Evidence-Based Planning

Rhetoric and Reality

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Abstract: This paper aims to conceptualize the upsurge of governmental interest in evidence-based policy in Britain by drawing on two models of policy-evidence interface; the instrumental and the enlightenment model. It argues that much of the drive behind the enthusiasm for evidence is rooted in the linear and utilitarian view of research which is broadly based on three interrelated misconceptions about the nature of evidence, the role of experts, and the influence that these can have on policy. By drawing on examples from the UK planning systems, the paper explores the mismatch between the use of evidence in the "ideal" and the "real" worlds of planning and policy process. It is argued that the assumption made under the positivist view of planning in the 1960s and 1970s are similar to those made under the instrumental view of the policy-research interface.

The Rise of Evidence-Based Policy in Britain

There was a time when evidence was seen as an essential part of criminal conviction. Today, it seems that it has become an important part of political conviction, too (Solesbury 2002); or so we are led to believe. This is because, in Britain, there has been a growing governmental emphasis on more evidence-based policy and practice, particularly since the publication of the *White Paper on Modernising Government*, which states: "This Government expects more of policy-makers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy-making." (Cabinet Office 1999a: para. 6)

While the debate over the nature of evidence and its role in policy-making has a long and contested history (see Faludi and Waterhout in this issue), the term evidence-based policy is relatively new and a seemingly British invention. In an essay that advocates the adoption of an evidence-based approach to American public policy, the Urban Institute argues that, unlike the United States where "public policy has been conceived, debated and evaluated through the lenses of ideologies", in the UK, evidence-based policy is gaining momentum (UI 2003: 1).

Such an argument is not surprising, given the rise in research budgets, recruitment of analytical staff and the proliferation of research and consultancy work at all levels of government in the late 1990s. For example, in 1998/99 alone, over 350 million pounds were spent by government departments on policy-related research (Cabinet Office 1999b).

However, this apparently "peculiar British affair" (Solesbury 2002: 93) has been taking place in "most other Anglophone countries, and most especially in post-colonial societies such as Australia and New Zealand" (David 2002: 213) as well as Canada. The latter, for example, launched a Policy Research initiative in 1996 to build a "solid foundation" upon which future policy decisions could be made. Similarly, in New Zealand, work has been carried out by the State Services Commission to consider the effective use of information in policy advice (reported in Cabinet Office 1999b). In Europe too, the concept has been taken up by the European Commission, as manifested in its *White Paper on Governance*, which emphasizes that "scientific and other experts play an increasingly significant role in preparing and monitoring decisions." (CEC 2001: 428) One example is a major program of research called the European Spatial Planning Observation Network (ESPON), which has been funded to develop the evidence base of the European territorial policy (see Böhme and Schön in this issue).

As to the reason for its upsurge in Britain, Solesbury (2002) argues that some consider this a sign of New Labour's emphasis on a pragmatic rather than an ideological stance, and the shift in the nature of politics, while others see it as a manifestation of knowledge-power relationships with the incoming New Labour creating a renewed demand for knowledge to empower politicians to challange the established influences, particularly within the civil service. This first view is based on Francis Bacon's famous dictum that "knowledge is power" (Bacon 2000). However, as will be discussed below, the opposite is also true, that "power is knowledge" and that "power determines what counts as knowledge, what kind of interpretation attains authority as the dominant interpretation." (Flyvjberg 1998: 226)

Models of Policy-Research Interface

While discussion about basing policy on evidence is not new, the ability to achieve this goal and to actually take account of evidence in policy is shrouded with rhetorical assumptions. In broad terms, there are two distinct views about the policy-research interface: the instrumental view and the enlightenment view.

Instrumental Model

The instrumental view assumes that the relationship between evidence and policy is unproblematic, linear and direct. It is assumed that either research *leads* policy and hence policy is evidence-driven; or research *follows* policy and hence research is policy-driven. As Young et al. (2002: 216) suggest, the former contains "an element of scientific inevitability..., of the expert 'on top'", while in the latter, research is shaped by policy concerns, and "the expert is 'on tap', but not on top." Both represent a simple, linear view of the policy-research interface (see Figure 1), which "differ only in the posited direction of influence." (ibid.)

