Politics & Power in Evidence-based Policy

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March 2020
Instrumentalising, rejecting or ignoring evidence is a use of power for policy change

International Geneva, as a network of professional communities implementing the Sustainable Development Goals, needs to gather and filter extraordinary amounts of information, and with a firm grasp of different complexities and uncertainties, make decisions that affect people and places the world over. Decisions about which priority issues most urgently require global attention. Decisions about what actions to put resources and efforts into for the highest good. Decisions about who to work with, through which means, and for what ends.

For many, the purpose of evidence-based thinking as applied to global policy is to help navigate and justify these choices. Yet, strategies for evidence-based thinking are heavily informed by the individual beliefs, values and interests of those people involved directly in the global policy-making process. Who actually determines what information enters the policy-making process and how is this information used? Who is certified to provide and judge evidence in the first place? Whose evidence is heard and whose evidence counts? The Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI) organised an event in September 2019 that convened researchers and policy actors to debate these questions and identify robust ways to deal with power dynamics with the aim to achieve evidence-based policy.

As a synthesis of the discussion and backed by relevant literature, this GSPI thought piece invites proponents of evidence-based thinking to examine power dynamics in science-policy relationships, consider the means to navigate these, as well as learn how to exercise their own power. The interplay of three core beliefs, often formed during early academic training, is likely to give rise to a feeling of discomfort with this suggestion in many readers.

Evidence is evidence - it shouldn’t require power to see it used, just common sense!

Politics is dirty. Science is pure and objective. Let’s not mix the two.

The role of the scientific community is to be neutral, to be an ‘honest broker’ and that’s all.

If one holds these beliefs, then the exercise of power in evidence-production and use may feel like tarnishing the process, and the credibility and neutrality of what is produced.

We present three ideas to question these assumptions and offer thoughts on how to engage with issues of power constructively.

1. Power dynamics influence evidence production and use anyway, both intentionally and unintentionally.

As with many policy problems, the Sustainable Development Goals are multidimensional and are highly interconnected. They can be interpreted and advocated in different ways and for different reasons (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005). For instance, reducing inequality may be an economic goal as much as a principled action to increase fairness, or even a means to reduce conflict. These
various interpretations result in policy actors pushing for different solutions, different metrics of success. This is an arena where competing interpretations must face each other and interact (Cairney, 2016). Policy actors rely on framing strategies to convince one another about their own interpretations and instrumentalise the media or catastrophes to illustrate them (Young et al., 2002). This interplay is what we call politics. And it is subject to cognitive and emotional determinants as well as social factors. Power arguably plays an important role in which interpretation of reality ends up being prioritised by the policy-making process.

Two complementary perspectives on power shed light on its potentially pervasive influence in evidence production and use. Power can be understood as an individual’s or a group’s ability to achieve what they desire. This ability can take the form of different kinds of agency.

1. Powerful actors have the agency to reach their goals as they define them according to their values, beliefs and interests (Flyverbom et al., 2015). For example, policy-makers who often have a solution to a problem in mind (Cairney, 2016) can decide which evidence to select to support their choices. Similarly, policy-makers can convene experts who will provide an additional voice for their ideas, instead of a contrasting one.

2. They have agency over other actors (in the form of control or influence) (Smith and Hofmann, 2016). For example, a director can require their team to conduct a review of the evidence before it develops an intervention.

3. They gain agency to influence policy-making because they partake in collective actions which allow them to multiply their individual agency (Smith and Hofmann, 2016). For example, the World Health Organization’s guideline review committee aims to improve the extent to which guidelines rely on evidence. The committee consists of individuals that believe in the utility of evidence but could not influence institutional processes alone.

Additionally, we think of power as emergent from the structure underlying policy-making and other processes:

1. The current distribution of power defines power inequalities and the extent to which powerful actors have more agency than others (Hill and Varone, 2016). For example, UN diplomats from developing countries have less resources to rely on relevant experts to advise on the variety of topics diplomats must decide on. The influence of this structure lies in the relative difference of power between actors.

