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Workshop 30: The Politics of Policy Appraisal

Organisers:

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Abstract

Policy appraisal systems have emerged in recent decades to fulfil a variety of purposes, including, at the very broadest scale, attempting to deliver cross-cutting goals like more sustainable development, and address emerging large-scale global change challenges such as climate change. But policy appraisal systems have encountered some well-known difficulties in these aims, such as how well they truly offer representative stakeholder consultation, and how far they increase the influence of 'evidence' within the policy process. There are clear higher-level political considerations in play than there being simply too few resources available for appraisals. This workshop particularly examines sustainable development as a major cross-cutting issue, and hence takes an interdisciplinary approach to better understanding policy appraisal's role in delivering cross-cutting goals. The aims are 1) to better *define* appraisal, including different aims, concepts and terminology; 2) to better *explain* appraisal: how the political, institutional, cultural and organisational context shapes appraisal's goals and design; 3) to better *evaluate* appraisal: what counts as 'successful' and why - and are appraisals successful?; 4) to better engage with non-academic audiences: what processes and contexts promote usable knowledge?

Outline of the topic

Recent years have seen rapidly rising interest in how to make the policy-making process more effective in addressing global challenges such as climate change, energy security and food production. One of the main responses has been to employ and institutionalise new forms of *policy appraisal*, in order to make 'better' policy and deliver, especially, on cross-cutting policy goals such as sustainable development (SD) and/or on improving regulation (e.g. Cabinet Office, 1999; CEC, 2002; Russel & Jordan, 2007, Jacob et al. 2008). But this drive has achieved rather mixed results. There appear to be a range of constraints to the operation and effectiveness of policy appraisal, from resource availability to large-scale institutional barriers (e.g. Hertin *et al.*, in press).

To understand how and why the shift to more institutionalised systems of policy appraisal has taken the forms it has, and how this has altered uptake of evidence in the policy process, insights are required from different areas of literature, including policy analysis, evidence-based policy-making, law, political science, risk analysis, and economics. Approaches vary regarding the object of research, such as methodologies for appraisal, institutional analysis or science-policy interrelations. By bringing different schools of researchers together and sharing knowledge and experience, we also aim to better understand how more effective operation of appraisals can be developed.

The aim of this workshop is to address both this community-building need, and a significant academic gap: there is actually little empirical research on institutional and operational barriers to the role of policy appraisal, particularly in achieving more sustainable development.

The workshop builds on 'The Politics of Evidence-Based Policy-Making' workshop at the 2008 Joint Sessions, and also provides a bridge between the Green Politics and Theoretical Perspectives in Policy Analysis Standing Groups. We invite papers which address one or more of four identified priorities, using sustainable development as a 'meta case study':

1) *To better define appraisal:*

- defining concepts of appraisal and the evidence-policy relationship from different disciplinary perspectives and policy domains. How far are different approaches complementary or contradictory? What translation occurs between policy-maker and analytical discourses?
- exploring and defining the various positive and normative goals of appraisal (such as improving quality of regulation, protecting the environment, minimising costs)

2) *To better explain appraisal, and the opportunities and barriers to appraisal's effectiveness:*

- explaining causal mechanisms, including of effectiveness, and to develop a theoretical framework for an improved understanding of policy appraisals

- exploring how the political, institutional, cultural and organisational context shapes the goals and design of appraisal, in how far such contextual variables influence design, use and outcome of policy appraisals.

3) *To better evaluate appraisal:*

- defining the different criteria for assessing the ‘success’ or ‘quality’ of policy appraisal activities, including process, outcomes and impacts of appraisals
- exploring how appraisals are used, how effective they are in achieving their goals and how this can be evaluated
- exploring who is involved in the appraisal process in practice, and why
- exploring in how far appraisal actually works towards policy integration, and the consideration of SD in policy development

4) *To better engage with non-academic audiences:*

- assessing how academics, wider society and policy makers become engaged in co-production of knowledge
- exploring what processes and contexts promote usable knowledge and what kind of knowledge is useful in the political process
- debating appropriate checks and balances in appraisal design, and the limits to stakeholder consultation; exploring how far appraisals are a suitable and effective way to engage wider society in policy development
- developing new ways of designing appraisals
- exploring future directions for research on policy appraisal and evaluation