Much of the drive in the late 1990s for an evidence-based approach to policy and practice in the UK has been based on this linear utilitarian view. This is particularly true in terms of the expert-on-tap model, where the emphasis is on speed, i.e., on the need for evidence to be timely, intelligible and available on demand. Indeed, the new buzzword in the government departments is: "What matters is what works," without much attention being paid to what works for whom and in what circumstances (Leicester 2002). This was clearly reflected in a speech to the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in February 2000 by the then Education Secretary, David Blunkett, in which he stated that "social science research evidence is central to development and evaluation of policy... We need to be able to rely on social science and social scientists to tell us what works and why and what types of policy initiatives are likely to be most effective." (quoted in Young et al. 2002: 215)

Since the publication of the *White Paper on Modernising Government*, there has been a growing pressure on research funding organizations to adopt a utilitarian approach, and support research which is not just useful but useable (Solesbury 2002). It was this kind of pressure that led to the ESRC's decision to fund an initiative on Evidence-Based Policy and Practice in 1999 with a budget of three million pounds[1]. The new Centre for Evidence-Based Policy which emerged from this initiative acts as the hub for seven network nodes, each focusing on a different area, including one on the planning-related area of urban neighborhoods. Their aim is to acquire access to major databases and original documents on social science research (Packwood 2002: 268).

One of the problems with research for policy's sake (Weiss 1977), is that it is highly selective, if not opportunistic; with those areas that have not been considered as policy problems failing to attract investment in research. As Davoudi (in press) has shown, strategic planning for waste management is a striking example of such a policy area, to the extent that a recent House of Commons' Report[2] concluded that "the lack of high-quality data is a significant obstacle to the formulation and implementation of public policy." (HCEFRA 2005: 8) Referring to
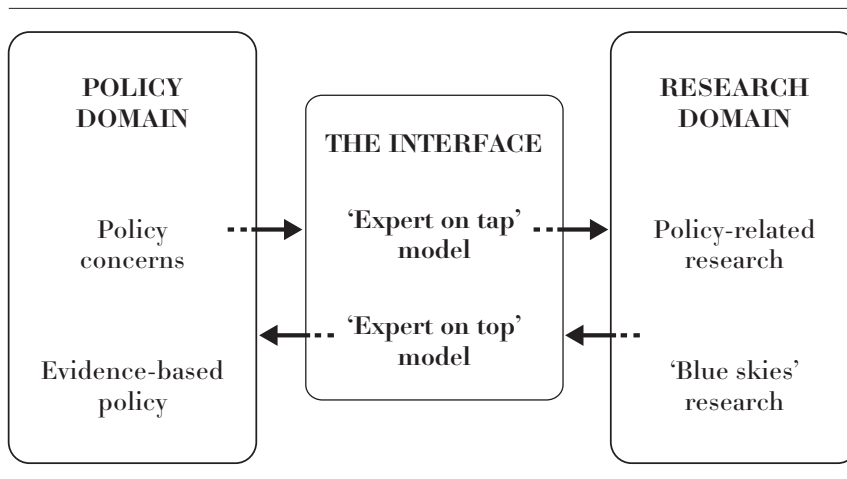

Fig. 1: The instrumental view of the policy-research interface.

hazardous waste flows, the Report pointed out that "no-one seems to have a clue what is going where, compositionally, geographically or by industry sector." (op. cit.: 7) Hence, although the emphasis on evidence is generally seen as a positive move, there is a growing body of literature which points to the problems of focusing on a narrow instrumentalism (Davoudi, in press; Owens et al. 2004; Young et al. 2002; Packwood 2002; Solesbury 2002).

Enlightenment Model

There is, however, another view of how research affects policy called the enlightenment model. Here, rather than research serving the policy agenda directly, its benefits are indirect and sometimes take longer to be realized. The emphasis is not to produce "punchy policy messages"[3], but to illuminate the landscape within which policy decisions have to be made. The emphasis is on providing a deeper understanding of the conditions within which different interventions might be effective (Young et al. 2002: 217). Under the enlightenment model, the emphasis is on *evidence-informed* policy rather than evidence-based policy. This means that although research does and should play an important role in policy-making, that role is less one of problem solving than of clarifying the context and informing the wider public debate. As Shulock (1999: 241) puts it, research "serves best not as a comprehensive, problem-solving, scientific enterprise, but as a contributor to an informed discourse."

