

***Contemporary Social Science* 2015 10(2)** **International and Interdisciplinary Insights into Evidence and Policy**



Linda Hantrais and Ashley Thomas Lenihan (both Visiting Fellows at the LSE Centre for International Studies), together with Susanne MacGregor, have edited a themed issue of the UK Academy of Social Sciences' journal *Contemporary Social Science*, on [International and Interdisciplinary Insights into Evidence and Policy](#). This themed issue builds on a seminar series sponsored and organised by the Centre, in conjunction with the Academy and the International Social Science Council (ISSC).

In 2013–14, the Centre and the Academy's International Advisory Group jointly ran a series of seminars exploring [International Insights into Social Science Evidence and the Policy Process](#). In 2014, the Centre, Academy and ISSC hosted and coordinated the [third World Social Science Fellows Seminar](#) on the topic of 'Global Social Governance: developing international social science', with a focus on evidence-based policies. Participants at the seminars from countries around the world have now contributed to the themed issue of the Academy's journal as authors and reviewers, bringing to bear their wide-ranging international experience and offering valuable insights into the relationship between research and policy in international contexts.

Although the majority of the authors of the articles in the themed issue were based in UK institutions at the time of writing, only one of the articles presents a UK case study. All the authors have had experience of living and working in different countries, of conducting international comparative studies, and of crossing the divide between researchers and policymakers. They are drawn from countries as geographically and culturally diverse as Australia, the US and UK in the English-speaking world, Austria, Estonia, Italy and the Netherlands within the European Union, and India representing South Asia. Through the examples they select to illustrate their arguments, coverage is extended to the EU institutional level and the 'global South', including countries in Africa and South America. Collectively, the authors provide a mix of disciplinary perspectives on the relationship between research and policy, ranging from economics, sociology and political science to human geography, media studies, ethnography and anthropology, in several cases in collaboration with biological, medical and technological sciences. The contributions thereby support the claim made in its title that the themed issue offers international and interdisciplinary insights into evidence-based policy.

Evidence-based policy in international settings



Image created by Ed Fell

The editorial by **Linda Hantrais, Ashley Thomas Lenihan and Susanne MacGregor**, entitled [Evidence-based policy: exploring international and interdisciplinary insights](#), sets the scene by arguing that the relationship between international evidence, politics and policy is never straightforward. The authors provide examples of politicians citing comparative findings from social science evidence collected and analysed by international organisations to support policy proposals without sufficient understanding of contextual factors. They show how the media exploit data from such studies to highlight national policy successes and failures; and they argue that academic literature on evidence-based policy is more interested in identifying policies that work (**what works**), or do not work, in a particular

country than in investigating the reasons why policy solutions might, or might not, be effective if transferred to other regions.

The editorial introduces some of the key terms and issues explored in the articles by examining various configurations of the relationship between evidence producers and users (**evidence brokerage**) as they seek to stimulate **knowledge transfer** in a variety of **institutional settings** and **policy environments**. They identify case studies in health and social policy that illuminate the complexities of the **policy process** and the development of **hierarchies of evidence**. In conclusion, they consider what might be the most promising conditions for successful **policy learning** across time and space.

Insiders' and outsiders' perspectives on evidence-based policy



The Education Endowment Foundation
<http://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk>



The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence
www.nice.org.uk



The What Works Centre for Local Economic Growth
<http://whatworksgrowth.org>

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing
<http://whatworkswellbeing.org>

