

## **REPORT:**

### **Principles and guidelines for social science advice to policy**

**An expert workshop jointly organised by INGSA, MCC Berlin, and Stiftung Mercator**

*Date: Tue, 25 April 2017 (10.00–16.45h)*

*Venue: MCC, EUREF-Campus 19, 10829 Berlin, Germany*

#### **1) Workshop motivation**

The role of the social sciences in public policy processes is an increasing focus of academic and science policy debates, with regular calls for better integration of social science evidence and expertise in policy advice processes. However, various challenges persist, including the societal relevance of social science results, implied value judgements and legitimacy issues (advocacy versus brokerage, etc.), complexity and uncertainty, and sometimes inconclusive, overly theoretical, or too specific results. So reflecting on the prospects and pitfalls of an enhanced role for social science in policy advice is crucial and timely.

In November 2015, the World Science Forum (WSF) endorsed a Declaration that includes, for the first time, a specific request that a set of guidelines and principles to underpin science advice be developed. To meet this request, INGSA has set up a small working group of practitioners, ethicists, legal and STS scholars to develop a draft for discussion, which will be consulted on widely before seeking endorsement at the World Science Forum 2017, to draw on a diversity of views. The development and consultation process is co-chaired by Dan Sarewitz (Arizona State University, USA) and James Wilsdon (University of Sheffield and INGSA vice-chair, UK).

As a contribution to this process, INGSA, MCC Berlin and Stiftung Mercator co-hosted an expert workshop on 25 April 2017 in Berlin with 24 participants (practitioners of social science policy advice, policy-makers, social science funders, STS/observers, etc.), mainly from Europe. This workshop provided an excellent opportunity to reflect on social science policy advice, and particularly focused on the contribution that the social sciences can make to the new principles and guidelines for scientific advice to policymaking – a first version of which was released in September 2016 in Brussels at INGSA's 2<sup>nd</sup> international conference, in partnership with the European Commission.

## 2) Workshop objectives

The workshop's main objectives were to:

- ✓ Facilitate broader discussions about current challenges and opportunities for social-science policy advice in Europe, including best practices and lessons learned. How can social sciences contribute to resolving current societal crises? How to deal with post-normal contested issues at the science-policy interface? How to move from advocacy to the assessment of policy alternatives?
- ✓ Consider the draft INGSA science-policy guidelines from the perspective of the social sciences. Refine and amend the draft INGSA guidelines to ensure that the draft guidelines sufficiently address the challenges and requirements for social-science policy advice – including on issues that have natural science and technology components as well.
- ✓ Enlarge and strengthen the capacity and network of those interested in social science advice to policy.

## 3) Workshop summary<sup>1</sup>

The workshop succeeded in facilitating a lively, well-informed and highly inspiring discussion about the current challenges and opportunities for social-science policy advice in Europe. There was broad agreement by the participants, among them researchers, research funders, practitioners and science policy makers, that this topic is both timely and relevant in light of current academic and political debates about the roles of social sciences in policy and society more broadly. Below is a summary of the main challenges and opportunities for social science policy advice identified and discussed by workshop participants – without however necessarily implying a consensus among all participants.

### 3.1 Major challenges for the social sciences in public policy processes

#### *a) Bridging 'social science' and 'policy' as very different systems*

Already in the introduction, a first challenge for social science advice to policy was identified: the difficulty of being able to include the “demand side” into the discussions around for social science advice. Involving politicians is essential in order to be able to provide relevant and meaningful scientific advice. Engaging them,

---

<sup>1</sup> This workshop summary was prepared by Martin Kowarsch, Julia Stamm, Jeannine Hausmann and James Wilsdon, and does not necessarily present a group consensus but rather the authors' views of the workshop discussions. We are very grateful to Ms. Jennifer Garard (researcher at MCC Berlin) for taking notes during the workshop, based on which this report was produced. The workshop programme and a list of participants is provided in the annex. Please also note that Alessandro Allegra who participated in the workshop wrote a blog titled “INGSA workshop on social science advice to policy: perspectives from an early career researcher” which is on the INGSA website (<http://www.ingsa.org/ingsa-blog/ingsa-workshop-on-social-science-advice-to-policy-perspectives-from-an-early-career-researcher/>).

however, remains not an easy task. Take the example of this workshop: Several demand-side representatives (i.e. different kinds of decision-makers that potentially use social science results in their work) had been invited, among them experts working for the EU Commission, the German national parliament, and national governments. However, unfortunately, many of them cancelled their participation in this workshop at short notice. As a result, the majority of workshop participants consisted of distinguished practitioners of social science policy advice, critical observers, and social science funders, thus limiting the scope of the discussions.