However, the current interest in evidence-based policy is dominated by a utilitarian view of research which is underpinned by a number of flawed assumptions about the way in which policy handles input from evidence (with evidence being understood largely as scientific research). These assumptions are based on three interrelated misconceptions about the nature of evidence, the role of experts, and the influence these can have on policy. At the risk of some oversimplification, these misconceptions are often expressed as: policy-making is a rational process, evidence can only be generated through positive science, and experts are apolitical and value-free – and they know best.

As discussed below, the current instrumental view of policy-evidence interplay has a lot in common with the positivist view of planning, especially during its heydays in the 1960s and 1970s. Both portray a limited understanding of the mismatch between the role of evidence in an

ideal world and the way it is actually used in the real world. The following account will elaborate on these in turn.

The Use of Evidence in an Ideal World of Planning and Policy Process

In Britain, as in many other countries, the use of evidence in the planning process has a long and contested history. For example, using descriptive data and trend statistics is one of the oldest and most enduring practices in planning. In fact, a key trigger of the late 19th century public health and housing acts, which were the predecessors to the post-war planning system, was a social survey undertaken by Charles Booth in 1887 to quantify the social problems of London. This is considered the first modern survey. Yet, within the planning community, the term survey has become strongly affiliated with the Geddesian survey-analysis-plan. Patrick Geddes' famous aphorism: "survey before plan", coined in the early 20th century, remained every planning student's grand rule of good practice for many decades. Geddes, influenced by the French geographers and sociologists, insisted that "planning must start with a survey of the resources …; in all his teaching, his most persistent emphasis was on the survey method." (Hall 2002: 147) In his Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, he even created a local survey center.

However, these survey works were essentially related to physical aspects of the cities and regions. The plans which were based on these surveys were master plans; blueprints for an end-state which would one day be achieved. This was the time when planning was seen as a physical, design-based activity. According to Taylor (1998: 66f.) the Geddesian dictum of "survey-analysis-plan" (SAP) had at least three shortcomings. Firstly, it was not clear why a survey needed to be done; in other words, the Geddesian approach remained unclear about the need for a pre-survey stage of problem definition. Apart from general statements such as Abercrombie's triangle of objectives: "beauty, health and convenience" (Abercrombie 1933: 139), the goal was left implicit, to be defined intuitively by planners themselves who were seen as "experts", apolitical and the "guardian of public interests." (Hall 2002: 324)

Secondly, the SAP approach implied that the outcome would be one single plan rather than a number of alternative strategies. Thirdly, the approach implied that the planning process would end with the production of the plan.

For example, in the early planning textbooks, such as those written by Abercrombie (1933) and Keeble (1959), no assumptions were made about the need for a learning process, or indeed any discussion on implementation and updating. It was, as Batty (1979) calls it, the "golden age" of planning when "the assumed certainty of the process was such that possible links back to the reality in the form of new surveys were rarely if ever considered... This certainty, based on the infallibility of the expert, reinforced the apolitical, technical nature of the process." (Batty 1979: 31)

While the Geddesian approach can be seen as a typical linear view of evidence-policy interface with strong elements of instrumentalism, it was profoundly different from its successor, rational planning, in two important ways: firstly, in terms of the type and quality of evidence, which was limited to physical description; and secondly, in terms of the role of the planner which was seen as being imaginative and visionary, not only in setting the goals, but also in taking a creative leap from the analysis of the survey to the making of the plan. Hence, despite the rhetoric of the survey-analysis-plan, "plan and planning decisions were made largely on the basis of intuition or rather, on the basis of simplistic aesthetic conceptions of urban form and layout which embodied physical determinist assumptions about how best to accommodate the diverse economic and social life." (Taylor 1998: 15) As Eric Reade (1987) argues, planning practice was not grounded in empirical research and theory.

Indeed, the planning movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was highly ideological, embedded in the reformist ideas of a number of visionary individuals who, despite being considered the founding fathers of the planning movement[4], were not trained as planners. Concepts such as "expert" and "professional" planners did not enter the vocabulary of planning practice until the 1930s when the Town Planning Institute provided a town planning qualification, which was followed by the establishment of the first recognized planning schools in Britain (Davoudi, Whitney 2005).

