WHAT ABOUT SOPHIA?**

Since nearly a decade, the Global Development Network endeavours to be instrumental in generating knowledge in support of global development and the attainment of the Millennium Development Goals. An important focus of the Network, according to Stone (2002), is the ‘knowledge agenda’ or the idea that an increase in knowledge would, within
certain parameters, would lead to better policies for development. This idea is endorsed by, for instance, the World Bank in its support of the Global Development Network. One of its projects is looking at bridging research and policy; Stone (2002) finds three categories for the dynamics on that bridge:

*Pushing research onto policy agendas:*  
- if research would become more policy-relevant (a ‘public good’) its uptake will be easier;  
- there is enough research, but its accessibility should be improved;  
- research presentation should be better connected to policy parameters (such as cost-effectiveness);  
- researchers should become better communicators.

*Policy-making pulls research into its considerations:*  
- overcome policy-maker’s research ignorance by appointing scientists on policy platforms;  
- a tendency towards anti-intellectualism in government bureaucracy could be overcome by strengthening democratic institutions;  
- the life cycle of politics is incompatible with research time lines; bureaucrats and political leaders should be trained to become ‘intelligent customers’;  
- research is politicised and will only be used if it is consistent with current political motivations.

*The policy current is too strong to be bridged:*  
- strong beliefs in society that research and decision-making are separate worlds sustain the separation. Using community-based actors would facilitate overcoming this;  
- research outcomes are transformed from specific to broader ideological perspectives which only slowly pervade political agendas;  
- different policy domains display different rationalities, thus limiting logical connections;  
- there is a final question around ‘knowability’: what can be known, and how can that knowledge be generated? There may be different epistemologies between different cultures which limit effective knowledge generation for policy change.

Clearly, Stone’s twelve-point message rings true to prevailing conceptions in the international development aid community, but is surprisingly devoid of any political theory explaining these phenomena. Policy decision-making is a messy affair, by some described as 'muddling through' (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979), or a negotiated space in the 'polity' (Stone, 1997). Kingdon (1995) has demonstrated that windows of opportunity for policy decision-making are created when policy entrepreneurs have applied a process of 'alternative specification' in which different representations of the same 'truth' are presented to stakeholders in the process. This implies that the evidence used in alternative specification may take different shapes for different stakeholders.

The perspective is shared by Weiss (1979, 1998) and Vedung (2000). In their work on research utilisation (or, in our terms, the application of evidence for decision-making
purposes) they maintain that research is put into action through different strategies. Six models are proposed:

- The **knowledge-driven model**: new knowledge will lead to new applications, and thus new policies. An example could be fundamental research into nuclear resonance signals, leading to the development of NMR and MRI scanners, the emergence of which led to medical technology assessments to assist governments in deciding where and how the costly new technology could be implemented.
- The **problem-solving model**: research findings are actively sought, and used for pending decisions. In its ideal form, health impact assessments are an instrument in this model; HIAs supposedly are commissioned to guide decision-making related to proposed profound environmental and social change operations.
- In the **interactive model** incremental policy change is interactively driven back and forth by emerging research outcomes. The current Swedish national health policy is an exemplary application of this model, taken some twenty years to establish.
- The **political model** leads to research being used to support partisan political positions. Debates around the acceptability of nuclear power demonstrate the different political connections to different research perspectives.
- In the **tactical model**, the fact that research is being undertaken may be an excuse for delaying decisions, or deflect criticism.
- And in the **enlightenment model**, concepts and theoretical perspectives that social science research has engendered permeate the policy-making process, rather than single studies or research programmes having a discernable impact on policy priorities.

As is so often the case, the Ancients, in this case Greek philosophers, have already reflected on the question which knowledge is relevant in which situation. It is useful to show that pure scientific knowledge, episteme (‘Επιστήμη’ or the knowledge of facts), in this view is only relevant if complemented with ‘Τέχνη’ (techne), the knowledge of art, craft and skill as well as Σοφία (sophia; wisdom) and phronesis (Φρονήσεις) which is the virtue of using knowledge in ethical or political considerations. It appears that in western, Cartesian and positivist perspectives on science, technology and society, for a long time wisdom and phronesis have disappeared from the debate. In their discussion of the sociology of science and technology Pinch and Bijker (1984), together with Latour (1988) make an effort to re-integrate these four sources of knowing. In connecting these dots (De Leeuw, 2006) we would hope to be able to shift the tipping point for the application of evidence towards a balance that is more in favour of policy actions to address global inequity. The issue here is, to summarise, not to generate more knowledge, but better and different types of knowledge. And it should, furthermore, not be considered sufficient to just generate such knowledge, but a responsibility of knowledge networks (sets of interconnected actors that fund, use, apply, and create knowledge) to be responsive to a range of needs. This requires mutual appreciation and action. How to go about this is the subject of the next section.
SIX MODELS TO ACT AT THE KNOWLEDGE NEXUS

In order to shift the evidence→action tipping point we should consider the different models to act at the knowledge nexus of research, policy and practice:

The 'Blurring the Boundaries' Model

This model resists the notion that the worlds of researchers, policy-makers and practitioners are essentially separate from each other in terms of values, goals, timelines and 'jargon' employed (Neilson, 2001; Caplan, 1979; Caplan, 1975). This is not to say that the model denies the existence of differences between the 'communities'. However to improve the interactions between researchers, policy-makers and practitioners, Blurring the Boundaries highlights the value of each community recognising the values, demands and pressures that the other adheres to/experiences. Ideally, understanding 'the other' facilitates the development of shared understandings between the communities.

