Generalitat de Catalunya
Escola d'Administració Pública de Catalunya

INTERVIEW

"Academia is key but not enough. Nobody can have a monopoly of the evaluation of public policies"

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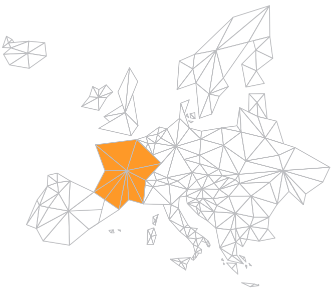

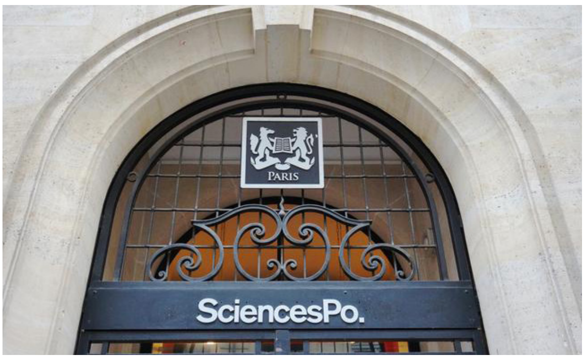

LIEPP is an interdisciplinary research center for public policy evaluation; why do you think that an interdisciplinary approach is so important for policy evaluation?

LIEPP is an academic initiative with recurrent public funding (the French Labex programme) which gives us the luxury to choose our own projects, hire assistant professors, and finally to finance our own research programmes. The *I* (standing for interdisciplinarity) in LIEPP is important for many reasons. Let me start with the one reason we thought was not a good one. We did not think that there should be a quest for interdisciplinarity just for itself. Researchers need to practice their own field and get evaluated by their peers, as economists, sociologists or political scientists. I would be concerned by transdisciplinarity if borders between disciplines are abolished: it's already hard to evaluate the academic quality of good work in one field, so it would be even more difficult to evaluate it in two or three different fields.

Instead, the good reason for interdisciplinarity is that, when cross-examining policy programmes or reforms, one single look would generally not be enough. It is often the case that economists carefully run regressions in randomised experiments or quasi-experiments and establish a robust result, but cannot always explain all their coefficients and all the mechanisms, or have difficulties in establishing the external validity of their results. On the other hand, it is also often the case that very careful description of the mechanisms, of the context, of the appropriation of a policy by actors coming out of careful sociological work, is not sufficient for policymakers: they need a quantitative answer. We therefore thought that having two or three different approaches to a single policy question would be needed: each approach would complement the others. When the conclusions of each approach are similar, we have more confidence in the result. This is what came out, for example, of the **evaluation by LIEPP of the CICE**: researchers from different fields concluded the programme had a very limited impact during its first few years. When the conclusions differ strongly or simply

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diverge slightly, we can be more cautious in our policy prescription: this is a school of modesty.

How does LIEPP ensure an interdisciplinary approach through the evaluation process? Do you experience any difficulties?

This is not easy because of the contradiction in terms: we want people to publish in their own field to achieve excellence, and also to talk or collaborate with others to cross over expertise and methodologies. However, this is a problem that can be overcome: social scientists are passionate about their topics and like to learn from each other. Nevertheless, it calls for strong incentives: LIEPP, for instance, incentivized by providing more money to interdisciplinary teams. It also requires the creation of a common language. Let me give you an example: sociologists, and to an even greater extent political scientists, think for instance that the concept of "optimal policy", so familiar to economists, is at best naïve and in the worst case a dangerous concept, because it seems to forget that a policy is often (if not always) a way to arbitrate between diverging interests. Once we grasped this reciprocal misunderstanding, we could go further. In my view there is no contradiction between us: an optimal policy is a normative concept which is not a good description of what is actually implemented. Instead, we invented the concept of the policy circle: some social scientists have a view of what would be preferable for society, let's call it a policy ideal X0, and they may actually put a policy proposal X1 up for public debate that already drifts away from that ideal, because they know that X0 would not be feasible. This idea passes on to a platform in a party and becomes X2; what is eventually voted for is X3, after many compromises; X4 is implemented by the administration because it controls the application and the decrees; the social scientists evaluate X4, find it does not work well, or could be improved if it had been closer to X0/X1, or more rarely find that X4 works well and change their own view of X0. In each stage the policy evaluation triangle, the *ex ante* methods, the monitoring and the *ex post* methods, all play an important role. We discussed these **ideas** with Cornelia Woll in 2011 to develop LIEPP.

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Your Center is at the Sorbonne; what should academia's role be in order to foster evaluation and its utilization?

We are part of Sciences Po, itself part of a larger group of universities called Université Paris-Sorbonne-Cité. This is different from Paris-Sorbonne. The French like to make things complicated and then complain that nobody understands. More seriously, academia is key but not enough. It's key because we have time to evaluate projects and the independence to make points that may be critical of the action of the current or previous governments. However, we cannot always answer the questions asked: either the data are not available or they do not even exist, or there is no good econometric identification of the impact of the policy. In contrast, the

administration often has access to the data and knows more about them. However, the administration is sometimes under pressure not to publish results that would be too sensitive in the political context as the administration is supposed to be neutral. But this is not black and white: academics may be politicized. This is why nobody can have a monopoly of the evaluation of public policies. Different viewpoints are useful and should be compared.

I would also add that having public funding is key: as I said before, this allows us to choose the agenda. We cannot rely exclusively on external funds to pay for our staff and researchers. If as a director I needed to accept contracts with conceptual difficulties (lack of data, lack of identification, lack of freedom to publish

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and so on) to make sure that the center survives, I would be in a weak position. And we cannot allow this to happen: the stakes are too high. So, a budget of say 75% public funding and 25% from contracts seemed to us the best compromise. We were also lucky to obtain several external contracts on our own terms, and with great partners such as *Societé du Grand Paris* (SGP). SGP gathered a world-class scientific committee and gave us three years to evaluate the impact of the Grand Paris Express (an additional 200 km of metro lines). We developed new theoretical tools and new datasets for them, and delivered interesting new results that we expect to publish in academic journals. Our results have already contributed to policy debates and media coverage while also being presented in many academic departments, from London to Barcelona and from Berkeley to Vancouver.

What are the main barriers for effective use of evaluation?

I'm tempted to say that we cannot claim to have the truth. We're a bit more than suppliers or sub-contractors of policymakers, but we are not the ones who decide. In a democracy, the final word goes back to Parliament and the government. So as academics, we only need to gain in credibility, defend our independence, play fair, not reach firmer conclusions than what the data really tell us, and perhaps limit our media exposure to what is necessary to improve the public good. We are not politicians, or if we become politicians, that should be clear for people listening to us in the best interest of science's credibility and independence. Membership of political parties or philosophical clubs should be made public along with our financial interests. I have the feeling that we as economists have got better in the second aspect but not really in the first one.

What are your recommendations in order to enhance the role of evidence in policymaking?

As a quantitative economist, I strongly believe that evidence-based policy is key. However, over the years I have also come to think that this is not enough; the dialogue we fostered with sociologists, especially non-quantitative sociologists, and political scientists showed that we can be less naïve when faced with other researchers. Again, this lends greater credibility to our recommendations, which can only be good for evidence-based policy. A last dimension is that somebody should take a serious look at what experts have said over the decades, and an independent ranking of the credibility of experts may be a great complement to their academic curriculum. Both are key ingredients of good policy evaluation, and sometimes judgment and common sense are needed, something which cannot be evaluated by academic journals. ▮

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