Foresight: an interview with Stephen Quest, Director-General at the Joint Research Centre (JRC) and Pascal Leardini, Deputy Secretary-General and Chief Operating Officer of the European Commission

The importance of evidence-informed policymaking and the main challenges

Evidence-informed policymaking aims to mobilise the best available knowledge in a transparent manner and to connect scientific research communities with public administration. It helps us to clarify the understanding of the policy problems, develop and assess policy options, systematically evaluate existing policies and services, or estimate the expected outcomes of new solutions. **Stephen Quest** points out that in particular dealing with complex, "wicked" problems such as the climate crisis, or pandemics requires the integration of knowledge from different fields and coordination across different services. Increasing the capacity to anticipate such challenges for better preparedness becomes key, especially, as the environment for developing policies and services is more and more volatile, with the presence of mis- and disinformation and increasing societal polarisation undermining trust in government and expert knowledge.

The recently published Commission Staff Working Document on "Supporting and connecting policy-making in the Member States with scientific research identifies three key challenges at the interface between science and policymaking. First, the need for better coordination within and across science-for-policy ecosystems. Second, the need for better professional competences for scientists and public servants to engage with evidence-informed policymaking. Finally, the need for greater clarity on how science-for-policy processes and roles should be governed. The latter is particularly important to ensure that Europeans trust our evidence-informed policymaking processes.

In order to tackle these issues, **Stephen Quest** highlights the importance of involving both the research community and public administrations across Europe: "On the one hand, we need to look at policy frameworks with our partners in Member States: how can we ensure that the contributions of science informing public policies and services are recognised. Some discussions at EU level, on research assessment and knowledge valorisation, are already pointing to some changes. Additionally, this can be achieved through calls for evidence by policymaking institutions directed at research communities. But beyond policy frameworks, we look at organisational innovations and designs that are being discussed in different Member States. For instance, scientific institutions could consider setting up support structures for policy engagement and impact – much like the support that is given for technology transfer or for science communication."

Stephen Quest stresses that the European Commission can contribute to evolving policy frameworks, convene and support organisational and professional networks among Member States, facilitating the exchange of best practices and coordination, provide technical support for public administration reforms, encourage the use of financial instruments such as the Recovery and Resilience Fund or the different Cohesion Policy funds to design and deploy science advisory networks across government departments.

Better Regulation

Pascal Leardini explains that "the state of permacrisis which we seem to enter requires an agile and evidence-informed regulatory policy that is future-proof. We must ensure that our policies bring benefits to society and make Europe a better, but also more resilient place. All our legislative proposals should contribute to overarching sustainability goals, make use of the best available evidence, while minimising regulatory burdens for citizens and businesses alike. But let me add that better regulation is also about improving professionalism in every aspect of our policymaking, as well as considering alternative ways to achieve the intended results. Legislation should never be an end in itself. Actions at the EU level should always add value compared with what can be done at national, regional, or local level". He further points out that evidence-informed and transparent policymaking is an integral part of the way the Commission executes its right of initiative. The Commission's better regulation system is one of the most advanced regulatory systems among OECD countries. We have great experience in consultations with citizens and relevant stakeholders to collect evidence to support informed policymaking. Different views, experience and data helps us to improve our understanding of the issues at stake. Documenting all this information in an impact assessment and/ or evaluation report is important to best inform not only decision makers, but also the public and relevant stakeholders, on the problem we aim to tackle and the impact of the identified solutions.

What are the most recent updates in this regard? **Pascal Leardini** highlights the introduction of a single 'Call for Evidence', the improved Have Your Say portal, the mainstreaming of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, or the increased focus on burden reduction for businesses and citizens and the competitiveness check.

Strategic foresight in support of evidence-informed policymaking

Among the updates, there is also the integration of strategic foresight in the Better Regulation toolbox. According to **Pascal Leardini**, it helps the Commission to move from analysis to action. Foresight enables us to explore, anticipate risks and opportunities, but also to shape the future we want. In the recent years, the Commission has put strategic foresight at the heart of better policymaking. This contributes to efforts to reinforce anticipatory governance and adapt EU policies to the future. Each year the Commission produces a Strategic Foresight Report, providing a strategic assessment of long-term trends and related recommendations. The 2023 Strategic Foresight Report expected in early summer, with a focus on social and economic aspects of sustainability, will complement the preceding three editions on resilience, open strategic autonomy, and the twining of the digital and green transitions.

