

Paul Cairney: Politics & Public Policy

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What does it take to turn scientific evidence into policy? Lessons for illegal drugs from tobacco

This post contains preliminary notes for my keynote speech ‘The politics of evidence-based policymaking’ for the COPOLAD annual conference, ‘From evidence to practice: challenges in the field of drugs policies’ (14th June). I may amend them in the run up to the speech (and during their translation into Spanish).

COPOLAD ([Cooperation Programme on Drugs Policies](#)) is a ‘partnership cooperation programme between the European Union, Latin America and the Caribbean countries aiming at improving the coherence, balance and impact of drugs policies, through the exchange of mutual experiences, bi-regional coordination and the promotion of multisectoral, comprehensive and coordinated responses’. It is financed by the EU.

My aim is to draw on policy studies, and the case study of tobacco/ public health policy, to identify four lessons:

1. ‘Evidence-based policymaking’ is difficult to describe and understand, but we know it’s a highly political process which differs markedly from ‘evidence based medicine’.
2. Actors focus as much on persuasion to reduce ambiguity as scientific evidence to reduce uncertainty. They also develop strategies to navigate complex policymaking ‘systems’ or ‘environments’.
3. Tobacco policy demonstrates three conditions for the proportionate uptake of evidence: it helps ‘reframe’ a policy problem; it is used in an environment conducive to policy change; and, policymakers exploit ‘windows of opportunity’ for change.
4. Even the ‘best cases’ of tobacco control highlight a gap of 20-30 years between the production of scientific evidence and a proportionate policy response. In many countries it

could be 50. I'll use this final insight to identify some scenarios on how evidence might be used in areas, such as drugs policy, in which many of the 'best case' conditions are not met.

'Evidence-based policymaking' is highly political and difficult to understand

Evidence-based policymaking (EBPM) is so difficult to understand that [we don't know how to define it or each word in it!](#) People use phrases like '[policy-based evidence](#)', to express cynicism about the sincere use of evidence to guide policy, or 'evidence informed policy', to highlight its often limited impact. It is more important to [try to define each element of EBPM](#) – to identify what counts as evidence, what is policy, who are the policymakers, and what an 'evidence-based' policy would look like – but this is easier said than done.

In fact, it is far easier to say what EBPM **is not**:

It is not 'comprehensively rational'

['Comprehensive rationality'](#) describes, **in part**, the absence of ambiguity and uncertainty:

- Policymakers translate their values into policy in a straightforward manner – they know what they want and about the problem they seek to solve.
- Policymakers and governments can gather and understand all information required to measure the problem and determine the effectiveness of solutions.

Instead, we talk of '[bounded rationality](#)' and how policymakers deal with it. They employ two kinds of shortcut: 'rational', by pursuing clear goals and prioritizing certain kinds and sources of information, and 'irrational', by drawing on emotions, gut feelings, deeply held beliefs, habits, **and what is familiar to them**, to make decisions quickly.

It does not take place in a policy cycle with well-ordered stages

['Policy cycle'](#) describes the idea that there is a core group of policymakers at the 'centre', making policy from the 'top down', and pursuing their goals in a series of clearly defined and well-ordered stages, such as: agenda setting, policy formulation, legitimization, implementation, and evaluation.

It does not describe or explain policymaking well. Instead, we tend to identify the role of environments or systems.

When describing less ordered and predictable [policy environments](#), we describe:

- a wide range of actors (individuals and organisations) influencing policy at many levels of government
- a proliferation of rules and norms followed by different levels or types of government
- important relationships ('networks') between policymakers and powerful actors (with material resources, or the ability to represent a profession or social group)
- a tendency for certain 'core beliefs' or 'paradigms' to dominate discussion
- shifting policy conditions and events that can prompt policymaker attention to lurch at short notice.

When describing [complex policymaking systems](#) we show that, for example, (a) the same inputs of evidence or policy activity can have no, or a huge, effect, and (b) policy outcomes often 'emerge' in the absence of central government control (which makes it difficult to know how, and to whom, to present evidence or try to influence).

