

How Research–Policy Partnerships Can Benefit Government: A Win–Win for Evidence-Based Policy-Making

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Quel est l'attrait de l'élaboration de politiques basée sur des données probantes pour les responsables politiques ? En quoi, pour ces responsables, le fait de subir des influences au cours du processus de prise de décisions – ce qui les conduit à prendre des décisions différentes de celles qu'ils auraient prises autrement – présente-il un attrait pour eux ? Dans cet article, l'auteur soutient que l'établissement de partenariats entre des organismes de recherche et des organisations gouvernementales offre sept avantages à court terme pour les responsables politiques, indépendamment du fait que cela peut influencer leurs décisions. Ces sept avantages possibles peuvent inciter les responsables politiques à établir des partenariats, qui peuvent ensuite, à plus long terme, se transformer en véritable outil capable ayant une influence sur l'élaboration de politiques. Cet article est donc de façon générale un plaidoyer en faveur de l'élaboration de politiques basée sur des données probantes, et plus particulièrement en faveur de partenariats chercheurs/responsables politiques, qui s'adresse à la fois aux chercheurs et aux responsables gouvernementaux.

Mots clés : processus d'élaboration de politiques, élaboration de politiques basée sur des données probantes, partenariats chercheurs/responsables politiques, avantages à court terme

What is the appeal of evidence-based policy-making to policy-makers themselves? What is the appeal of being influenced to make decisions they would not otherwise make? In this article, I argue that forging partnerships between research organizations and policy agencies can result in seven short-term benefits for the latter, independent of decision influence. These potential benefits are a more intuitive initial basis for partnership, and genuine influences on policy-making may still emerge over the long term. Overall, this article serves as a general argument in favour of evidence-informed policy, and research–policy partnerships in particular, directed at both academic and government audiences.

Keywords: policy-making process, evidence-based policy-making, research–policy partnerships, short-term benefits

Introduction

The concept of evidence-based policy-making (i.e., EBPM) is frequently invoked in political discussions and seems to enjoy broad support across governments, researchers, and interest groups (see Boswell 2014). This is not surprising, given the attractive underlying notion that important decisions should be made objectively, using the best available information, rather than being unduly influenced by ideology, prejudice, or whims (see Davies 2004). In theory, this practice increases the likelihood of accurately assessing the advantages and disadvantages of any given policy measure, leading to more beneficial outcomes for society as a whole. If the appeal of EBPM is intuitive and everyone seems to agree that it is worth

pursuing, where is all the attention and controversy coming from? The answer, of course, is that the concept and its application are much more complex than they appear at first glance (see Marston and Watts 2003), and the underlying rationale has some weaknesses. There are divergent perspectives on what counts as evidence, various interpretations of its proper role in the policy process, and different understandings of the possible benefits. On these matters, it is easy to see why researchers and policy-makers might disagree, even as both groups tend to nominally support the broader idea of EBPM. In navigating such a quagmire, the purpose of this article is to map out some common ground between the two groups by investigating the potential advantages of

research-policy partnerships (RPPs). I write primarily from the perspective of an academic, with policy-makers in mind as a target audience.

Conceptual Issues with Evidence-Based Policy-Making

The rationale and assumptions behind EBPM as a concept have three relevant weaknesses. These weaknesses can lead to tensions between researchers and policy-makers, undermining the pursuit of EBPM.

