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Wilson, Robert H.

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KNOWLEDGE AND POLICY ACTION IN URBAN DEVELOPMENT: if we know so much, why is the urban condition not improving?

Robert H. Wilson

Philips International Visiting Professor at the EAESP/FGV,
Mike Hogg Professor of Urban Policy at LBJ School of
Public Affairs and Director of the Urban Issues Program at
the University of Texas at Austin.

E-mail: rwilson@mail.utexas.edu

RESUMO

Apesar da geração de riqueza potencial das grandes cidades no mundo, as condições precárias de vida de uma grande parcela da população urbana persistem. Embora as cidades sejam muito estudadas, a política urbana é, aparentemente, ineficaz. Este trabalho assume uma abordagem da política pública na análise da relação entre conhecimento e ação governamental. As barreiras à melhoria da política urbana estão associadas com a incapacidade dos governos de atuar e com a política envolvida na tomada de decisões em regimes democráticos. O artigo recomenda que uma visão pragmática da geração do conhecimento deva ser utilizada.

ABSTRACT

In spite of the wealth generation potential of the world's large metropolitan cities, poor living conditions for much of the world's urban population persist. Although the city has been widely studied, urban policy often remains ineffective. The paper adopts a policy process approach to analyze the relationship between knowledge and governmental action. Impediments to improving urban policy are found in the inadequate capacity of government to act and in the politics of democratic decision-making. The paper recommends that a pragmatic view of knowledge generation be adopted.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Política urbana, pesquisa urbana, capacidade governamental.

KEY WORDS

Urban policy, urban research, governmental capacity.

A sense of frustration can be heard in academia and research communities in many countries. Why does urban development policy not incorporate the current state of knowledge about cities and urban problems? Government officials and others argue that academic research is irrelevant, if not politically naive. The fact that some research may be critical of existing policy further exacerbates the lack of mutual respect and constructive interaction between researchers and policymakers. Knowledge appears not to be sufficient for improving the urban condition. Although the breach may be great, the state of the world's cities compels us to strive for better and more effective urban policy. This paper will examine the challenges to bringing to bear research and knowledge on policymaking in order to achieve more effective government action in cities.

A cursory review of the relationship between knowledge and public policy reveals many examples of technological or scientific understanding informing public policy to dramatic effect. The history of public health, for example, convincingly demonstrates that scientific research can be applied to public policy in ways that substantially improve the human condition. The remarkable expansion in the understanding of pathological agents and the development of effective mechanisms to impede these agents, ranging from vaccinations to sewerage and drainage, lead to improved living conditions. International cooperation contributed to past success in public health research and policy. Certainly not all public health concerns have been resolved, for resources are inadequate in many parts of the world and new public health challenges continually emerge. Notwithstanding current and future challenges, the integration of scientific research in this field of governmental action has produced impressive results.

Moving from public health to the wider range of urban issues, the contribution of research and knowledge to improvement in urban policy is more difficult to identify. To be sure, the field of urban research is extremely difficult to demarcate. Among researchers a multitude of problem definitions and disciplinary and methodological approaches exists. Further complicating this field of inquiry, the nature of the problems varies substantially across cities and countries. As

geographical spaces in which a great range of human experience occurs, cities pose a enormous challenge to human understanding, yet it is in these spaces that the engine for wealth creation and human development is increasingly located. We are not modest in striving to develop a rigorous understanding of urban development nor in expecting this research to be applied to improving the urban condition through public policy. But the state of the urban condition in the world suggests there is much to learn and that effective urban policy remains elusive.

I initiate this discussion with a simple proposition: for government to act, some conceptual framework or understanding of the society, its problems, and the role of government in addressing societal needs is necessary. Although numerous examples of irrational government action come to mind, government action is generally premised on expectation of the consequence of action, which implies some understanding of the causal relationships and systems operating in society.¹ The framework may be wrong or incomplete, but proposed actions are necessarily developed within some conceptual structure. As manifest in policymaking, conceptual structures may be imbued with the particular interests of individuals or groups and may not incorporate broad, public interests. In addition, there is no expectation that rationality and good judgment will replace power in the exercise of governmental action in the foreseeable future (Lindblom, 1990). Furthermore, governmental action can be taken without a recognition of the rights of all citizens, may exclude certain societal groups, and may be taken on the behalf of particular private interests. Nevertheless, some understanding or expectation about impacts of action is inherent. How does this conception come to be formed in the policy process and how can it be changed or improved by the application of knowledge and research?

