

Policy Entrepreneurship

Simon Maxwell – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 11 June 2003

This talk is about how researchers can be 'policy entrepreneurs'.

Why we must do better

The Academy of Learned Societies for the Social Sciences produced a report earlier this year called 'Great Expectations: the Social Sciences in Britain'. They make a point which is a starting point for our discussion, that researchers are often very bad at communicating what they know, and what they think should happen, to the people who make the decisions. We speak naively of policy issues (says the report), we demonstrate little or no awareness of current policy, we are over-technical, and sometimes we need drastic editing to make ourselves readable and understandable to key players. Of course, that critique does not apply to anyone in this room, but it may apply to some researchers some of us have met.

I want to exclude from the discussion those who are pure campaigners, even though research-rich, and those who are pure researchers, with little direct connection to poverty. Ann Pettifor provides a model of success at the campaigning end. Martin Luther King might be another example of the kind of person who takes ideas and translates them into practice, but would not normally think of themselves as potential ODI Research Fellows.

At the other extreme, we find the researcher who is not at all engaged in policy. There are perfectly legitimate reasons not to be engaged in policy, if one is concerned with pure research or if one is in an entirely academic world. I do not want to decry that.

ODI, however, is different. We exist between the campaign and the pure research. There is legitimate territory in the middle which we try to occupy. Our purpose is well-captured by the title of the book by Diane Stone (an ODI Council member): 'Capturing the Political Imagination - Think Tanks and the Policy Process'. That is the art form we need to master.

Policy-making is not a linear process

We have discussed a number of aspects of the policy process during the course of these meetings. We often start with a very simple linear model of the policy process in which the problem is identified, the alternatives are analysed and the best option is chosen, implemented and evaluated. We know policy-making does not work in that way. As Clay and Schaffer remind us: 'the whole life of policy is a chaos of purposes and accidents'.

Our job, if we wish to be policy entrepreneurs, is to unpack that statement, to see whether we can impose some order on the chaos of purposes and accidents.

We know that there is a rich literature, in anthropology, political science, sociology, public administration, and management and organisational theory. ODI reviewed this literature in an ODI Working Paper written by Rebecca Sutton in 1999, which provides an overview of the policy process. We tried to write this as the 'bluffer's guide' to the policy process, simplifying the jargon in the field, and providing a glossary.

More recently, ODI has developed a large programme of work in this area, 'Research and Policy in Development' (RAPID), led by John Young. There is an annotated bibliography and a review paper, available on the website. There are many different models of policy change presented in the literature, for example 'policy as social experiments', 'disjointed incrementalism', 'policy as argument' and 'mixed scanning'. John Young has organised these ideas around three sets of issues which provide the framework for the Working Paper: understanding the political context; understanding the links between policy and research communities; and looking carefully at the quality of evidence that is provided in that process.

I will not be talking about the whole of that framework, but instead will take a very narrow and practical question, which is the question of what we as researchers can do if we want to engage in the policy process.

Four styles of policy entrepreneurship

In seeking to break this question down, I have identified four styles of policy entrepreneurship. Each of these is informed by an image of how the researcher can best contribute to the policy process.

(a) The researcher as 'story-teller'

The first style is that represented by the story of Scheherazade, who offered to marry a sultan who had been so aggrieved by his wife's betrayal that he had taken to marrying a different woman every day and having her murdered the following morning. Scheherazade managed to survive by telling him the most wonderful stories, which she spun out for so long that she succeeded in bearing him several children and living to a happy old age.

There is a literature about the importance of telling stories in changing policy. Roe developed the idea of development narratives. For example, he argued that rural development is a genuinely uncertain activity, but that one of the principal ways that practitioners, bureaucrats and policy-makers articulate and make sense of this uncertainty is to tell stories or describe scenarios that simplify the ambiguity.

Much of the literature on this topic demonstrates that narratives can be profoundly misleading and that 'counter-narratives' develop. Leach and Mearns assemble cases in their cleverly-titled book, 'The Lie of the Land', which is about how environmental narratives tell lies. Desertification narratives are a good example of misleading over-simplification.

Narratives are, however, incredibly powerful. It is not difficult to think of powerful narratives which have informed policy: 'getting the prices right', structural adjustment, the Washington Consensus, the Post-Washington Consensus, debt-relief as the answer to poverty-reduction. These are powerful stories which help us to get over to policy-makers what the problem is and what the solution might be. So, successful policy entrepreneurs need to be good story tellers.

(b) The researcher as 'networker'

In model two, the researcher is a networker. There is a large literature which demonstrates that policy-making usually takes place within communities (policy or epistemic communities) of people who know each other and interact. President Lyndon Johnson talked about being inside the tent or outside the tent. If you are inside the tent, your voice is heard and you will have an influence. If you are outside, you will not.

ODI is a power in the land and influential because, by virtue of the position we occupy in London, we are able to help create the epistemic community which informs policy. Clare Short first heard about the international development targets sitting in a meeting like this one at ODI. She was able to take the idea from within the epistemic community and turn it into a very powerful policy vehicle. At ODI, we invest a great deal in building networks. We have the Rural Development and Forestry Network, the Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN), the Agricultural Research and Extension Network (AgREN) and many other formal and informal networks which enable us to be influential in policy.

The other example I often use is that of Zoltan Karpathy in *My Fair Lady*. When Henry Higgins had trained up Eliza Doolittle, he took her to the ball, where a Hungarian linguistics professor set out to trap her. He is described as having 'oiled his way around the floor, oozing charm from every pore'. That is what I want ODI Research Fellows to do, because that is the way that we stay within our network.

