

Viewpoint

72. Failing to translate science into policy? From Stockholm 1972 to Rio+20

by
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Since the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, there has been a clear failure to put the international environmental agenda into practice, particularly in areas such as climate change. Science is not produced in a policy vacuum, nor does policy operate in a void of knowledge, which is precisely why politics is embedded in this interplay from the outset.

An adequate understanding of the process by which decisions based on scientific findings bear fruit requires three things. First is an understanding of how social concerns are incorporated into the agenda of public decisions. Second, once societal challenges are fully integrated into political discourse, an understanding of how policies change is required, so that scientific knowledge feeds into concrete actions. Third, we must pose the question how policy results change the scientific agenda by identifying new knowledge gaps that require further research.

The belief that science speaks for itself is problematic. Assuming that science does respond to real challenges faced by society, we might mistakenly expect that due to their intrinsic value for the common good, research findings require no more than powerful and brilliant breakthroughs to be translated into action, as most decisions adopted since the Stockholm conference indicate. Nothing could be further from reality. As Francis M. Cornford (1908) indicated in his razor-sharp *Microscopographia Academica: Being a Guide for the Young Academic Politician* in 1908:

“You think (do you not?) that you have only to state a reasonable case, and people must listen to reason and act upon it? At once. It is just this conviction that makes you so unpleasant. There is little hope of dissuading you; but has it occurred to you that nothing is ever done until everyone is convinced that it ought to be done, and has been convinced for so long that it is now time to do something else?”

This view later became prominent in the literature on public policy formulation and implementation (Lindblom, 1980).

Any issue can only be incorporated into political processes if it is firmly connected to the dominant public debate and social context (Guimarães, 2004). For example, research existed in areas such as environmental change and racial and gender discrimination long before these became concerns for public policy, thanks to their association with demands for human rights, democratisation and social equality. It was no historical coincidence that environment and gender policies gained strength in the late 1960s. They were part of the anti-war, pro-freedom of expression counter-culture movement in most western countries at that time. Conversely, it should be no surprise that, even after environmental issues gained legitimacy through four World Summits, internationally adopted decisions in areas such as climate change have been the hardest to translate into action. Why is this? Is it due to a lack of scientific data? Of course not. Climate change has so far been the only issue to benefit from an institutionalised channel through which the world's science community can "communicate" with policy: the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), created in 1988. The answer to this paradox does not lie in the failure of science to convey the gravity of climate change to policy. Rather, it can be found in the fact that the actions proposed by the scientific community run against the dominant economic yardstick for public policy (Mooney, 2005; Fredenburg et al., 2008).

The more scientists, governments and others accepted climate change as an established scientific fact, the more the Washington Consensus¹ spread its wings throughout the world (Williamson, 1990). From a political perspective, this cannot be ascribed to pure chance. Barely one year after the IPCC came into being, two of the ten commandments of neoliberal economics prescribed privatisation and deregulation as a cure-all recipe to solve the profound external debt crises of the 1980s. Thus, science did not fail, as Aaron Wildavsky (1987) maintained in his book *Speaking Truth to Power*. It was, and remains, a fact that power is not willing to listen to a policy challenge which requires government intervention and more regulatory mechanisms to correct the failure of the market's addiction to fossil fuels. The world had to wait for the increased occurrence and severity of "natural" disasters, the corresponding economic loss and the awakening of insurance companies to take action. The actual increase of a couple of degrees in mean temperatures is having more policy effect than all the scientific evidence, particularly now that the Washington Consensus is apparently receding at a faster pace than the glaciers.

However, the fact that an issue is successfully incorporated into the policy discourse does not guarantee real policy change. Decisions that require societal responses, such as climate change, involve much more than the simple organisation of public action in one area. It is the very concept of development itself that is being called into question. This means that issues which are often regarded as technical and scientific (standards, regulations, norms) will have to be negotiated politically. The Kyoto Protocol is a perfect illustration of this predicament.

It is therefore easy to summarise the limits within which environmental conflicts can be negotiated. National leaders do not acknowledge that a nation's security depends on an environmentally sound development strategy. Instead, environmental decisions are consistently subsumed either by national security interests or by economic criteria, and economic growth enjoys priority over conservation. On top of that, the techno-bureaucracy and the corporate elite share an ideological orientation towards the private allocation of natural resources and of the "commons"² in general.

Economic elites and their proxies in government have also learned the lessons of coping with the institutional and policy innovations posed by global change. Faced with this new challenge, markets and governments have continually adopted what Donald Schon, in his brilliant *Beyond the Stable State* (1973), calls “dynamic conservatism”. First, people accept a discourse that incorporates the new issue. This principle has been demonstrated successfully from Stockholm 1972 to Rio+20. Then follows the institutional stage of “containment and isolation”, when people literally throw the discourse into a bureaucratic box in the governmental structure or in an internationally adopted agreement. Care should be taken not to provide adequate resources to this new national or international agency. Just enough people should be employed to give the impression that something major is being done, and to serve as scapegoats when things do not get done, as we know they will not. Just enough resources should be allocated for a couple of works to be built and, it should not be forgotten, for studies: dozens and dozens of scientific studies.

In short, people should promote the minimum change possible to guarantee that nothing major will actually change, as the lack of implementation of international decisions on the environment shows. This is dynamic conservatism, and is termed dynamic because it is not the result of a carefully conceived scheme of overt resistance. There is no conspiracy theory at work here. This brand of societal conservatism develops out of the synergistic effect of special interests. The individual, group or class is able to establish a connection between their special interests and the inertial interests of the social system as a whole. Because the hard policy choices needed to respond to global change are bound to affect everyone, there is no need to conspire against taking them seriously. It is simply a question of letting the bureaucratic process run its course.

Many proposals can be put forward to address the failings of science in its attempts to speak truth to policy since Stockholm 1972. Among these is the much-needed involvement of policymakers early on in the endeavours of the science community. More should also be done to disseminate science and build capacity. Yet if I had to derive a single proposal, it would simply be to suggest that the scientific community take a hard look at its own faults before scrutinising those of policymakers. Instead of hiding behind science, it would do no harm to translate relevant findings into the political and bureaucratic logic of those whose attention is needed. In other words, whatever research projects produce, their findings should be expressed in entirely different terms depending on whether the audience is the United Nations or another intergovernmental body; an industrialised country such as the United States or Japan; a resource-rich and socio-economically unequal country such as Brazil or Mexico; a poverty-stricken country such as Haiti; or a “post-material” nation such as Norway. Finally, decisions on the environment adopted at world summits should have enforcement mechanisms to put teeth into the resulting agreements if the world wants to overcome their blatant lack of implementation so far. The future of sustainable development lies in politics working hand in hand with science. Neither can bring it to fruition alone.

Notes

1. The term “Washington Consensus” refers to a strong market-based approach, market fundamentalism or neoliberalism.
2. Natural resources and public goods which are shared, used and enjoyed by all.

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