

Africa

Facing the facts of policymaking may be challenging but it is rewarding for all concerned, writes **Jean-Jacques Cornish**

Public matters

There was a time, Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern noted to his public servants last year, when those who had an interest in policymaking would be given the same warning as people who like sausages — “don’t look too closely at how they are made”.

Happily, today’s policymakers are increasingly realising the importance of examining various ingredients of policymaking, particularly the evidence-based approach.

This is normally taken to mean that decisions taken on the course a country runs must be based on a body of facts rather than on ideology, historical baggage or the wishes of special interest groups.

Nevertheless, there does not

appear to be an understanding of what evidence-based policymaking really means.

Often there is tension in seeking to adopt an evidence-based approach to manage decision-making in a policy-driven world that often uses evidence merely to support belief-driven action. Experience shows that getting the evidence into policymaking is easier said than done. Achieving it requires a synergy between the government, civil society and academia.

Public policy is both complex and diverse. It connects areas such as housing and education to health and arts, so that what happens in one sector affects many others. The Irish premier likened it to an iceberg with the bulk lying below the surface.



Irish Prime Minister Bertie Ahern has highlighted key aspects of the problems that confront policymakers.
Photograph: AP

Public policy is reflected in budget expenditure, information campaigns tackled by government and, most importantly, in the legislative programme. The danger of this is that policies are often taken aboard from previous administrations. Officials see it as their duty to deliver their decisions to the public rather than allow policies to bubble up from the public.

Evidence-based approaches should improve the effectiveness of social and economic policies and legitimise public policies, using data and models from civil society.

In applying this approach, the government must aim for:

- Effectiveness — ensure it does more good than harm;
- Efficiency — use scarce public resources to maximum effect;
- Service Orientation — meeting citizens’ needs and expectations;
- Accountability — transparency of what is done and why;
- Democracy — enhance the democratic process; and
- Trust — help ensure trust in government and public services.

The aim is to reduce guesswork and to solicit better quality information to achieve the best possible data on which to target policy.

Again, given the complexity and diversity of the task it is impossible to remove guesswork from public policymaking. The objective should be to reduce this as far as possible through comprehensive and foresighted understanding of the evidence.

Evidence-based policymaking should link objectives and outcomes with strategic decisions.

The government must produce policies that deal with the existing problems and keep a sharp eye on the future. Forward-looking policies are shaped by the evidence rather than short-term pressures.

Ahern highlighted key aspects of the problems that confront policymakers. “Firstly, the huge complexity of the social and market systems that we seek to influence, can defy our complete understanding at any point in time. Secondly, the interrelationships between the various factors change over time and will change as a result of our intervention,” he said.

The government has to accept that it does not know everything and that it relies on the input of outsiders. Examples of this are combating HIV/Aids, stem cell research and genetically modified foods.

It must realise that sometimes the intent of policy does not match the outcome, necessitating corrective measures. It has to monitor, evaluate and adjust policies and it is here that evidence-based policymaking is key.

An increasingly sophisticated electorate wants to see the analysis and the number-crunching before policy is implemented. This is where the evidence-based approach is transparent and holistic. The public also wants regular reviews of projects and legislation to see if it is achieving the desired result. This is where the evidence-based approach ensures effectiveness and efficiency.

Naturally, there are challenges to this approach. For starters, politicians and public servants must decide which evidence can be relied upon. Often the temptation is to take the direction pushed by the most vociferous interest groups. This is where the fairness of the consultation process is tested.

Channels of communication between the government and academics must be built and maintained so the results of independent research can flow to policymakers. Academics contributing to this body of knowledge must be properly recognised and rewarded.

In justifying their existence, NGOs are driven by their purpose of inspiring broad public support for their respective causes; informing the government and the public of their reality and representing the views of their constituents; and improving the society in which they operate by holding the powers that be accountable. Using the evidence-based approach NGOs can build the momentum necessary to become part of the agenda-setting process. They can gain the credibility necessary to ensure they are part of the formulation process of policy. And they are able expertly to monitor the process of implementation.

What the experts say:

Isobel Frye, Senior Researcher, Poverty Eradication and Socio-Economic Rights, National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI)

“The Government seems to be entering into a critical interrogation of many of its driving policies, and it is essential that other social partners become part of this process. This will require certain shifts from all sectors — for the government it will be to appreciate that consultation involves an inclusive process from the beginning, rather than briefings once decisions have been reached. For academia, this will require that certain research outputs are presented in more accessible ways to be of benefit to policymakers, and broader civil society must be able to engage with out-of-the-box thinking to provide innovative alternatives, moving away from sector-specific interests during such engagement”.

Benjamin Roberts, Research Specialist, Urban, Rural and Economic Development (URED), Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC)

“The last decade has seen substantive improvements in the availability and use of empirical evidence in South Africa and the region. This has occurred alongside a concern with the monitoring and evaluation of government policy outcomes and the demand for more participatory approaches to policy design. This is beginning to produce a shift from traditionally top-down modes of decision-making towards a culture of evidence-based policymaking. Yet obstacles remain. These include: human and financial resource constraints, the politics of representation which informs whose evidence gets heard, the credibility of the evidence, the effective communication of research findings, and the willingness of senior officials to accept difficult conclusions”.

Gemma Wright, Deputy Director, Centre for the Analysis of South African Social Policy (CASASP), University of Oxford, United Kingdom

“By placing independent research evidence at the heart of the policymaking process, evidence-based policymaking ensures that effective use is made of scarce resources, and that the government is seen to be acting in an informed and transparent way. However, evidence can only identify the nature and extent of social problems, and point to possible policy solutions. It is then the role of the government to make policy choices. Once policies have been formulated they should be piloted and independently evaluated to explore “what works” before the policies are rolled out. Academics play a crucial role in producing independent evidence and have a duty to ensure that the research is of a high quality.”



Like seeds, good ideas can't remain small



DRIVERS OF CHANGE

Three years ago, Pula Kgomotso started a youth gardening project where people in impoverished communities worked with NGOs, local businesses, and the government to have access to tools, seed and manure to grow their own vegetables. Within three years, the scheme has grown to provide access to food and an income for several families in the area. The same innovative attitude in policymaking can drive down poverty on a much bigger scale in southern Africa.

Nominate innovators!

The Drivers of Change award honours people like Pula; individuals and organisations who, in their thinking and action for better poverty reduction policies, are going beyond the conventional to make a real and lasting difference in the lives of people living in poverty.

We invite you to nominate individuals or organisations of civil society, business, and government in any southern African country who are doing things differently to overcome poverty. The winners will be honoured at a gala event in Johannesburg in October this year.

The closing date for entries is Friday 25 August 2006.

Contact **Sudley Adams** on +27 11 250 7300 or +27 82 900 0776 or go to www.southernafricatrust.org for more details.



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