Pascal Leardini stresses that "as foresight is all about collective intelligence, the preparation of the reports is a thorough and inclusive exercise. They are developed hand-in-hand with the JRC, by engaging with a diverse group of experts and stakeholders, publishing a dedicated Call for Evidence to gain the citizens' perspective, discussing with Member States and partner institutions in the European Strategy and Policy Analysis System."

Cooperation in the EU-wide Foresight Network, established in 2020, is another example of said collective intelligence. It gathers high-levels officials from the national administration in all Member States to draw on their foresight expertise, share best practices, and align strategic thinking on long-term issues relevant for our future. There is also a political level composed of "Ministers for the Future" designated by each Member State, and led by Vice-President Šefčovič.

The Commission's foresight activities are also among the global best practice, with more than 30 years of experience. In this context, **Stephen Quest** emphasises how the JRC, with its Competence Centre on Foresight, applies a broad range of methods and tools to support EU policymaking. Those range from classic tools such as scenarios to develop and learn from stories about plausible, different futures, to horizon scanning for identifying early signals of change, and megatrends analysis. The JRC also strives to advance the foresight toolbox by developing and experimenting with integrating new approaches such as policy gaming or speculative design to provide for diverse and immersive experiences and learnings from alternative futures. Its tools are presented and publicly available via its website.
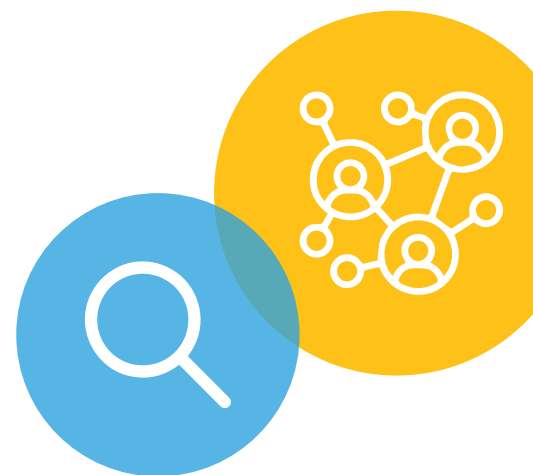
Focus article: Linking evidence to policy

> **Knowledge valorisation** is "the process of creating value from knowledge … It transforms data and research results into sustainable products and solutions that benefit society."

If there were any doubts about the importance of scientific evidence in shaping policy responses to societal challenges, the COVID-19 crisis should have dispelled them. While the priority at the outset was to understand the pathology of this deadly disease and find biological and behavioural solutions to slow or stop its spread and mitigate its effects, the consequences of these decisions soon crossed policy boundaries beyond public health, among them border management, international trade, employment and the economy, social care and welfare, education, law and order, and public finance.

What do we mean by evidence? While the term 'scientific' conjures images of laboratory experiments, the sources and scope are much broader, as described in the JRC's 2020 Science for Policy Handbook.

Evidence-informed policy making (EIPM) draws on objective facts and their interpretation, and excludes unfounded perceptions and opinions (unless they themselves are the policy target). Such evidence can come from inside public administrations (e.g. research units, scientific agencies, statistical offices), within the wider public sector (e.g. national banks, supreme audit institutions, regulatory agencies), or outside government (e.g. universities, private institutes, research-based think tanks). Citizen science projects can also contribute.

> Knowledge based in science is presented as evidence to support reasons used in a policy argument (…) broadly taken to mean data, information, concepts, research findings, and theories that are generally accepted by the relevant scientific discipline

As the term implies, EIPM means policy making should be guided by evidence, not driven by it. Policy makers will always have to weigh up policy options, make judgements and prioritise. Evidence, and the expertise behind it, can help to identify and qualify choices. But it is neither a panacea nor an alibi.