It was not until the 1960s when the wider social-economic information and analytic evidence opened their way into the making of plans and planning decisions. The hallmark of what, in Thomas Kuhn's words, was "a paradigm shift" (Kuhn 1962) in planning thoughts were two distinct theories: the systems view of cities, and the view of planning as a rational process of decision-making. While the former deals with "substantive" planning theory (the object of planning), the latter deals with "procedural" planning theory (the process of planning) (Faludi 1973). In the terminology of this paper, the former relates to what is or should be the evidence base of planning, while the latter is about what is considered as the nature of planning process and the role of planners in that process.

The systems view of planning which was derived from the science of cybernetics, developed by Norbert Wiener in 1948 and was imported into planning by the works of Brian McLoughlin and George Chadwick in the 1960s, conceptualized cities and regions as complex systems, or indeed as a spatially-based sub-systems of larger systems. Seen in those terms, the concept of planning was considered as: firstly, understanding such complex systems, and secondly, engaging in a continuous process of control and monitoring of these systems. Given that exercising intelligent control over a system requires a prior understanding of the system to be controlled, planning was conceived as a form of systems analysis and control (Taylor 1998: 62).

This in turn required the type of evidence which was more analytical than descriptive and more sophisticated than the simple survey work advocated by Geddes. Planners needed to analyze and understand how cities and regions functioned spatially in economic and social terms. That knowledge was to come from an intellectual revolution which took place in the mid-1950s in urban and regional studies and human geography which led to the ideas that were later imported into planning in the 1960s and had their widest influence on planning thought in the first half of the 1970s. Planners, largely via geographers, began to discover the works of German location theorists, notably Walter Christaller, and his central place theory which was developed much earlier, in the 1930s. They explored the tenets of Logical Positivism and suggested that the evidence base of planning should move away from simple descriptive physical surveys represented in detailed maps and blueprints towards developing general hypotheses about spatial distributions which could be tested against the reality; the very essence of scientific method advocated by Popper in his best-known essay: "Science: Conjectures and Refutations" where he suggested that "*the criterion for the scientific status of a theory is its falsifiability, or refutability or testability.*" (in: Popper 1969: 37, italic original)

Viewing cities as interconnected systems with economic and social dimensions rather

than merely physical and aesthetic dimensions required a broadening of the knowledge base of planning within the education system, too. This was achieved by the review of planning education by the Schuster Committee in 1948 which recommended: firstly, to widen the entrants to the profession to include geographers, economists and sociologists, and secondly, to incorporate greater social science input into planning courses (Schuster 1950).

Using mathematical techniques and the data-processing powers of computers, a new, heavily engineer-based (Hall 2002) spatial science emerged which aimed to develop spatial interaction models capable of measuring and predicting patterns of spatial change, particularly in the area of transportation planning. The quantitative revolution in the 1960s stemmed from a desire to provide geography and planning studies with a firmer theoretical and scientific foundation and hence to improve their standing within the family of social sciences. Systems theory with its claim to scientific rigour, coupled with quantification methods, offered the hope for a way forward in changing planning from what was traditionally seen as an art to a science.

This reflected developments in other policy areas where there was a "renewed faith in the application of 'science' to policy- making – not only in applying the findings of scientific research but also in relation to the policy-making itself." (Taylor 1998: 69) This cybernetic model of planning, which was based on both systems theory and rational process, was closely associated with and reflected the rise of modernism after the Second World War (Giddens 1994: 58).

Policy process was considered a rational process of decision-making in which technical professionals played a key role in advising the politicians on the best course of action. The rational process of planning involved a cycle of five logical steps, including: definition of problems and/or goals, identification of alternative policies/plans; evaluation of these alternatives; implementation of the preferred plans/policies; and monitoring and review of these policies. However, this ideal rational process of how decisions *ought to* be made hardly matched the "disjointed, incremental" process that characterized how decisions *were* actually made in practice (Lindblom 1959). As Taylor (1998) points out, the cybernetic model of planning control marked the high tide of post-war modernist optimism with its legacy going back to the 18th century European Enlightenment.

