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Round table on the interaction between policy and academia

Elisa de Weerd, Editorial assistant at ESB

What steps need to be taken to improve the interaction between academia and policy? During a round table discussion, we have asked both academics and policy makers to share their experiences and ideas.

About 75 years ago, Jan Tinbergen came up with a scientific basis for Dutch policy making when he served as the first director of the CPB Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis. In the current economic debate, however, the validity of economic research seems to be increasingly questioned (Lukkezen and Ernst, 2019). Researchers feel that evidence-based policy recommendations remain on the shelf, and that solutions to complex economic problems are more and more based upon political interests and advocacy groups. At the same time, economic research cannot always be directly applied to economic policy. We have asked both academics and policy makers to share their views as to improving the interaction between academia and policy. The discussion was held under the Chatham House Rule. The opinions in this article may not reflect those of every individual attendee.

The participants kindly responded to the invitation from the KVS (Royal Dutch Economic Society) to participate in the discussion before attending the Prof. F. de Vries Lecture by Esther Duflo. The room in the *Paushuize*, one of Utrecht's oldest buildings, is full – and considering the applied nature of Esther Duflo's work it is not surprising that attendees at her lecture are enthusiastic to discuss their ideas on the interaction between academics and policy makers within the Dutch context.

Experiences

Academia and policy can interact with one another in different ways. Government institutions, like the planning bureaus, analyse policies using academic methods. Furthermore, academics can also distribute their research results themselves by publishing their research in the media, and by directly contacting relevant policy makers.

The majority of the attendees at the round table discussion are academics, and most of them have little successful experience of policy making. The

attendees who have tried to translate their research for policy purposes are not all that enthusiastic about the current interaction. “My experience is that scientific knowledge is rarely used in policy making.” Indeed, policy makers seem to have little interest in academic research.

The problem is not necessarily that policy makers seem to lack a desire for a scientific basis. The willingness to base economic policy upon research is definitely there. “Whenever the ministry is looking for a solution, they are very eager to start new research.” This is favoured above searching for existing academic research.

Academic economists feel that their research’s valorisation could be a lot higher. Since some researchers have difficulty in directly contacting policy makers, they attempt to increase the impact of their research in other ways. They try publishing in newspapers, in journals, or sharing short summaries of their research on platforms like Twitter. One attendee joined a political party’s research institute out of frustration that this person’s academic work had not landed in the policy world.

One of the participants calls policy makers’ lack of taking up economic research “the market failure in the exchange of ideas between academia and policy”. There are too few individual efforts to improve this, and there is not one university that is able to provide a solution to this single-handedly.

The issues

Then what does prevent academic insights from being used in policy making? From the academic side, scholars may not always conduct research with the greatest policy impact. Since researchers, especially starting ones, still have to make their mark, their incentives are rather to conduct novel research instead of just applying relevant research to different contexts. The result is that only a limited number of studies is conducted on a single policy topic. Furthermore, researchers are becoming more specialised. They may know a lot about a specific intervention’s labour market outcomes, but they may not be aware of the consequences of other interventions that could tackle the same problem. Knowledge is thus piecemeal, while what policy makers want are full solutions.

Secondly, policy makers are making insufficient use of the currently existing knowledge base. This may be because they are not sufficiently aware of the research available, but it may also be a case of only using the literature oppor-

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tunely. If earlier research findings are not in support of the new policy change or of political opinion, it could be easier to conduct new research in order to see whether the specific Dutch context provides other results, even though the chances of finding these may be slight.

Historical perspective

The attendees feel that there is a lot to be improved in the interaction between policy and academia, but this does not mean no improvements have taken place since Tinbergen's time. Is the situation better or worse than in Jan Tinbergen's time? The opinions are mixed. On the one hand, back in Tinbergen's time, policy makers and academics were more closely connected. Nowadays, the public is more sceptical of economic research, and policy makers seem inclined to give in to the demands of the public. Because of economic research's changed status, the situation can thus be perceived as worse than in the time of Tinbergen.



On the other hand, current policy changes need to be reviewed by law within a few years. Changes in policy are thus more evidence-based. Cherry-picking may, however, still occur. A participant who has been involved in economic research from both a policy and a research perspective, relates that the majority of policy makers regards research as potentially bad news. “Only a minority recognizes the opportunities that policy research may bring.”

International comparison

The participants agree that the situation in the Netherlands is relatively positive in comparison with other countries. “I have spent years abroad, and I can only be very enthusiastic about the wonderful infrastructure we have in the Netherlands.” The Netherlands has various institutes and advisory bodies, such as the planning bureaus, that help translate economic research into policy recommendations, and scientists are generally given a stage in order to inform members of parliament about their research.

