



Sustainable Lifestyles Research Group

Overview of Policy–Research Dialogues project

SLRG conference, London
3rd June 2014

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SLRG Policy Dialogues project

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- Goals and context
- Method
- Fieldwork
- Issues and ideas for policy and research communities



Research questions and goals

- How do policymakers use research evidence and relate to research communities in the course of policy development ?
- How can researchers make their evidence topical and accessible to policymakers?
- Explore the experience of policy communities in using research evidence in relation to sustainable living and ‘pro-environmental’ behaviours
- Explore the experience of research communities in generating evidence and ideas for policy audiences
- Synthesis: develop a policy ‘tool’ that can be a guide for better linkage between social science research, policy development and evaluation of ‘impact’ from evidence



Policy and research communities

- Distinct professional identities, goals and settings:
 - supplier/client–user
 - academic/‘frontline’
- Convergence:
 - shared organisation
 - mainstreaming
 - what works?
 - action research



Context for the project

- Economic crisis, spending pressures and deregulation
- End of SDC and other institutions for research-policy interaction & challenge
- Civil service reform
- Strong focus on ‘what works’ and value/impact of evidence
- Evidence investment strategy review and production of evidence plans for each policy priority of Defra
- Defra: embedding social research in policy teams



More on strategic context

- **Factors reshaping policy–research ‘landscape’ :**
 - Austerity:
 - economic policy priorities and politics of sustainability; value from evidence investment
 - SD evolution:
 - Green economy, ‘mainstreaming’ in Government, public sector, business, civil society
 - Complexity in the UK:
 - DAs and strategies for sustainability and environmental action; grassroots and corporate SD initiatives
- **Value and impact from research evidence:**
 - What Works centres in Whitehall
 - Behavioural Insights: ‘Nudge’ and RCTs
 - Closer evidence–policy alignment
 - Open Policy–Making initiative

Methods



LITERATURE REVIEW

- Academic and policy literature on impact of research on policymaking
- Eg ESRC impact assessment literature, including evaluations of policy and practice impacts, and synthesis studies on influence of research
- Links to PACHELBEL study in Defra: EU programme on utilisation of research knowledge in policy-making organisations (<http://www.pachelbel.eu>)
- Links to SPRG work (Sarah Parry, Edinburgh) on policy-research connections and development of 'trading zones' between social scientists and policy actors

Methods

1. Expert respondents: 'boundary-spanning' experience
2. Defra case study
3. Scottish Government case study

FIELDWORK

1. **BOUNDARY-SPANNING EXPERTS**
 - Expert informants with experience of working in and across diverse policy and research communities
 - 14 experts: semi-structured interviews with follow-up discussions around presentations of SLRG projects
2. **DEFRA CASE STUDY**
 - Interviews with research & policy staff
 - Case study of policy development and influence in relation to evidence base on pro-environmental behaviours
3. **SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT CASE STUDY**
 - Interviews with research & policy staff
 - Case study of policy development and influence in relation to evidence base on low-carbon behaviours



The boundary-spanners

- Experience across past decade and more of SD research / policy
- Experience of commissioning, conducting and using research; and of policy advisor roles
- Reflecting diversity: experience of Whitehall, Edinburgh, Cardiff, RDAs & local policy systems, universities, think-tanks, consulting, advocacy



Interviews with boundary-spanners

- How does research inform policy development?
- What is problematic for policymakers in relation to research?
- What is problematic for researchers in relation to policy development?
- What opportunities and ideas for enhanced interaction?



Boundary-Spanners' views: Questions and methods

- Perception of risks in current prominence of RCTs as gold standard for evidence and testing of interventions
- Perception of risks of a narrow concept of 'intervention' and outcomes
- Do the questions we ask and the policies being applied match the nature of our sustainability challenges ?
- Issues: structural economic transformation for sustainability, limits to policy individualism, experimental grassroots processes, long-range influences as well as definable short-term impacts



Boundary-Spanners on Policy: Processes, politics & pluralism

- Policy processes – orderly and planned phases coexisting with disruptive political events / decisions, with their demands on time, evidence-gathering and sense-making
- Policymaking is framed and powered by political aims and motivations: ‘evidence-based policy is not the same as evidence-led policy’ (B-Sp interviewee)
- Big picture framing in politics is not ‘SD’: it is recovery from 2008
- **Policymaking and translation of research into action: need to look beyond Whitehall and DAs – business, communities, NGOs, local governance systems**



Boundary-Spanners on issues in research-policy relations

- Academic researchers don't understand policy processes well
- Perceived problem: capacity for evaluation and synthesis in policy communities in Whitehall
- Anxieties over Departmental reorganisations, cuts, turnover, loss of collective memory, risk of lower capacity for synthesis and evaluation
- How to align effectively with policy cycles/concerns?
- Yes to rapid appraisal and tight link to outcomes – but need room for patience and open-endedness
- Perceived low political interest in sustainability, pro-environmental behaviours, environmental citizenship



Boundary-spanners: looking ahead

- Towards ‘co-production’ ? : ‘Open Policy Making’ and research mainstreaming as opportunities
- Secondments for better understanding of policy by researchers
- Shared agenda of ‘impact’ – fields of influence not ‘golden threads’, need for timely translations of research
- Multiplicity of policymakers & settings for research-policy-innovation dialogues : not just Whitehall & DAs but in local governance, business, think-tanks & civil society, international networks
- Invest in relationships with, and development of, research/policy/delivery brokers at all levels
- Spaces & processes for dialogue:
 - SDRN, LWEC, What Works for SD?
 - ESRC Nexus Network+ as model?



Summary of B-Sp views: brokerage and interaction

Loss of SDC, RCEP, RDAs and RAs; funding pressures...
What spaces and investment models for interaction and
for development of boundary-spanning
brokers and translators?



Need for more
interaction and boundary-spanning
within and between communities