

Evidence Based Policy: 'build on' or 'spray on'

David Halpern – Does evidence matter? – ODI – 30 April 2003

It is nice to be here. Firstly I should just confess that mainly I work on domestic policy. I am told that that is ok, but many of the examples I give therefore will be domestic ones. I will talk to the title of an issue which is being discussed in Government, about whether evidence is something that we build on, or whether it is something we just spray on.

A few words about the Strategy Unit so you know what it is and where I am coming from. We are known both as 'the Strategy Unit' in the Cabinet Office, or as 'the PM's Strategy Unit'. So we serve the Prime Minister. We do a mixture of both relatively public reviews, which are often divided into a large evidence-gathering exercise and which we nearly always publish if we can (we have learnt that this is the right thing to do, for lots of reasons) and then sometimes more private reviews on what the politics is and so on. We take long-term cross-departmental views on issues – that is our value-added. It is project-based, so we assemble teams of people from both outside and inside to work on particular issues. I believe we operate an evidence-based approach. I have to confess that I am a bit naïve about this. I have worked in all parts of government and I almost cannot understand how else you can do policy, but of course policy is often done in other ways.

I am going to cover, quite succinctly, classic examples of successes and failures, in terms of the impact of the evidence on the subsequent decision, in the UK domestic context particularly; what characterised the effective use of evidence (essentially what makes the difference: what made it work in one case and in another the argument did not fly), and how can we do it better.

I am going to try to do that first from the perspective of how can we – government – do it better, but also try to reflect back to the mindset of an academic or being in a think-tank. Of course, it is an informal view, a cluster of thoughts.

So, the key question: are we in a new golden age of evidence-based policy? Or are we a spray-on cover for decisions that we would have made anyway?

Classic success stories:

Literacy strategy

The literacy strategy in Britain is perhaps the most quoted example of success. Back in 1996 we had Michael Barber [then responsible for drafting the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy, now head of the PM's Delivery Unit] and a group of people coming together to try to work out what the problem was in terms of low-levels of literacy and numeracy, particularly at the primary level, and to look at what you could do about it. They looked at a wide range of evidence to try to work out what would work to improve literacy and numeracy. Indeed, it was something just to believe that it was possible after years and years, when many people believed that there was nothing you could do about it (which was patently not the case when you looked in terms of international comparisons).

A big part of the success of the literacy strategy was not just that the evidence was put together, but how it was put together. It was about building a certain coalition and consensus amongst many of the stakeholders. I am going to focus mainly on the evidence-based approach, but that is nested within a wider set of issues about what leads to effective policy intervention and change. Those are two different types of stories.

The literacy strategy was very successful and with a very high profile. Although the ultimate targets have not quite been reached on time, nonetheless it was a spectacular turnaround in terms of Key Stage One and Key Stage Two in British schools. From an evidence-based policy viewpoint, it can and has been criticised on specific points, for example about insufficient emphasis on phonetics and so on not being adequately covered. There is also the question of how far we can say that the improvements in literacy and numeracy actually resulted from the strategy and therefore from the evidence. Because it was pretty universally applied – or encouraged perhaps we should say – it is actually quite difficult to track whether that original strategy was the cause, from an evidence-based point of view.

Active Welfare or New Deal

Active welfare or New Deal was another classic example. Particularly borrowing on Scandinavian evidence about

how you could achieve much higher participation in the labour market through certain means. It drew on that and also on evidence from Richard Layard [London School of Economics] and others about how unemployment was moving across countries, between cycles and so on.

Early Years

Early Years is a more current example. Spending reviews are supposed partly to be evidence-based pleas to the government and to Treasury. A Department will make a submission saying you should give us x many more billion pounds because we will spend it well and here are our ideas. As part of that process, SureStart was put together, partly based on US evidence. In the last spending review, a successful bid around a massive expansion of childcare was definitely swung by an evidence-based argument and it was a particularly good submission to treasury and it continues to be an area, even though it is very expensive in terms of pre-school interventions, where there is quite a lot of focus and is very much driven by the evidence of, for example, the extent to which the Scandinavian countries have been able to break the link between class origins and class destinations, specifically through pre-school. Or to put it another way, the extent to which standard education has not broken the link and therefore you have to look elsewhere. And longitudinal data suggests that a vast amount of the attainment gap can be seen in under-five year olds, in fact it can be seen even at twenty-two months, which suggests you have to do something before that, even though government is not particularly comfortable about it in some ways.

A few other examples to mention in passing include:

The Energy white paper: whilst it may not be perfect, it is certainly true that it is an argument and an area which is being driven strongly by the science base, because there are high costs of getting involved.

Higher Education: for example, the OECD cross-national analyses about the contribution of various kinds of research and development to economic growth has definitely had a big impact, especially in the medical area.

Failures – or areas where the discrepancy between the evidence base and the policy is larger:

Classically, criminal justice, crime etc.

Mary Tuck when she was at the Home Office [ex-head of the Research and Stats Unit] put this in a particularly forthright way about the discrepancies between what governments had done for many years in terms of policy and what was it actually known, in terms of the evidence base, would reduce crime. This is an area where the gaps are particularly large.

Primary healthcare:

Arguments about if you really want to improve primary health, not just in the UK context but nationally, what is the way to do it. The political temptation is always to go for secondary healthcare as opposed to trying to pick up causes early. Similarly with attempting to do things about mothers' education and so on in different contexts.

