

Bridging Policy and Knowledge

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Thank you for inviting me to join you this morning on the occasion of the inaugural MacArthur Asia Security Initiative Grantees' Meeting.

This initiative brings out two important things. Firstly, the need to increase the effectiveness of international cooperation in areas such as the prevention of conflict, and the promotion of peace. Secondly, the need to increase knowledge, so as to improve policy making, as well as the engagement of citizens in the policy making process.

The connection between academic knowledge and policy work has often been equated as the relation between academics and civil servants. Academics are primarily interested in scholarly knowledge, while civil servants are tasked with the role of policy making.

In the hard sciences, theories and scholarly knowledge are based entirely on the process of rational and logical thinking. Such theories are tested for predictability and repeatability, and can be put into practice without much modification. Though time consuming, such theories are considered good only when practice yields constant and predictable results.

On the other hand, in the case of policy makers, predictability cannot be guaranteed for their theories. The social, economic and political arenas are fraught with uncertainties. Neither practitioners nor policy makers are able to predict trends accurately every single time. Multiple influencing factors, which have rippling effects in other areas, also add to the uncertainty and difficulty of policy making. Nonetheless, these theories cannot be regarded as worthless. They serve well as touchstones, as guidelines, and as references.

It can be argued that in an ideal world, policy ought to be based on knowledge, and not merely on political expediency or on other factors such as “guanxi” or personal preference and quirks of individual policy-makers. Policy making ought to be based on facts and a rational calculation of what is necessary. As such, knowledge is essential and this could be shared with other policy makers and interested citizens who might adapt what they have learned to decide on the best policy which suits a particular situation or a similar set of circumstances.

Let me illustrate with three specific examples:

A. Is welfare good or bad for society, and in what way?

Knowledge in this area would be academic articles relating to the impact of welfare on families including children in areas such as health, education, social mobility, and on economic growth. For instance, there is now literature which suggests that welfare actually is better for economic growth in the long run, rather than being a drain on national resources and a drag on the economy.

B. Do sanctions work against regimes such as those in Myanmar and North Korea or is constructive engagement a more productive policy?

In this area, academic knowledge would come from historical studies of sanctions against previous regimes in Iraq and apartheid South Africa, and current studies on the respective embargoes against Myanmar and North Korea. The assessments from diplomatic missions in the countries concerned would also be relevant knowledge.

C. Is censorship conducive to the nurturing of a creative society?

In this area, the kind of relevant knowledge would be harder to determine, but presumably correlational studies across a host of countries of artistic and political freedoms versus measures such as patent or cultural goods exports would be germane.

Dwelling further into these three specific examples, several basic questions are worth thinking about. These questions concern the connection between knowledge and policy making.

Does knowledge have an impact on policy? That is, do policy makers take into consideration the scholarly knowledge of academics when deciding between different choices? If yes, what is the nature of the impact? If no, why is there no impact? What explains the lack of impact? Is it because there is no relevant knowledge out there? Or is the knowledge still uncertain, or in a domain where certainty is difficult to obtain? If there is knowledge, what can be done to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy, and get civil servants to take into account the work of scholars when formulating policy?

Although academics often bemoan the so-called gap between knowledge and policy, that is, the phenomenon of civil servants not always including the work of scholars in their decision making process, studies have found that the gap may not be as wide as feared. A study conducted by Landry, R., Lamari, M., & Amara, N. in 2003, entitled '*The Extent and Determinants of the Utilization of University Research in Government Agencies*' in Canada, concluded that university research is more extensively used than commonly assumed. Nevertheless, there is room for improvement, especially in the policy areas where the use of academic knowledge is crucial, such as in the areas of culture and justice, and economic development.

One of the more convincing explanations for why this gap exists is that academics and policy makers live in two different worlds. As former CIA Deputy Director Robert Bowie said in a well-known quotation concerning foreign policy making,

“The policy-maker, unlike an academic analyst, can rarely wait until all the facts are in...He is very often under strong pressure to do something, to take some action, even if all the facts are not yet available to him or where a careful assessment of current data would provide useful results.”

So, how do policy makers view academics and vice versa?