It does not resemble 'evidence based medicine' or the public health culture

In health policy we can identify an aim, associated with 'evidence-based medicine' (EBM), to:

(a) gather the best evidence on the effectiveness of policy interventions, based on a hierarchy of research methods which favours, for example, the systematic review of randomised control trials (RCTs)

(b) ensure that this evidence has a direct impact on healthcare and public health, to exhort practitioners to replace bad interventions with good, as quickly as possible.

Instead, (a) policymakers can ignore the problems raised by scientific evidence for long periods of time, only for (b) their attention to lurch, prompting them to beg, borrow, or steal information quickly from **readily available** sources. This can involve many sources of evidence (such as the 'grey literature') that some scientists would not describe as reliable.

Actors focus as much on persuasion to reduce ambiguity as scientific evidence to reduce uncertainty.

In that context, 'evidence-based policymaking' is about framing problems and adapting to complexity.

[Framing](#) refers to the ways in which policymakers understand, portray, and categorise issues. Problems are multi-faceted, but bounded rationality limits the attention of policymakers, and actors compete to highlight one 'image' at the expense of others. The outcome of this process

determines who is involved (for example, portraying an issue as technical limits involvement to experts), who is responsible for policy, how much attention they pay, their demand for evidence on policy solutions, and what kind of solution they favour.

Scientific evidence plays a part in this process, but we should not exaggerate the ability of scientists to win the day with reference to evidence. Rather, policy theories signal the strategies that actors adopt to increase demand for their evidence:

- to combine facts with emotional appeals, to prompt lurches of policymaker attention from one policy image to another ([punctuated equilibrium theory](#))
- to tell simple stories which are easy to understand, help manipulate people's biases, apportion praise and blame, and highlight the moral and political value of solutions ([narrative policy framework](#))
- to interpret new evidence through the lens of the pre-existing beliefs of actors within coalitions, some of which dominate policy networks ([advocacy coalition framework](#))
- to produce a policy solution that is feasible and exploit a time when policymakers have the opportunity to adopt it ([multiple streams analysis](#)).

This takes place in complex 'systems' or 'environments'

A focus on this bigger picture shifts our attention from the use of evidence by an elite group of elected policymakers at the 'top' to its use by a wide range of influential actors in a multi-level policy process. It shows actors that:

- They are competing with many others to present evidence in a particular way to secure a policymaker audience.
- Support for particular solutions varies according to which organisation takes the lead and how it understands the problem.
- Some networks are close-knit and difficult to access because bureaucracies have operating procedures that favour particular sources of evidence and some participants over others
- There is a language – indicating which ideas, beliefs, or ways of thinking are most accepted by policymakers and their stakeholders – that takes time to learn.
- Well-established beliefs provide the context for policymaking: new evidence on the effectiveness of a policy solution has to be accompanied by a shift of attention and successful persuasion.
- In some cases, social or economic 'crises' can prompt lurches of attention from one issue to another, and some forms of evidence can be used to encourage that shift. However, major policy shifts are rare.

In other words, successful actors develop pragmatic strategies based on the policy process that exists, not the process they'd like to see

[We argue that](#) successful actors: identify where the 'action is' (in networks and organisations in several levels of government); learn and follow the 'rules of the game' within networks to improve strategies and help build up trust; form coalitions with actors with similar aims and beliefs; and, frame the evidence to appeal to the biases, beliefs, and priorities of policymakers.

Tobacco policy demonstrates three conditions for the proportionate uptake of evidence

Case studies allow us to turn this general argument into insights generated from areas such as public health.

There are some obvious and important differences between tobacco and (illegal) drugs policies, but an initial focus on tobacco allows us to consider the conditions that might have to be met to use the best evidence on a problem to promote (what we consider to be) a proportionate and effective solution.

We can then use the experience of a 'best case scenario' to identify the issues that we face in less ideal circumstances (first in tobacco, and second in drugs).

With colleagues, [I have been examining](#):

- Why [some countries have far more stringent tobacco control policies than others](#)
- Why, although almost all countries in the world are parties to the same global tobacco policy (the WHO [Framework Convention on Tobacco Control](#)), the [implementation of policy is highly uneven across the globe](#).