The assumptions made in rational planning (and particularly rational comprehensive planning) of the 1960s and 1970s bear a strong resemblance to the assumptions made today in the instrumental view of evidence-based policy. Both conceive policy-making and planning as sciences in which scientific, value-free techniques are employed to solve well-defined and neatly-structured problems. Both have their roots in a misconception about the nature of real world decision-making which Nancy Shulock (1999) calls "the paradox of policy analysis." This paradox arises from "the mismatch between notions of how the policy process should work and its actual messy, uncertain, unstable and essentially political realities." (Young et al. 2002: 218) By drawing on examples from planning, the following section aims to outline some of the challenges of injecting a perceived evidence-based certainty and predictability into the messy ambiguities of real world policy-making.

The Use of Evidence in the Real World of Planning and Policy Processes

The messy world of policy-making and planning is littered with practical and institutional shortcomings which are far from the perfect rational model that the rhetoric of evidence-based planning leads us to believe. It is also infused with political and social ideologies and laden with value judgments. Ball, drawing a sharp contrast to ideal policy-making and planning, portrays an intriguing picture of what the real world of policy process looks like. He suggests that policy-making is a matter of *bricolage* rather than consistent principles:

It's a matter of borrowing and copying bits and pieces of ideas from elsewhere, drawing upon and amending locally tried and tested approaches, cannibalising theories, research, trends and fashions and not infrequently flailing around for anything at all that looks as if it might work. Most policies are ramshackle, compromise hit- and-miss affairs, that are reworked, tinkered with, nuanced and inflected through a complex process of influence, text production, dissemination and, ultimately, re-creation in contexts of practice. (Ball 1998: 126, quoted in Nixon et al. 2002: 238)

One of the frequent assumptions, for example, is that it is easier for policy-makers to make policies if they have access to all relevant information. In practice, however, more or better information may indeed lead to further confu-

sion; obscuring, rather than clarifying, policy choices which could otherwise be made more easily "under conditions of relative ignorance." (Young et al. 2002: 218) John Maynard Keynes once suggested that "there is nothing a government hates more than to be well-informed; for it makes the process of arriving at decisions much more complicated and difficult." (Skidelsky 1992: 630)

This echoes a pleasantly paradoxical remark from Bernard William's *Ethics and the Limit of Philosophy* (1985: 148) which says: "reflection can destroy knowledge", meaning that "people's sense of social and moral direction can depend on not asking too many questions." (Hollis 1994: 245) Moreover, the context within which the interface between research and policy is played out is an important factor in the extent to which evidence is taken into account in decision-making (Nutley et al. 2003). Practical, institutional and political factors can lead to what Carol Weiss (1997) calls the "problem of little effect." The problem-solving model of evidence-based policy overlooks the fact that a great deal of applied research, including research commissioned and paid for by the government, tends to sit on the shelf and gather dust; rarely being followed by policy-makers. For example, a recent audit of the UK government departments which was undertaken by the Cabinet Office as a follow-up to the publication of the *White Paper on Modernising Government*, shows the patchy role that evidence plays in day-to-day policy-making. The report stated that their "interviews revealed anecdotal evidence that little of the research commissioned by departments or other academic research was used by policy-makers." (Cabinet Office, 1999b: 36)

The ideal policy process fails to recognize that evidence is not the only contender for influencing policy. Weiss (2001: 286) identifies at least four other powerful competitors and calls them the four *I*s: "ideology, interests, institutional norms and practices, and prior information." Ideology refers to basic values and underlying belief systems which often shape, and sometimes determine, policy outcome in such a way that no amount of valid data and evidence can change it, at least not in the short term. As mentioned above, the post-war planning system in Britain is a clear case of the significant role played by ideologies and values in the framing of policies. The principle of urban containment, for example, was introduced and sustained to date largely on the basis of strong values that people (or some would say a powerful group of middle-class, suburban property owners) have

continued to attach to the protection of countryside, rather than scientific evidence.

Indeed, even the monumental study undertaken by Sir Peter Hall and his team (Hall 1973) which established the perverse and non-egalitarian effects of a strong policy on urban containment (largely through a strict Green Belt policy) was not able to make a direct impact on future policy. As regards the distributive effect of post-war planning, Hall argued (1974: 407) that "the effect of planning has been to give more to those that already had most, while taking away from the poor what little they had."

