

INTRODUCTORY: KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE AND POLICY MAKING IN SLOVAKIA

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In recent decades, scientific and political rationality has increasingly been used in policy making, particularly in OECD countries (for example, the method of impact assessment, which has become a part of the legislative process in Slovakia as well). Increasingly, politicians and other public policy-making actors are asking for “scientific expertise”, “usable knowledge”, information and guidance to deal with complex and often controversial issues. Successful promotion of “public policy analysis” hence makes the process of public policy-making more professional. Thanks to economists, psychologists, sociologists and public policy makers, knowledge has become a tool which has strengthened not only the way of public policy and decision making in it and also enhanced the transparency and accountability of the process. However, this raises the question of whether the outcomes analyses, expertise and knowledge in public policy are sufficiently utilized in practice.

Rich (1991) argues that policy makers have little interest in information. At the same time, politicians and other knowledge holders (officials and interest groups) often do not have the capacity to process this information. This phenomenon is known as the concept of “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1957). According to this concept, the primary function of knowledge is to confirm and strengthen existing insights and solutions. Simon (1957) criticized the model of Economic Man, who acts rationally. He perceives the world in all its complexity—he associates situations with others, sees connection in them and uses his knowledge to the maximum.

The research team at the Institute of Public Policy and Economics at Comenius University have been working on a project entitled “Knowledge utilization in the production of policy documents in the policy process” and supported by the APPV agency grant scheme of the Ministry of Education of Slovakia (APVV-0880-12), which focuses on the many aspects of knowledge and knowledge collection and thereby analyzes new data on the quality of information and knowledge available to decision-makers. “Knowledge” can have several functions. One is that it can support the policies a politician or civil servant seeks

to place on the agenda regardless of any new information, i.e. the use of “knowledge” in a symbolic manner. Another function would be the use of documents for real policy change. The way in which documents are used may then tell us whether a “policy learning” process has occurred or not. If it turns out that “knowledge” has been used for policy learning, then we will continue to examine whether, and under what circumstances, the “knowledge” was used to change the way government organizations function (Etheredge, 1981), under what circumstances it was used to change the tools that support implementation policies (Sabatier 1988) and whether and under what circumstances, “knowledge” contributed to changing core values and beliefs.

This introduction—and the articles in this special issue of *Human Affairs*—engages with the emerging research devoted to the study of knowledge utilization. The article is the first to map many aspects of knowledge utilization in Slovak context and suggests a possible methodological approach. What knowledge type can be observed? Are these in line with evidence-based policy making? In short, do the institutions of public administration in Slovakia institutionalize processes to gather information, data and evidence for policy making? How can we capture or measure these processes or outputs?

The answers to these questions matter for a number of reasons. First, at the *theoretical* level, this special issue engages with the extensive literature on knowledge utilization and possible ways of looking at it. It seeks to introduce the debate on the possibilities of, and limitations to, approaches to understanding how government functions in Slovakia in terms of the knowledge it generates. Analytical frameworks (e.g. for RIA document analysis) and typologies (of central coordinating structures in human resources) are, of course, constructed on the basis of existing literature and ways of conducting empirical research are suggested.

Second, at an *empirical* level, this issue provides fresh insights into ongoing research in the area. Thus, although the research findings are not presented, we learn how to approach these complex questions. The papers also offer insights into suggested typologies, analytical frameworks and methodological approaches. Thus, the question of knowledge utilization and how to measure it raises at least one major conceptual and theoretical question. Do the typologies and analytical frameworks employed in this research “fit” the institutional configurations? Which of the theoretical approaches that seek to link rules and behavior work in a Central and Eastern European (CEE) context? And how good is the theory at accounting for the effects in CEE (Slovakia)?

Finally, the work that will be undertaken on this research project over the next four years and whose goals are presented here is also of *practical* relevance for it helps to inform the debate about ‘evidence-based policy making’ in CEE, and Slovakia in particular. This is particularly important since there is a perception that state reforms have proved unsustainable in the years following accession and so the quality of governance has declined. In a similar vein, Verheijen (2006) has suggested that in much of the region, civil service and public administration development has stalled and ‘structural flaws’, such as civil service politicization, have reappeared. This is in direct contradiction to rational uses of evidence.

The remainder of this special issue develops the themes and arguments highlighted above. The first paper, by *Marcela Veselková*, surveys the academic literature on the use of scientific evidence in public policy making, focusing particularly on “wicked problems” (Rittel & Webber, 1973). In her contribution, she suggests using Narrative Policy Framework

(NPF) methodological tools as introduced by Jones & McBeth (2010). The advantages of the NPF are then illustrated by means of the issue of mandatory vaccination.

The second paper, by *Katarína Staroňová*, discusses Regulatory Impact Assessment (RIA) as an instrument for gathering knowledge and data for decision making and policy making. The paper proposes an analytical framework for RIA document analysis and argues that an institutional approach to understanding RIA performance does make sense in CEE, where RIA performance indicators are placed in an institutional context. But these approaches can only have explanatory power if they take account of the insights of organizational and institutional theory.

The article by *Ludmila Staňová* tackles the methodology for a more in-depth study of knowledge utilization by central coordination bodies. She proposes a new typology of “Central structures for coordination, management and control of the civil service” (CCSMS)—a term used by SIGMA/OECD think tank to cover the wide spectrum of different organization structures that carry out tasks in civil service management. The contribution of this typology is that it enables us to perform a comparative study CCSMS in relation to strategic knowledge utilization, which would not otherwise be possible since national civil systems vary in the number of organizations operating in the system and in the scope of functions they perform. There is therefore a need for a tool that captures the relative strength of CCSMS (i.e. in relation to other organizations operating within the system).

The next article, by *Matúš Čupka & Katarína Števové*, explores the potential of civic participation and the “lay” or “ordinary” knowledge they can make available to decision-makers. In particular, they provide an inventory of the tools for utilizing lay knowledge, and provide first hand experience of the use of such tools. The final contribution by *Radomír Masaryk* focuses on using qualitative methods to research social influences in decision making. This is an interesting area and has the potential to produce results that could not be achieved using approaches that tend to disregard the overall context. This is an extremely important aspect in studying knowledge utilization in the policy making process. As suggested in the paper and illustrated by numerous examples, the unique strengths of qualitative research may provide very valuable insights into knowledge utilization and decision-making research.¹

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¹ Acknowledgements. This Special Volume acknowledges the research project supported by the Ministry of Education under APVV grant scheme, no. APVV-0880-12 “Knowledge utilization in production of policy documents in the policy process”.

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