

## The changing face of policy making

George Clark, December 2004 (Based loosely on Hoppe, 1999)

A policy is a set of ideas or plans which are used as the basis for making decisions, especially in politics, economics, or business. In countries where participatory democracy is becoming more common the policy making process involves a wide range of people in *making sense together*. This popular approach involves deep changes in how society is organised and in the way that politicians, scientists and ordinary people go about their business. This short paper looks at how emerging forms of participatory democracy are changing what is involved in *speaking truth to power*.

### ***Policy making – a bird with three wings?***

Traditionally the bird of policy had two wings. The political wing dealt with power and opinion and was based on beliefs and ideology. The scientific wing dealt with truth and evidence and was neutral and value free. This gave rise to the idea of *speaking truth to power* ie the ‘facts of scientists’ could enlighten the ‘opinions of politicians’. This was a very simple way of looking at things. These days there are two main complications.

**Science gets political** – recent research shows that science is far from being neutral and value free. Science has to be funded and the funders decide what should be studied. Most of the funding for science comes from the private sector and from governments. The funders decide not only what scientists should study but also the kind of results that will be accepted.

**Politics gets scientific** – globalisation means that national politicians no longer have as much power and control as they used to have. Many of the major decisions about global issues are made by a small number of rich, powerful and largely unaccountable businessmen, and their key political associates. The decisions of these groups are heavily guided by evidence from vast armies of scientists. (Who of course (see above) work within the guidelines, and to match the mindsets, of their funders.)

The third wing on the bird of policy is relatively new – it is the popular wing – it involves ordinary people. Issue-based, participatory democracy is thriving. People are forming pressure groups and their voices are being heard on a wide range of issues which otherwise escape the attention of high level policy makers. Policy making is now viewed in many places as being, of necessity, a multi-stakeholder process. But there are two main problems with this.

The first problem is that ordinary citizens do not always have the expertise or the funding to gather the evidence needed to support their point of view. This presents a serious challenge for capacity building.

The second problem is that when there are many stakeholders there are many issues. We therefore need people who can bring order and clarity to the process, work towards some level of consensus, and thus set widely acceptable priorities.

### ***Policy analysis as ‘good’ science***

The European Enlightenment led to ‘modernism’ the ‘*Age of Reason*’ and thus to ‘science’. Many people came to believe that the scientific method of being rational, logical and consistent was the royal road to ‘truth’ and thus to human progress. But there were problems – science was associated with massive exploitation and pollution. Many people began to recognise that, in many ways, science was technocratic, undemocratic, exclusive and suppressive.

The pendulum thus swung to ‘postmodernism’. From this point of view there are many truths. All social issues and events are unique, context specific and fragmented. There are differences within and between cultures, lifestyles and discourses. The *one size fits all* models of the modern period have become less popular. There is a *rage against reason*.

#### **Representative democracy**

– people vote for politicians to make decisions on their behalf based on ideological principles. Politicians use technical experts to help make ‘good’ decisions. (Or to justify the decisions after they have been made?).

#### **Participatory democracy**

– people form social movements to advocate and lobby for particular issues. Politicians and technical experts are part of an ongoing multi-stakeholder process.

But this does not have to be an either/or, black/white situation. There are useful shades of grey.

Old fashioned methods still play a valuable role in the hard sciences and in engineering where ‘theories’ and ‘laws’ can be systematically deduced, accurately stated and have good predictive value. However, when studying social, political and economic systems, scientists have to accept that people’s motives are relevant and that meanings are socially constructed. This calls for scientific ways of working that are less mechanistic and more interpretive, participatory, and designed to investigate and take account of the views of *all* stakeholders.

Today’s top scientists rarely talk of ‘truth’ but rather of ‘best working hypothesis in the light of evidence presently available’. These days, the best scientists are eager to take part in discussions and debates. They are open to other people’s ideas and willing to revise their own ideas. They are keenly aware that local patterns of dialogue and action make the ‘reality’ in any particular time and place.

The ‘good’ scientists of today are less mechanical than their modernist ancestors. They see all ‘problems’ as being socially and culturally embedded. This guides how they work. Those who would be ‘scientific’ about policy analysis have to accept the conditions in which they operate. These usually have the following features:

- the ‘problem’ involves a complex web of interacting issues
- there are conflicts of interest between stakeholders
- the boundary between ‘scientific fact’ and ‘political opinion’ is constantly being renegotiated
- there are many uncertainties and thus unpredictabilities
- answers are needed urgently

So what can the ‘good’ scientist do? She has three main tasks:

- to develop a systematic approach which is detailed enough to catch all the relevant variables (ie to identify and analyse *all* the key issues and stakeholders)
- to separate out those areas where agreement can be reached and policies made, and those that need further work
- to make sure that the ongoing process is constantly subject to an extended system of peer review which is both internal (other experts from within the discipline) and external (other scientists, politicians, and non-expert citizens)

