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Knowledge for policy – policy for knowledge

Report

Request for advice

This advice concerns the use and acquisition of knowledge for high quality policymaking and implementation. In this report, the Advisory Council for Science and Technology Policy (AWT) argues that a sound basis for policy decisions is a necessary, albeit not a sufficient, precondition for high quality effective and efficient policy. The AWT is also convinced that this requires a well developed 'policy for knowledge', or knowledge policy.

The central issue in this advice is how the national government, and in particular its departments, give shape to knowledge policy. This involves two questions:

- How can the government organise its knowledge processes (such as to place items on the research agenda, allocation of research assignments, utilisation of knowledge and quality control) in such a way as to make optimum use of knowledge for the development and implementation of policy?
- What are the organisational preconditions for these knowledge processes to take place effectively and efficiently?

Scope and nature of the advice

This advice focuses in particular on the role of knowledge for the administrative organisation and processes of the national government. The AWT interprets 'knowledge' as being empirical data, concepts, analyses and theories that are considered true and correct and enable people to take decisions. This primarily means codified, stored and traceable knowledge that is the product of a public process of validation. This type of validated knowledge is often the result of academic research, which incidentally takes place not only at universities but also at national and international research institutes. In addition, although research is an important source of policy knowledge, by no means all knowledge used by the government is academic in nature. Practical knowledge from the field or citizens' experience are, for example, at least as important. Civil servants 'translate' knowledge into policy options for politicians and this means civil servants are the pivot between knowledge and academics on the one hand and politicians and policy on the other hand. This advice aims to provide pointers to ensure that optimum use is made of that pivotal position, above all by providing the departments with recommendations for the organisation of processes concerning the utilisation and acquisition of knowledge.

In order to achieve this end, the AWT's approach in this report is primarily to discuss knowledge policy considerations and give good examples from the field. This is because the AWT is convinced that there is no one optimal way of shaping knowledge policy, given the many different forms of the various parts of national government and the diverse nature of their problems.

Urgency

If the government underestimates the importance of knowledge in substantiating policy and making it convincing, it runs the risk of:

- *Creating fragmented policy* – The chance of suboptimum policy increases, the less aware the government is about what it needs to know in order to make good policy. This can result in ineffective or inefficient policy with serious, unexpected side effects or in policy for which those in the field are not well equipped.
- *Failing if it is caught unawares by unexpected, powerful developments* – The government needs knowledge to avoid being caught unawares by crisis situations. This means that it is important to have a good overview of the various options for taking action.
- *Being insufficiently prepared for the future* – The government will miss opportunities if it does not keep an eye on developments that are already influencing society. Reflecting on trends and gathering knowledge about the future will certainly help in this regard.
- *Its reputation being damaged* – If the government does not handle available knowledge in a transparent and responsible way, it runs the risk of losing citizens' confidence. Confidence will be damaged, for

example, if it emerges that the government is withholding, ignoring or does not know how to make good use of research.

If knowledge policy does not work properly, bottlenecks will occur in policy processes. The following are examples of such bottlenecks:

- *An excess of knowledge and information* – The amount of data, information, images and documents that departments receive from home and abroad is constantly increasing. It is becoming more and more difficult to pick up the relevant signals from this stream of information, to interpret them correctly and link them to existing knowledge and developments.
- *Compartmentalisation in knowledge domains* – Compartmentalisation between and within departments is reflected in the accumulation of policy knowledge. This makes it more difficult to adopt an integral, multidisciplinary approach to complex and often cross-department policy problems.
- *A greater focus on process than on content* – The national government's personnel policy currently places more value on process-related skills than on substantive expertise. The related large-scale civil servant mobility is beginning to become an obstacle to the accumulation of this expertise.

The inventory drawn up by the AWT shows that there are very few departments that have formulated an explicit knowledge policy and that there are also few ministries that are working on it in all respects. The Council considers this a cause for concern, although it did find good examples everywhere of targeted use of knowledge in policy. Many of those examples are presented in part II of this advice.

Knowledge for policy

The aim of knowledge policy is to contribute to the proper operation of the government by effective and efficient application of knowledge in the development and implementation of policy. Knowledge policy includes the organisation of processes to generate, acquire and utilise knowledge, and the creation of the necessary preconditions to do so.

Knowledge policy starts with the determination of the knowledge that the department needs, which means finding an answer to the question of what the policy aims are and what type of knowledge is needed to achieve these aims. The next step is to organise the processes that lead to this knowledge and to organise the knowledge function in the ministry.

Starting point: sound, substantiated policy

The AWT believes that ministries in their knowledge policy should strive to achieve *evidence-based policy*. In the opinion of the AWT, that means basing political choices on relevant facts, sound analyses and reliable risk assessments rather than using substantiated, validated and public knowledge.