As several participants pointed out, the potential influence of (social) science advice on policy processes is limited by nature and very difficult to measure. However, the degree of influence seems to depend on a variety of factors:

- Appropriate timing (e.g. the need to take into account the differing cycles of academic and policy processes),
- The Framing of the results, and
- An appropriate degree of interaction and exchange between the different groups of actors (e.g. knowing whom to talk to, and how (and in what language). For example, sometimes policy-makers know economists but do not know any social anthropologists in person to ask them.

For social science funders, a major challenge is balancing and bridging social science and policy-making as two very different systems by meeting the professionalism and standards of both (mainly: scientific credibility and academic relevance on the one hand, and political effectiveness and efficiency on the other, as one participant explained). On the one hand, many funders would like to see more policy-relevant social science research in terms of contributions to the debates about grand societal challenges, and the like. On the other hand, funders do not want to be “science-prescriptive” and force social scientists to mainly produce very applied, policy-relevant knowledge. They rather aim to enable scientific autonomy and independence as much as possible.

Some workshop participants noted a lack of (incentives for and provision of) policy-relevant social science research, with only little accountability to society. In particular, with the exception of economics, there is only limited systematic research available on the practical implications of specific policy options from a social science perspective. Many social science results are overly theoretical and lack an empirical underpinning. Furthermore there is still a notable lack integration of quantitative and qualitative aspects. Including them into the research design is essential to appropriately inform policy processes, while transdisciplinarity and dealing with different value issues is certainly not an easy task for the social sciences.

While social scientists are not always well equipped to inform policy making, funding calls are often designed in a way that makes it difficult for the social sciences to bring in their expertise in interdisciplinary consortia. ‘Fostering interdisciplinarity’ has become a buzzword, but we still need to learn much more about how it can be done effectively.

Participants also discussed whether or not the term ‘social sciences’ is at all useful, given the heterogeneity of disciplines, approaches, individual perspectives, and challenges. Some of them argued that, despite the obvious diversity within the social

sciences, it still makes sense to use this term, given that the science-policy-society interface is still largely dominated by natural science, technology, and economics. Also, many decision-makers (including in the EU Commission and national governments) are simply not aware of the wealth of social science disciplines and their potential contributions to policy debates, apart from economics.

The group also discussed whether, in times of Brexit, Donald Trump and “fake news”, we are currently facing a crisis of expertise in general and social science policy advice in particular, or whether it is rather a crisis of democracy and political institutions (populism, etc.). Some participants asked whether the sciences, overall, did contribute to this crisis, e.g. by too often aligning with the winners at the expense of the losers or by meeting the demands of elites only? The current rise of populism and post-truth trends in society constitutes an important framework for any contemporary social science policy advice, requiring first and foremost more humility among academics and a careful analysis of the underlying dynamics and politics, including in the academic realm. Other participants, however, doubted that the assumed “post-truth” trends are actually real.

In the context of the debate around facts and truth, it is essential to analyse issues of power and the “politics of knowledge” with respect to the role of social sciences in policy processes, but also within academia and scientific institutions. Presumably, power is the single most important factor in societal systems, but still rarely discussed openly. In science, we can name the, perhaps unjustified, epistemic hierarchies in advisory systems (natural science first, then economics, then social sciences and humanities). Another difficulty lies in the observation that economic and other social science-based policy advice often provided hard numbers which, however, were based on very soft and uncertain data and assumptions. Another issue is the rather unreflected use of the ‘we’ as social sciences when there is in fact a great variety of perspectives rooted in the different disciplines that are categorised as social sciences.