The Centre for Ageing Better
<http://www.centreforageingbetter.com>



The College of Policing
<http://www.college.police.uk>



The Early Intervention Foundation
<http://www.eif.org.uk>



What Works Scotland
<http://whatworksscotland.ac.uk>

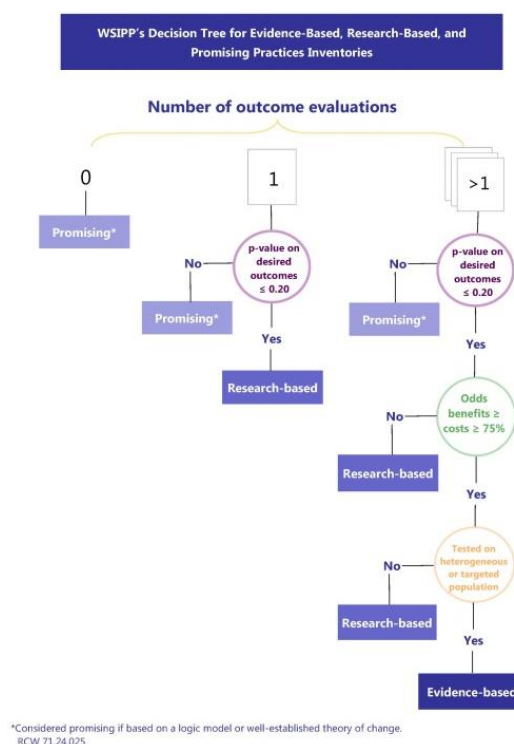


The Public Policy Institute for Wales
<http://ppi.wales>

In their article, [Using evidence to improve policy and practice](#), **Dan Bristow, Lauren Carter and Steve Martin**, from the Public Policy Institute for Wales, analyse the development of the UK's Network of What Works Centres, to which their Institute is linked. The Network was established in 2013 under the auspices of the UK Cabinet Office in the belief that good public policy decisions should be informed by the best available evidence about what works and does not work. From a review of the literature on evidence-based policy, Bristow and his colleagues argue that rational, technocratic models belie the complex and contested nature of the policy process, and that What Works Centres

therefore face a number of challenges as they seek to synthesise and mobilise knowledge. By tracking the development and impact of the Centres over time, the authors provide valuable insights into 'what works' in promoting evidence-based policy and practice, what counts as 'robust' and 'useful' evidence, and what appear to be the most effective means of mobilising research-based knowledge. They suggest that the experience of the UK Network will enhance understanding of the contribution that social science research can make to policy and practice not only in the UK but also in other countries interested in developing the research-policy interface to mutual advantage.

Institutional knowledge brokerage



Extracted from WSIPP, [WSIPP's decision tree for evidence-based, research-based, and promising practices inventories](#), Olympia: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, 2015, p. 1.

Writing from a base in the UK, but with an academic background from the US, in her article, on [Institutionalising evidence-based policy](#), **Ashley Thomas Lenihan** draws on her own first-hand research into two internationally recognised exemplars of institutional knowledge brokerage: the Washington State Institute for Public Policy and the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis (CPB). She posits that three primary factors, with wider international relevance and

application, help these organisations connect evidence successfully to policymakers: the institution's credibility, based on independence, neutrality, reputation, trust, transparency and the quality of its methods and evidence; the utility of its research, based on transferability, timing, stakeholder involvement and resonance with policymakers; and the communication of that research, in terms of effectiveness, dissemination, presentation and translation for policymakers.

Wetenschappelijk onderbouwd beleid



Image supplied by the author

In contrast to Lenihan's external analysis of the CPB's institutional structure, **Edwin van de Haar** offers an insider's account of the [CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis](#) and 'a Dutch perspective on policymaking'. He describes how, as one of the oldest independent fiscal institutions in the world, highly trusted for its provision of macroeconomic forecasts, the CPB has a long history of producing evidence for policymaking, encompassing the analysis of election manifestos, the national budget and coalition agreements. Van de Haar's article sets the CPB's role within the Dutch political system, and illustrates its place in

public administration and the different methods it employs to provide evidence for policymakers. Two different types of activities are described in more detail: the costing of election manifestos and ageing studies. Van de Haar outlines a multi-methods approach to illustrate how the CPB's influence extends to setting policy agendas and policy targets, and to reveal critical factors for success and failure. Although the CPB model cannot easily be transposed to other countries, he draws out a number of general principles that can be deduced from the CPB's work for application elsewhere.