2. Institutions have powers because they set standards, norms and regulations which reach large populations for a long time (Smith and Hofmann, 2016). For example, the International Organization for Standardisation sets standards on how laboratories must operate, conduct and release their research.

3. The configuration of social networks facilitates or restricts access to resources and central actors (Berbés-Blázquez et al., 2016). Evidence does not speak for itself and thus needs individuals to spread it through policy networks. For example, a scientist with a limited policy network will be unlikely to be commissioned by political institutions to provide expertise while scientists who have already engaged with institutions can reinforce their network position.
4. Incentives orientate actors’ interests and actions and thus define the type of powers that individuals aim to pursue (Dowding, 2008; Giddens and Nugent, 2010). For instance, elected policy actors seek to pass the electoral test and thus are unlikely to consider the evidence that contradicts what their electoral base believes.

All in all, power is the counterpart of information. Even if the information is scientific, power dynamics still exist.

2. Power dynamics influence the scientific process

The scientific process is not neutral because scientists also have implicit or explicit values and beliefs. For instance, they might have epistemological stances (i.e. what is truth?), methodological preferences (i.e. how to study truth?), and moral inclinations (i.e. what is worth studying?). Therefore, values and beliefs have an impact on which type of research scientists conduct and, by extension, on which knowledge gets produced.

If one recognises that scientists have pre-existing values, one must also acknowledge that research does not happen in a vacuum but - often - in an institutional context. This context features academic and funding institutions who have limited resources and must de facto prioritise and support selected types of research. Therefore, to be able to conduct the research they desire, scientists must build a network, frame their research to appeal to the values and beliefs of other individuals, and progressively shape the institutional contexts such that their research gets more supported (Callon et al., 1986).

These dynamics are a function of power. One example is when researchers aim to conduct interdisciplinary research in a disciplinary institution and must convince their directors to support their research. The success of this endeavour often boils down to researchers’ agency and power structures.

Experienced scientists know the influence of power dynamics in science. It is time to go beyond the romantic view that the scientific process is completely neutral and to admit the fact that power also drives science.Acknowledging power dynamics in science does not reduce the value of scientific findings. Instead, it helps to understand the context of the research and encourage scientists to not form unrealistic beliefs about their process. This can help them see how to use their own power.

3. The scientific community has power and rules for exercising it

If proponents of evidence-based thinking were to combine scientific rigor with pragmatism and thus rely on their power to influence policy processes, what is their power?

Individual researchers have power through their expertise. First, researchers tend to specialise on particular topics which allows them to acquire in-depth knowledge that most other individuals often
do not have. Cultivating this specialisation puts them in a position where their opinion is, theoretically, more powerful. Second, topic specialisation reinforces the external perception of researchers, putting them on a pedestal to express themselves on these topics. Therefore, researchers must be aware of their individual power through knowledge and resulting perception.

The scientific community detains power because it acts as a collective. First, it can act as a single voice to express a consensus on policy-relevant issues. For example, a scientific consensus supports that climate change is human-induced (Pachauri et al., 2015). Second, scientists can form epistemic communities, which are networks of knowledgeable experts who advise policy-makers on the problems they face (Haas, 1992, 2015).

Moreover, research institutions such as universities exercise extensive power through their image, resources and network. They are the institutional representation of knowledge and generally are perceived as credible and rigorous. Global spending on research and development has reached 1.7 trillion dollars in 2017. Moreover, institutions have policy actors in their alumni networks and build partnerships with policy institutions to promote the exchange between research and policy-making.

Last but not least, some research institutions are also embedded within policy institutions in order to directly advise decision-makers. Two prominent examples are the International Panel on Climate Change which assesses the science on climate change for the United Nations and the Joint Research Centre, which provides scientific advice to the European Commission. Both are characterised by large funding, in-house expertise and strong policy networks. They also develop expertise in how to bridge science and policy (Topp et al., 2018).

What can you do to foster the use of evidence in policy-making?

