

Call for Papers

Evidence for Sustainable Development

2012 Berlin Conference on
the Human Dimensions of Global Environmental Change

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Organised by the
Environmental Policy Research Centre, Freie Universität Berlin,



in collaboration with the
EC-FP7-Network of Excellence LIAISE
(‘Linking Impact Assessment Instruments to Sustainability Expertise’)



The Environmental Policy Research Centre, Freie Universität Berlin, in collaboration with the Network of Excellence LIAISE (‘Linking Impact Assessment Instruments to Sustainability Expertise’), invites proposals for papers for the 2012 Berlin Conference that focuses on evidence-based decision-making for sustainable development.

From climate change to stock market crashes, societies are increasingly confronted with complex, interconnected economic, social and environmental problems. Public and private decisions to meet these challenges affect future generations and – in a globalized world – oftentimes impact on societies abroad. Governance of sustainable development has to take into account these complex, long-term and side effects. This is why the evidence base of decision-making is of growing importance. Many countries have established institutions such as advisory councils, assessment procedures, evaluation clauses etc., and initiated research programmes to collect evidence and to assess policies with regard to their impacts on the various problems that modern societies face. This is meant to take possible side effects into account, thereby improving the quality of decision-making and contributing to sustainable development.

While the political commitment to improve the evidence base of public policy has considerably strengthened in the last decade, these intentions are often not met in practice. The provision of evidence and knowledge is obviously not a sufficient condition to change policies and behaviour. To be seriously taken into consideration, scientific evidence has to be perceived as relevant and timely. However, there exists neither a uniform science nor a single decision-maker: Scientific evidences are constantly challenged by competing theories and methods. Policy-making is a process that involves many actors and interests. Problems and policies to address

them are constantly challenged, reframed and reconsidered. In such ambiguous situations, scientific evidence is used to support political arguments and to legitimise a course of action, but it is also frequently disregarded, side-lined or even discredited if it challenges established practices and vested interests. A direct impact of scientific evidence on political decisions is apparently rare. In many cases, research has a much more indirect and unintended impact on policy-making through conceptual use and knowledge creep, that is through ideas that enable policy-makers to gradually revise their framing of a policy problem at hand. In such situations, many scientists experience their involvement in the support of decision-making as frustrating. Policy-makers and society in turn perceive science as a chorus of often contradicting voices, not useful to base decisions on.

Against this background, the conference will cover two issues:

1. How can the research process be organised to develop evidence that is considered relevant and timely in the political process to meet the challenges of sustainable development?
2. How can the policy-science interface be organised in a way that such scientific evidence is taken into consideration?

The conference aims at bringing together scientists from different disciplines and strands of research that produce evidence to support decision-making for sustainable development, and those that study the use of such evidence. Furthermore, we invite policy-makers and practitioners working at the science-policy interface or dealing with issues of evidence use in policy making to share their experiences. In particular, we call for contributions of

- Scholars of political science, law, administrative science etc., studying the use of evidence in decision-making;
- Scholars of science and technology studies, studying the construction of evidence and the interaction with decision-making;
- Scholars in the field of modelling of ecosystems, economic modelling and modelling of social impacts, working on the evidence itself to be used in decision-making.

The conference will be organised around the following topics, and submissions of paper proposals are invited to contribute to one or several of the research questions:

1. Data, models and tools for decision-making

The list of societal problems to be addressed in sustainable development is long: Climate change, environmental pollution, nuclear waste disposal, biodiversity, food security, water management, resource scarcities, diseases, genetically modified organisms, the financial crisis, demographic changes etc. The common characteristic of these problems is the complex systemic, human-environmental interconnections they imply. Sustainable development also focuses on the long-term dynamics of human-environmental systems in which uncertainty about future developments of systems and sub-systems prevails. The consideration of complexity, of the various side effects and feedback loops is not possible with linear models of cause and effect. The production of complex evidence is key to a comprehensive policy assessment. Therefore, models and tools that combine different impact areas, as well as analytical tools such as cost-benefit analysis, multi-criteria analysis and scenario techniques are needed. The production of evidence is however not an end in itself. Evidence also has to be salient in the sense that it should be relevant for decision-makers or affected stakeholders. Interesting and relevant topics identified within the scientific community may be of little relevance to outsiders. Timing and scope of the research are also crucial since information arriving too early or too late, or being too broad or too narrow to fit policy-makers' agendas might fail to be considered in the decision-making process.