Thirty years later, the social and distributional effects of the planning system has come under scrutiny again. This time by a Treasury-funded study undertaken by Kate Barker and through a focus on the shortage of housing supply in England and the consequential (according to the report) rise in house prices in the last decade which has made home ownership an unaffordable prospect for a large section of society (Barker et al. 2004). Whether, and how, the Barker Review makes any real difference in a long-standing policy on urban containment remains to be seen.

Weiss's second contender to policy-making is interest, which refers to people's and organizations' self-interests and expediencies which may undermine the use of evidence. A revealing example is one stated by the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) under the self-imposed question: "What do we mean by evidence?" They answer: "Any information that helps turn DEFRA's strategic priorities into something concrete, manageable and achievable." (DEFRA 2005) In other words, evidence is needed to justify and/or implement priorities that have already been decided upon.

Young et al. (2002) refer to this as the political/tactical model of evidence-based policy. Under this model, policy is seen as the sole outcome of political process, with the research agenda being politically driven to establish a particular point and justify a particular policy direction, often through a process of cherry-picking, where some evidence is used or amplified while other evidence is disregarded or marginalized. The support for the growth of "think tanks" during the Thatcher administration, for example, is seen by some commentators as a deliberate strategy for providing "intellectual legitimacy" to policies that were already decided and that also "helped to sustain the radical momentum of Thatcherism by reinforcing the sense of a collective crusade." (Denham and Garnett 1996: 52)

Another, more recent example is Kate Barker's forthcoming second report which will focus specifically on the economic impact of planning. The fact that the report was commissioned jointly by the Treasury and the ODPM shortly after a major reform of the planning system is considered by some to be a politically-driven, "narrow and biased inquiry" (Ellis 2006: 10), influenced by an argument evoked by big business. This suggests that planning is a brake on wealth creation; an unnecessary regulatory activity which stifles enterprise. This argument, which goes back to the late 1970s when Michael Heseltine famously said that "every night thousands of jobs are locked away in the filing trays of planning departments" (quoted in Ward 1994), has since become the hallmark of pro-market, anti-planning debate.

The third contender is the influence of institutional traditions, culture and capacity in terms of the salience of research in decision-making processes, the ways in which research is communicated, and the ability of the organization to make sense of the available research. It is about how knowledge is created, accumulated, transferred and used. For example, the Cabinet Office Report, mentioned earlier, points out that the demand for quick fixes discourages the commissioning or the use of in-depth research, and, where time is not a constraint, it is the sheer volume of research material which is daunting for policy-makers (Cabinet Office 1999b: 36). Hence, it seems that decision-makers demand more analyses than they can easily digest.

Yet, the issue is not just one of information overload, but also a shortage of intelligent users of research who have the skill to understand or interpret available information (ibid.). The Report recommends enhancing the skills of policy-makers in dealing with evidence to know where to find it, how to commission it, and how to use it (ibid.). Among the core competencies identified by the report for what they call professional policy-making, is the ability to "use evidence". Hence, the Report concludes that "ensuring that policy-making becomes more soundly based on evidence of what works means tackling two key issues – the need to improve departments' capacity to make best use of evidence; and the need to improve the accessibility of the evidence available to policy-makers." (op. cit.: 37)

Making evidence accessible requires better communication channels between policy and research communities. A frequently rehearsed barrier to knowledge transfer relates to the politicians' inability or lack of time in reading long written reports. Such reluctance seems to go back as far as eleventh century England, as recorded by the medieval historian, Clanchy:

Both to ignorant illiterate and to sophisticated Platonists, written record was [a] dubious gift, because it seemed to kill living eloquence and trust and substitute for them a mummified semblance in the form of a piece of parchment.
(quoted in Blackler 1995: 1032)

Old habits die hard; today it is common knowledge that the vast majority of the huge volume of reports remains largely unread by policy-makers and practitioners. However, it would be wrong to think that this is a peculiar, die-hard English habit, because as Weiss (2001: 286) reports, "the U.S. Congress [also] works largely through face-to-face dealings … Members do little reading… Research that arrives in written documents doesn't have much of a chance."