Evidence in EU policymaking

L 123/42

EN

Official Journal of the European Union

17.5.2003

DIRECTIVE 2003/30/EC OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL
of 8 May 2003
on the promotion of the use of biofuels or other renewable fuels for transport

THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and in particular Article 175(1) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the Commission ⁽¹⁾,

Having regard to the opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee ⁽²⁾,

point of view, the White Paper therefore calls for dependence on oil (currently 98 %) in the transport sector to be reduced by using alternative fuels such as biofuels.

(6) Greater use of biofuels for transport forms a part of the package of measures needed to comply with the Kyoto Protocol, and of any policy package to meet further commitments in this respect.

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Extracted from [The EU Biofuels Directive](#)

From their UK academic base, **Karen Anderton and James Palmer** explore [Evidence-based policy as iterative learning](#), applying it to the case of EU biofuels targets. They show how, in recent years, attempts to promote sustainable transport by international institutions have fallen victim to the impact of ‘unintended consequences’ on decision-making and policy outcomes. The authors cite the pressure that EU biofuel targets place on global food production and the role they play in facilitating deforestation. The article demonstrates how the failure of policymakers to consider evidence relating to the potential impacts of biofuel mandates in the early 2000s resulted in a

host of complex problems developing over subsequent years. Drawing on the concept of problem ‘framing’, the article then examines the extent of policy learning that has taken place since the Biofuels Directive was implemented in 2003. While acknowledging that not all eventualities can be prepared for, the article identifies the importance of enhanced communication and collaboration across different levels and departments of government in policymaking processes as a means of promoting learning, especially when dealing with complex cross-cutting and international social, environmental and economic problems.

Evidence and large-scale surveys

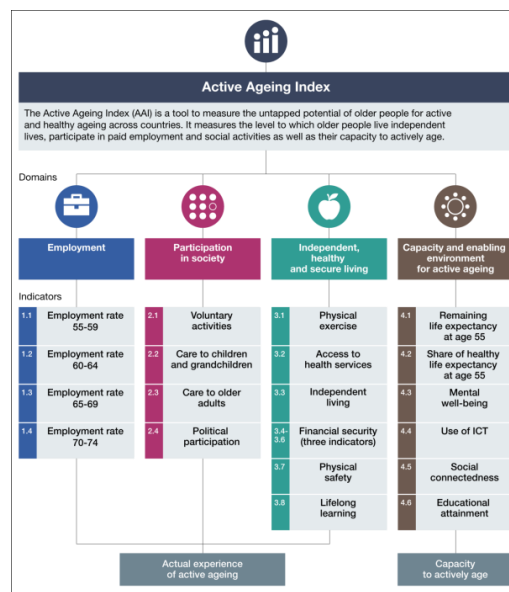


Figure 1 from Zaidi's article 2015

Again from an academic base in the UK, but with experience of living, studying and working in Pakistan, the Netherlands and Austria, **Asghar Zaidi** analyses the process of [Creating and using the evidence base: the case of the Active Ageing Index](#). The research for the AAI was undertaken at the University of Southampton, as a joint venture by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe and the European Commission's Directorate General for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion. As a researcher and former economic adviser to government, Zaidi argues strongly that the value of evidence-based policymaking depends on the quality and robustness of the available data, and that the

comparability of the data collected in large-scale international surveys and their usefulness as an evidence base are restricted by both conceptual and operational difficulties. Taking the AAI as an exemplar, he shows why a greater understanding of the context of data sourcing and application is vital to the usefulness and transferability of the evidence generated. Drawing on recent AAI findings, he suggests how the Index could be used most effectively as a toolkit by policymakers seeking to devise evidence-informed active ageing strategies. He recommends applying this advice more widely to other large-scale international databases and initiatives such as the Global AgeWatch Index.