Our studies help us identify the conditions under which scientific evidence, on the size of the tobacco problem and the effectiveness of solutions, translates into a public policy response that its advocates would consider to be proportionate.

1. **Actors are able to use scientific evidence to persuade policymakers to pay attention to, and shift their understanding of, policy problems.**

Although scientific evidence helps reduce uncertainty, it does not reduce ambiguity. Rather, there is high competition to define problems, and the result of this competition helps determine the demand for subsequent evidence.

In tobacco, the evidence on smoking and then passive smoking helped raise attention to public health, but it took **decades** to translate into a proportionate response, even in ‘leading’ countries such as the UK.

The comparison with ‘laggard’ countries is crucial to show that the same evidence can produce a far more limited response, as policymakers compare the public health imperative with other ‘frames’, relating to their beliefs on personal responsibility, civil liberties, and the economic consequences of tobacco controls.

2. The policy environment becomes conducive to policy change.

Public health debates take place in environments more or less conducive to policy change. In the UK, actors used scientific evidence to help reframe the problem. Then, this new understanding helped give the Department of Health a greater role, the health department fostered networks with public health and medical groups at the expense of the industry and, while pursuing policy change, policymakers emphasised the reduced opposition to tobacco control, smoking prevalence, and economic benefits to tobacco.,.

In many other countries, these conditions are far less apparent: there are multiple tobacco frames (including economic and civil liberties); economic and trade departments are still central to policy; the industry remains a key player; and, policymakers pay more attention to opposition to tobacco controls (such as bans on smoking in public places) and their potential economic consequences.

Further, differences between countries have **largely endured despite the fact that most countries are parties to the FCTC**. In other words, a **commitment** to [evidence based](#) ‘[policy transfer](#)’ does not necessarily produce actual policy change.

3. Actors generate and exploit ‘[windows of opportunity](#)’ for major policy change.

Even in favourable policy environments, it is not inevitable that major policy changes will occur. Rather, the UK’s experience of key policy instruments – such as legislation to ban smoking in public places (a major commitment of the FCTC) – shows the high level of serendipity involved in the confluence of three necessary but insufficient conditions:

1. high policymaker attention to tobacco as a policy problem
2. the production of solutions, introducing partial or comprehensive bans on smoking in public places, that are technically and politically feasible

3. the willingness and ability of policymakers to choose the more restrictive solution.

In many other countries, there has been no such window of opportunity, or only an opportunity for a far weaker regulation.

So, this condition – [the confluence of three ‘streams’ during a ‘window of opportunity’](#) – shows the major limits to the effect of scientific evidence. The evidence on the health effects of passive smoking have been available since the 1980s, but they only contributed to comprehensive smoking bans in the UK in the mid-2000s, and they remain unlikely in many other countries.

Comparing ‘best case’ and ‘worst case’ scenarios for policy change

These discussions help us clarify the kinds of conditions that need to be met to produce major ‘evidence based’ policy change, even when policymakers have made a commitment to it, or are pursuing an international agreement.

I provide a notional spectrum of ‘best’ and ‘worst’ case scenarios in relation to these conditions:

1. Actors agree on how to gather and interpret scientific evidence.

- Best case: governments fund effective ways to gather and interpret the most relevant evidence on the size of policy problems and the effectiveness of solutions. Policymakers can translate large amounts of evidence on complex situations into simple and effective stories (that everyone can understand) to guide action. This includes evidence of activity in one’s own country, and of transferable success from others.
- Worst case: governments do not know the size of the problem or what solutions have the highest impacts. They rely on old stories that reinforce ineffective action, and do not know how to learn from the experience of other regions (note the [‘not invented here’ issue](#)).

2. Actors ‘frame’ the problem simply and/or unambiguously.

- Best case: governments maintain a consensus on how best to understand the cause of a policy problem and therefore which evidence to gather and solutions to seek.
- Worst case: governments juggle many ‘frames’, there is unresolved competition to define the problem, and the best sources of evidence and solutions remain unclear.

3. A new policy frame is not undermined by the old way of thinking about, and doing, things

- Best case: the new frame sets the agenda for actors in existing organisations and networks; there is no inertia linked to the old way of thinking about and doing things.
- Worst case: there is a new policy, but it is undermined by old beliefs, rules, pre-existing commitments (for example, we talk of '[path dependence](#)' and '[inheritance before choice](#)'), or actors opposed to the new policy.