In this context, the following questions arise: How can we deal with issues of complexity, uncertainty, and long-term developments in evidence production? Which specific data is required? What models and tools are available? How can we take account of the complex and dynamic nature of evidence that is supportive of sustainable development? What are the challenges of interdisciplinarity in tools and models development, and of interaction with policy-makers? How can relevance and usability of evidence in the policy process be taken into account as factors from the supply side, i.e. in model building and evidence production? How can policy-makers be engaged with scientists in the design of research to heighten the relevance and improve the understanding of the research process?

2. Evidence in decision-making

Evidence about the various potential impacts of a policy is pivotal for sustainable development. In conventional decision-making characterised by political bargaining between the different interest groups, this aspect is oftentimes not sufficiently considered. As a consequence, many countries have established institutions and procedures to collect and to consider evidence in decision-making. It is however rather unclear how they work in practice. Frequently, these procedures are built on the assumption of a 'linear model' of science and problem solving that rests on objectivity and neutrality of scientific evidence, as well as on science's autonomy from politics. Post-positivist critiques of these forms of evidence use, in contrast, stress the constructive character of knowledge and the political nature of policy formation. They argue that both considerations of how science is used in decision-making and the role users of scientific outputs have in its production are important aspects of understanding the effectiveness of scientific evidence in decision-making. This is particularly relevant in cases in which transscientific issues are at stake, when science is unable to converge upon a solution, or the policy problem is unstructured such that proponents cannot even agree on a framing of the problem at stake. In such a setting, it is obvious that science cannot deliver 'true' knowledge for 'best' policy options, but can at best inform open debate and critical reflection.

Numerous questions follow from this: What is the role of evidence and knowledge in decision-making for sustainable development as compared to power, interests and other political factors? What evidence is considered 'useful' in decision-making? How should policy-makers deal with competing evidence claims? Can we distinguish between scientific and other forms of knowledge, such as from stakeholders? Are there differences between policy fields, between administrative cultures, or between levels in multi-level systems with regard to their demand of knowledge? How can the evidence base of policies be improved? Can we define quality criteria for evidence for sustainable development?

3. The interaction of science and policy

Science and politics are often conceived as two separate worlds of knowledge production and knowledge use, each following distinct rules and objectives. Common-sense notions like the distinction between 'truth' and 'facts', on the one hand, and 'values' and 'power', on the other, exemplify the two-worlds hypothesis. However, the model of a clear-cut labour division between science and politics deflects attention from the ongoing interaction between the two. In fact, science is part of the governing process and plays an important role in defining problems and advocating solutions. Furthermore, knowledge is judged and valued by society as it enters the public arena. Advisors are selected, not only because policy-makers and administrative officers need their advice, but because they need their authoritative support for policies. Science-policy interaction is less neatly separated than the two-worlds hypothesis implies. Rather than a one-directional movement of knowledge, we can discern ongoing interactions and negotiations between science and policy, concerning the relation of an advisory body to a government department, the formulation of research questions, the way in which a scientific model is to be built and subsequently used, etc.

Regarding the science-policy interface, we can ask: How can the relationship between science and policy, and politics in particular, be described? How do science and policy interact? What is the role of boundary organisations in this? What can we say about the similarities and differences of science-policy interfaces in different contexts, e.g. countries or policy areas? Has science-policy interaction changed over time, for example with the occurrence of global sustainability problems like climate change? What are the requirements and criteria for 'good' governance of science-policy interfaces?

Paper submission and selection

Paper proposals (max. 300 words) are invited for submission through the conference website by **1 April, 2012**. Submissions will then be reviewed anonymously by an international reviewer panel. Acceptance will be decided on the basis of scientific quality (theoretical, methodological, new empirical evidence) and best fit with the conference topics. Notification of acceptance will be announced by 30 June, 2012. Full papers are expected by 15 September, 2012.

The conference hosts aim to make funds available to support travel of researchers from developing countries and of young researchers. However, as these funds are limited, contributors are encouraged to identify other sources for funding as well.

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Website:

<http://www.berlinconference.org/2012>