

Making Research Relevant for Policy Advice

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Thankyou for inviting me to be part of this event. A significant part of the role of the Policy Research Initiative is to help departments make the connections between research and policy, particularly on medium term issues that cut across the mandates of a number of organizations.

Je voudrais d'abord dire que je ne suis pas ici pour une quelconque expertise de nature économique ou agricole, mais à cause de mon rôle au PRP en matière de recherche sur les politiques et de mon expérience antérieure au sein des Réseaux Canadiens de Recherche en Politiques Publiques, notamment dans la participation du public dans le processus d'élaboration de politiques sur des questions comme la gestion à long terme des déchets nucléaires, ce que Lars a pensé être pertinent avec le sujet de votre conférence : *Qu'est-ce qui rend la recherche sur l'économie agricole pertinente pour des conseils stratégiques au niveau politique?*

Public involvement is becoming increasingly recognized as an essential part of policy analysis and decision making around the world by researchers and practitioners. This is particularly true of issues that require behavioral change on the part of individuals and societies, ones that involve a high degree of uncertainty and risk, and ones that require tradeoffs between values based options. These criteria certainly apply to issues of food and agriculture today, as the policy lens being applied to the agricultural sector is increasingly one of food security. The growing discussion about the connections between biofuels,

climate change, water, food prices, trade poverty and population growth demonstrate the difficulties in making decisions where tradeoffs between competing values are required. People can understand these connections at a high level, but strong analysis and evidence informed advice is need to avoid the pitfalls of policy by perception.

In addressing the question of what makes research relevant to policy, I would suggest the following four related characteristics are important: first, it needs to be framed within the broad context in which the policy decisions are made and implemented; second, it must be integrated and interdisciplinary; third, it needs to be future oriented; and, fourth, it needs to engage multiple policy actors and support them in fulfilling their policy roles. I will speak briefly about each of these characteristics and how public involvement can strengthen all of them.

1. Framing issues in the broad context:

The business of food operates at local, regional and global scales, and so do its risks and opportunities. Decision makers need to understand the policy options in the broad context across this spectrum.

On Oct 12 the New York Times carried a lengthy article entitled “An Open Letter to the Next Farmer-in-Chief” that offers the following advice to the next US President: “Food is about to demand your attention. ...you will need not simply to address food prices but to make the reform of the entire food system one of the highest priorities of your administration: unless you do, you will not be able to make significant progress on the health care crises, energy independence or climate change. “

Dans le même ordre d'idées, le rapport que la FAO a publié plus tôt ce mois-ci et qui demande une « révision urgente des politiques actuelles appuyant, subventionnant et entraînant la production et l'utilisation de biocarburants»

(Pomeroy, p.1) souligne le besoin d'évaluer les options en matière de politiques, dans le contexte le plus étendu. Une analyse et des conseils stratégiques doivent évaluer les conséquences possibles – positives et négatives – sur d'autres secteurs de politiques et coordonner des actions complémentaires.

2. Integrated and interdisciplinary:

There is growing awareness about the interconnectedness of public policy issues and an understanding that policies in one area cannot be successful if done in isolation of the others. For such complex interactions, single political interventions are not enough for sustainable development. (Nölting, p. 9)

John Holdren, Director of the Science, Technology and Public Policy program at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and past president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science suggests a number of cross cutting things needed if we are to tackle the big problems being faced by the world today, among them:

- “Greater emphasis on analysis of threats and remedies by teams that are interdisciplinary, intersectoral, international and intergenerational (as the problems are):
- More attention to the interactions among threats and to remedies that address multiple threats at once;
- Clearer and more compelling arguments to policy makers about the threats and the remedies; and
- Increased public S&T literacy.”

Holdren urges all of us to, “...read more and think more about relevant fields outside your normal area of specialization, as well as about the interconnections of your specialty to these other domains and to the practical problems of improving the human condition...”(Holdren, p. 432)

This is what sustainable development is about – integrating economic, social and environmental considerations in research, analysis and advice and

policy formulation and implementation. To do this effectively, policy research needs to incorporate broad knowledge across many disciplines in order to assess risks and opportunities, and develop sound, comprehensive policy options to manage those risks or take advantage of opportunities. It is also necessary to inform empirical research with normative research, leading to better policy choices and outcomes. Analysis from multiple perspectives helps to uncover “blind spots”, thereby reducing risks. (Nolting p.9)