Clearly, EIPM does not happen by accident. Governments must take conscious steps, so that initial openness to evidence becomes willingness to engage with it, and EIPM ultimately infuses the administrative culture. This shift in mindset involves accepting that evidence can sometimes be indicative, not (yet) conclusive, or even contradictory – as occurred early in the pandemic. There might be relatively few available experts in a particular field, so the evidence net must be cast internationally. Policy makers can also be confronted with a plethora of sources to sift through and synthesise; patterns can be found in even scattered evidence. The temptation to 'cherry-pick' findings to suit predetermined positions should be resisted. The credentials of institutions and experts should be proven, and the credence of evidence tested through peer review, which puts a premium on transparency. Raw data require analysis, interpretation and sometimes combination to enrich debate.

This puts the onus on civil servants to be science and data literate. The ability to frame policy questions, identify knowledge needs and gaps, connect with experts, and gather and assess evidence should be core competencies of public officials engaged in the policy process, backed up by education and training, and recognised in recruitment, selection and career development. Policy-relevant research must be financed, which can be achieved through various mechanisms, such as

centrally-earmarked funding for strategic research, open calls for evidence, multi-annual framework agreements, performance contracts, and procurement of research services, including evaluations.

Encouragingly, governments are showing a growing awareness of the merits of EIPM, as demonstrated by EU-27 research ministers meeting for the first time in December 2022 to discuss science for policy. It is also illustrated by the inclusion of EIPM measures in Recovery and Resilience Plans, most notably by the Czech Republic, where a newly-established central analytical unit will "spread awareness of the importance of evidence-informed principles among all relevant public administration stakeholders, while simultaneously providing advice and methodological guidance on the correct application of qualitative and quantitative analytical methods to the relevant units in public administration".

Such whole-of-government approaches can also help to overcome the fragmentation that often characterises EIPM. In mapping science-for-policy ecosystems across the EU, the JRC conducted a survey of around 500 national experts, of which 7 out of 10 agreed or strongly agreed that "organisations rarely coordinate their activities and are often not aware of each other". This calls for institutionalised functions, forums and platforms at the evidence-policy interface to connect the policy and research communities, both within and with each other, also known as 'boundary organisations'. These can take different forms, both permanent (such as science advisors, government offices, advisory councils, inter-ministerial committees and other standing bodies, academies, learned societies) and temporary (such as task forces, working groups, consortiums, etc.). As EIPM is inevitably demand-led, the common factor is formal recognition from the policymakers' perspective. To be trusted, there should also be transparency in their terms of reference, membership and operation.

As "Supporting and connecting policymaking in the Member States with scientific research" points out, modern policy is made in a challenging global context for knowledge and expertise, due to polarisation, disinformation, misinformation and authoritarianism. Trust in government or science cannot be taken for granted and is interconnected.

In the past months, DG REFORM's initiative on European Public Administration Country Knowledge (EUPACK) has explored ways in which capacity and mechanisms for EIPM can be measured and compared across EU countries.

Moreover it is also the focus of a large multi-country two-year project of the Technical Support Instrument on building capacity in governance and public administration in a post-pandemic Europe. The project aims to contribute to a reinforced institutional integration of the use of evidence, science, and evaluation in policy making processes and provides technical support to seven EU Member States: Belgium, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania and the Netherlands. The expected outcomes are to improve the capacity for EIPM in the participating Member States, as well as to increase awareness, recognition and understanding at the political level and in the scientific communities of the actions and investments that are required to fully use science and evidence to contribute to well-informed policy making.

Updates from the Member States

Finland: Report on 'Foresight and future developments in law-making processes, institutions and practices'

The Report on 'Foresight and future generations in law-making processes, institutions and practices' highlights the important role that foresight should play in the legislative process in Finland. The aim of the publication drafted by the FORGE project was to increase understanding of how foresight could be better used for the identification of regulatory needs and for guiding the drafting of legislation. the report found that foresight has not yet been systematically used in legislative processes. According to researchers, Finland has all the prerequisites to be an international pioneer in the use of foresight. As part of the implementation of the Government's plan for analysis, assessment and research, this report served as a background study for the Government's Report on the Future, submitted to Parliament in November 2022.