Tõenduspõhine poliitika

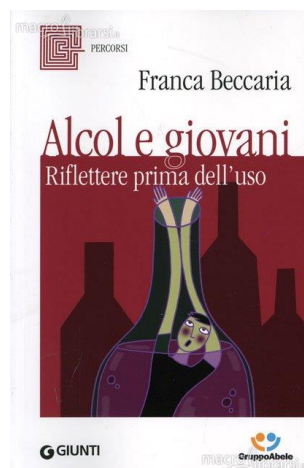


The Estonian Parliament building, Tallinn, and the University of Tartu. Images supplied by the authors.

Several contributions pursue the analysis of the evidence-based policy theme from the perspective of EU member state insiders interested in international knowledge transfer. **Tatjana Kiilo and Dagmar Kutsar** analyse the complex process involved in [Using evidence to reconstruct second-language learning policies in Estonia](#). They exemplify the extremely close relationship between research and policy in a small state like Estonia. Kiilo is herself a part-time researcher at the University of Tartu, while also holding a full-time position as Deputy Head of the Analysis Department at the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research. The article describes the use of framing analysis to examine how evidence from research and public consultations played out in the process of public policy formation in the case of the

Estonian Government's new integration strategy for ethnic minorities. The strategy used 'culture steering' to address a horizontal policy area, namely second-language learning policies for adults. Kiilo and Kutsar draw on diverse forms of evidence from contrasting ideological stances to examine how a government administration functions as a knowledge broker in a post-socialist country. They discuss the appraisal process and review various ways of framing and reframing evidence, while also exploring the potential for policy learning. They conclude that, not only did the quality of the evidence assembled matter, but that 'culture steering' also played an important role by addressing possible sources of resistance to change and by managing conflicting ideological discourses.

Politiche basate sulle evidenze

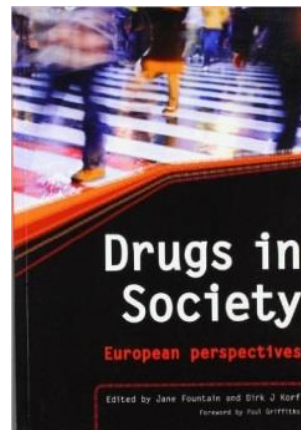


[Alcohol and Young People](#)

In her article on [Evidence and alcohol policy](#), **Franca Beccaria** addresses the topic of alcohol abuse and control from a sociological perspective by examining the Italian case. She shows how, during the 1970s, the widely adopted total alcohol consumption model and the public health approach it inspired in the international arena shifted the focus of control policies from individuals to the entire population. From the late 1990s, sociological studies were challenging TCM. Instead, they identified the advantages of the harm-reduction approach, which distinguishes between low- and high-risk patterns of use. They therefore suggested the adoption of a drinking

patterns paradigm, focussing on the relationship between types, ways and contexts of drinking and alcohol-related problems. In her article, Beccaria argues that TCM nonetheless remains influential in international discussions of alcohol policy, and she points out that sociological studies are largely ignored by the most influential stakeholders in the field. Using Italy as a case study, and comparing Italian attitudes and practices with those in the Anglo-Saxon and Nordic countries, she challenges the universal application of the public health approach in alcohol policy and advocates an increased contribution from the social sciences to understanding and addressing the alcohol issue.