Les économistes sont bien placés pour soutenir de tels efforts interdisciplinaires avec votre expertise en matière d'analyse coût-bénéfice et de gestion du risque. Je sais que bon nombre de décideurs que David Pannell a interrogés, ont identifié l'isolement des économistes par rapport aux autres disciplines comme une faiblesse, mais ils ont aussi reconnu la solidité et la globalité du cadre analytique que la discipline offreⁱⁱ. (Pannell, p.551 – 553). En ce qui concerne l'aspect faiblesse, les économistes ne sont certainement pas les seuls à être compartimentés et je pense que vous pourriez entrevoir, sur ce point, une bonne occasion d'exercer votre leadership et de développer votre influence.

3. Future oriented

The impacts of many food policy decisions taken today will be felt by generations to come. Sustainable policies require that the interests of future generations be brought to bear on policy decisions and actions taken today. The uncertainty that comes with how policies will manifest themselves in the future and the corresponding need to take risks today put many politicians used out of their comfort zone. However, I think there is a growing recognition by senior decision makers – both in the public sector and private sector – of the need for precaution - to anticipate future drivers in the context of risk management, and not be caught by surprise and forced into rear guard actions.

Dealing with uncertainty is the normal course of business for economists, and you have developed tools to support the kind of analysis required to assess risks, such as asking a lot of “What if” questions, developing different scenarios and policy options that can be adapted as more is learned through monitoring.

Il y a aussi des questions de droits et de responsabilités, d’une génération à l’autre, qui ajoute des dimensions déontologiques dans l’analyse des politiques. Ces dimensions doivent être prises en compte dans la mesure où les politiques sont censées refléter les valeurs sociétales – ce qui est nécessaire à leur légitimité et au succès de leur application.

4. Engaging multiple policy actors

The nature of the relationship between governments, the private sector and society is changing, with the lines of responsibilities in public policy less clear. There is a growing understanding that successful public policy does not rest with governments alone, but requires action on the part of all actors. Policy research and analysis needs to engage all players across the policy spectrum to understand their needs, the different barriers they face, and the policy levers they hold. Public involvement – of both stakeholders and individuals - is necessary to develop sound policy options and garner their support for implementation of policy decisions.

In Germany, the Social-ecologic research program for sustainable agriculture and nutrition (part of the German Ministry of Education and Research) analyzes patterns of food production and consumption considering social, political and cultural contexts, bringing together researchers, practitioners, consumers and policy makers in a process to address real life problems with a focus on finding solutions - what can be done, not just what should be done. They look at the multiple implications of our food choices – for our health and well-being, for economic development at home and abroad, for the ecological integrity of the global environment, for transport systems, and for the relationship between urban

and rural areas. For them, “production and consumption of food are not isolated events, but are rather influenced and shaped by ... policy frameworks and public behaviors, discourse and norms.” (Nölting p.9)

It is in understanding societal norms and shaping discourse that meaningful public involvement is required. Individuals manage choices in the complex constraints of their everyday life – influenced by their deep rooted values, culture, and habits and the society in which they live. Their perspective, along with those of experts and stakeholders, is critical to sound policy analysis and advice. We need to do a much better job of educating the public with reliable facts, rather than leave it to debates in the media to inform perceptions. If individuals are to change behavior in the necessary way in order to successfully implement a given policy, they need to be motivated to do so. Part of this is helping them understand the broad context within which the policy question is at play – not just in their role as consumers but as citizens: What is (or what could be) the collective impact of our individual choices – for me and my family, for my community, for my country, for others around the world? Altruism often plays a role in their decision making processes.

Individuals will also have questions of process. Frank Fischer is a political science professor at Rutgers University who studies the relationship between citizens, experts and policy and explores the differences between technical and social reasoning, and the importance of both. Technical reasoning is based on scientific methods and evidence; socio-cultural reasoning is based on social experiences. The lay person understands risks from a qualitative perspective, draws on their values and their experiences and uses practical reasoning. Rich, complex facets go into the individual’s analysis of the various factors involved, the tradeoffs and decisions. They may not have the expertise to challenge the evidence, but they certainly assess the process by which the evidence was obtained or a decision reached: Is the process trustworthy? Is it independent and neutral or does it protect the interests of the powerful? (Fischer)

We continue to see low levels of trust in government – not only in Canada but in most developed democracies. Decision making processes that are seen to be elitist, self-serving (e.g. for short term political expediency) or uni-dimensional (one winner and lots of losers) exacerbate distrust. British researchers Stephen Coleman and John Gøtze note in their report *Bowling Together*, “The alternative to engaging the public will not be an unengaged public, but a public with its own agenda and an understandable hostility to decision-making processes which appear to ignore them.” (Coleman and Gøtze, p.1).