Source

## Estonia: Increasing the innovation capacity of the public sector

The Estonian Government will soon open a funding measure to increase the innovation capacity of the public sector. The focus will be on the collaboration with researchers and entrepreneurs, in order to facilitate the application of new research results and smart solutions. The Estonian Government Office already organised three 'idea accelerators' in October 2022 – the topics ranged from health promotion to mobility, and spatial planning. These public sector innovation projects are framed in the 'Estonia 2035' strategy, where new knowledge and technologies are meant to find solutions to alleviate the development needs specified in the strategy.

Source

Estonia: New Open Government Partnership Action Plan 2022-2024

The newly approved "Estonian Open Government Partnership Action Plan 2022-2024" includes activities that will help increase co-creation and evidence-based policymaking. The Open Government Partnership (AVP) is an international initiative created under the leadership of President Barack Obama in 2011, which aims to increase openness, transparency and dialogue with the people in the exercise of public power. Estonia has been elected by the members of the initiative as co-chair of the AVP as of October 2022. The activities of the Action Plan expand the thematic focus areas of open government, now including public sector innovation and supporting a culture of experimentation or developing data-driven decision-making. The aim of the Open Government Partnership (AVP) is to increase openness, transparency and dialogue with the policymakers.

Source
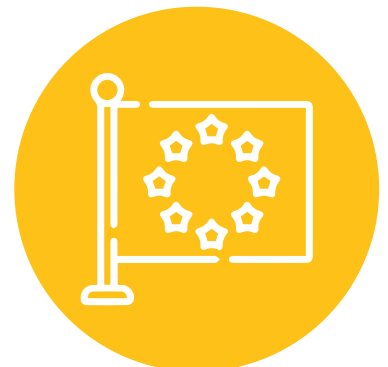
Project in the spotlight: Strengthening policy development and foresight in the Irish Public Service, Ireland

The policy development and Civil Service Renewal 2030

Ireland has several examples of good practices across many areas related to policy-development, outlined in a suite of documents – framework, handbook, and system-wide supports – prepared by the Civil Service Management Board in 2019. However, the real challenge remained embedding a fully coherent approach to strengthening policy-development in a consistent and connected way across the system.

The strategy Civil Service Renewal 2030, aiming to achieve an innovative, professional and agile Civil Service, is centred on three core themes: Evidence-Informed Policy and Services; Digital First and Embedding Innovation; and Workforce, Workplace and Organisation of the Future. The strategy is informed by an extensive evidence base, developed by a whole-of-government process, including findings of the Civil Service Employee Engagement Surveys and Civil Service Customer and Business Satisfaction Surveys; learnings from the response to the COVID-19 pandemic; implementation of the 2014 Civil Service Renewal Plan; the lessons learned from the organisational capability review programme; consultation with Management Boards and the overall strategic context in which the Civil Service operates.

Strategic foresight and better policy making

The framework for the next phase of Public Service Reform, Public Service Transformation 2030, is currently under development. It will closely align with the priorities set out in Civil Service Renewal 2030 and will guide the Public Service in the provision of high-quality public services on behalf of the Government, addressing the needs of the people of Ireland. Strategic foresight has been identified as an area that could be further developed within the Civil and Public Service as part of the ongoing work to strengthen policy development. Perceiving emerging future changes and using them to generate insights to policy development, along with engagement with stakeholders in the policy development process and engaging with customers and service users, will support better evidence-informed outcomes.

The project 'Strengthening policy development and foresight in the Irish Public Service'

The ongoing project 'Strengthening policy development and foresight in the Irish Public Service', supported by the Technical Support Instrument, aims to provide a consistent basis for policy making. The project is based on three mutually-reinforcing pillars: evidence, feasibility and legitimacy, which are promoted as the essential and necessary basis for policy-development work within the civil service across all departments.

The main objective of the project, building on the work already underway within the Irish Civil Service, is to ensure that these three pillars are extended and connected, in order to improve the overall quality of policy-development and of advice given to ministers, secure greater public engagement in and satisfaction with government services and deliver better outcomes for the citizens.