To explore the relation of research and knowledge in urban development, I suggest a framework that focuses largely on urban policymaking and governmental action. In particular, I wish to focus our attention on the way knowledge and information are utilized in policymaking. After presenting a simple model of government action and the policymaking process, the capacity of government to act will

be examined. Knowledge and understanding will not be effectively utilized if the capacity of government to act is inadequate. The discussion then turns toward the opportunities and impediments for the integration of knowledge in policymaking.

URBAN POLICYMAKING

For purposes of this paper, a four-phase conception of the policy process – agenda setting, policy formulation and choice, implementation, and evaluation – will be used.² Information and knowledge enter the policymaking process in a variety of ways and different types of knowledge are utilized in the different phases. Although this conception of the policy process can be applied to many different policy arenas, its application to urban policymaking draws attention to several distinctive features. Urban policymaking affects a relatively wide range of governmental functions, making it a complex policy arena. The question of private interests versus public interests is particularly problematic given the extensive externalities found in urban activities. Finally, in both unitary and federal governmental structures, intergovernmental relations are critical since urban policy will frequently confront questions of local resource disparities.

In the **agenda-setting** phase, issues of concern to a country and society are placed before governmental bodies which adopt actions or policies to address the issues. The governmental body is generally one with legislative responsibilities but in some circumstances may have executive or even judicial roles. Issues become part of the public policy agenda in a variety of ways.

Triggering events – natural or manmade disasters, political crises, and, occasionally, the publication of research – can focus public and legislative attention on a problem. Or, issues can be placed on the policy agenda by organized groups that bring pressure on an appropriate governmental body. Organized groups – including citizen, business, occupational, and religious groups – often utilize the media and other mechanisms to gain attention and place items on the public agenda.³

Applied academic research can be influential in this phase. The analysis of such questions as poverty, distressed communities, environmental pollution or traffic congestion can be quite helpful in terms of defining problems properly. The analysis of such problems, undertaken independently of governmental authority, can provide significant, alternative understandings of problems. Such efforts can be reinforced by the emergence of policy communities or networks within countries which provide

The history of public health, for example, convincingly demonstrates that scientific research can be applied to public policy in ways that substantially improve the human condition.

persistent and long-term attention to an issue. International institutions or actors may also be able to influence the agenda of a country. The United Nations-sponsored Habitat II, held in Istanbul in 1996, provided the opportunity for an international policy community to legitimize the question of housing as an important public policy concern.

Political power can be important in this phase of the policy process. Powerful groups can control agendas, and even prevent issues from being addressed as public policy concerns. In many countries, traditional oligarchies have been able to control national policy agendas. Disenfranchised communities without political influence may have difficulty convincing the policymaking process that their concerns are legitimate and deserve to be placed on the agenda of a public decision-making body. Recent efforts to promote democracy and broader access to democratic policymaking may well affect the range of issues on the policy agenda in a country.

For ongoing governmental activities, the periodic budget process, usually undertaken by a legislative body, may bring certain policies, agencies, or actions to the foreground of the public policy discussions. The extent of discussion and debate during the budget process

on specific governmental endeavors will vary considerably – by level of government, salience of the endeavor, and extent of interest among affected constituencies. Over the decades a number of budgetary innovations have been introduced to improve accountability and enhance oversight of the budgetary process. Developing citizens' ability to understand budgeting and to participate in budget debates has been identified as a key to enhancing democratic practice (Singer, 1996). To the extent that budgeting involves a process of negotiation and compromise among many interested parties, citizens groups need to have their independent sources of analysis and research. These mechanisms can lead to public

Through applied research, water wells were identified as the source of the epidemic and this finding suggested a policy to reduce, if not solve, the problem. The experience demonstrated the importance of public health research in problem definition and policy formulation and established the legitimacy of an emerging profession.