### ***Policy analysis – making sense together***

Earlier we thought of the bird of policy having three wings - political, scientific and popular. Thoughts about the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes of people in the scientific wing have been hotly debated for the last 30 years. The range of ideas falls between the two extremes which are set out below:

<b>Technocratic</b>	←	→	<b>Populist</b>
Truth by analysis and logic	←	→	Truth by argument and discussion
Facts speak for themselves	←	→	Opinions count – facts need interpretation
The experts know best	←	→	The people know best

In the earlier days there were three schools of thought about how to analyse and make policy. The **analycentric school** reckoned that facts and statistics were all that was needed to make good policy and that the process should therefore be in the hands of experts. The **neo-positivist school** reckoned that there were scientific laws of cause and effect which could be used to predict the future and that policy making should be in the hands of those who understood the laws. The **critical rationalism school** showed a move towards the populist end of the above table. It accepted laws of cause and effect but recognised that the laws were constantly changing. Progress could therefore be made in cycles of action and reflection. Policy content could be thought of as a hypothesis and policy implementation as an experiment. There was therefore a move from a blueprint approach to an emergent approach. But the scientists (technocrats) were still in ultimate control!

In more recent times people have recognised that scientists no longer discover the ‘truth’ about ‘reality’. So it is fair to ask how they might add value to the common sense of politicians and ordinary people. The answer is that they can ‘facilitate the process’. There are four schools of thought about what this might involve.

The **relativist school** accepts that nothing is fixed and that the main task of the scientist is to help systematise the process and procedures for analysing and making policy. A selection of short cuts and rules of thumb can be used to support what is in essence an art or craft rather than a science.

The **critical school** accepts much of the relativist point of view but feels that it gives up too easily. There is a range of techniques which can be used to uncover bias and deception and thus to push beyond common sense to new learning. This makes it possible to have good quality decisions and to reach real consensus.

The **forensic school** accepts that there are conflicts in multi-stakeholder situations but offers a range of techniques to steer a pathway through them and thus reach shared consensus. Experts from this school make systematic use of the action/ reflection cycle which turns several times to produce a draft policy and then turns several times again. In a fast changing world the policy is forever in draft!

The **participatory school** builds on all the others and uses many of their techniques. The difference is that it makes positive use of a range of participatory techniques so that all key issues and stakeholders are included in the process. These techniques are vital in three very common situations:

- when finding a solution to a policy problem depends on using citizen’s knowledge of local or regional conditions
- when policy issues involve deciding what is right or wrong from an ethical point of view - this means that ‘experts’ are no more competent to judge than ordinary people
- when experts are strongly divided over an issue.

Note that all of the above schools have strengths and weaknesses. Our best approach is to make good use of the various strengths and to avoid the more obvious weaknesses. Policy making is deeply political and has to face problems of bias, deception and a host of other human weaknesses. The secret of success lies in improving the quality of argument, discussion and debate in a participatory and multi-stakeholder process of policy analysis.

The good news is that, at least in the rhetoric, there seems to be a growing consensus that, more often than not, populist approaches are ‘better’ than technocratic ones. The democratic door is thus more open than it used to be. There is therefore the possibility of scientists, politicians and ordinary people *making sense together* and thus of *speaking their own truth to their own power*.

### **Short reading list:**

- Thomas S. Kuhn (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*;  
University of Chicago Press; ISBN: [0226458083](#) (online synopsis at <http://www.emory.edu/EDUCATION/mfp/kuhnsyn.html> )
- Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*;  
Peregrine ISBN [014055176x](#) (online synopsis at <http://www.rdillman.com/HFCL/TUTOR/ComEnv/CEnv.ex.socconsreal.html> )
- EG Guba and YS Lincoln (1989) *Fourth Generation Evaluation*; Sage; ISBN [0803932359](#) (for outline of ideas see <http://www.srds.ndirect.co.uk/4th.htm>)
- Stuart Sim (1998) *The Icon Critical Dictionary of Post-modern Thought*;  
Icon Book; ISBN [187416665x](#) (for further online sources see also <http://www.spiritandsky.com/philosophy/movements/postmodernism/> )
- Robert Hoppe (1999) *Policy analysis, science and politics: from ‘speaking truth to power’ to ‘making sense together’*; University of Twente; <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/tps/e-print/s&pparticle.pdf>
- Minu Hemmati (2002) *Multi-stakeholder processes for governance and sustainability – beyond deadlock and conflict*; Earthscan; ISBN [1853838705](#) (also available online at [http://www.minuhemmati.net/eng/msp/msp\\_book.htm](http://www.minuhemmati.net/eng/msp/msp_book.htm) )

Note: Click on the ISBN number to view the book at Amazon.co.uk