For example, the Boundary Management framework (van Buuren & Edelenbos 2004) promotes researcher/policy-maker/practitioner interaction from the outset of a research project. It follows the logic that researchers' engagement is more likely if they have been involved in the original priority-setting (IDRC 2004; Hanney 2004); they are less willing to work on an agenda with which they disagree (Kogan & Henkel 1983). As de Leeuw (2006: 2) argues "collaboration should ideally start from a joint recognition of a problematic issue, and not from an ideology that dictates partnerships." Also, shared priority-setting befits the development of basic conditions which aid the sharing of knowledge between organisations; conditions include the development of trust and the establishment of a collective language and vocabulary (Nahapet & Ghoshal 1998).

In another example, the focus of Sustained Interactivity (Huberman 1990) upon stakeholder interaction (even beyond the duration of a particular research project) provides stakeholders' insight and understanding into the research process. This, in turn, provides a more realistic stakeholder view of the research project (Hanney 2004). Also, through continued interaction, researchers become more informed of variation in organisational set-ups (Hargreaves 1996). When a range of practitioner experiences/contexts are reflected in the research, practitioner receptiveness toward evidence is more likely (Hargreaves 1996).
Shifting the Tipping Point on Achieving Realistic Outcome Parameters...

By design, Sustained Interactivity is facilitative of the finding that;

"Research utilisation is more likely where steps are taken to encourage policy makers to: absorb and learn from interaction with researchers, commission and learn from systematic reviews and policy analysis; base some policies on appraisal of evidence; and balance research with other factors (industry, media, public, etc.)" (Hanney 2004: 77).

So Blurring the Boundaries promotes trust, understanding and confidence between researchers, along with enhancing opportunities for research uptake. However, the understandings that emerge through the 'blurring the boundaries' approach needs to extend to an understanding of power differentials between the communities (Springett 2001). For instance, even when collaboration between the communities has occurred, if the researcher/s ultimately sets the research agenda, the applicability of the research to practitioner and policy maker experience is limited. Thus the potential wide-ranging influence of research is undermined.

The 'Utilitarian Research, Policy and Practice' Model

In this model the core idea is that research should be 'useful' in order to be applied in policy and practice. It recognises that the underlying principles informing the decision-making of policy-makers and practitioners are often not the same principles informing researchers. In this regard, research needs to be 'pitched' in such a manner that it is clearly of use to policy and practice communities (e.g. the research outcomes are articulated in a manner that reflects current political concerns/agendas, and/or the research suggests how the outcomes can be applied on a practical level). As alluded to in the Blurring the Boundaries model, the interaction of researchers with policy-makers and practitioners can provide researchers with insight into how to most effectively direct new knowledge at policy-makers and practitioners. One framework, Utility-Driven Evidence (de Leeuw & Skovgaard 2005) follows the thought that knowledge should be generated in such a way that it is made relevant to stakeholders. Other frameworks within the 'utilitarian' paradigm, assume that utility is created through relatively autonomous processes and events. One of them is the 'Multiple
Streams' idea where a policy entrepreneur tries to connect perceptions about policies, problems and politics. Another, the Percolation idea, assumes that new evidence slowly seeps into the realities of politicians and practitioners (Overseas Development Institute n.d.).

The 'Conduit' Model

The 'conduit' is a person or agency who acts as a link between research, policy and practice. The 'conduit' informs different communities - policy communities, practice communities, the 'general' community - of research developments and outcomes through developing 'user-friendly' language and presentations. Whereas a journal article uses dense academic terminology to report on research outcomes, the 'conduit' works to disseminate new knowledge in a format that is more widely accessible (e.g. using more common, every-day terms, utilising tables and graphs, avoiding jargon) (Mitchell & Walsh 2003).

The 'conduit' figure facilitates collaboration between the communities in that clear communication during various research decision-making processes "fosters the ongoing engagement of the partners in the research activity" (Bernier et al., 2006: 353). In working between the various communities, the 'conduit' provides a platform for communities to express their concerns, in particular those who have fewer material and symbolic resources (e.g. resources such as skills and knowledge of specific disciplines) (Bernier et al. 2006). Also, in disseminating new knowledge in an accessible manner, 'conduits' anticipate that at some point a demand for the application of the evidence is created.
The 'Alternative Evidence' Model

What if research projects and research outcomes are perceived as running counter to current political agendas or are believed to contradict current organisational practice? Alternative Evidence follows the notion that if research does counter current political agendas/paradigms, its immediate impact will be muted. However, there will likely come a time where the mass of counter evidence can no longer be ignored - or at least not without undermining present policy positions or inviting criticism from opposing parties and/or practitioners (Hanney et al., 2003; Nutley, 2003).