Weiss' fourth contender in policy-making is prior information, which can be expanded to include the wider issue of the nature of evidence itself. The Oxford English Dictionary defines evidence as: "The available body of facts or information indicating whether a belief or proposition is true or valid." (OED 1998) This shows that:

• Firstly, facts or information are not in themselves evidence, they become evidence when they are used in conjunction with other facts to prove or disprove a proposition.

• Secondly, evidence is not limited to research findings and includes multiple sources of different forms of formal and informal, expert and experiential, and systematic and tacit knowledge. As David (2002: 213) suggests, the notions of evidence and research have been contextualized so that they "are not deemed to be the same."

• Thirdly, what counts as evidence is what is available and also what is accessible, at any given time and place.

• Finally, there is a question of validity, not only in terms of the validity of facts and information, but also in terms of the validity and relevance of the relationships between facts and the proposed proposition.

Moreover, in many cases, evidence can either be incomplete, contradictory or inconclusive, *adding* to the difficulty of taking informed decisions rather than *reducing* it (Cabinet Office 1999b). For example, despite numerous studies and reports on the economic, social and environmental cost and benefit of high-density residential development, the evidence is still inconclusive and open to different interpretations

depending mainly on one's value system. Ironically, while the debate is still ongoing, policy has already been made and high-density development is now seen as a way of achieving sustainable communities. Some even argue that the evidence-based approach to policy is ideological in the sense that it supports particular beliefs and values compatible with the dominant cultural paradigms that define how people and society function. According to Packwood (2002: 267), these are determined by definitions of effectiveness as a quantitative measure, professionalism as performativity, and "credible" evidence as statistical meta-analysis.

When it comes to influencing policy, it should be noted that new evidence does not enter a pristine environment, it has to fit into the policy-makers' general understanding of how the world works. Such understanding comes from a variety of sources ranging from scientific, systematic research evidence to anecdotal experiences and tacit and un-codified knowledge. Policy process is as much about power relations and competition over agenda setting as it is about finding the truth and solving the problems. Overlooking this, researchers often complain about political barriers to the use of scientific and technical know-how. However, scientific and technical know-how will be more effective if the social and political were acknowledged as frameworks from the outset (Davoudi 2006). As Flyvbjerg (2001: 142) suggests "knowledge about the phenomena which decide whether … knowledge gets to count is as important at least as that knowledge itself. If you are not knowledgeable about the former, you cannot be effective with the latter."

Finally, there is the issue of the evidential nature of social science itself (Young et al. 2002), a subject which has evoked fierce debates ever since social sciences began to establish their standing as "scientific". However, such uncertainties are not exclusive to social science. As Popper suggests, "The empirical basis of objective science has … nothing 'absolute' about it. Science does not rest upon solid bedrock. The bold structure of its theories rises, as it were, above swamp." (Popper 1959: 111)

To sum up, contrary to the instrumental view of evidence-based policy and planning, the real-world experience clearly shows that "there is more to policy and practice than the disinterested pursuit of truth and wisdom." (Solesbury 2002: 93) It takes more than knowledge and ideas to make policy. Creativity and imagination play a significant part in transforming ideas into workable policy proposals. It also takes mobi-

lization and political support to turn the proposals into policy (Weiss 2001: 289). The planning system in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s became the antithesis of the above statement. Planning was heavily criticized for its lack of imagination and creativity, and for becoming a bureaucratic regulatory routine, largely preoccupied with procedural rather than substantive issues. Project-by-project conflict mediation and negotiation and detailed knowledge of regulatory rules became planners' new stock in trade.

In the world of practice, evidence remained synonymous with "proper surveys". A study commissioned by the RTPI concluded that plans were "fit for purpose" if they were "based on proper and adequate survey…" (Crow et al. 2000: 21). The report stated that one of the "classical virtues" of a good plan was "the soundness of reasoning and of the factual base, and also being up to date." (ibid.) This, as before, was interpreted in terms of routine data collection and statistical monitoring of the trends, with little connection to the wider debate about the conceptualization of space and place.