First, definitions of what constitutes evidence are subjective. When academics support EBPM, they typically use a fairly narrow definition, including only (or at least privileging) peer-reviewed academic research (Head 2008, 4; Head 2010, 82). I use the term *tight EBPM* to refer to this perspective. In comparison, when policy-makers refer to EBPM, they often use a broader definition, including professional experience, political know-how, stakeholder accounts, and government evaluations (Head 2008, 5; Head 2010, 83). I use the term *loose EBPM* to refer to such interpretation. This conceptualization helps to clarify why academics and policy-makers may disagree about EBPM, even as both groups support the practice in general (see Boswell 2014). Furthermore, each perspective has its own limitations. Tight EBPM, on one hand, may overlook legitimate, useful, and more timely sources of information (Head 2008, 2010; Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvæ 2014), ignoring the practical realities of policy-making. Loose EBPM, on the other hand, risks being a meaningless concept. Governments can get rhetorical benefits from claiming to pursue EBPM (see Feldman and March 1981; Hindmarsh and Matthews 2008) and then use evidence selectively and politically under a broad definition (see Marston and Watts 2003; Wesselink, Colebatch, and Pearce 2014), which is no better than opinion-based policy-making. Finding common ground and meaningfully pursuing EBPM requires an acknowledgement of these differing interpretations and their complications.

Second, EBPM appeals can be naïve about the realities of policy-making. Academic proponents of EBPM often favour a political norm whereby evidence (i.e., under the tight definition) is the primary determinant of policy decisions. However, this overlooks the legitimate influence of many other important factors such as public opinion, popular culture, media commentary, risk management, political relationships, and interest groups (Head 2008; Head 2010, 80; Wesselink et al. 2014). Without taking these elements into account, it is difficult to make good policy decisions while at the same time maintaining trust and support for the government. Policy-makers are likely to be skeptical of any EBPM perspective that suggests they dismiss (or at least deprioritize) these factors in favour of evidence. Also, the expectation that policy decisions can be made in a

linear, rational, and objective fashion is overly idealistic. Policy-makers operate under temporal, resource, and cognitive constraints, giving rise to a limited, or bounded, form of rationality (Cairney 2016). Crisis and controversy often preclude the luxury to fully assess the rigour of new evidence (Weiss et al. 2008). Besides, evidence by itself is not enough to determine the appropriate course of action, even if it is perfectly understood (Cairney 2016). For academics to make an effective appeal for (tighter) EBPM, they need to acknowledge the legitimacy of other inputs to decision making and recognize that the policy process will never follow a perfectly linear process to produce entirely rational outputs.

Third, specific benefits to policy-makers are often overlooked. As demonstrated in the previous paragraph, academic appeals for EBPM may fail to genuinely consider the policy-maker's perspective. This deficiency is also apparent in discussions specifically about the benefits of EBPM. Proponents tend to simply assume that EBPM will lead to better outcomes for society (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvæ 2014, 6) rather than spell out the causal mechanisms and the advantages for policy-makers. Simplistic models presume that evidence will be used rationally or instrumentally (see Amara, Ouimet, and Landry 2004) and have high influence to facilitate shifts in policy. In reality, policy-makers are seldom interested in hearing outright advocacy from academics and instead tend to consider the basic data and analysis that are produced, using information incrementally (see Lindquist 1988; Pielke 2007). EBPM appeals based on receptivity to academic advocacy and drastic shifts in course will not be well received. Even though an incremental, or "enlightenment," model is a more accurate portrayal of how evidence can and does flow into the policy process (Amara et al. 2004; Head 2010; Weiss 1977), it is similarly an ineffective basis for an EBPM appeal to policy-makers. Given time constraints and incentives of the electoral system (see Cairney 2016; Weiss et al. 2008), policy-makers are unlikely to be particularly interested in an interpretation of EBPM that can promise only the possibility of subtle incremental benefits over the long term. If academics want the policy process to change, it is problematic that classic portrayals of EBPM's social benefits are not intuitively persuasive to the policy-maker audience that must ultimately be convinced.