Much more fundamentally, however, some researchers even question whether the social sciences should explicitly contribute to better understanding specific policy options and their implications at all:

- First, because of the theoretical assumption that it is hardly possible to steer societal behaviour and processes in a targeted, rational manner through any policy design efforts.
- Second, because of normative concerns regarding the asymmetry of power inherent in scientific policy evaluation, in terms of “speaking on behalf of those affected” (if at all). This may, as some assume, lead to undesirable outcomes and impact of social science policy advice. From this perspective, the only reasonable thing to do for the social sciences is to critically analyse the *politics* inherent in all science-policy processes (rather than focusing on *policy*).

Finally, it was argued that we should be both careful and critical about natural sciences “appropriating” social sciences aspects in their policy advice, for example by adding some – superficial – value or behavioural aspects to their policy recommendations.

### *b) The reliability of social science advice*

The group discussed how to ensure the scientific quality of social science research and policy advice, particularly given the huge complexity of the wicked policy problems at stake. Many participants agreed that better quality indicators need to be developed that are specifically aimed at social science policy advice. The INGSA principles and guidelines could provide a useful basis.

It is very difficult to achieve a reliable assessment of the available social science results to inform policy, and this for at least two reasons:

- *First*, it is very hard to aggregate the individual social science studies with their often highly diverse results, because these studies use very different theoretical approaches or empirical metrics. There is a clear lack of meta-studies in some social science fields that aggregate research results and thus help to more systematically understand variation in available social science studies. There is perhaps a general lack of a synthetic research culture in the social sciences (within and across the disciplines, also limiting opportunities for transdisciplinary co-production of knowledge which presupposes openness to other problem framings, methods, ways to go about things), from which scientific progress and policy advice suffer. Furthermore, many stakeholders (including some natural scientists) do not trust social science results. Therefore, relevant social dimensions of policy problems are often neglected in policy debates and predominant paradigms (e.g., in the 'planetary boundaries' concept). Many workshop participants claimed that this is largely based on mistaken assumptions about the social sciences.
- *Second*, there is a rapidly growing body of literature in some fields (e.g., 212,000 publications in the field of climate change between 1990 and 2014). Without sophisticated bibliometric methods, it is hardly possible for small research teams to be aware of and read all of these publications, let alone evaluate them.

Moreover, it was stated that some natural scientists and decision-makers do not consider social science insights as objective because of the many value judgements implied in the social sciences. Many workshop participants disagreed with this view, noting (1) that there are also plenty of value judgments – cognitive, epistemic, but also ethical ones – implied in natural science policy advice, and (2) that value-laden research can still lead to reliable results and even objectivity (if understood in an appropriate way). The challenge, however, is to adequately address value issues in social science research, and to be transparent with regard to existing value judgements in models and studies. From a post-normal science perspective, where stakes are high, facts uncertain, values in dispute, and decisions urgent, the sciences are not yet up to the task. The fact-value entanglement and the related complexity are not yet being dealt with in a satisfactory way. Values are certainly important drivers but they are also highly elusive - you cannot just read them off a list or from an ethics book.

### 3.2 Promising ways forward

#### *a) Promoting social sciences in the policy realm*

Applying a broader, more differentiated conceptual framework for outcomes and impacts of social science policy advice allows the identification of various forms of influence on policy processes (e.g., in terms of contributions to long-term learning processes among several actors). However, if one wants to achieve this, this would have a number of implications for individual research careers and entire science-related institutions, including the funding organisations.

So, how can social sciences become more relevant to policy-makers? First, it is essential for them to understand (and for social scientists to point out) that social science research, contrary to natural science, is largely nation-state based and, thus, focuses on incentives and processes on the national level incentives. Second, it is crucial to better understand the limitations of natural science policy recommendations. Furthermore, the one-size-fits-all approach needs to be reconsidered: There is a need to clearly distinguish between different disciplines within the social sciences. Mixing them up can lead to unrealistic consequences and unrealistic expectations.

In order to achieve a better timing of policy advice, it would help to not only focus on policy agenda-setting, but also to provide more scientific input on current policy problems. To better understand the needs, expectations and respective environments of both researchers and policy makers would considerably increase the effectiveness at the science-policy-society interface. It would also improve communication, including the art of “story-telling”, i.e. the development of narratives. One possibility could be to foster an exchange between academia and policy to promote mutual understanding.