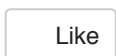
4. There is a clear 'delivery chain' from policy choice to implementation

- Best case: policymakers agree on a solution, they communicate their aims well, and they secure the cooperation of the actors crucial to policy delivery in many levels and types of government.
- Worst case: policymakers communicate an ambiguous message and/ or the actors involved in policy delivery pursue different – and often contradictory – ways to try to solve the same problem.

In international cooperation, it is natural to anticipate and try to minimise at least some of these worst case scenarios. Problems are more difficult to solve when they are transnational. Our general sense of uncertainty and complexity is more apparent when there are many governments involved and we cannot rely on a single authoritative actor to solve problems. Each country (and regions within it) has its own beliefs and ways of doing things, and it is not easy to simply emulate another country (even if we think it is successful and know why). Some countries do not have access to the basic information (for example, on health and mortality, alongside statistics on criminal justice) that others take for granted when they monitor the effectiveness of policies.

Further, these obstacles exist in now-relatively-uncontroversial issues, such as tobacco, in which there is an international consensus on the cause of the problem and the appropriateness and effectiveness of public solutions. It is natural to anticipate further problems when we also apply public health (and, in this case, 'harm reduction') measures to more controversial areas such as illegal drugs.

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Policy Concepts in 1000 Words: Framing

- *Framing*. Framing involves the definition of a policy's image, or how issues are portrayed and categorized. Issues can be framed to make them appear 'technical' and relevant only to experts, or linked to wider social values to heighten participation (Rochefort and Cobb, 1994: 5). To attract attention in the US, one may wish to link ideas to widely accepted values: 'progress, participation, patriotism, independence from foreign domination, fairness, economic growth' (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993: 7). However, core values may vary from country to country and over time (for example, compare the post-war and present day attitudes of most countries to the welfare state). More generally, issue expansion requires the reframing of an issue from a focus on self interest to a problem which the general public (or powerful sections within it) can relate to (Hogwood, 1987: 30). Framing is 'a mixture of empirical information and emotive appeals' (True *et al.*, 2007: 161).

Most policy issues are multi-faceted and can therefore command a wide range of images. For example, smoking may be framed in terms of health, health and safety, health inequalities, nuisance, employment, the economy, customs and excise, the role of multi-national corporations, civil liberties and even human rights. Yet, while there are many ways to frame the same problem, there is limited time and energy to devote to issues. So, highly complex issues are simplified, with very few aspects focused on at any one time at the expense of all the rest. This has policy consequences. For example, a focus on smoking as a health issue prompts governments to restrict tobacco use, while an economic image prompts governments to support the industry (Cairney, Studlar and Mamudu, 2012). Baumgartner and Jones (1993: 109) suggest that while certain groups may exploit these limitations to create and protect a policy monopoly (based on one image for long periods), the agenda-setting process is too dynamic to expect this to go on forever. In particular, the news agenda is based on attempts to seek new angles to maintain the interest of a public audience. This new focus is accompanied by new journalists with different views, providing audiences for people who were previously ignored and creating interest within venues which were previously uninvolved. Indeed, the basis for creating monopolies – limited time, attention, cognitive abilities – also produces radical shifts of attention to different policy images.

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'Framing' is a metaphor to describe the ways in which we understand, and use language selectively to portray, policy problems. There are [many ways to describe this process](#) in many disciplines, including communications, psychological, and sociological research. There is also more than one way to understand the metaphor.

For example, I think that most scholars describe this image (from [litemind](#)) of someone deciding which part of the world on which to focus.



However, I have also seen colleagues use this image, of a timber frame, to highlight the structure of a discussion which is crucial but often unseen and taken for granted:



1. Intentional framing and cognition.

The first kind of framing relates to bounded rationality or the effect of our cognitive processes on the [ways in which we process information](#) (and influence how others process information):

- We use major cognitive shortcuts to turn an infinite amount of information into the ‘signals’ we perceive or pay attention to.
- These cognitive processes often produce interesting conclusions, such as when (a) we place higher value on the things we own/ might lose rather than the things we don’t own/ might gain (‘prospect theory’) or (b) we value, or pay more attention to, the things with which we are most familiar and can process more easily (‘fluency’).
- We often rely on other people to process and select information on our behalf.
- We are susceptible to simple manipulation based on the order (or other ways) in which we process information, and the form it takes.