In Defence of Evidence-Based Policy-Making

Despite the issues with EBPM as a concept, it would be reckless to completely discard it. It is possible for critical discussions of research evidence to be overly relativist, and the notion that some forms of evidence should have more authority than others in certain situations is defensible (Ceccarelli 2011, 199–201; Garvin 2001, 446–447). Indeed, policy failures can certainly be caused by poor information management and underutilization of

research evidence (Howlett 2009; Maor 2016), which suggests that the concept of EBPM may have some fruitful suggestions for the decision-making process. As for concerns about the pursuit of EBPM leading to exclusionary and undemocratic practices, EBPM is not necessarily meant to be a purely technocratic exercise; rather, it is meant to be a combination of technocratic and political perspectives (Howlett 2009, 156). Executed properly, it actually has the potential to strengthen democracy by making information available for the public monitoring of government (see Wesselink et al. 2014, 341). On the whole, it is not radical to suggest that policy-makers may sometimes underuse important pieces of evidence, leading to suboptimal democratic outcomes. If this suggestion is valid, then (tighter) EBPM remains an important goal, even if the concept has been difficult to implement in practice. Rather than abandon any pursuit of EBPM, it would be more prudent to address the existing conceptual issues to develop balanced definitions, norms, and benefits that are amenable to both academics and policy-makers.

Research–Policy Partnerships as a Way Forward

Developing nuanced theory that systematically addresses each of the three conceptual issues with EBPM is too great an undertaking for this short treatment. However, I hope to show that refocused attention on RPPs can reveal some common ground between academics and policy-makers while paying heed to historical concerns about EBPM. That is, instead of advocating the pursuit of EBPM in general, I argue specifically for the formation and maintenance of RPPs (also see Cairney, Oliver, and Wellstead 2016, 401; Weiss et al. 2008, 34). I define these as any lasting, regular, collegial interaction between a specific ministry, branch, or agency within government and a specific department, research group, or institute within academia. They can be as simple as informal monthly meetings to exchange information about current policy priorities and contemporary research in a given field. For the sake of simplicity and focus, this definition sees university-based groups as the likely research partner, but similar arrangements may be possible with research organizations outside of academia (although think tanks and private research groups may bring their own complications).

Focusing on RPPs, rather than EBPM in general, has the potential to address (or at least sidestep) the existing issues with EBPM as a concept. First, the focus is on defining a specific kind of relationship rather than a specific type of evidence. The relationship may lead the policy partner to be exposed to more research evidence, but it does not preclude using other types of evidence or engaging with other groups (e.g., the general public, interest groups). There is also no requirement that

the partnership itself be centred on evidence; general networking, theoretical discussions, brainstorming, and conversations about current events are perfectly acceptable. Second, because the end goal of evidentiary influence is de-emphasized in favour of pursuing partnership in and of itself (see Cairney et al. 2016, 401; Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvær 2014, 8), strong presumptions about ideal processes and outcomes are not present to contradict the reality experienced by policy-makers. Third, focusing on the concrete construction of RPPs, which can be pursued in the short term, instead of the general pursuit of EBPM, which alleges benefits primarily in the long term, allows for the identification of short-term benefits. These benefits may be more appealing to policy-makers operating under time constraints. However, to my knowledge, the existing literature on EBPM has given little attention to such potential benefits, especially as a tool for promoting EBPM or RPPs to policy-makers.

This analysis gives rise to a key claim: If academics seek meaningful engagement with policy-makers, they must demonstrate the short-term benefits to the latter. RPPs must be presented as win–win arrangements, not just channels for academic influence. In the following section, I hope to make an initial contribution to this endeavour by identifying seven potential short-term benefits for policy-makers. My discussion is based on interviews with scientists and policy representatives from existing RPPs in British Columbia, which were part of a larger research project on climate change policy (see Richards 2015). Readers should appreciate that these are merely potential benefits; I do not mean to suggest that they can be expected in every case (especially because I am drawing on only a small number of qualitative accounts) or that they are the only benefits that may materialize. However, although I acknowledge the provisional nature of each individual benefit identified, I believe they are collectively sufficient to support an overall argument in favour of RPPs.