In any event, researchers should also keep in mind that "at the end of the day, policies...are constantly framed and reframed in response to changing contexts" (Choi et al., 2005: 634).

Alternative Evidence suggests that the impact of research outcomes on policy and practice communities is, in line with the Enlightenment function of research (Weiss 1977), gradual and often subtle. That is, it can contribute toward a more gradual paradigm shift (Krastev 2000; Neilson 2001; Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith 1993). This contrasts with the three previous models which suggest that research can have a relatively direct and immediate impact, depending on how appropriately research is 'pitched' at policy-makers and practitioners. In the case of 'alternative evidence', the utilisation of research as political ammunition has integration value if evidence is consequently "distributed more widely among members of policy and practice communities than is presently the case" (Nutley 2003: 15).

This model also demonstrates the aforementioned value of research in providing 'wisdom'; that is, building upon the evidence-base with critical commentaries and alternate perspectives (Hanney et al. 2003). As Hanney et al. (2003: 15) emphasise 'there is no monopoly of wisdom and those who wield enormous power do well to foster their own critics and counter-analysis.' Furthermore, 'alternate evidence' connects with political theory that says that in the reality of policy-making there are always groups of stakeholders that negotiate and try to connect with each other to advance their ideas (e.g. the 'advocacy coalition framework') (Abrar, Lovenduski & Margetts 2000).
The 'Research Narratives' Model

Research Narratives work to 'humanise' the presentation of research aims and outcomes with the inclusion of personal stories. Through using personal stories, they inject 'common man' (sic) experience into research outcomes (Sutton 1999). The narratives humanise the research, but can also bring a sense of immediacy to the research topic that a 'dry' presentation of results might otherwise lack. Given policy makers' valuing of experience and common sense (over esoteric science) in their 'selection' of evidence (Booth 1988) then the inclusion of narratives in the overall presentation of research would appear a wise one. The narratives support the research, and they potentially highlight practitioner experiences. Furthermore, they can function to both illustrate research findings and simplify complicated findings (Stone 2002). Connecting Research Narratives conscientiously with any of the first four models - where actors try to blur boundaries, demonstrate usefulness, act as conduits, or generate alternate evidence - would likely have higher impact on the integration of research, policy and practice.

The 'Research Resonance' Model

This model works on the idea that researchers - or their 'conduits' - should have their 'finger on the pulse' of contemporary cultural belief systems. In doing so, they can link their
research outcomes with popular or emergent belief systems (e.g. 'social inclusion', a 'safe environment for all individuals'). Therefore, the receptivity of the intended audience to their research should be increased.

As an example of this, the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society (ARCSHS) (Hillier & Mitchell 2004) provided a case study of how they attracted greater organisational and public interest in health issues affecting gay youth. Through crafting a publicity campaign that related the health issues to the theme of individual safety, they increased the receptivity of communities to their health issues. Their previous campaign had focussed on the more contentious issue of 'morality', and it had attracted a far less receptive response (Hillier & Mitchell 2004).

Similarly, debates around HIV/AIDS, birth control, or euthanasia, have often been framed in the context of morality (derived from religious perspectives). It would not be helpful to argue that the morality is 'wrong', as it is very strongly connected to people's life worlds. However, trying to make the evidence resonate with other belief systems could advance the application of new knowledge. In the Research Resonance model it is argued that connecting the HIV/AIDS discourse to issues of 'safety', and the euthanasia discourse to 'dignity', rather than to 'morality', is helpful in integrating research, policy and practice. Issues of safety and dignity are issues that any individual, irrespective of their belief system, can identify with. Widdershoven (1999, 2005) has demonstrated that notions of 'autonomy' in the euthanasia debate in The Netherlands have liberated it largely from religion-based belief systems and subsequent ethical judgements, and enabled an open societal discourse on the desirability and conditions for voluntary active euthanasia. The Research Resonance model displays how the 'spin' which promotes research can influence the level of public and organisational interest in the research.

CONCLUSION

We have seen that 'pure evidence' to guide actions of policy-makers and practitioners does not exist. Evidence is (ab)used for political purposes, filtered, manipulated, tweaked, inflated, hidden, disputed (even when the evidence is beyond any reasonable doubt), ridiculed and marginalised. Those who recognise these (harsh) interfaces between research, policy and practice and have the ability to act at that nexus with wisdom and phronesis will be more effective in generating and applying their favoured types of knowledge. The aid industry needs more 'knowledge operators' with such characteristics in all three areas in order to shift the tipping point for credible and effective action in favour of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

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