In addition to knowledge, there are of course other ingredients that are needed to optimise the quality of policy, such as a change in culture in parts of the national government, a more intensive dialogue with civil society organisations and greater flexibility and decompartmentalisation of the organisational structures in and between the departments. However, these aspects are outside the scope of this advice.

In day-to-day policy practice, knowledge is often used for a purpose other than to substantiate policy choices, namely as a 'political weapon'. For example, knowledge is brought into play to justify choices after the political lines have already been drawn. In such cases knowledge is often partially acquired, presented in a biased way, or temporarily withheld.

The AWT fully accepts that a good knowledge policy is not a universal remedy for all of the problems and challenges facing the government. Furthermore, how knowledge is handled in itself causes tensions between policy and politicians on the one hand and policy and knowledge suppliers on the other. However, the AWT is convinced that knowledge policy improves the quality of policy development and implementation, and makes it easier to manage the tensions between politicians and academics.

Principles that apply to handling policy knowledge

The aim of knowledge policy is to obtain relevant, high quality and reliable knowledge at the right moment in the policy cycle. The government is therefore required to assume a particular attitude in the processes of knowledge acquisition and knowledge utilisation. In the AWT's view, there are a number of guiding principles that apply to handling policy knowledge:

- *Being open to different perspectives* – Try to be open to all perspectives on policy questions and strive for wide 'knowledge input' into the policy process.
- *Academic quality* – Use only validated knowledge of proven quality.
- *Public access* – Try to be completely open about the knowledge used and to be transparent during the process of knowledge acquisition and utilisation.
- *Independence* – Secure an independent position for the suppliers of knowledge.
- *Being aware of uncertainty* – Try to stay aware of the complexity of social issues and do not expect definitive or exact statements where the academic world is unable to give them.

Relationship with external parties

If the government wants to have the relevant high quality policy knowledge available in good time now and in the future, this will ultimately require the presence of a rich knowledge base from which the government can draw over a long period. Therefore, although the government primarily acts in its knowledge policy as a customer for 'knowledge as a product', it also has a responsibility for 'knowledge as an asset'. Furthermore, it is important that the government not only guarantees long-term high quality capacity, but also that it organises its own *countervailing knowledge*.

Recommendations

Only an ambitious approach to the knowledge function will provide the guarantee that knowledge policy can conform to these principles and result in *evidence based policy*. In that regard, the AWT believes that the departments can significantly improve a number of aspects of the way in which they deal with knowledge. Of course, the aspects differ from department to department, but the common denominator is that more attention needs to be paid to making knowledge policy more explicit and to the actual organisation of the knowledge function. The AWT wishes to make the following four recommendations in this regard:

1 Work on knowledge policy

In order to ensure that departmental knowledge policy takes shape and begins to operate, a strategic vision of the role of knowledge in policy and an ambitious approach are needed first of all. A number of actions are also required from those at a senior level within the ministry:

- a. Make someone from the senior level of the ministry responsible for formulating and implementing knowledge policy, preferably someone at the level of a director-general or a director. The responsibility for knowledge policy lies with the Secretary-General, although he can obviously delegate someone else to formulate knowledge policy and reorganise the knowledge function.
- b. Assess knowledge policy against a number of crucial safeguards namely that, as regards developing policy, the department:
 - uses a broad range of perspectives and insights from independent sources of knowledge – and that it organises sufficient *countervailing knowledge for this purpose*;
 - bases itself on validated knowledge that is from independent sources and is of proven quality – and to this end sets requirements with regard to public access to the knowledge used. For example, requirements could be that the results of research are always published, or that external quality assessments are made obligatory for the major knowledge suppliers;

- uses knowledge transparently and accounts properly for that use, taking into account the limitations and the uncertainties surrounding knowledge – in any case by indicating in policy memoranda what research the memoranda are based on.
- c. Ensure that knowledge policy is evaluated periodically and that this evaluation has consequences. This is above all a test of the way in which the department deals with knowledge and whether it operates in practice according to the principles recommended above.

2 Organise the knowledge policy

Working on knowledge policy is a question of organisation and implementation. This is the focus of the recommendations set out below. In part II of this advice the AWT gives additional pointers in the form of considerations, comparisons of the merits of different organisational methods and specific examples from the field. The primary focus is on what the AWT believes must be properly organised.