Seven Potential Short-Term Benefits of Research–Policy Partnerships

Necessary Information Is Gathered More Efficiently

Although the concept of EBPM implies that the most useful research is generated by universities, governments also conduct their own research. For example, public servants might scan news articles and available reports to brief high-level decision-makers. Also, governments employ scientists, policy analysts, and engineers to provide expertise directly. To avoid redundancy, a functioning partnership can reveal areas of potential overlap, allowing public servants to use their time more efficiently. In the words of one provincial policy analyst,

If it's information that [the research organization] is just compiling on a regular basis and sharing, to a certain extent what happens there is it frees up our staff from having to dig deep into some of those issues.... There are people in our group that are very up to speed on this, but it doesn't have to be their focus at work. That's a huge benefit.

Greater Access to Academic Sources and Interpretation

Much contemporary research that might be relevant to a given policy issue is published in academic journals that require expensive subscriptions, to which smaller governments in particular (e.g., those at the municipal level) may not have access. A government may be able to retrieve the key ideas in these sources through its relationship with a university unit. As one provincial public servant noted,

There's a paper that was being put out in *Science*, last week I think, and I needed to get a copy of the paper really quickly and a quick summary of it, so I sent out to [some scientists at the research organization].... I managed to get three different copies of it. *Science* is a subscription which—we don't have a direct subscription.... And [one of the scientists] provided a quick summary.... This could well come up during the debates in the legislature.

This quote also demonstrates that academic researchers are capable of providing interpretations and summaries, translating research into a more usable form, further benefiting the government's own information collection function.

Building Capacity through Coalitions and Literacy

After a time, an RPP is likely to evolve. Although a partnership may be initiated by a single policy liaison or a single government department, other officials and units will tend to become engaged organically as relationships are established and knowledge is shared through word of mouth. This can have the effect of building coalitions for certain policy initiatives (see Cairney et al. 2016, 401) and developing general literacy or capacity (see Howlett 2009) for a particular issue, which can lead to more productive internal discussions and increased competency in gathering information. The comments of one municipal planner allude to this benefit:

I think they'll be an incredible resource for broadening so that—I am, at the moment, I am pretty much the conduit for every question to do with future climate and sea level—whereas I'm hoping, by reference to [the research organization's] resources and perhaps building relationships between, say, our sewers engineer and their hydrological expert, that I won't have to hold that knowledge just myself.

More Relevant Framing of Research Findings

When there is dialogue between researchers and policy-makers, it allows the former to appreciate the needs of the latter and subsequently frame relevant information in a more useful way. To quote a scientist partnering with a provincial policy agency,

Political winds change, so we pick up on that. We have to read the political tea leaves.... [The head of the government agency] and I will talk often, and he'll say, "Here is where things are going from the inside view in politics" and that helps me to frame our research, and we try to use the language that politicians will understand best.

This might seem to advantage primarily the research side of the partnership, but policy actors certainly benefit from having information presented to them in a more relevant and accessible form. For example, if one of the government's priorities is public health, and climate change researchers emphasize relevant impacts such as heat-related deaths and disease pathways, policy-makers may be able to expand their action agenda in a way not previously realized.

Opportunity for Feedback

Once a RPP is well established and there is a foundation of trust, the partners can interact with minimal fear that any communications will be made public. Contacts at the research organization will have expertise on the issue at hand, which makes them an ideal source of external feedback. For example, they might review a new government report or policy statement before it is released to the public. In the words of a provincial government advisor,

We've been far more reliant on [the research organization] in a vetting or sniff-test kind of a role—as a non-dangerous outsider who could take a first look at something and predict for us how it would go over with a more broad audience.

A municipal planner added that informal relationships with researchers can facilitate convenient opportunities for quick feedback (e.g., through a phone call or email) on more minor matters, such as short articles or meeting preparations.

Greater Ability to Convene Stakeholders

Government agencies can more effectively fulfill their mandates when they have a functioning relationship with stakeholders in the relevant policy sector. However, to paraphrase several interviewed civil servants, it is difficult for government to navigate "the traditional relationship between regulator and regulatee" and portray a "neutral stance" as facilitator of workshops or consultations, whereas research organizations can offer a certain "credibility" and "convening power" as facilitators. Thus, research organizations may be able to assist govern-

ment in connecting with industry, non-governmental organizations, and other interest groups. As one provincial government manager noted,

It's easier for [the research organization] to put on a conference or something on a topic that might be controversial than for government to do it. So we work with them and through them so that they're the public face of the event, whatever it may be. Very useful in that regard.