Relation to existing research

Interest in delivering more sustainable development has been mirrored within the academic literature on assessment, with the concept of integration playing a major part in the further development of policy appraisal. Integration in appraisal is often taken to mean linking the three pillars of sustainability – economic, social and environmental (e.g. Lee, 2002; see also Kidd & Fischer, 2007). But integrated appraisals do not necessarily have 'more sustainable policy' as their primary goal; other pertinent issues such as employment, minimising legislative costs, or cost effectiveness are also regarded as politically salient tasks for appraisal to tackle (Lee, 2002; Kidd & Fischer, 2007). Some parts of the appraisal literature (e.g. Scrase & Sheate, 2002) have therefore included other dimensions of integration such as: enhancing transparency and participation, integration between different levels (e.g. national and local), integration of appraisal results into governance (e.g. George & Kirkpatrick, 2007), and integration across policy domains. Some of these additional dimensions are explicitly mentioned in guidelines issued to policy-makers who are meant to undertake appraisals (e.g. Cabinet Office, 2003; CEC, 2005).

But integration, however defined, is proving difficult to achieve in practice in the new policy appraisal systems (Turnpenny *et al*, in press). First, integration across economic, social and environmental aspects appears enormously complicated. The holism of SD poses particular challenges as procedures of policy appraisal have to deal with long-term and cross sectoral impacts with potential synergies and trade offs between temporal, spatial and issue related impacts. Research reveals that appraisals are often highly focussed on the economic, or at least the more easily quantifiable, impacts of a policy proposal, and neglect the social and environmental aspects which are often not monetisable or easily comparable either with each other or with other kinds of impact (eg. Wilkinson, 2004; EEAC, 2006; Renda, 2006; NAO, 2006). Second, the same research often shows that integration of a wider range of stakeholders' perspectives into appraisal appears rather limited. Stakeholder involvement is often limited to providing input on the choice between a limited set of options rather than radically redirecting policy. In spite of political promises that appraisal will deliver greater objectivity and transparency, appraisal processes appear to buffer decisions from public scrutiny (Rayner, 2003: 167). Third, the integration of appraisal knowledge into policy-making is also proving to be highly complicated (eg. Turnpenny & O'Riordan, 2007); a modern manifestation of the old problem of what Carol Weiss terms 'little effect'. The knowledge produced by appraisals is often little used in policy-making (eg. Owens, 2005), and when used, it is often to bolster political positions and justify decisions already taken (cf. Bulmer, 1980; Fischer, 1995; Russel and Jordan 2007). In fact, policy formulation is often constrained well before the decision-making process has formally started, for example by pre-existing political initiatives and policies, by administrative procedures, and by international and European Union (EU) legal frameworks and commitments (Hertin *et al*, in press; Russel & Jordan 2007).

Participants

We will build on existing network contacts, including, for example, the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Evidence Network, the FP6 European Network on Better Regulation (ENBR), the international Politics of Policy Appraisal network, and networks around the politics of evidence-based policy-making. We encourage contributions from scholars of policy evaluation, public policy, environmental and sustainability assessment, political science, law and better regulation with the aim of enhancing mutual learning. We also aim to ensure a balance between contributions from senior and junior researchers.

Type of paper

The workshop is a means to better understand the politics of policy appraisal, to improve understanding of barriers and opportunities for effective appraisal, and to identify potential improvements to appraisal practice. The workshop is a valuable opportunity to bring together those working on research which:

- Develops different appraisal tools and methods
- Encompasses both a theoretical and an empirical perspective
- Encompasses different epistemological and practical perspectives on appraisal and evidence-based policy-making

At the workshop we will explore the opportunities for high profile publication, for example in an edited book, or journal special issue, and also potential grant applications.

Funding

An application to the European Science Foundation for network funding (decision pending) could be used to bolster the ECPR's support.

Biographical Note

John Turnpenny is a Senior Research Associate at the Tyndall Centre and CSERGE, University of East Anglia. John's recent projects include the EU-funded MATISSE, on the use made of policy analysis in policymaking, the 'real world' research needs of policymakers, and the various constraints conditioning selection of policy analysis tools. Recent relevant publications include a framework for tool selection in sustainability assessment (de Ridder *et al*, 2007), on the use of climate change knowledge by regional policymakers (Turnpenny & O'Riordan, 2007) and on institutional aspects of integrating policy assessment.

Klaus Jacob is a senior research fellow and research director at the Environmental Policy Research Centre / Freie Universität Berlin. His main foci of research are innovation oriented environmental policy and environmental policy integration. He participated in a number of national and European projects developing and evaluating tools and systems for policy impact assessments, including IQ-Tools and EVIA. Recent publications include the co-editorship of *Politik und Umwelt*. (Politics and the Environment) PVS special edition 39/2007 and *Environmental Governance in Global Perspective: New Approaches to Ecological and Political Modernisation*.

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