

Making the links: Policy, Practice and Research

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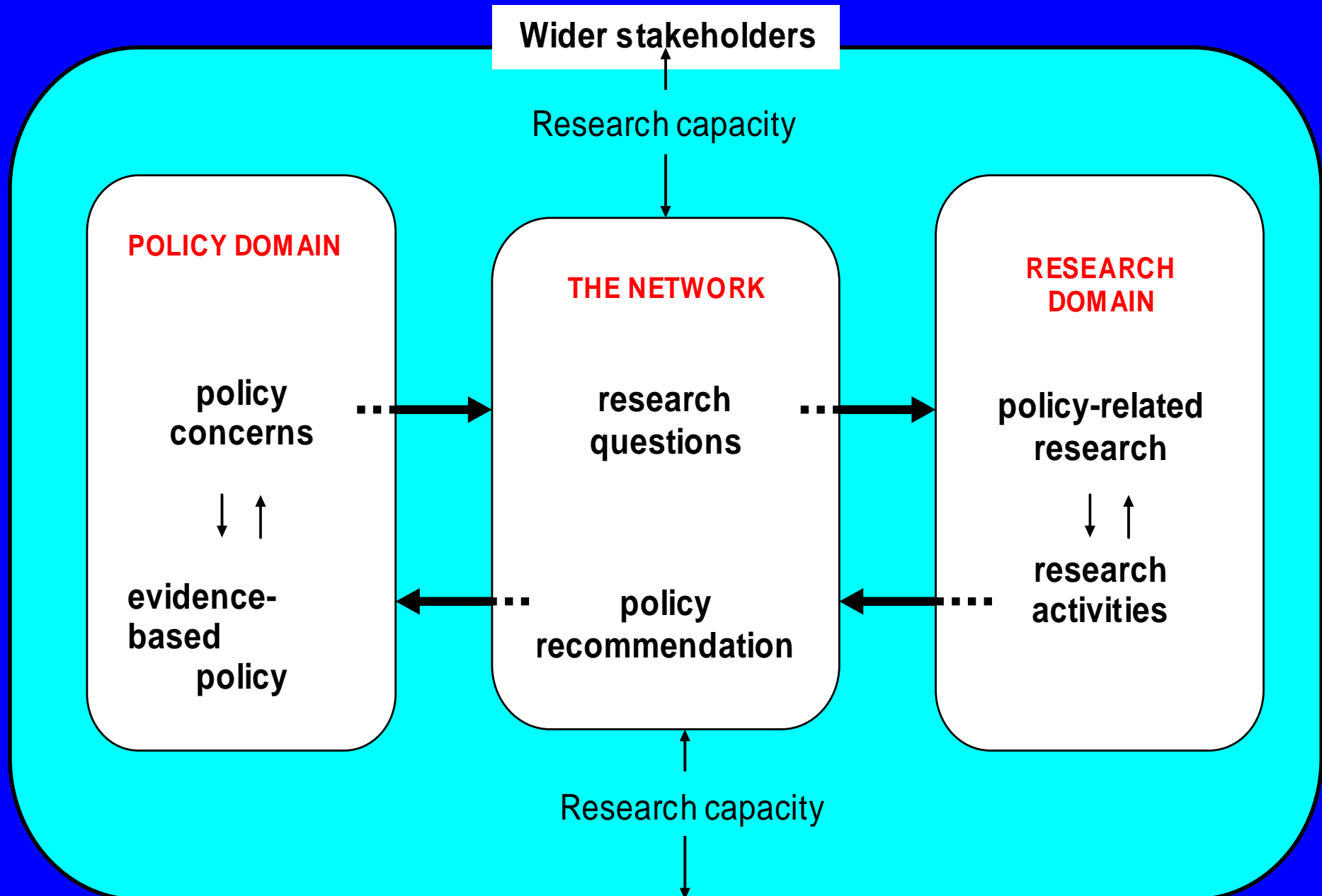


Evidence Matters!