For many issues, the specific legislation needed for policy formulation requires knowledge not only of the specific issue, but also of the relevant governmental apparatus. This expertise is available in the governmental apparatus itself and, consequently, governmental agencies often design or assist in designing policy proposals. Expertise outside the legislative and

executive branches may also be important. Industries subject to significant governmental regulation, such as the utility and real estate industries, are a source of legislative proposals. The formulation phase in areas such as environmental or telecommunications policy requires extensive technical and scientific

The remarkable expansion in the understanding of pathological agents and the development of effective mechanisms to impede these agents, ranging from vaccinations to sewerage and drainage, lead to improved living conditions.

discussions of governmental policy and, thus, help shape the policy agenda. Academic research of budgeting questions may be important in this phase, but the media and other intermediaries are likely to be more helpful in developing public understanding of budgetary matters.

Once an issue is placed on the public agenda and pressure builds for government action, a policy must be **formulated and adopted**. Formulation and adoption are distinct but related steps. Most issues produce competing policy formulations or approaches which can originate in many different quarters. The legislative body itself can formulate alternatives but executive governmental agencies, political parties and organized interest groups can propose alternatives and bring these to the legislative body.

Research findings occasionally produce dramatic results during this phase. The severity and breadth of the cholera epidemic in the middle of the nineteenth century in London made it a paramount public policy issue.

expertise. This phase does not necessarily require new research, but can certainly benefit from the basic understanding of cause and effect relations for specific problems, as was the case in the cholera epidemic.

The outcome of the legislative process constitutes a policy choice or decision. This choice is generally the prerogative of a legislative body at local, provincial, or national levels. A great many factors affect the specific positions taken by legislators. If they are elected officials, the interests of their constituents condition their views on policy formulation. Constituencies take many forms and include the voting citizens, the general public, political parties, financial backers, and organized interest groups. The ability of any single constituency to affect policy decisions will depend on its political power and its ability to cooperate with other interests through coalitions. As a result, the adopted policy frequently represents an amalgam of competing formulations and incorporates ambiguous goals. At this point in the policy process, knowledge and

understanding of an issue become subordinate to the exercise of power and compromise.

Once a policy has been adopted, in the following phase of the policy process it is put into action. The **implementation** of policy almost invariably involves actions by some agency of government that creates the mechanisms by which the policy is executed. Although the purpose of this phase may seem clear, implementation can be quite complex. An imprecise statement of goals and objectives in the original policy may force the implementing institution to interpret the intent of the policymakers. The implementation of many, if not most, policies requires, or is affected by, actions of agencies other than the primary implementing agency and even by other levels of government. The intergovernmental context can be critical to successful policy implementation.

Governmental institutions, particularly large bureaucracies, are not neutral, technical agents in the implementation phase. Rather, they approach implementation with their own set of concerns, interests, knowledge, constraints, and constituents. Professional norms of conduct, values held by administrators, the technical competency of agencies, and bureaucratic politics all affect implementation. Particularly in nonroutine policies, as in the creation of new programs, the institutional context – especially the government agency's ability and will to respond to change – will influence government performance. For example, the departure of colonial powers from Africa or the displacement of military governments often left in place administrative systems that had limited ability and interest in responding to issues previously excluded from the policy agenda of the earlier governments.

Governmental institutions often hold critical information in the policy formulation process and may disagree with elected political leaders about particular policy directions. Policymakers in cities and local governments are frequently dependent on bureaucracies for analysis of problems, policy formulation, and evaluation. In this situation, the separation between policy

decisionmaking and policy implementation is obscured, if not rendered meaningless. More importantly, it suggests that a potential avenue for introducing better knowledge and information into policymaking is through the training of individuals in government.

As manifest in policymaking, conceptual structures may be imbued with the particular interests of individuals or groups and may not incorporate broad, public interests.

The **evaluation** of policy and feedback into a new cycle of policymaking occurs in a number of ways. Evaluation is typically understood to be a technical activity in which specific policy outcomes are measured against the original policy objectives in order to determine policy effectiveness. The costs associated with the policy or program may be compared with its benefits in order to examine its efficiency.