Is there anything we can learn from other countries? In France, many leaders in both government and academia come from a small number of prestigious schools. This leads to strong network effects, and makes it easier to connect these two worlds. Not everyone sees this as positive though: “Good networks create an efficient way to circulate certain ideas.” If all people within this network come from the same kind of background, then the diversity of ideas actually circulate in both academia and policy may not be reflected. Something we may learn from the United States is that there it is easier to track the actual uptake of certain policy recommendations.

Solutions

Several parties can play a part in improving the interaction between academic research and policy. What could academics and policy makers do better, and what would need to change in the research structure in the Netherlands?

Academics

The participants in the discussion highlight the importance of research networks. Perhaps an elite network, similar to the one found in France, may not be ideal for this, but networks concentrated around specific issues in society can also be founded by academics themselves. In such networks, researchers

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from several disciplines can come together with policy makers so that one may approach issues from various perspectives. To create this may cost time, but it could result in a network that would make developments in the field more visible.

In addition to this, academics can learn to communicate their research better to both the public and policy makers. National institutions or individual universities can play a part in this. “In general, policy makers are well-informed on the topics discussed in the news or social media.” Platforms like Twitter force researchers to summarise their research in a concise and clear way. This may further improve the comprehension of economic research, and create a better uptake of economic ideas.

Policy makers

Policy makers can also play an active part in incorporating academic research in policy. It is already obligatory to evaluate policy changes within a few years after transition, but a more ex-ante evaluation can increase the quality of these evaluations. This mandated basis creates the need to evaluate the existing research in order to decide on the policy change’s anticipated impact. The proper questions need to be formulated from the start. “Look for impact, not just output.”

A subset of the participants was somewhat surprised that experts were only to a lesser degree included when it came to complex issues such as the climate plan. To improve the political support for new policies, policy makers and politicians sometimes use ‘the polder model’, a consensus- and decision-making model for designing new policies. From a long-term perspective, it would be better to base policies more on research. “Policy makers and politicians lack the guts to include academics in the policy process, because they are afraid that those solutions may not be accepted by parliament or the public.”

Research structure

What might be changed in the incentives for academic and policy research? “The holy grail of research is research that is publishable, feasible, and in line with the authorising institution’s objective.” Research is not always directly policy relevant, and is thus not always in line with the policy makers’ objectives. One solution to provide incentives for researchers to do policy-relevant





- Create interaction networks (academia + pol)

... HAVE FUNDED VET TO SUPPORT
OF RESEARCHERS IN POLICY AND DESIGN
... THESE TALENTS
... PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO BE AND STRONG-ARMED HAND
... CREATE A
... VISUAL MEMORY
... BY A REFERENCE



Empire + Science

Science Community

- design numbers (renewables)
- SPEED #3
- CREATE CONDITIONS TO ATTRACT MORE FOR RESEARCH

policy/policy

proper awareness

... more policy
... quality research
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... look at output
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research is to design publicly-funded temporary positions for researchers in policy (research) units, while preserving their tenure-track incentives. One attendee reflects: “When I was doing policy work, it just filled me with ideas. Every day ideas for new studies popped up.” Thus, these positions not only bring academic ideas to policy makers more directly, they may also influence the societal impact of academic research that is being conducted by influencing the research agenda.

Conclusions

Jan Tinbergen never really worked exclusively in policy, nor did he work solely as an academic researcher. His influence on both policy and academia allowed him to connect these two worlds. Connecting these worlds again by expanding the ability of researchers and policy makers to interact with one another may help to strengthen once again economic policy’s scientific basis.

The majority of the discussants feel that giving researchers the opportunity to bring findings from their research field into the policy field will improve interaction most. Giving researchers the opportunity to extend or even start their tenure track in this way, can be expected to increase enthusiasm among researchers. The other popular solutions focus on improving and stimulating scientific communication, and on performing the proper policy evaluations mandated by law.

Impact on policy does not only depend on the researcher’s or policy maker’s efforts, it also depends on the timing. One of the discussants mentions that, in the early 1990s, Card and Krueger researched the employment consequences of a rise in the minimum wage. It was read by many in the economics discipline, but was not taken up by policy makers in the Netherlands until the Labour Party used it in the elections. “Many things in policy making only change if something in society changes.”

References

Lukkezen, J. and L. Ernst (2019) *Verstandig beleid in tijden van nepnieuws en afbrokkelend draagvlak*. ESB, forthcoming. Article can be found on esb.nu.