The Move towards a Sound Plan

In 2004, the notion of soundness entered the new planning legislation[5] which introduced the move away from land use to spatial planning in the UK. While what is considered to be a "sound" plan relates mainly to the plan's conformity with appropriate procedures and policies of the higher tier plans and policies, it is also related to whether or not the plan is based on evidence. Hence, a whole section of the national Planning Policy Statement 12 (PPS 12) is devoted to the "development of the evidence base" which states: "Local planning authorities should prepare and maintain an up-to-date information base on key aspects of … their area, to enable the preparation of a sound spatial plan." (ODPM 2004: 32, para 4.8) Elsewhere in the PPS12, it states that "at the earliest stage in the preparation of the development plan document, … the local planning authority should gather evidence about their area." (ibid., para 4.11)

An independent panel will then examine the plan and "test its soundness" on the basis of a long list of criteria which also include whether "the strategies… are founded on a robust and credible evidence base" and whether "there are clear mechanisms for implementation and

monitoring." (ibid.: 39f., para 4.24) As regards "the scope and scale of evidence", PPS12 makes it clear that "examinations are not the place to press the detailed merits of proposed development schemes. Inspectors are interested in the evidence and reasoning behind the authority's proposals and in the arguments and evidence against them." (ibid.)

The above extracts show that the notion of evidence is used in its quasi-judicial term, which is not significantly different from what used to be called "reasoned justification" that all previous plans had to provide for their policies and proposals. Early signs show that the test of soundness is largely based on procedural issues and is often articulated through a tick box exercise. For example, the Chairman of the Development Plans Group at the Planning Officers' Society argues that "more of the evidence relates to the validity or otherwise of the processes followed, rather than the merit of particular sites." (Wright 2003: 23) In response to the question: "What does soundness mean?" he suggests that it is about "whether the plan is fit for its purpose," (ibid.) which, considering what was mentioned earlier, leads us to a circular debate. The substantive evidence about, for example, the merit of one growth strategy compared with another does not feature large in the test of soundness. Yet, it does become the subject of heated debates that are grounded in different interpretations or frames of reference rather than the scientific validity or otherwise of technical evidence.

Summary and Concluding Remarks

The current enthusiasm for evidence-based policy derives largely from an instrumental view of policy-evidence interface. The underpinning assumptions in such a view have a lot in common with the positivist approach to the planning system. Both are based on ambitious and naïve assumptions that the complex political and socio-economic processes could be technicized, commanded and controlled through a scientific process. The sophisticated analyses advocated by the systems view of planning hardy reached the world of practice. While the Structure Plans of the 1970s were backed by massive Reports of Survey with detailed statistical information, they lacked policy innovation and that elusive ingredient called "imagination" which underpinned their predecessors. In the following decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the debate continued to focus so much on distinguishing planning pro-

cess (i.e., how to plan) as something separate from what is planned that the latter became neglected. Attention moved away from developing the substantive evidence base of planning about how cities function (knowing what) to developing new ideas, such as communicative planning, about the process of planning (knowing how).

It was not until the early 2000s that the need for developing the knowledge base of planning began to be advocated by the RTPI's Education Report. This stated that "planning education should seek to promote critical thinking about space and place as the basis for action or intervention" (RTPI 2003: 1). For this to happen; i.e., for developing the substantive knowledge base of planning, it is crucial that a broader view of the policy/research interface based on the enlightenment model is maintained; one which aims to inform policy rather than spoon-feed politicians, who after all may not have the time or inclination to follow it. Interaction and bridge-building between policy and research is crucial, but such bridges have to be capable of withstanding a two-way relationship between the two communities, where the agenda for both policy and research is being set through a process of interaction. This is because narrow instrumentalism not only curtails imagination and creativity, it is also based on fragile assumptions about the research/policy interface. What is needed is less emphasis on evidence-based policy and more focus on what Smith (1996) calls, "an evidence-informed society" and the capacity to make use of the available evidence, because as Sir David King, the UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser, stresses "in recent years we have seen the level of public interest in evidence-based issues increase, and in some cases the level of public confidence in the government's ability to make sound decisions based on that evidence decrease." (OST 2005: 1)

Notes

1 See www.evidencenetwork.org
2 House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee
3 This is the phrase which was used frequently during the Study Programme for European Spatial Planning which was a predecessor to the ESPON programme
4 For example, Ebenezer Howard who pioneered the Garden City Movement in the late 19th century was in fact a short-hand writer
5 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004

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