Beyond this narrow and technical focus, evaluation also occurs through the changing attitudes of the public, in general, and policymakers, in particular. In a complex process of social inquiry, members of society can develop new ways of understanding society, which can lead to developing the political will to force the changes in governmental action (Lindblom, 1990).⁴ Changes in attitude may lead to modifications or even reversals in policy decisions over time. The extent of democratic practice and openness in a country will affect the pace and potential of social inquiry. Changes in attitude may result from formal evaluations of existing policies, but they may also be the result of shifts in general public attitudes toward and understanding of issues.

Lindblom observes that in this process of changing social attitudes, knowledge is not enough.⁵ Without volition, at least in democratic societies, government action will not be focused on social problem solving. Knowledge can serve as an important support for social problem solving by helping to frame issues, analyze problems, and capture learning from past experience. But without volition exercised in the policymaking system, policy

choice and governmental action will not be responsive to social concerns. The promise of democratic and open societies is that elites will not be able to control the formation of social values and attitudes and, as a result, popular and broad-based volition for action can emerge.

Knowledge and understanding will not be effectively utilized if the capacity of government to act is inadequate.

The reservation of one-third of the seats for women in the Panchayati Raj elections in India represents a remarkable moment in the change of social attitudes (Institute of Social Science, 1995). This change was the result of efforts of many people, including academics, journalists, women's organizations, and progressive political leaders, and was supported by various international efforts. Academic research and media reports on the conditions and problems of women helped establish the legitimacy of the issue and were effective in changing social attitudes about women's role in society and government. The adoption of democratic election systems at the village level in China is similar. These dramatic changes are the outcome of complex social processes, partially the result of improved understanding of social conditions, but also a reflection of political advocacy and broad change in social attitudes.

At the international level, understanding of and attitudes toward urban problems have certainly changed in recent decades. The deleterious effects of high pollution levels in cities are now broadly recognized and the environmental sustainability of communities has gained acceptance as a policy goal. Habitat II and other international forums not only support exchanges among researchers and others to understand transnational trends and problems but these meetings also give legitimacy to issues that may have previously been ignored in individual countries or communities. In other words, transnational efforts can help set the policy agenda in individual countries.

The pace of changing social attitudes and public policy is much slower than that of expanding knowledge gained from urban research. Furthermore, the openness of the policymaking process to changes in social attitudes is very much dependent upon political structure and the extent of democratic practice in a country. The great frustration in urban policy research communities derives, in part, from the slow pace of change in social attitudes, but these processes may represent the best hope for improving urban conditions.

CAPACITY TO ACT

The policy process provides a framework for understanding how government action comes about and how it can be modified over time, but it does not explicitly address the issue of government's capacity to act. A sound understanding of the urban dilemma may be found in the policy process but government may not have the capacity to act upon this understanding at a level sufficient to produce the desired impact. Without the capacity to act, the potential impact of knowledge will not be realized. This point may seem gratuitous or appropriate only in extreme cases. But when addressing government action in the area of urban development, the point has broad application. In many countries of the world the capacity of local government to act may be severely lacking. Local governments are frequently ill-prepared to assume responsibilities for policymaking, resource mobilization, and program implementation.

The question of governmental capacity is particularly important in the many countries of the world decentralizing their governmental structures. Decentralization is believed to lead to more effective governmental action and to promote democratic practice, but the difficulties generated by these policies have called attention to the question of capacity in local government. In countries like Mexico, Brazil, and India, local governments, lacking adequate financial, human, and institutional resources, have frequently not been prepared to assume the new responsibilities required by decentralization. The degree of preparation of local government varies substantially from

country to country and even among regions of the same country.⁶

The intergovernmental dimension of urban development policy has become prominent in the context of decentralization. Local governments are linked to higher levels of government in several ways, including through constitutional and statutory frameworks, fiscal relations, joint responsibilities of program implementation, and politically. The specific set of linkages varies substantially across countries. The promise of decentralization, in which relatively rigid centralized systems would devolve powers and cooperate with lower levels of government, has proven difficult to fulfill in practice. Decentralization holds the potential for improved urban development policy, but this policy may operate within a set of complex intergovernmental relations that can constrain if not impede effective local action.

PRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE AND URBAN POLICYMAKING: A PRAGMATIC VIEW

That policymaking requires different types of knowledge and understanding is not a new observation. Confucius, the ancient Greeks, and others gave much consideration to knowledge and social action. One view emerging from classical Greek thought argued that governing required two types of knowledge (Dahl, 1989). Moral knowledge is needed when issues of right and wrong, fairness, and judgments are central. For other types of situations and issues, an empirical or instrumental knowledge of mankind and society is also required. Over the centuries, a series of epistemological questions have been raised concerning these views of knowledge, but a contemporary version of Plato's philosopher king, leading a scientifically-directed society, seems fundamentally incompatible with current attitudes toward democracy.

The policymaking process described above adopts a more pragmatic and practical attitude toward knowledge. The policy process is primarily concerned with acting, not knowing. The process is imbued with interests and the

various actors in the process may not share the same world view, thus generating conflict. Decisionmakers may be concerned with the accuracy of their understanding of the world but public policy is first and foremost a question of action.

One means for introducing new ideas or knowledge into policymaking is through the training received by public officials.

Drawing from another Greek, Peattie suggests Aristotle's ideas about different kinds of knowledge, especially *phronesis*, are relevant (Peattie, 1995). Aristotle's term can be translated as knowledge of what to do in particular circumstances. I would suggest that this position requires, in policymaking, not only an understanding of a particular problem but a theoretical or conceptual knowledge of society and social organization in order to produce effective policy. For example, to improve an infrastructure system in a city, policymakers must have some expectations concerning the impacts of changes in relative prices embedded in a policy instrument. There is an element of theory, of markets and market behavior, but this theoretical knowledge must be applied in existing infrastructure markets. Furthermore, effective policy must incorporate a practical understanding of governmental organizations and structures. Organizational theory may be helpful, but a specific understanding of the organization or agency which will implement the action is essential to success.

Those of us in academic settings tend to privilege theoretical knowledge and understandings derived from the rigorous application of the scientific method and involving high standards of data quality. Without encouraging the abandonment of this type of inquiry, we should recognize that such knowledge may have limited direct application in policymaking for several different reasons. Disciplinary boundaries may impose a narrowness of focus, perfectly justifiable for

academic inquiry, that renders the findings irrelevant for the messy, if not boundless, social problems addressed in policymaking. Furthermore, the particular type of knowledge available in academic fields may simply not be on the policy agenda of government. For example, extensive, rigorous research of the urban informal sector exists, but in most countries the problems of this sector do not hold high priority for public policy. I would not argue that scientific inquiry should be foremost concerned with policy relevance. Understandings developed in academic research communities, I believe, are indispensable to the creation of appropriate frameworks for analyzing complex problems, even if policymaking does not explicitly adopt these frameworks. It would be foolish, for example, to disregard theoretical work in chemistry and biology as we develop policy concerning environmental pollution. But if individuals in research communities look for direct policy relevance, a better understanding of the use of knowledge in policymaking becomes necessary.

The understanding of cities incorporated in the policy process originates in many different settings. The very practical informational and knowledge requirements of policymaking make theoretical knowledge of limited use to the policy process. Rather, knowledge and information used in policymaking originate in such places as governmental organizations, think tanks, for profit and nonprofit private organizations, and even the media.

Government action represents the outcome of a process in which political power is a critical element, a process in which interests and competing views of the world exist. Different interests come to policymaking with not only unique, interest-based views of the world and cities, but their own research and analysis. The competition among alternative policies occurs in a political context. The correctness of ideas and true understanding are not unimportant, but democratic policymaking is contentious and scholarly research rarely important to the outcome. More often than not, research is used to justify political positions rather than change or modify positions in light of the research.

Theoretical or instrumental knowledge may also be relatively unimportant to citizens

articulating their interests in the agenda setting process. In Bangalore, a relatively simple strategy of giving visibility to citizen views on public services has had a very important effect on improving the quality of the services (Paul, 1996). A nonprofit organization created a report card in which citizens graded public services in the city, and the results were published by the local newspaper. The grades were quite low and the service providers were sufficiently embarrassed that better performance followed. In what sense was theoretical knowledge useful in this context? The report card attempts to create pressure on agencies which have no pressure from competing organizations. This initiative may draw from theory on markets and organizations, but the application of this knowledge and the dissemination of the findings through an efficient channel of communication have led to improvement in services.