A number of already existing initiatives could serve as example and inspiration:

Brigitte Knopf introduced the MCC Berlin as an institution with the ambition to provide highly relevant, solution-oriented social-science insights to policy processes in the field of sustainable development, through inclusive, deliberative assessment processes and based on excellent academic publications and a systematic reflection on the science-policy interface.

ALLEA (All European Academies) and SAPEA (Scientific Advice to Policy by European Academies) aim to promote social sciences in the policy realm, thus creating avenues for social sciences to become more visible. Academies and their umbrella organisations can be effective hubs for inter- and transdisciplinarity at the national and international level. The European Union’s Joint Research Centre “Evidence for Policy Community” is another interesting network promoting (social) science policy advice by providing an online platform for practitioners and researchers (facilitating information, exchange, trainings, etc.).

Sharon Smit from Groningen University mentioned the “Sustainable Society Project” as a remarkable initiative launched as an interface between different disciplines, universities, and external stakeholders, among them policy makers. Establishing indicators of societal impact beyond scientific impact metrics may provide incentives for more policy-relevant social science research, but also requires an understanding of the audiences and investments in the next generation of researchers in terms of training and capacity building, along with allowing failure to happen in experimental dialog platforms and policy labs.

The IPSP (International Panel on Social Progress) could also become a very helpful initiative to promote social sciences in the policy realm.

#### *b) Improving knowledge aggregation and the treatment of value issues*

More meta-studies in the social sciences are needed to support knowledge aggregation. Also better linking results to existing research and testing theories empirically would help to improve the quality of social science research. However, consistency (for comparison purposes) should be achieved in a way that does not narrow down diversity in scientific approaches and perspectives (i.e., avoiding narrow standardisation). Regarding the exploding bodies of literature, bibliometric tools and big data analysis are required for a more comprehensive review.

Value issues inherent in social science research and advice could be more constructively addressed and discussed beyond the focus on ‘social acceptance’ (‘resilience’ is a better concept, for instance). A collaborative and open exploration of alternative policy scenarios was suggested. Disputed ethical principles or values are brought to bear here upon concrete policy options and their implications (i.e., alternative concrete futures) to facilitate iterated policy learning and pragmatic compromises regarding means and ends based on inclusive deliberation.

We should acknowledge multiple knowledges and ways of knowing. If it is to be transdisciplinary, this needs to have a more open structure within and between disciplines and publics, starting with the problem framing already, to be determined jointly. Metrics of diversity (i.e. from bibliometrics) may be directly applicable to the different aspects of social science policy advice. Transdisciplinarity is acknowledging and challenging power (politics) within and outside of social science, and requires being conditional and opening up outputs. Marginalised and new kinds of stakeholders should be engaged with, beyond who we are already working with.

### 3.3 Advancing the INGSA principles and guidelines process

James Wilsdon introduced the INGSA activities regarding principles and guidelines for scientific policy advice. Following the call from the 2015 World Science Forum to

come up with such guidelines, the process set up by the INGSANetwork<sup>2</sup> is intended to be a forum for practitioners (demand-side and supply-side) and different experts, including for example STS scholars. They can come together, build capacity, and learn from what has gone wrong as well as right in an open and non-rigid way. There is a valuable repository of relevant documents on science-policy guidelines on the INGSANetwork website. The World Science Forum 2017 where the principles and guidelines will be presented will be a good arena for getting reach into natural science-policy world but with broader resonance.

It is virtually impossible to provide a comprehensive and differentiated set of principles and guidelines that apply to all possible contexts and formats (e.g., different geographical scales, short-term, rapid response formats versus long-term policy debates, etc.), and often some forms of pragmatism are required for scientific policy advice. Moreover, the output should be crisp and digestible also for policy-makers, and timely (e.g. regarding populist movements). A Manifesto or declaration of some few major principles and guidelines may thus perhaps be the better option, as it would not have to comprehensively address complexity and diversity in this field. This can also serve as a teaching tool. Key claims may include, for instance, (1) the need for more accountability of advisers and policy-makers to wider politics, (2) going beyond the traditional linear science-policy model, (3) and humility – not as being humble, but having an accurate view of oneself and one’s role at the science-policy-society interface. One participant suggested to be a bit more outspoken in the critical parts of it (i.e., more bite required).