The above content clarifies the influence of power on research production and use, the scientific process as well as the fact that researchers do have power too. Taking this realistic perspective allows us to delineate pragmatic strategies to promote the use of evidence and reason in policymaking (see Oliver and Cairney (2019) for a more extensive review of advice to academics).

1. Don’t view rigorous research and political engagement as mutually exclusive.

We believe that the production of high-quality research and political engagement are not mutually exclusive. It is possible to do both. Researchers should put their primary focus on generating evidence of the highest quality, even if their focus is on policy-relevant questions. If they were to navigate policy networks to advise decision-makers, then they can use a different toolbox which does not contradict with producing relevant research before or after. It is important to encourage the involvement of researchers in policy-making processes but it should not reduce the quality of the information they produce. Both pertain to different activities that, when combined, can deliver high value.

2. Conduct power-mapping analyses.

The likelihood that scientific information and methodologies inform policy decisions depends on how
they spread in policy networks. This means that it is conditional upon actors’ power to use and
diffuse them. To understand these dynamics, proponents of evidence-based thinking must leverage
methodologies used by advocacy groups to understand power landscapes. Doing power-mapping
analyses will allow understanding how to frame information, to whom and when. For example, see

3. Appeal to the hegemony or work with the minority depending on the context.

In practice, the levers to influence decisions vary across contexts and limited resources prevent from
working with everyone. Power-mapping analyses shed light on which actors must receive informa-
tion, be convinced or empowered. Sometimes, such actors are the hegemony, such as a president
or strong interest groups. Sometimes, such actors are the minority, such as the beneficiaries or the
people who do not have a voice at the table. Being pragmatic involves making the hard choices on
who to communicate with. Such hard choices will influence network building strategy and how to
frame information.

4. Be entrepreneurial and use your power

If you aim to influence decisions, you must take the initiative, build relevant networks, and package
your information in a way that appeals to other people’s beliefs and emotions. While the scientific
process is about bias minimization and rigour, political engagement is about counting on others’
biases. Moreover, if your power builds upon perception, then you should use it to increase your
chances of being heard. We understand that this is conflicting for people who want to promote
evidence and reason and value honesty. Yet, being pragmatic is about forming the belief that it is
valuable to engage with political reality as is in order to achieve one’s goals. By writing this explicitly,
we hope to lower the barrier to political engagement and give power to other actors who want to
support decisions with sound information.

5. Find allies

Find like-minded individuals within the scientific and policy communities who can introduce you to
relevant actors, update you about on-going processes, give you advice on how to frame information
and when to act, and reinforce your credibility. Science-policy interface platforms, such as the GSPI,
may offer useful resources and expertise in order to create the right connections and support strate-
gic policy engagement. Moreover, finding allies allows you to exercise the power of the collective (as
defined above) as well as identify the complementary skills and networks that, together with yours,
increase the chances of influencing decisions.

Conclusion

This think piece aims to communicate three core arguments.

First, power dynamics influence the production and use of evidence. Proponents of evidence-based
thinking must take them into account to build a realistic understanding of the context in which they
want to act.
Second, researchers have power themselves, either as individuals and communities or through their institutions. They should not shy away from using this power if they want to influence decisions.

Third, using power and engaging in the policy-making process should not reduce scientific integrity and evidence quality. We offer pragmatic strategies that can be implemented alongside rigorous research.

About the Geneva Science-Policy Interface

Backed by ETH, EPFL, IHEID, LERU, UZH, UNIGE and CERN, the Geneva Science-Policy Interface (GSPI) is an independent, neutral platform that strives to enhance scientific engagement with global governance actors within the Geneva ecosystem, aiming to facilitate the emergence of effective policy and strategic solutions to complex problems. The GSPI works at the intersection of science and policy, leveraging the synergy between actors of international Geneva and an extensive network of researchers to promote the development of effective practices.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank the participants of the event on Politics and power in evidence-based policy in Geneva on the 1st of October 2019 for having contributed to this think piece through open discussions.
References