- a. Ensure that policy development and knowledge development are properly attuned:
- Knowledge is necessary not only for the development and implementation of policy measures ('doing the things right'), but also with regard to departmental strategic development and policy priorities ('doing the right things'). This is why more attention needs to be paid to the production of knowledge about long-term developments and the production of interdisciplinary knowledge about integral policy issues. However, more direct knowledge from the field – about the feasibility and effectiveness of policy measures – is also required.
 - Ensure that the major policy themes that require knowledge development are on the agenda in good time. This should preferably be done on the basis of exploratory studies, but in any event in an integral and interactive way. An integral approach – i.e. going beyond the intradepartmental and interdepartmental compartments and disciplinary boundaries – is important because policy issues seldom adhere to those boundaries. Interaction in the drawing up of the knowledge agenda, both with academics and with 'stakeholders', is particularly important for width in problem definitions and policy options.
 - Ensure sound articulation of knowledge questions. The analysis of policy problems and the translation of those problems into knowledge themes, research lines and research programmes must be clear. This requires civil servants with sufficient time, capabilities and knowledge for this translation process.
- b. The AWT wishes to make the following recommendations with regard to the utilisation of existing knowledge:
- Try to utilise the internal sources of knowledge and the information streams that flow into the department as effectively as possible: free the capacity to monitor, select, synthesise and internally transfer information, e.g. by producing overview studies or presentations about the latest developments *in a particular area of knowledge*.
 - The diffusion of knowledge (e.g. by 'translating' research reports into readable documents or by organising a series of lectures) is also important for the proper utilisation of the knowledge available internally and externally.
 - However, knowledge comes most effectively and efficiently into the department via direct interaction with knowledge suppliers – therefore interaction must also be well organised, e.g. by having researchers organise workshops or by offering affiliated institutes working space or a unit in the department.
 - An audit of the actual application of acquired knowledge is the final tool to ensure the proper utilisation of knowledge.
- c. Wherever the necessary knowledge is not yet available, research must be carried out. It is important to keep an eye on the quality and usability of this research, the independence of the suppliers and the transaction costs of outsourcing or tendering for contracts, because these issues depend greatly on the outsourcing procedure adhered to. The AWT therefore wishes to make the following recommendations as regards the acquisition of new knowledge:
- Guarantee quality and independence by requiring public access to the research results, e.g. by immediately publishing all the acquired research oneself.

- The transaction costs of market mechanisms for acquiring knowledge are quite often underestimated, certainly when the market is 'failing' or when contact-specific investments are needed. Take care therefore when strengthening the question-setting role and when engaging remote suppliers of knowledge, because the mechanisms that are more in line with the market require much greater investment in terms of time and expertise from the department itself. Consequently, always carefully consider any outsourcing to remote suppliers of knowledge.
- d. Ensure that the organisational preconditions are met to allow effective and efficient utilisation and acquisition of knowledge. In the AWT's view this means:
- Developing a personnel policy that fits in with the knowledge intensity of a department. That includes policy employees having sufficient knowledge of their area of policy and being able to maintain this knowledge. Also hold employees to account on the basis of substantive performance criteria and do not allow the balance to tip towards process competencies.
 - That the knowledge policy must be implemented by a clearly recognisable organisational unit in the department, headed by such as a Scientific Advisor (a position that is comparable to that of 'Chief Scientist' in England). This Scientific Advisor must have extensive substantive expertise, research management skills and have access to sufficient resources and powers to be able to operate with authority in the ministry. The Advisor acts as a bridge between researchers, politicians and policy. The department should employ a number of other people with research experience and who are able to act as a critical customer for, and supervisor of, research.

3 Knowledge from outside

In addition to a good internal organisation of the knowledge function, it is also important for the departments that the knowledge facility is properly organised in the outside world:

- The departments must play a role in organising a broad, sustainable undercurrent of knowledge development and have the capacity to research policy issues. In this regard, the AWT wishes to point out that there is an interest (for the departments themselves) in there being a knowledge base outside the departments. This means, for example, sufficiently long-term scheduling of research, sufficient room available for the knowledge suppliers affiliated to the government to develop their own strategy, and provision for the maintenance of investments in the knowledge infrastructure that is important for the government.
- Sufficient *countervailing knowledge must be available outside the department in the form of objections that guarantee broad perspectives*. This is an 'academic' conscience, in one or more organisations, that is slightly removed from daily political 'business'. Each ministry should regularly investigate whether its own environment offers sufficient fruitful resistance. If not, then such resistance needs to be organised.

4 Interdepartmental coordination

A certain provision for interdepartmental coordination of knowledge policy is needed, if only to avoid overlapping research programmes. This requires:

- Learning from each other and keeping each other alert, e.g. by organising interdepartmental audits of departmental knowledge policy – In the AWT's view, the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations should take the lead in this government-wide quality assurance initiative.
- Regularly setting the long-term knowledge agenda for government-wide, interdepartmental or major new themes. This should be done on the basis of broad exploratory studies of the long-term future. The AWT envisages the Ministry of General Affairs playing the main role in organising this process.
- Continuing the current initiatives for the unambiguous activation of the government research institutes. It is a matter for the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science to take the relevant initiatives.