Life satisfaction:

Partly I just threw this in because I was doing something on it this morning at Downing Street and I have this graph, which I think is great. I was tempted to get it stuck on a T-shirt and wander around Treasury. But basically what it shows is GDP per capita, which is the line going up and up, and life satisfaction for the UK – depressingly flat. What it poses is the fundamental question about what is it you are trying to achieve and what are your levers. Anyway, it certainly poses questions, if not answers.

What drives impact?

There has to be evidence there:

This might seem quite inane, but there has to be good evidence there to have an impact and actually good evidence normally takes a long time to assemble, particularly when you want for example, great longitudinal data with cross-national comparisons and so on. You are not going to get that in a six week period when you suddenly have to do something in that area. It has to be there already.

Someone has to know it:

Again in some ways this is trite, but also phenomenally important. The way in which knowledge gets transmitted is not primarily through someone reading very detailed technical papers somewhere in government (although that does happen a little bit). You have to have someone there who actually understands the literature and the material well enough to be able to interpret it effectively. That is clearly absolutely critical and not to be assumed.

It has to go somewhere:

We produce various papers which go to the Prime Minister in an early draft form and he will write on the bottom 'so what?' It is all very well to explore a particular literature but it has to go somewhere with some policy implications. You have to believe that you can do something about it.

Our relationship to public attitudes and interests:

Clearly criminal justice policy etc. are constrained by these familiar issues.

'Zone of proximal development':

There is also this thing of 'zone of proximal development'. The psychologist Vygotsky used this phrase to explain development in children. His point was that siblings would learn from one another but they had to be close enough in the development process to be able to learn from one another and if the gap was substantial that learning would not occur. You see that all the time. It partly goes to this issue of absorptive capacity, but if you are way out there ahead with the evidence, it will not have that impact. You have to be in that zone where people are going to do something with it.

How can we do it better?

Within government, one of the things I have been shocked about is the extent to which departments often have this division between analysts and the policy-makers, which often makes little sense. You have to encourage experiments and variability. For evidence-based policy to work, it is not just about hiring some academic and getting them to do a review of the literature, although that might be worthy enough, but in many key areas, the system itself has to generate the evidence, because there has to be variability within it and there has to be analysis of what worked and what did not, in a systematic way. That is absolutely pivotal for creating some sort of learning system.

Be realistic about how knowledge spreads. This is not just about getting the knowledge originally but, in terms of the practices on the ground, we have to be more sophisticated than we have been about how best practice spreads. You often go into an area and think you know what the key evidence would be but we do not have it. You could put down a marker so that when you come back to the issue in five years' time, such evidence would be in play. That would be a sensible thing to do.

Statistical literacy would be nice. It is not that widespread and it is a serious limitation, not just in terms of being able to interpret a logistic progression or something but it is about being able to understand a mindset of a whole body of work.

You should talk to others. Let them know questions. It is a bit unfair when policy-makers bemoan the wider community about not delivering the right evidence at the right time and the question is, who told them? You have to know what is in the minds of the policy makers in order to know how to understand. Reform of the Research Assessment Exercise is a possible point for discussion.

Outside the black box:

The above was a message delivered to government, but in terms of the wider community, evidence is often used much more than people think it is at certain key points. People do not realise that at the right time a particular paper or piece of evidence can dominate. Key arguments can really hinge on one or two academic papers. The person who wrote it may never know that but it may happen.

You have to keep talking to policy-makers, even where this is frustrating at times. You have to keep looking for the window of opportunity. You can be banging on about an issue for years and years and no one seems to listen and then the right configuration of factors will emerge and all of a sudden it will be the issue and there will be a readiness. It is very difficult often to judge that when you have only ever worked in a particular area.

The key point is that you can have much more influence if you look to the two year rather than the two week horizon. Normally by the time things get into detailed consultation documents, government has gone a long way down the road to making formal commitments and adopting a position. You can tinker with it at the margins but if you really want to have a big impact, you normally do it before that has happened, in some more fundamental agenda-setting way.

Use intermediaries. Clearly that matters greatly. A good example might be capital endowments and asset-based welfare. Ackerman in the States and Le Grand and others in Britain made the argument quite well about why people should be given a capital endowment at a certain age but they could not really make any progress. Then

the Institute of Public Policy Research took it up and ran with it as a 'Baby Bond' and they just got good contacts. And the other thing is to do what people like me do: work inside. Increasingly there are opportunities for this. Someone told me that there are four thousand people now working in the civil service, seconded from bits of academia. They can have a very big impact.

So, in conclusion:

Evidence can be massively influential. I think there are a number of policy areas where you could say that it was utterly decisive, though not enough, and only when you are in that 'zone', when the opportunity is there. We have to be honest about it. Generally, it is not routine practice and it is not the case that most submissions and papers relate to and rely heavily on the evidence.

Evaluation is probably getting better and this is my point about a learning system: it can not just be that we occasionally stick our heads out and do a literature review. It has to be about how you conduct policy and deliberately introduce or encourage variation into systems and evaluate it in such a way that you are learning all the time about what works and what does not.

I cannot give the exact field but in a major area of policy we decided to look at all the evaluations done and all the different policies and see if we could work out their cost-effectiveness and what worked best. Of course there had been hundreds in this major area of government policy. Yet we were able to identify only two which met any kind of methodological rigour. It is getting better but there is still a long way to go.

Lastly, evidence-based policy is only one of a number of factors. There are many other things which drive whether a policy and policy change is effective: about how you engage with stakeholders and a whole variety of issues. We should not conflate evidence-based policy as being a case of 'if we did that, everything's fine'. There is more at play than that.