Strategies can overcome irrational UK policy-making

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The UK charity Sense about Science yesterday published a report on non-publication of government-commissioned research. The report, entitled 'Missing Evidence', reveals that despite spending 2.5 billion pounds (3.6 billion dollars) on policy research each year, the UK government maintains no comprehensive account of how many studies have been commissioned or if and when they have been published. It says this is true for the vast majority of government departments, raising questions about the role of evidence in policy-making.

What next

Interest groups may be able to influence policy-making through mapping out likely allies, forming coalitions with other groups with similar interests, identifying key policy-making venues and the 'rules of the game', and providing timely and reliable information to help gain the trust of key actors. Such strategies can help overcome 'irrational' policy-making. In most cases, confrontation on the surface will give way to a longer-term and more consensual process involving far more actors (including civil servants and professional groups) and drawing on evidence that more actors trust.

Analysis

The process of policy-making often appears 'irrational'. Elected politicians do not seem to make decisions in a well-reasoned or evidence-based way, and policymakers operate within a chaotic political system in which few seem to be able to deliver on their promises.

High-profile objectives to reform public services and influence public behaviour -- such as a shift to more digital healthcare -- often seem to disappear into a complex system instead of being delivered (see INTERNATIONAL: Digital healthcare will spread slowly - October 10, 2014).

However, politicians may also try to downplay the political context and their own ideological motivations by claiming that a particular policy is 'evidence-based'. In addition, the objectivity and robustness of 'evidence' can be called into question, raising concerns over who funds research, whether the right questions are being asked and whether research is conducted according to rigorous standards.

This raises questions for interest groups and companies as to how best to influence the policy-making process. There is little hope of predicting how one's actions -- to pursue a particular evidence-based outcome and propose it in a straightforward way to the right audience -- can have the desired effect.

Policy-making complexity

No single person or company can understand the 'policy process' as a whole. However, it is typically characterised by a number of features:

- a wide range of actors (individuals and organisations) influencing policy at many levels and types of government;
- a proliferation of rules and norms followed by different levels or types of government;
- close relationships (networks) between policymakers and some powerful actors;

Impact

- External expertise is becoming increasingly important because of the growing complexity of policy-making.
- The lack of transparency could facilitate 'burying' politically inconvenient results.
- Increasing public pressure could eventually lead to clearer and more transparent procedures.
Individuals use rational and irrational shortcuts in decision-making

- a tendency for certain beliefs to dominate discussion; and
- the potential for shifting policy conditions and events to prompt policymaker attention to act at short notice.

In other words, it is not a centrally controlled process with clear stages of decision-making. Alongside an elite group of elected policymakers at the ‘top’ is a wide range of influential actors creating and influencing outcomes in a multi-level policy process.

Indeed, policy-making is complex and fragmented:

- Many actors compete to present evidence in a particular way to influence a policymaker audience.
- Support for particular solutions varies according to which policy-making 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 what ways of thinking are in good ‘currency’ -- that takes time to learn before one can be seen as a credible participant.

In some cases, social or economic ‘crises’ can prompt lurches of attention from one issue to another and shift those ways of thinking, but these instances are rare and unpredictable.

**Bounded rationality**

The concept of ‘bounded rationality’ describes the fact that policymakers do not have the ability to gather and consider all evidence relevant to policy problems. Instead, they employ two shortcuts:

- ‘rational’, pursuing clear goals and prioritising certain sources of information; and
- ‘irrational’, drawing on emotions, gut feelings, beliefs and habits to make decisions quickly.

Psychological studies suggest that all individuals combine goal-driven and evidence-informed strategies with moral or emotional judgements based on their well-established beliefs (see INTERNATIONAL: Bias awareness improves decision-making - December 5, 2012).

When policymakers act ‘rationally’, they still need to turn an almost infinite amount of information into a decision quickly. They use rules or heuristics to simplify their task, including relying on familiar sources of information.

Sometimes the familiar (or tried and tested) source is scientific evidence, but policymakers also build on what they know personally and whom they trust.

Therefore, making an evidence-based case is not enough. Instead, actors attempting to establish themselves as reliable sources of information may need to invest a significant amount of time to develop a trustworthy reputation, as someone who provides relevant information that can be trusted and does not always need to be checked.
This implies that certain actors may have little luck with policymakers in the short term, only to gain disproportionate influence in the long term.

When policymakers are considered to act ‘irrationally’, their behaviour may be thought of as erratic and unpredictable. Yet, it really means that they employ cognitive shortcuts and rules of thumb -- using their emotions and habits -- to make quick decisions.

**Persuasion strategies**

Some of this behaviour is predictable and open to manipulation. It takes time to work out the cognitive biases of policymakers, but the payoff is the knowledge of which issues they are likely to pay attention to, how they are likely to frame policy problems and therefore how open they are to particular forms of evidence and policy solutions.

Persuasion strategies are effective when they appeal to the emotions and the familiar: combining facts with emotional appeals to prompt lurches of attention, telling simple stories which manipulate people’s biases, apportioning praise and blame and highlighting the moral and political value of solutions and recognising the importance of interpreting evidence through the lens of the beliefs and knowledge of influential actors.