---

<sup>2</sup> The process is coordinated and led by James Wilsdon, Daniel Sarewitz, and Marc Saner.

## **PROGRAMME:**

### **Principles and guidelines for social science advice to policy**

*Date: Tue, 25 April 2017 (10.00–16.45h)*

*Venue: MCC, EUREF-Campus 19, Torgauer Str. 12-15, 10829 Berlin, Germany*

*Registration and coffee (from 09.00h)*

#### **Welcome (10.00–10.40h)**

- Welcome address (B. Knopf) and programme overview (M. Kowarsch)
- Plenary: brief round of self-introductions

#### **Part I: Social sciences in public policy, and the INGSA guidelines (10.40–11.30h)**

*Moderator: Jeannine Hausmann*

- Input by W. Rohe, Stiftung Mercator (5 min)
- Input by M. Kowarsch, MCC (5 min)
- Presentation of INGSA guidelines by J. Wilsdon (20 min)
- Plenary: Q&A (15-20 min)

*Coffee break (11.30–11.45h)*

#### **Part II: Challenges and opportunities for social science policy advice (11.45–12.30 and 13.30–14.45h)**

*Moderator: Julia Stamm*

Open discussions about the challenges, opportunities and guidelines for social-science policy advice in Europe, with a particular focus on the identification of best practices, lessons learned, and potential concrete steps to build further science-policy capacities among all actors involved, including in cases where social-science perspectives have a role in more traditional science advice domains.

- 4 brief inputs (5 min each). Inputs followed by brief plenary discussion.
  - James Wilsdon, INGSA
  - Matthias Kaiser, University of Bergen
  - Sharon Smit, University Groningen
  - Andrew Stirling, Sussex University

*Lunch break (12.30–13.30h)*

- Discussion and wrap-up (13.30–14.45h).

*Coffee break (14.45–15.00h)*

**Part III: Commenting on the INGSA science-policy principles and guidelines**  
(15.00h–16.45h)

*Moderator:* James Wilsdon

- Discussion on how to refine or amend the INGSA science-policy guidelines from the perspective of the social sciences.
- Wrap-up and concluding remarks by J. Wilsdon, including information on next steps, especially in terms of how INGSA will proceed with the development of the guidelines (15 min).

16.45h end of workshop.

*Reception, drinks and snacks (16.45h–18.00h).*

## PARTICIPANTS:

Name	Affiliation
1. <b>Allegra, Alessandro</b>	University College London
2. <b>Cairney, Paul</b>	Stirling University
3. <b>Johannsen, Matthias</b>	All European Academies (ALLEA)
4. <b>Felt, Ulrike</b>	University of Vienna
5. <b>Hausmann, Jeannine</b>	Stiftung Mercator
6. <b>Hielscher, Rudolf</b>	acatech / Scientific Advice to Policy by European Academies (SAPEA)
7. <b>Joas, Fabian</b>	Agora Energiewende
8. <b>Kaiser, Matthias</b>	University of Bergen
9. <b>Knopf, Brigitte</b>	Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change (MCC)
10. <b>Kowarsch, Martin</b>	Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change (MCC)
11. <b>Lambini, Cosmas</b>	All European Academies (ALLEA) / Scientific Advice to Policy by European Academies (SAPEA)
12. <b>Lombardo, Gabi</b>	European Alliance for Social Science and Humanities (EASSH)
13. <b>Mair, David</b>	EU Commission
14. <b>Pritchard, Stuart</b>	Wellcome Trust
15. <b>Rohe, Wolfgang</b>	Stiftung Mercator
16. <b>Saner, Marc</b>	University of Ottawa
17. <b>Smit, Sharon</b>	University of Groningen
18. <b>Smith, John</b>	Independent research policy consultant
19. <b>Stamm, Julia</b>	Science Leads
20. <b>Stevance, Anne-Sophie</b>	International Council for Science (ICSU)
21. <b>Stirling, Andrew</b>	University of Sussex
22. <b>Straßheim, Holger</b>	Humboldt University, Berlin
23. <b>Streiter, Felix</b>	Stiftung Mercator
24. <b>Wilsdon, James</b>	International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA) / University of Sheffield

## About the organising institutions

The **International Network for Government Science Advice (INGSA)** is a collaborative network founded by, and operating under, the aegis of the International Council of Science (ICSU) with the primary goal of improving the use of scientific evidence to inform public policy formation at all levels of government. The network includes practitioners, academics, knowledge brokers and policy-makers. It is also developing a formal partnership with UNESCO.

