



**Comments to the Research-Policy Symposium  
Oxford, 16<sup>th</sup> November 2006  
By Andrew Barnett**

1. It has been a pleasure to participate in such an interesting meeting. It is a difficult task to summarise such a rich and diverse set of presentations. I will however try to set what I heard into three themes.

**Theme One: The Nature of Evidence**

2. Many presentations raised issues of the nature of the evidence – people have used the term “evidence” to describe many different things. For instance we were told that “information is not evidence”. I would add that “a narrative” or story is also not “evidence in the sense that it has been used in the context of Evidence Based Policy (EBP).
3. The term EPB in the UK at least appears to have been coined to be a counter balance ideologically driven policy of the Thatcher/Regan era.
4. The meeting acknowledged that there are other drivers of policy change, including “might”, ideology and politics.
5. There is clearly a danger in using the term “evidence” to mean
  - a. All the outputs of “research” – research produces theories, ideas, models, empirical evidence, statistically significant numbers and so on.
  - b. Anything that works to convince policy makers – I particularly noted the warning of the term “policy based evidence”.
6. The speaker from Argentina gave us an eloquent description of the value of good evidence in the formulation of policy (it tells us what works). Comments from the floor from Indonesia also told us that evidence can be used as a stick with which to beat governments – to hold them to account – to put the “alternative statistics” in the public domain – so that the public could see what the effects of government policy has been.
7. This part of the discussion leads me to conclude: policy impact correlates with the simplicity of the message. But it poses the question what else correlates with simple messages? I guess that it correlates with reductionism, lack of evidence, lack of insight into the complexity of the real world, and probably falsity!
8. Reference was made to the recent report of the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and technology (which I have not read). Press coverage of this report suggested it warned of the dangers of governments “spinning” scientific evidence to support their position.
9. Much has been said about “advocacy” – while making evidence, insight and analysis more widely available is certainly part of what we mean by advocacy. But another part is the idea that “advocacy spins the evidence” (probably meaning that uncomfortable evidence is suppressed).

## **Theme Two: Conceptual Models of Evidence and Policy Making**

10. I think that it is important to find away of thinking about all the different types of knowledge and the processes that surround its production and use. I find it useful to think of the analogy provided by the “food chain”. We can think of the following:
- “Top Feeders” – Oxfam, Journalists and lobbyists
  - Think Tanks – ODI (that take research and put it in a form useful to the top feeders). It is worth noting however that in recent years Think Tanks have been increasingly associated with a particular ideology or political idea (not ODI – except that it is associated with liberal aspirations to reduce poverty).
  - Quality Assured information Portals (eg ELDIS)
  - People and organisations associated with training, the production of text books (e-books were mentioned), syntheses etc.
  - The production of scientific papers and technology, including INASP that facilitates access to such information and knowledge.
  - The “bottom feeders” who do the heaving lifting associated with the development of theories, empirical evidence, and (as was mentioned) the unexpected results of research).
11. The conclusion is that properly functioning economies are likely to need all parts of this food chain. While DFID may well have concentrated in the past too much on bottom feeders, the recent pendulum shift towards the top feeders – while probably a good thing will inevitably have to be re-adjusted in time when they find that the other parts of the knowledge system are not working well.
12. We had a wonderful presentation on the effectiveness of Korea in developing its National System of Innovation and how these ideas were being introduced into Pakistan. The world knows a great deal about how to foster “innovation”. A person at the DTI described research as the process that converts money into knowledge, while innovation is the process that converts knowledge into money!
13. The important lesson for me from that presentation was that in addition to worrying about the supply side of knowledge creation and acquisition, one had to worry equally hard about the demand side. This process attaches great importance the intermediary organisations, such as consulting and engineering design organisations, and to business development services. The message from Pakistan is that all the parties must “engage” with each other.
14. The question is does the innovation systems model work for the policy process? Certainly from what I have heard today it is clear that engagement is also key to the research-policy process. Similarly intermediaries are also important (including communication specialists). Also we have heard of the intermediaries who are inside ministries who act as “product champions”. (The conversation was overly focussed on policy makers in government, but there are also policy makers in the private sector, in NGO in households - “on farms and in factories”).
15. In the policy process it is often the journalists who can “open up the space” in which outsiders can engage in the policy/evidence process. I also liked

the idea of grabbing “policy windows” – timeliness. I am reminded by this that in 1968 when I first started to learn about these issues my professor (Marie Jahoda) said that the effectiveness of communications was determined by four factors. I wonder if we have moved forward from this in the subsequent 40 years. These factors were:

- a. The timeliness of the message
- b. The clarity of the message
- c. The credibility of the source, as perceived by the audience
- d. The appropriateness of the format of the message – appropriate to the audience not appropriate to the convenience of the communicator!

### **Theme Three: New Policy Process Models**

16. But I think it is important to note the “new” policy models – only some of which have been mentioned. These include the so-called “drivers of change” approach that gives emphasis to earlier insights gained from what used to be called the political economy approach. But this itself raised the question about who has legitimacy in engaging in the policy process? Do you want external actors (researchers, donors etc) engaging in your internal political process? The answer from today is probably yes, sometimes!
17. One feature of the new policy models is the rise in “systems thinking” as opposed to earlier linear models. There is now widespread use of biological analogies that have taken over from the analogies based on Newtonian Physics (if you hit this billiard ball the following will happen). We now talk of
  - Interaction
  - Complexity
  - Lack of control over certain elements of the system
  - Long term perspectives
  - And above all else trade the issue of trade-offs – if you do (a) then you cannot do (b) and by the way there will be lots of unforeseen consequences on x, y and z!
18. This contrasts with the political processes that appear to be
  - Short term
  - Overly responsive to single issue lobbyists (both “big business”, but also now increasingly single issue NGO)
  - Knee-jerk responses
19. While the presentation from Oxfam was no doubt a good reflection of what they do, and how to be effective as a single issue lobbyist. Do we really want political decisions to be made on the basis of a single killer fact. Government by anecdote? As the talk went on I wondered whether Oxfam was part of the solution or part of the problem – certainly I am not inclined to believe that Oxfam would not suppress “evidence” that did not coincide with their pre-conceived idea.
20. US government is often said to be plagued by the power of lobbyists and the power of money. Is this inevitable?

### Three Take-Away messages

- a. “engage, engage, engage” – with all parts of the knowledge food chain
  - b. “horses for courses” – don’t lump into one category all policy processes and all types of evidence. Clearly there are some policy decisions that need heavy scientific evidence. There is clearly a question of the validity and the credibility of evidence – this is a major are for this group to worry about. “Transparency” about the sources of evidence, methods etc may well be a key.
  - c. Build “policy literacy” (a term mentioned by someone at the meeting – was it Zambia), but this must mean both increasing the literacy (capacity) of those who use evidence in the formulation and implementation of policy, AND of those that supply the evidence.
21. As economist cant count, might I add a forth?!! This is the issue of accountability, particularly of lobbyists. I sense a strong backlash from democratically elected governments (particularly in Africa) against single issue pressure groups. One Minister said to me recently “I will not be held to ransom, by three young people working out of a broom cupboard in Washington DC”!!!
22. So when I am dictator I would certainly ban single issue NGO lobbyists – and if I cannot do this I would certainly “advocate” a code of conduct for them.

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