According to a paper by Alexander L. George, '*The Two Cultures of Academia and Policymaking*', policy makers complain that academics are interested in general knowledge and wisdom, whereas practitioners are interested in specific instances in which what they do

will change things. Hence, there is a conflict in the two different cultures of academia and government. Academics thus do not understand how policy is actually made. They over-intellectualise or exaggerate the importance of analytic rationality as a criterion for making policies. In addition, academics think of policy making as a science, not an art, and underplay the role of judgement. Academics are also perceived to think in narrower terms whereas policy makers simultaneously take all factors into account.

In contrast, academics think policy makers are too a-theoretical and a-conceptual, and even anti-conceptual or anti-intellectual. However, policy makers may actually be influenced by theoretical concepts and use them as implicit assumptions without knowing that they are in fact doing so. Worse still, academics think that policy makers choose the political expedient over what is the best policy.

That brings me to the next question. How should this gap be bridged?

There are several ways. First, there is a need to focus on the relationship between knowledge and action. Scholars need to know the kind of knowledge that policy makers need. They also need to know how to repurpose their research so that policy makers can see the relevance to their work. Second, there is some use in having people move between the two worlds, who go from academia to the civil service and vice-versa, or to increase linkages between the two worlds by having people fulfil two roles, for example, having scholars serve on government committees.

The formation of think tanks, bodies explicitly created to bridge the gap between knowledge and policy, is a third way. Think tanks play several roles. In addition to doing research and analysis, think tanks contribute to policy making and act as a bridge between policy and knowledge. At the Institute of Policy Studies in Singapore, for instance, we try to bridge academia and policy making. Through analysis and communication, we endeavour to link academia and policy making.

To put it another way, think tanks make information available, educate the public and encourage greater engagement, as well as use basic and applied research for the purpose of making better policies. This is a critical function as civil servants may not have the time, resources or ability to tap into the wide ocean of academic knowledge. It is particularly crucial if the policy issue being deliberated cuts across several government agencies.

Furthermore, academics may not be interested in the relevance of policies in their areas of speciality work or may not know how to make that research more relevant to policy makers.

One key driver in the building of bridges would be the strategic use of technology. Modern technology would first reduce the transactional cost of the interaction between the two seemingly distinct arenas of academia and policy conceptualisation. Modern technology also has the capacity to transfer and carry large amounts of information, which will aid information transfer greatly.

Take Singapore for example. Singapore has put in place systems and processes that could aid the anticipation of possible futures. This would thus enable Singapore to be better prepared to handle surprise shocks, such as the current global economic crisis, 9-11 or even SARS. This has been achieved through the development of Singapore's own Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning (RAHS) abilities. The RAHS is process comprising a unique combination of cutting edge concepts, methodologies and technological solutions. The aim is to provide policy makers anticipatory knowledge of the nature of potential upcoming issues in order to minimise risks, and the maximization of opportunities. Through the detection of indicators, networking and linking various governmental and private agencies, as well as through the fostering of shared and informed analysis based on methodological diversity, the RAHS is to empower policy makers to better meet challenges arising from future strategic surprises.

On the part of the government, there should also be an assessment of the ways in which its capabilities could be synergised with those of think tanks. Though think tanks have the capacity to collect their own raw data, when it boils down to country-wide or large-scale information gathering, think tanks are severely constrained. Governments on the other hand, routinely collect such data. If the data was made available to think tanks, of course within the constraints of official secrecy and sensitivities, it would do a world of good for both sides. Even where the government has its own capacity and resources for analysis of this data, getting a think tank to scrutinize such results, might yield different results or at the minimum, this would serve as a second opinion.

In conclusion, the gap hindering the transfer of knowledge, and the connection between academics and policy makers, and vice versa, is an important issue to address. It is easy to be cynical about the prospects for a more evidence based policy making - research rarely

provides definitive answers to policy questions and intellectual based decision making rarely lies at the heart of policy processes. Yet, the development of a well-informed policy requires it. Many bridges are needed to link researchers and academics with relevant policy and practice networks. Civil servants should not be seen as the only group involved in policy work. Other bodies and interested parties can contribute too. Much is to be gained from developing sustained interactions between academics and policy makers. This can be achieved through the development of partnership arrangements between both communities. The MacArthur initiative we are witnessing today is certainly a big contribution in this respect.

Thank you for your attention.