The policy process utilizes information from many sources, including from the government bureaucracies and agencies. One means for introducing new ideas or knowledge into policymaking is through the training received by public officials. These public officials must obtain a view of urban development from some quarter, and the training institutions may be an effective means for promulgating ideas concerning urban development. This suggests a long-term strategy, one in which researchers serve as teachers and trainers, not only in post-secondary institutions but also through professional associations, political parties, and other channels.

A related strategy to improve the quality of urban policy is the development of research competencies in government. Not infrequently government agencies and officials will call upon academic researchers for assistance in understanding problems. In many countries, government itself has started developing its own research or analysis capabilities. Such endeavors generally appear first at the national level, where the necessary resources are more likely available, but local or provincial governments, with large urban populations, might be well served by developing internal research capacity. The academic community might find assisting such endeavors a useful mechanism for disseminating research findings and methods into the public sector.

It has been asserted here that for government to act in cities, some understanding of the urban condition must exist in the minds of the policy actors. These frameworks can be influenced through a variety of mechanisms, but legislators, advocates, civil servants, and others are not likely to digest and utilize knowledge found in formal research publications. Academic research will frequently not be presented and disseminated in a fashion that makes it easily accessible to those in positions of power or to communities that hold or seek political influence. If influence on public policy is a goal, research findings must make clear their relevance to current issues and they must be placed in the channels of communication likely to affect the process of social inquiry.

EPILOGUE

Decentralized urban policymaking systems require a better understanding of the urban development process and provide a challenge to research communities. Acquiring basic

descriptive information, much less an understanding of innovation, becomes increasingly difficult as local governments are given more discretion for managing the affairs of their cities. Decentralization creates a new context for urban policy, and how local policymaking institutions and citizens are responding to this context is unknown. The impacts of the broad expansion of elections in local government on interest representation and policymaking are relatively unexplored. International research communities should monitor these changes and exchange findings. This collaboration will provide a basis for critiquing local practice, for identifying good practice and disseminating information about these practices. The collaboration will create and nurture policy communities which can be mobilized at times of triggering events when the opportunities for change are greatest. Investment in this research agenda is vital, even though its relevance for policymaking and social inquiry might not be apparent until sometime in the future. ○

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NOTES

1. We need not worry, for now, about the normative dimension of governmental action, as contrasted for example by the liberal democratic concept in which government action is to create conditions where societal resources can be freely developed by individuals or a more aggressive concept in which government action is intended to promote change and development. Conceptions vary widely around the world and frequently citizens in a single country will dispute the appropriate purpose of government.
2. For a critique of the four-phase policy process model, see NAKAMURA, R. The textbook policy process and implementation research. *Policy Studies Review*, v. 7, n. 1, p. 142-154, Autumn 1987 and SABATIER, Paul A. Toward better theories of the policy process. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, v. xxiv, n. 2, p. 147-157, June 1991.
3. One critique of the four-phase characterization of the policy process has been advanced by Kingdon. (KINGDON, John W. *Agendas, alternatives, and public policies*. Little: Brown, 1984). Instead of the sequential steps of agenda setting and policy formulation, Kingdon proposes three largely unrelated "streams": a problem stream, which consists of the knowledge about some problem and the effects of past policy, a community or network of advocates and specialists, and a political stream. The opportunity for major policy changes occurs when these three streams coincide to create windows of opportunities and such occurrences are rare.
4. An early formulation can be found in LINDBLOM, Charles, DAHL, Robert. *Politics, economics, and welfare: planning and political-economic systems resolved into basic social processes*. New York: Harper Torch Book, 1953.
5. For an analysis of this phenomenon in terms of a social learning, see Lindblom (1990).
6. For a very useful four volume series, see *Urban research in the developing world*, edited by Richard Stren and published by the Center for Urban and Community Studies at the University of Toronto (Volume 1 – Asia, 1994; Volume 2 – Africa, 1994; Volume 3 – Latin America, 1995; Volume 4 – Perspectives on the City, 1995).