The engagement process itself is an important part of the outcome. Stakeholders and the public are more likely to trust and support decisions that arise from a process in which they feel they had a meaningful opportunity to have their say – especially on issues that directly affect them and those close to them. The experience in the German research I mentioned earlier was that, “actors who were integrated into the research process adopted the perspective of sustainable development more openly and considered related strategies relevant for their daily business.” (Nölting, p. 8)

Engagement processes that work best are those that offer meaningful opportunity to influence decisions; that help to generate understanding of the facts and context; that generate shared learning about the range of perspectives different people hold based on their own reality and expertise; acknowledge and respect differences; explore advantages and disadvantages of the various values based policy options; and identify common ground and shared values. It is this common ground that provides the basis for moving forward. It allows for open discussion of where people are willing to make tradeoffs between competing values, and under what conditions, without having to defend their organizations interests or start from a firm negotiating position. In the deliberative dialogues I was part of organizing at CPRN, many participants would leave the discussion with a greater understanding of the difficulties of making decisions on complex

issues, where there is no clear right or wrong answer, and express a certain degree of empathy for those ultimately responsible for making the decision.

Public engagement can lead to a form of shared accountability, as participants often recognize the need for citizens to share in the responsibility for effective public policy as they recognize the part they play through their choices and actions in contributing to a problem or in implementing a successful solution. (Abelson and Gauvin, 2004:17).

Effective participation can take many forms. In deciding what public participation method to use, form must follow function. Variables that need to be considered include the issue at question, the stage of the decision making process, the general context of the process, and the objectives of involving the public. Is it defining the problem? Understanding public values? Testing a policy option? Convincing the public of a choice already made? The method or methods chosen must also be in line with resources, time and capacity available.¹

As I conclude my remarks, you may well be thinking, this is all very good to say, but not so easy to do, and of course you are right. This is very complex and to make it more challenging, it has to be communicated to decision makers in simple, attention-getting packages. Sometimes I think we are moving to a policy world where we will have to tell the whole story and communicate advice in a high-impact YouTube 3 minute video!

No one has a silver bullet, but there is a lot of research and experimentation going on around the world on the HOW of sustainable development and I believe you will hear about some tools today that are having some success.

¹ See Gauvin, Francois-Pierre and Julia Abelson, in collaboration with Mary Pat MacKinnon and Judy Watling, *Primer on Public Involvement* (prepared for the Health Council of Canada) CPRN. July 2006 <http://www.cprn.org/doc.cfm?doc=1519&l=en> pp.13-17 for a description of various public involvement methods and criteria for success.

J'insist sur le leadership que les économistes peuvent exercer en élargissant la recherche et l'analyse de manière à étoffer des politiques saines et durables en y incorporant le contexte étendu et en adoptant une approche intégrée et inclusive visant à donner aux gouvernements et autres acteurs des conseils nécessaires au succès des politiques publiques. Je vous encourage à continuer de développer des manières d'intégrer recherche normative et qualitative et recherche empirique et quantitative. Le PRP commence à étudier les innovations en gestion intégrée visant à faire progresser la pratique de développement durable et nous aimerions en entendre davantage sur vos idées et vos efforts dans ce domaine critique des politiques.

To close, I'll simply pose some policy challenges that require the integrated and inclusive approach I have talked about if we are to achieve the broad societal transformations required to address them:

- What are the possible impacts of a carbon market across the food production / consumption chain? How should carbon costs be shared?
- What are the risks and opportunities for existing or new crops in a changing climate?
- What are the potential security issues relating to food shortages and forced migration and can agricultural policies help address these risks?
- What would be the agricultural and other policy impacts of a move away from global trading regimes toward greater protectionism?
- What are the connections between our lifestyle patterns, urbanization, demand for convenience, processed foods, chronic disease, productivity and agricultural policies and practices?
- What knowledge is needed to support the broad societal transformations required for sustainable agricultural policy?

Thanks for your attention.

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