In that context, you can see one meaning of framing: other actors portray information selectively to influence the ways in which we see the world, or which parts of the world capture our attention ([here is a simple example of wind farms](#)).

In policy theory, framing studies [focus on ambiguity](#): there are many ways in which we can understand and define the same policy problem (note [terms such as ‘problem definition’ and a ‘policy image’](#)). Therefore, actors exercise power to draw attention to, and generate support for, one particular understanding at the expense of others. They do this with [simple stories](#) or the [selective presentation of facts](#), often coupled with emotional appeals, to manipulate the ways in which we process information.

2. Frames as structures

Think about the extent to which we take for granted certain ways to understand or frame issues. We don’t begin each new discussion with reference to ‘first principles’. Instead, we discuss issues with reference to:

- (a) debates that have been won and may not seem worth revisiting (imagine, for example, the ways in which ‘socialist’ policies are treated in the US)
- (b) other well-established ways to understand the world which, when they seem to dominate our ways of thinking, are often described as ‘hegemonic’ or with reference to paradigms.

In such cases, the timber frame metaphor serves two purposes:

- (a) we can conclude that it is difficult but not impossible to change.
- (b) if it is hidden by walls, we do not see it; we often take it for granted even though we should know it exists.

Framing the social, not physical, world

These metaphors can only take us so far, because the social world does not have such easily identifiable physical structures. Instead, when we frame issues, we don’t just choose where to look; we also influence how people describe what we are looking at. Or, ‘structural’ frames relate to regular patterns of behaviour or ways of thinking which are more difficult to identify than in a building. Consequently, we do not all describe structural constraints in the same way even though, ostensibly, we are looking at the same thing.

In this respect, for example, the well-known '[Overton window](#)' is a sort-of helpful but also [problematic concept, since it suggests that policymakers are bound to stay within the limits of what Kingdon](#) calls the 'national mood'. The public will only accept so much before it punishes you in events such as elections. Yet, of course, there is no such thing as the public mood. Rather, some actors (policymakers) make decisions with reference to their perception of such social constraints (how will the public react?) but they also know that they can influence how we interpret those constraints with reference to one or more proxies, [including opinion polls, public consultations, media coverage, and direct action](#):

PUBLIC AND MEDIA OPINION

Public opinion became the key battle ground for pressure participants pursuing different policy solutions. We can identify three main aspects:

1. The use of different opinion polls or the selective use of the same data.
2. The use of consultation documents rather than opinion polls to demonstrate support.
3. The less precise *feeling* among decision-makers about changing levels of public opinion and the scope for change.

They might get it wrong, and suffer the consequences, but it still makes sense to say that they have a choice to interpret and adapt to such '[structural](#)' constraints.

Framing, power and the role of ideas

We can bring these two ideas about framing together to suggest that some [actors exercise power](#) to reinforce dominant ways to think about the world. Power is not simply about visible conflicts in which one group with greater material resources wins and another loses. It also relates to agenda setting. First, actors may exercise power to reinforce social attitudes. If the weight of public opinion is against government action, maybe governments will not intervene. The classic example is poverty – if most people believe that it is caused by fecklessness, what is the role of government? In such cases, power and powerlessness may relate to the (in)ability of groups to persuade the public, media and/ or government that there is a reason to make policy; a problem to be solved. In other examples, the battle may be about the extent to which issues are private (with no legitimate role for government) or public (and open to legitimate government action), including: should governments intervene in disputes between businesses and workers? Should they intervene in disputes between husbands and wives? Should they try to stop people smoking in private or public places?

Second, policymakers can only pay attention to a tiny amount of issues for which they are responsible. So, actors exercise power to keep some issues on their agenda at the expense of

others. Issues on the agenda are sometimes described as ‘safe’: more attention to these issues means less attention to the imbalances of power within society.

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