Evidenzbasierte Politik



[Austrian Handbook for Alcohol](#) and [European Perspectives on Drugs in Society](#)

Although he is writing from a base in a public health research institute in Vienna, **Alfred Uhl** does not confine his comments to Austria in his article on [Evidence-based research, epidemiology and alcohol policy](#). With his background in psychology and addiction studies, and his experience of working with European administrations and international bodies, and as an expert adviser for the Austrian government, Uhl is well qualified to critique some of the most prominent Western literature on the subject. Adopting an historical perspective, he demonstrates that the original intention of the term 'evidence-based' was to use the best existing evidence while recognising that, in some areas, experimental research would be neither sensible nor feasible. However, as the

paradigm became established, he observes that three dubious and commonly coexisting additional connotations developed in practice: 'proven beyond doubt', 'exclusively relying on experimental research', and 'any conclusions based on empirical data'. He illustrates such practices from a critical perspective with examples from a wide-ranging literature covering epidemiological research and alcohol policy. By taking a stand against certain value-driven positions which unjustly claim a degree of proof that is not factually justified, Uhl argues for greater modesty on the part of scientists. He goes on to conclude that much of what is presented as 'evidence-based policy' should more appropriately be labelled 'policy-based evidence'.

Evidence and microfinance in development



Image supplied by the authors from [Careers 360 India's](#)

Writing from a UK academic base in development studies, but with experience of evaluating the impact of international aid programmes in Africa, South America and South Asia, **Maren Duvendack and Kate Maclean**, make a critical assessment of the [\(Mis\)use of evidence in microfinance programming in the global south](#). They examine how economic and social 'evidence' in debates on microfinance was recognised initially as a financially sustainable, even profit-making, development intervention and went on to be seen

as a development 'panacea'. In their article, they refute the evidential basis of the claims made for the success of microfinance, arguing that the exclusion of qualitative evidence was a political choice rather than an epistemological imperative, and that the large-scale quantitative evidence in support of the scaling up of microfinance was not collected with sufficient methodological rigour. Their argument leads them to conclude that the evidence base in development can never be apolitical.

Tathya adharit neeti



[Parliament House, Delhi](#), and
[Farewell address by Dr A.P.J. Abdul Kalam, Former President of India](#)

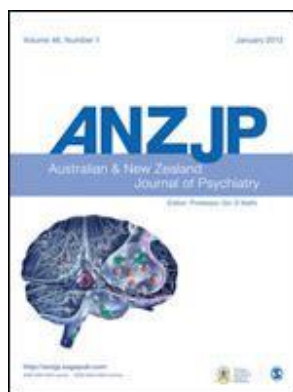
Although **Ruth Kattumuri** is writing from a UK academic base, she provides [an Indian perspective on evidence and the policy process](#). Her article benefits both from the knowledge, experience and contacts of an insider and from the distance of an

external observer and analyst. She presents the institutional framework and setting within which evidence has become linked to policy in India, and the role that multidisciplinary researchers play in the policy process.

In doing so, she draws on a number of empirical studies exploring sustainable and equitable development in India to illustrate the two-way relationship between researchers and policymakers, and to demonstrate the value in policy-oriented research of combining quantitative and qualitative methods. Kattumuri assesses the potential impact and effectiveness of evidence-based policymaking within the institutionalised

strategic planning framework of the National Institution for Transforming India Aayog. She considers whether the lessons learnt from one region could be transposed to other regions within India and elsewhere, discusses how experiences of policymaking and practice could be shared, and why forms of delivery may require adaptation if they are to be implemented in different socio-economic, political and cultural contexts.

Mediated evidence and mental health policy



[The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry](#)

The article by **Carla Meurk, Harvey Whiteford, Brian Head, Wayne Hall and Nicholas Carah**, [Media and evidence-informed policy development](#), shifts the focus to Australia and the role of 'media' in influencing evidence-informed policymaking in mental health. Written by a team of researchers from a mix of disciplines, the article draws together theory from political science, media, and science and technology studies, as expounded primarily in the Australian, American and British literature, to develop a nuanced understanding of the role that

media framing, focussing events and participation have played in the evolution of mental health policy. The authors consider how the global circulation of ideas that media enable affects policy issues within national jurisdictions, suggesting that their findings are relevant to policy issues in other areas and regions where media are deliberately used, both to achieve individual behaviour change and influence policy. The fact that 'media' is a recurring theme in almost all the other articles in the collection would seem to support this view.



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