Lessons learnt and next steps

The recent report ['Towards a strategic foresight system in Ireland'](#) prepared by OECD assesses existing strengths and areas of improvement and sets out a general plan for improvement, oriented around building what is termed a policy capability infrastructure which entails action on multiple fronts to achieve a systemic approach. Moreover, other fundamental aspects of policy-development, such as political and public engagement and real-time data collation/analysis, need to be upgraded to take into account the changed operating environment of the civil service.

Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance

Third High-level meeting of the Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance

The third high-level meeting of the Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance took place in February 2023 in a hybrid format (both in Brussels and online). It brought together high-level experts from the Member States (MS), the Commission services (SG, JRC, DG RTD, DG NEAR, DG DIGIT, HR) and observers organisations, such as the OECD, Expertise France, the European Public Law Organization (EPLO).

The meeting marked one year of successful collaboration of the Expert Group since its establishment. The main aim was to define the objectives and work topics for the Expert Group in 2023. The review of the Commission and Member States' thematic priorities supported the discussions. The Expert Group identified 11 topics of importance: crisis management, multi-level governance, resilient public administrations – green and digital transitions, the future of work, human resource management processes, coordination, and trust and democracy, digitalisation (artificial intelligence, big data), evidence-informed policymaking, skills (upskilling, reskilling, green skills, digital skills), attractiveness of public administration. The last three: skills, attractiveness and evidence-informed policy making were selected as priorities for the 2023 work programme of the Expert Group.

The Expert Group will explore the common and specific needs of Member States on the three main priorities, discuss existing frameworks and practices, as well as the potential of developing new practical tools, indicators and non-binding guidelines that can help Member States improve their management and performance in the priority areas.

The next Expert Group meeting is planned for June 2023.

Spotlight on publications/events

Past

8-9 FEB

Meeting of the European Commission Expert group for public administration and governance
Organiser: European Commission
Date: 8-9 February 2023
Where: Brussels (BE)
[Expert Group on Public Administration and Governance (europa.eu)](#)

27-27 MAR

EUPAN Working Level Meeting
Organizer: SE Presidency
Date: 27-28 March 2023
Where: Stockholm (SE)

29-30 MAR

2023 US Summit on Democracy
Organizer: US State department
Date: 29-30 March 2023
Where: Washington DC (US)
[Summit for Democracy 2023 – United States Department of State](#)

18-19 APR

Public Governance Committee
Organiser: OECD
Date: 18-19 April 2023
Where: Paris (FR)

20 APR

Workshop: Preparing the State of The Digital Decade Report 2023
[Link](#)

12 MAY

Technical Support Instrument 2023 Press Conference
[Link](#)

Upcoming events

25 MAY

Supporting Skills Development through Reforms
[Link](#)

MAY 2023

European Semester: Spring Package Communication
[Link](#)

JUN 2023

Strategic foresight report
[Link](#)

Spotlight on publications/events

Spotlight on publications

Digital Transformation and Simplification of Administrative Processes in Greece – publications as outcomes of the DG REFORM funded SRSP project

Digital Transformation Projects in Greece's Public Sector: Governance, Procurement and Implementation

The review explores how Greece can ensure that digital transformation reforms and investments further improve the efficiency of current processes – such as in public procurement –, result in policy coherence, achieve value for money and deliver intended outcomes. It also highlights the crucial role of whole-of-government co-ordination.

Digital Transformation Projects in Greece's Public Sector: Governance, Procurement and Implementation | en | OECD

Effective Government Information Websites:

The report looks at how developing a fit-for-purpose search function, using predictive text, machine learning techniques and other functionalities, can contribute to effective information websites for the better service of citizens and businesses. It presents recommendations as well as guidelines for ensuring high-quality standards across government information websites, including upgrading them into transactional portals, where citizens may easily access public services and communicate with government agencies about their needs.

Effective Government Information Websites : Toolkit for Implementation | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

EU competitiveness beyond 2030: looking ahead at the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Single Market

A press release on the two communications adopted by the European Commission 'On the Single Market at 30" and on "Long-term view of Competitiveness".

EU competitiveness beyond 2030

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