Policy Inquiry Through Impact Assessment

by

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Talk Outline

- Argue that IA should be a *process of inquiry*
- Insights from policy analysis suggest that policy inquiry should be:
  - a communicative process
  - based on a model of scientific inquiry
- Core features of policy inquiry
- Case study

Communicative Process: A Case Study

- Global Environmental Change programme at Harvard University - comparative study of 5 SEAs at various levels (sub-national, national, international, global)
- Found that communication and judgment were defining characteristics of all SEAs
- Scientists, decision-makers & stakeholders communicate to:
  - define relevant questions for analysis
  - mobilise experts and expertise
  - interpret findings in particular ways

Communicative Process (cont'd)

What we already know about IA – but don't always admit! (after Beattie)

- Judgments were made at all stages of the process:
  - the framing of questions and problems
  - decisions about who will participate (how and why)
  - decisions about which results will be used
  - choices about data analysis and interpretation
  - making summaries and specifying recommendations

Communicative Process (cont'd)

"Only when we approach impact assessment as something more than a technical exercise will it be truly useful. While the assembly of facts by experts plays an important role in documenting the existence of environmental hazards, most of the interesting questions that we hope will be answered by impact assessment require judgmental analysis…. As long as we continue to overestimate our technical capacity to perform each of these tasks, we will insulate many significant decisions from public scrutiny."

(Bacow 1980)

“Policy Sciences of Democracy”

- Policy analysis began with Harold Lasswell’s dream of a “policy sciences of democracy” (inspired by John Dewey)
- Policy inquiry should be based on a model of scientific inquiry
- Science is rational not because it produces universal laws, but because it is a self-correcting enterprise

"Policy Sciences of Democracy" (cont'd)

- Because the individual human mind is fallible, "truth" is the outcome of unconstrained critical discussion within a community of inquirers
- Knowledge is always tentative, and is therefore always subject to further interpretation, criticism, and correction
- Because any one particular result may be overturned by further investigations, inquiry is open-ended

A Model of Scientific Inquiry

Reflection and Action

Critical Reflection

On the goals and methods of inquiry

Conjecture

FOCUS ON ENDS

Systematic Inquiry

Theory-testing

Refutation

FOCUS ON MEANS

A Model of Policy Inquiry

Reflection and Action

Critical Reflection

Policy formulation

Creative Design

FOCUS ON ENDS

Systematic Inquiry

Policy implementation

Precautionary Action

FOCUS ON MEANS

Self-Correcting Process

"Policy formation kept separate from implementation approaches a formula for failure" (Jenkins 1978).

- Interplay of means and ends ensures that
  - Policy goals direct scientific inquiry
  - Science informs policy goals

"Strategies for impact assessment should imply and lead to strategies for *policy in action*" (Caldwell 2000).

Creative Design: Critical Reflection

"The real value of SEA is as a creative tool in the design cycle of the formulation and reformulation of PPPs" (Thérivel and Brown 1999).

- Framing of research and policy questions determines:
  - who and what is relevant to the assessment
  - who participates at each stage of the process
- Dialogue amongst multiple perspectives helps to ensure all concerns are addressed
- There is no "technical fix" for multiple perspectives

Precautionary Action

"Many SEAs as currently practiced … assume science-based knowledge will be instrumental in improving decision making" (Thissen 2000).

- German notion of *vorsorge* (Precautionary Principle) recognised the fallibility of human understanding
- Policy as experiment

Policy Inquiry Through IA: A Case Study

"Dependable Dynamism"

(Eckley 2002)

- formulation of a protocol on persistent organic pollutants
- the protocol was part of a larger, ongoing process – the Convention on Long-Range Transboundary Air Pollution
- provision to revisit decisions when new scientific information becomes available

Case Study (cont'd)

Dynamic

Participants were more willing to base action on uncertain science because the decision could be revisited in the future.

- the decision to adopt a target of a 30% reduction in sulphur emissions was based on inadequate scientific evidence
- but it was taken because it was recognised by all parties as a first step

Case Study (cont'd)

Dependable

Participants were willing to make compromises when it was agreed that options for future revisions would be kept open.

- the record of repeated assessments in the protocol gave participants confidence in the institutional longevity of the process

Recovering Caldwell's Vision

Critical Reflection

"The basic purpose behind the development of EIA was to broaden and strengthen the role of *foresight* in governmental planning and decision making" (Caldwell 1989).

Precautionary Action

"EIA should reform public decision making by institutionalising patience, caution and looking before leaping" (Caldwell 1982).

Wise Judgment

"Problem-solving is not a substitute for … the old-fashioned quality called '*wisdom*'" (Caldwell 1988).