These broader conversations can increase awareness of government initiatives, establish buy-in for regulations, feed new information into the policy process, and allow governments to explore contentious subjects from a (perceived) neutral standpoint.

Resources for Joint Projects

Research organizations and policy institutions are by their very nature different. The former might be able to draw on resources unavailable to the latter (e.g., venue space at universities) and in some situations might simply have more freedom with financial and labour resources. Accordingly, many projects (e.g., workshops, conferences, information campaigns) can be completed more effectively as joint initiatives. As one provincial public servant said,

It was a very good relationship because what [the research organization] could do, government could not. We simply can't host events like that, with the fiscal constraints, but [the research organization] can. . . . Fiscal restraint is one reason. The other reason is optics. And a third reason, not as important, is simply the capacity to run events, particularly in a place like Vancouver. The relationship with the universities is extremely beneficial—greatly lowers costs.

Interviewed scientists also described examples of joint research projects based on sharing raw data and computer-based tools between government and academia (see Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvæ 2014, 8).

Conclusion

If academics want to advocate for EBPM (i.e., a tighter definition that necessitates greater use of research evidence), it is not enough to assume or imply long-term social benefits. The short-term advantages to policy-makers must be clear because policy-makers are ultimately most responsible for EBPM's implementation, whether through direct acquisition efforts (see Amara et al. 2004), changes to organizational culture (see Head 2010, 81–82), or the pursuit of research–policy collaboration and relationships (see Oliver, Innvæ, et al. 2014, 4). Here, I have suggested that governments pursue RPPs because of the potential short-term benefits they may be able to reap. In partnership with researchers, policy-makers may be able to improve their own information function (i.e., the first through fourth benefits), better manage relationships with stakeholders and the public

(i.e., the fifth and sixth benefits), and pursue fruitful joint projects (i.e., the final benefit). Efficiencies in these areas might also free up time and resources for unrelated endeavours.

I hope the strength of my argument is that it will appeal to both academics and policy-makers, drawing on an even-if, oblique, or co-benefits approach (see Mayrhofer and Gupta 2016; Prins et al. 2010). That is, even if the interest in long-term societal benefits from EBPM is much lower among policy-makers than among academics, and even if those benefits have historically been assumed rather than empirically supported (Oliver, Lorenc, and Innvæ 2014, 6), there are still many good reasons to pursue RPPs. Although I recommend that these partnerships be established on the basis of their efficacy in the short term, I remain optimistic about EBPM and believe that RPPs will increase the chance of realizing its societal benefits in the long term. That is, both instrumental and enlightenment uses of research evidence (recall Weiss 1977) seem more likely if a RPP has already been established (see “soft influences” in Richards 2015), even if such utilization is not the foundational goal of the partnership. Of course, the list of benefits identified may not seem to provide sufficient impetus for pursuing collaboration with researchers, especially because every partnership will be different and no single benefit can be guaranteed (however, for design principles that may increase the chance of establishing an effective RPP, see Richards 2015). Remember, though, that this article is only meant to be an initial proposition, and there may very well be other advantages to RPPs. Besides, it is important practice for organizations to avoid stagnation by exploring new initiatives, even when the benefits may be unknown, rather than simply exploiting what they already know (Lindquist 2009).

In closing, EBPM is an idealistic goal. However, its practical implementation may yet be achieved if the potential short-term benefits of RPPs for governments are understood. These partnerships should not be approached with the expectation that either party will be able to immediately and directly influence the other, which appears to be the implicit desire of many academic proponents of EBPM. Rather, they must be founded on a basis of mutuality, striving for advantages related to shared information, feedback, and collaborative dialogue. Genuine influence may emerge from this arrangement over the long term, when both parties perceive such changes as beneficial.

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