

Report

Evidence for Policymakers

An international conference on structuring evidence and data
for improved policymaking

December 15 - 18, 2020
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Conclusions and Recommendations



Universiteit
Leiden
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Alliance for
Useful Evidence



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Tuesday December 15

Policies and Strategies for Evidence Informed Policymaking

Parallel session 1 recommendations

What Works Where and When: How can we systemize the development, sharing and use of evidence for policymakers?

What works internationally: “The session discussed how best to promote an evidence driven agenda, through a mix of rigorous evaluation approaches to promote use, to change the culture and incentives, to learn more about what works, to build on larger bodies of evidence, as opposed to individual data points and studies. Including taking stock of standards and principles for the governance of evidence, which was illustrated through a mix of experiences from a comparative perspective in developing countries, concrete examples, and experiences from more developed countries.”

National (what works initiatives): “For science to influence policy, you need to ask the right questions, know your leaders and be at the table”

Regional/Local initiatives: “Organizing evidence for policy implies organizing a context for productive interactions. This context can be stimulated by standard of excellence (that incentivize learning, comparing and improving), but also requires – because of the networked context – leadership that helps to establish trustful relationships between actors involved in the same issues of value chain.”

The Nature of Evidence in the Public Arena: “Build science advisory systems that embed principles of evidence as a public good, which can hold ministries to account and promote public goals through appropriate robust evidence and evaluation.”

Parallel session 2 recommendations

External or internal organisation of evidence: How can we optimize the development and dissemination of evidence for policymakers?

International: “The need for interdisciplinarity, the broader view on the issues dealt with in the context of evidence informed advice, are essential as well as the need to explain uncertainties in scientific knowledge and the pathways in the scientific process. Independence of the advice in a trust-based dialogue with the recipients is key.”

National: “Governments should create systematic models for utilising international high-quality scientific reports and best practices in national policy process.”

Parallel session 2 recommendations (cont'd)

External or internal organisation of evidence: How can we optimize the development and dissemination of evidence for policymakers?

Regional/Local: “People are at heart of local evidence-use, we need cultures of collaboration and learning to support the process.”

Policy based evidence: “Train your scientists to be resilient (to unwanted external influences).”

Summary

Getting evidence to policy is not something technical for technocrats: It is deeply political. Researchers have to start grappling with underlying issues, like the trust of the public. If researchers want to convince the people/policymakers/politicians to use evidence, they need to listen to their concerns and values. One way of involving the public is to try to democratize evidence. Talk to citizens what kind of research is needed and deliberate over evidence through public engagement. People are at the heart of evidence. There needs to be a new culture of collaboration and learning to support the process. In the Netherlands, the National Science Agenda was partly created by asking the citizens what they want. The trust in science and democracy will be enhanced, if scientists engage better with citizens.

One condition of restoring the trust is transparency about if and how government policies are progressing. Transparency leads to accountability. However, while transparency often tells you which interventions are executed, it often does not tell you how it is executed, what the deliberations were and what we can do to improve it.

It is important to bring together the experts to learn which methods and instruments can be applied and how to improve the quality of useful evidence. Furthermore, bringing scientists and policymakers together will create new insights and mutual benefits, as they are the gamechangers of evidenced based policy. We should not only explore how to improve skills of individual researchers for policymaking, but also work with policymakers to structure the cooperation to contribute effectively to evidence informed policy. After all, we should not forget that next to policymakers, researchers can be susceptible to political pressure as well, which may harm the objectivity and quality of their research evidence. If countries want to develop sustainable systems for evidence informed policymaking, researchers need incentives to become more relevant for policy and policymakers require even stronger incentives for integrating evidence in their policies.

Wednesday December 16

Creating and Using Evidence in the Policy Cycle

Parallel session recommendations

Assessing evidence for policymakers: Generating evidence for early use

Evaluation: “How can we make evaluation happen? By learning from international practices, embedding them in our national systems in a way that takes the context into account, promote use through learning, sharing and engaging with stakeholders, and being open about the data, methods and models.”

Big data: “Enhance a culture of using data, take one step at the time, and be very sensitive to the issues of trust and transparency.”

Structuring insights in effective policy interventions: “Structures can be helpful in getting evidence into policy and practice. They need to address provision of evidence but more important the dissemination and implementation of evidence. Therefore, we need to understand the complexities of evidence-based policy.”

Structuring ex-ante impact assessment: “Always start with a thorough analysis of the societal challenge you want to address before actually carrying on a Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA), an Article 3.1 analysis (NL) or any type of ex-ante evaluation!”

Summary

One important message of the day was that we are facing the same challenges across the world. Founding international structures to exchange successful interventions to address these challenges will be an ambitious next step. Next to that, there is not only a need to teach decisionmakers evaluation skills, but to train citizens or stakeholders these techniques as well. The reason why we need to get these citizens to the table, is that they may have unique insights on some practical aspects of evidence. We may become too dependent on the evaluation skills of policymakers and politicians. If they do not explain policy outcomes better, citizens get distressed toward political parties and feel that policymaking and evaluation is done by elites. To resolve this stigma, is it possible to bring the public or the end users to the table of policy design? This may be difficult and time consuming, but you may discover new perspectives on a policy or a problem. This creates buy-in among the people.