The network's focus is on the development of effective advisory systems, independent of any particular national or local constitutional or structural considerations. Through workshops, conferences and a growing catalogue of tools and guidance, the network aims to enhance the global science-policy interface to improve the potential for evidence-informed policy formation at local, national and transnational levels.

INGSA's membership currently numbers over 600 individuals from over 45 countries and its Advisory Committee includes some of the most experienced practitioners of science advice to governments at international, national and sub-national levels. As a not-for-profit network operating under the aegis of ICSU, INGSA relies mainly on volunteer and in-kind support from its expert membership ranks, which supplements seed funding received from the Wellcome Trust, ICSU and the Royal Society. The INGSA executive is actively seeking to broaden its funder base to make the network more sustainable. The INGSA Secretariat is currently hosted by the Office of the Chief Science Advisor to the Prime Minister of New Zealand, Sir Peter Gluckman, Chair of INGSA steering committee.

Website: [www.ingsa.org](http://www.ingsa.org)

The **Mercator Research Institute on Global Commons and Climate Change (MCC)** Berlin is a scientific think tank addressing the grand challenges of climate change and of governing the global commons. Its research is rooted primarily in economics and other social sciences. MCC provides scientific policy advice and aims to identify policy-relevant solutions.

Global economic growth has led to the overuse of natural resources like the atmosphere, land and forests. These special assets are called global commons, because they need worldwide cooperation for their sustainable use. To achieve that, a farsighted and international view is needed, which governments and other stakeholders often lack. MCC aims to fill this gap and provides policy advice as well as research on long-term, global issues such as climate change. In this area, MCC explores solutions, fosters public debates, and supports a broad societal exploration of development alternatives.

MCC envisions a world of deliberative democracies that discuss openly and take well-informed decisions for the sustainable management of global commons. This ensures that current and future generations are provided with equitable access to

the global commons. MCC's mission is to provide solution-oriented policy pathways for governing the global commons to enhance sustainable development and human well-being. The approach is based on high-quality research to inform policy making in an iterative societal learning process. MCC calls this assessment-making.

MCC was founded in 2012 by Stiftung Mercator and the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK). MCC's research is carried out in seven working groups and one special task force. Prof. Dr. Ottmar Edenhofer is Director of the MCC.

Website: [www.mcc-berlin.net](http://www.mcc-berlin.net)

### **Stiftung Mercator**

Stiftung Mercator is a private and independent foundation. Through its work it strives for a society characterized by openness to the world, solidarity and equal opportunities. In this context it concentrates on strengthening Europe; increasing the educational success of disadvantaged children and young people, especially those of migrant origin; driving forward climate change mitigation and promoting science and the humanities. Stiftung Mercator symbolizes the connection between academic expertise and practical project experience. One of Germany's leading foundations, it is active both nationally and internationally. Stiftung Mercator feels a strong sense of loyalty to the Ruhr region, the home of the founding family and the foundation's headquarters.

Website: [www.stiftung-mercator.de](http://www.stiftung-mercator.de)

### **Contact details**

**INGSA:** Lara Cowen, INGSA Coordinator, [l.cowen@ingsa.org](mailto:l.cowen@ingsa.org), Tel: +64 9 9236442.

**MCC Berlin:** Dr. Martin Kowarsch, Head of Working Group "Scientific Assessments, Ethics, and Public Policy", [kowarsch@mcc-berlin.net](mailto:kowarsch@mcc-berlin.net), Tel: +49 30 338 5537 247.

**Stiftung Mercator:** Jeannine Hausmann, Project Manager, [Jeannine.Hausmann@stiftung-mercator.de](mailto:Jeannine.Hausmann@stiftung-mercator.de), Tel: +49 201 24522-63.