- “This Government expects more of policy makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, **better use of evidence and research in policy making...**”

Cabinet Office, 1999, White Paper, para. 6

Planning Research Network



Policy-research interface

- **Instrumental view**
 - Assumes that the relation between policy and research is unproblematic, linear and direct
- **Enlightenment view**

Instrumental View

- Expert 'on top' model
- Research *leads* policy, hence policy is research-driven
- It contains an element of scientific inevitability
- Expert 'on tap' model
- Research *follows* policy, hence research is policy-driven
- Research is shaped by policy concerns

The 'expert on tap' model

- Evidence has to be timely, intelligible and available on demand
- 'What matters is what works'
- Research has to be not only useful but also useable
- The "research for policy's sake" is highly selective

The enlightenment view

- Rather than research serving policy agenda directly, its benefits are indirect and sometimes take longer to be realised.
- Rather than producing ‘punchy policy messages’, the aim is to illuminate the landscape within which policy decisions are made
- The emphasis is on **evidence-informed** policy rather than **evidence-based** policy

Much of the drive for evidence-based policy is rooted in the utilitarian view

- Underpinned by 3 interrelated misconceptions:
 - Policy making is a rational process
 - Evidence can only be generated through positive science
 - Experts are apolitical, value free; and know best

The paradox of policy analysis

- Arises from the mismatch between notions of how the policy process should work and its actual messy, uncertain, unstable and essentially political realities

(Young et al, 2002)

How does the real world of policy making look like?

- Policy making is “a matter of *bricolage*, ...
- a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, ...
- drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches,
- cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and,
- not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as if it might work.
- Most policies are ..., compromise hit and miss affairs, ...”

(Ball, 1998:126)

Having access to all information doesn't necessarily make policy-making easier!

- “... there is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult”

(John Maynard Keynes in: Skidelsky, 1992:630).

How evidence is used depends on the context within which it is used!

- Practical, institutional and political factors can lead to ‘problem of little effect’:
- “Little of the research commissioned by departments or other academic research was used by policy makers”

(Cabinet Office, 1999:36)

Evidence is not the only contender for influencing policy

- There are at least 4 other powerful competitors:
 - Ideology
 - Interests
 - Institutional norms and practices
 - Prior Information

Contender 1: Ideology

- Basic values and underlying belief systems
- These shape and, sometimes, determine policy outcome

Contender 2: Interests

- People's and organisations' self-interests and expediencies
- Research agenda is politically driven
- Cherry picking evidence

Contender 3: Influence

- ...of institutional traditions, culture and capacity
- It is about how knowledge is created, accumulated, transferred and used
- Demand for 'quick fixes' may discourage the commissioning or use of long term strategic research
- Information 'overload'
- 'Intelligent users' of research

Reluctance to read written report!

- “Both to ignorant illiterate and to sophisticated Platonists, **written record was a dubious gift**, because it seemed to kill living eloquence and trust and substitute for them a mummified semblance in the form of a piece of parchment”
(quoted in Blackler, 1995: 1032)
- “The U.S. Congress works largely through face-to-face dealings. ... *Research that arrives in written documents doesn't have much of a chance*”
» (Weiss, 2001: 286)

Contender 4: Information

What is evidence?

- Facts or info are not evidence in themselves
- Evidence is not limited to research findings
- Availability, accessibility and validity are key to what counts as evidence

New evidence doesn't enter a pristine environment

- It has to fit into policy makers' world view, which derives from:
- Scientific and systematic research evidence as well as anecdotal experiences and tacit knowledge
- It has to compete with power relations and competitions over agenda setting

Contrary to the instrumental view...

- “There is more to policy and practice than the disinterested pursuit of truth and wisdom”.
(Solesbury, 2002: 93)
 - It takes more than knowledge and evidence to make policy
 - Creativity and imagination play a significant part in transforming ideas into workable policy proposals
 - Mobilisation and political support are needed to turn policies into practice

The way forward

- Narrow instrumentalism curtails imagination and creativity, and ...
- It is based on fragile assumptions about policy-research interface
- Less emphasis on ‘evidence-based policy’ and more on **‘evidence-informed society’**