A critical assessment of our democratic standards is an important element in evaluation and evidence informed policymaking. This is not only important for countries where we question their democracies, but also for the ones with longstanding democratic traditions. It is the responsibility of scientists and policymakers to avoid that their work becomes a technocratic part of the democratic process. That is why we need an international exchange of skills, examples and perspectives, and a dialogue between evaluators, scientists, policymakers, the general public and politicians.

Politicians may be the most challenging one to involve, as they often lack the knowledge, time and motivation to make a substantial effort for evidence based policy. A more simple approach may be to create – and control – ex ante procedures by using existing evidence before substantial policy interventions are approved.

Thursday December 17

Data and Algorithms for Better Policy

Parallel session recommendations

Data & algorithms for better policies: How can we be both responsible and effective?

International: “The emphasis in Europe is on the right track to pursue trustworthy and human centred AI, but leadership in AI is needed; we should not replace but enhance the existing thinking in AI.”

National: “In order to promote a responsible and effective data for better policy, national governments should ensure data analytics prioritize human rights and transparency, with clear recognition about the role of human values and judgement in applying and using data (and evidence) that changes policy.”

Regional/local: “We are in the phase of growing use and need of evidence-based policy making. Time for action; key elements: knowledge, fun, money and collaboration.”

How dark are data: “The future of Europe is bright”

Summary

The key phrase of this day is collaboration and trust. There is a lot of work to be done to make data useful for societal changes. We should adopt a clear and consistent focus on human rights when applying and developing algorithms. This is a core responsibility of government.

There is a lot of discussion about artificial intelligence and the possibility that it may overtake our working processes as a whole. We have to change our thinking on this. We have to think about AI as a new form or process co-existing with theory-based thinking. This process has to be taken step by step. It is vital to remember and retain that AI is not deciding changes in policy, humans make the decisions. Data-analytics are informing, not dictating.

Furthermore, it has to become clear to the public that data is used for the public benefit, as long as this is sustained by daily political practice. One of the conditions is that policymakers are informed when new algorithms are introduced in such a way they understand and accept the consequences.

A conference like this is necessary to get new insights in the development of AI and algorithms. We have to take responsibility as – in the long run – doing nothing is not an option. This implies that data-analytics and AI will be applied for policy analytics anyhow. The only way to use these instruments in an accountable way is that we teach politicians and policymakers how these instruments operate. As long as governments are capable of attracting data scientists they should promote alliances to make these instruments transparent and actionable. The best way to win back the trust of the people is to form alliances between data engineers to make instruments, data scientists to explain the underlying principles and policymakers to create responsible outcomes. It may be a challenge for governments to attract and retain this expertise all together.

Friday December 18

Structuring Evidence in Government and Politics

Parallel session recommendations

How to effectively develop and share evidence for thematic policies?

Behavioural insights: “Let's utilize the appetite for studies if such an appetite exists among policymakers and commission research the helps answer relevant policy questions. Let's build more capacities that can broker evidence between scientists and policymakers' entities such as Behaviour Insights Teams but also intermediary organizations with knowledge about quality implementation.”

Health: “We need more people at the interface between policy and research with the right competencies to communicate research evidence and its importance to different audiences.”

Security: “We need to convince leaders to build systems that facilitate/support evidence informed policymaking.”

Education: “If we want to embed evidence in policymaking we need collaboration, trust, professionalization, incremental change, and consider identity and diversity.”

Sustainability: “Evidence generation should move from the ivory tower to mere reflexive approaches. The conditions have to be set in place; that means they have to allocate time and resources. On the research side, the organisations of the research process should be open up to participatory approaches, this acquires time and skills.

Development: “Policy impact needs sustained engagement on the ground and a change in the evidence culture with stakeholders near and far.”

Summary

For structuring evidence informed policymaking, we need to convince our leadership to build systems that support this effort. We need capacity on the interface of science and policy. Next to systems, it is key to develop a culture in which governments are stimulated to bring evidence into policymaking. We have to learn how we can operationalise research evidence and how we can translate it into applicable knowledge for different professions.

For academia: Creating evidence for successful policies can be generated through experiments, scientifically monitored interventions, or evaluations. We need to stimulate the dissemination of the results even within one country. We need to make clear under which conditions these outcomes remain applicable in different circumstances. If this is well organised, the international exchange of these outcomes for proven effective policy interventions makes more sense. Research communities should be stimulated to use, apply and disseminate methodologies for generating such evidence.

For policymakers: it needs to become clear what the benefits are to use more evidence and to take time for achieving this. Procedures on a national level will be accepted and used as long as these benefits are clearly defined and broadly accepted. We need to continue this discussion between internal and external researchers, policymakers and politicians and make use of the current momentum. Covid is creating a new context, use it.

For politicians: Leaders face dilemma's: if they receive more timely data and evaluations outcomes, it may become clear that some policies are not working, with all the political risks involved. Why should they make time and invest resources in evaluation when these resources may be needed for short term urgent societal needs? We concluded that leadership has to find balance in those dilemmas. Politicians want to sell certainty and solutions. Therefore, we should incentivize them to create and use evidence before their policies are started. It will increase the chance of acceptance of their policy (proposals) in the political arena and among the people.

For more information, please read the [Hague Recommendations](#).