A final example comes from 'The Tipping Point', by Malcolm Gladwell, which we have referred to a number of times in this series. This is the example of Paul Revere, riding out in 1775 to raise the militia against the British. Malcolm Gladwell describes the fact that on that night, two people set out. One was Paul Revere, and the other was William Dawes. In all the villages that Paul Revere went to, the militia turned out and defeated the British. In the villages that William Dawes went to, no-one turned out to fight. Why is that? The answer is that Paul Revere was networked and William Dawes was not. Paul Revere was a well-known pewtersmith and silversmith, who sat on all the committees, was well-connected, knew people and had their trust. William Dawes did not.

(c) The researcher as 'engineer'

The third model comes from the literature about 'street-level bureaucracy' and is informed by this phrase: 'policy is what policy does'. There can be a significant implementation gap between what politicians and policy-makers think that they are doing and what actually happens on the ground. Researchers need to work not just with the senior level policy-makers, but also with the 'street-level bureaucrats'.

Who better to represent that way of working than Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Unfortunately, my favourite story about him is apocryphal, but it is worth telling nonetheless. Brunel was very much engaged in the debate about whether paddle wheels or screws were more efficient and powerful for moving boats. In order to test that theory, the (sadly apocryphal) story is that he built one of each, tied them together and put them in the Bristol Channel to see which would tug the hardest. The story captures the idea of being engaged on the ground and not just sitting in a laboratory. Needless to say, we at ODI spend a great deal of time engaged in that kind of activity.

(d) The researcher as 'fixer'

The fourth and final model of the policy entrepreneur in our field is the 'fixer'. The examples could include Rasputin and Machiavelli. This model is about understanding the policy and political process, knowing when to make your pitch and to whom.

I come to this partly from the literature on organisation and management. Charles Handy, in 'Understanding Organisations' (1976) said that if you want to change anything, you need first of all to think about your source of power. Handy identifies these sources of power as: physical power, resource power, position power, expert power, personal power and negative power. As researchers, our 'expert' power is often very powerful. If you are able to look a Minister in the eye and tell them that by applying the principles of game theory to a problem, the solution becomes obvious, they will normally crumble and do what you say. In theory.

Choices, sequences and trade-offs

So, we have four models of policy entrepreneurship that researchers can use. They are not entirely straightforward and I want to end with a few remarks about the issues involved.

First, it is necessary to use the right styles at the right times. That is both a question of choosing between the styles and about getting the sequencing right. There is no point in rushing to present narratives in a very forceful way and claiming expert power if you have not done the research. There is no point in trying to play political games unless you are safely inside the network.

Much more seriously for people like us, there are issues about choices. You can either write a paper for Development Policy Review, or write an article for The Guardian, or take someone out for lunch, but you probably cannot do all three. So the questions we need to ask ourselves every day are about what we are trying to achieve and what the best instruments are to do it. This means asking who is making what decision, when they are making it and what product is needed in order to influence the decision. These are not questions that we researchers ask ourselves very often, but they should be, because these questions help us to choose between the styles of policy entrepreneurship.

A second question is whether there are any trade-offs. Every week, we face rather practical questions about how to play this game at the interface of research and policy. The issue of the balance between the public and the private personality of ODI is a particularly difficult one to judge. For example, there have been a number of occasions when there has been an issue in the news and I have spoken to the person in ODI who knows about that issue to suggest that they ring up The Guardian or the Today Programme and make a point. The response has often been that that would not help because it is much more influential to make a private phone call to the Head of one of the bilateral aid agencies, for example, than to make a statement to the media.

The third question is whether we can expect one individual to deliver all of these different aspects of policy entrepreneurship or whether we should try to construct teams who do it. That is another practical management issue for those of us involved in think-tanks. My own prejudice is that most people could do most of these four styles if they wanted to, but it is also true that some people are very much predisposed to one rather than the other. If you are not someone who can turn a very detailed piece of research with lots of appendices, or eighteen detailed studies, into a simple message which says 'yes, but not yet' (to take this week's example of the UK Treasury's review of the desirability of the UK adopting the euro), then you need someone who is, because no-one is going to read your eighteen volumes unless they are paid to do so.

Finally there is the question of whether policy entrepreneurship can be taught. I start from the prejudice that it can, that simply by opening up these styles and these roles and by thinking about the choices and identifying the trade-offs, we could all do a great deal better at this core task of trying to change policy.

Policy entrepreneurship can be taught

I want to leave you with two things. One is to remind you about our mission statement at ODI, which is to inspire and inform policy and practice. 'Inspire' and 'inform' are carefully chosen words, which imply that we are

research-based, but also that we do not do research simply to put it into a journal or onto a shelf. We want to use our research proactively in order to change things.

Finally, it is an interesting question for each of us as to what kind of style we ourselves favour in our policy work. I have prepared a [questionnaire](#) which you are each invited to fill in. There are fifteen questions to answer and if you send it back to us, we will tell you what kind of policy entrepreneur you are and whether or not we think you ought to develop one particular area or not. We are doing this partly because we are interested to see whether we can turn this kind of material into practical training of which a self-assessment questionnaire might form a part, but also because it might encourage you to sign up for the very important and interesting work which we are doing in the RAPID programme. If you send your answers (or a summary of them by email) back to John Young, we will put you on our mailing list, feed back material to you and make sure that you hear what else we are doing.

At ODI we do not think it is enough simply to do research. Policy entrepreneurship is exactly the territory in which an independent, London-based think tank like ours needs to be. It is a skill that needs to be thought about, taught and mastered if we are to be even more successful than we are now.

Thank you.