USA: evidence-based policy leading the way

At the urging of the Office of Management and Budget, President Obama's administration is taking an increasingly scientific approach to public policy with a view to directing government expenditure towards programmes with a tried and tested outcome. This evidence-based policy approach is revolutionising the federal government's way of doing things. It is now encouraging states and local governments to fund pilot projects.

"I don't care if the ideas are Democrat or Republican. I do care that they work. I do care that they are subject to evaluation…". In a speech given on January 9, 2014 outlining the anti-poverty Promise Zones Initiative, President Obama focused on the Initiative's convincing results and expected performance. The federal government favours a scientific rather than an ideology-based approach, placing the emphasis on new, evidence-based policy initiatives. The main goal is to "increase government effectiveness through the use of rigorous evidence about what works[1]". This approach also helps to reassure taxpayers about how their tax dollars are being spent.

US evidence-based policy relies mainly on the randomised evaluation[2] method which, since the year 2000, is seen as being the most reliable scientific model for producing rigorous evidence. According to this method, scientists study two groups with similar characteristics. They apply the measures being tested to one group (the test group), but do not apply them to the other (the comparison group). They then assess the effectiveness of the measures by comparing the outcome in both groups.

NGOs as trailblazers

In the early 2000s, the work performed by scientists independently of the public sector encouraged the switch to the use of evidence-based medicine in the formulation of social policy. This new approach to public policy was essentially formulated by three economists from MIT[3]: "Creating a culture in which rigorous randomized evaluations are promoted, encouraged, and financed has the potential to revolutionize social policy during the 21st Century, just as randomized trials revolutionized medicine during the 20th[4]".

The Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy founded in 2001[5] has helped legitimise the evidence-based policy approach in the US. The Coalition uses mainly randomised evaluations to innovate in the social policy sphere, often an area that has proved costly for the federal government and whose programmes often have a higher rate of failure than in other public policy areas. Evaluations on a limited scale are financed by private funds. Once approved, a report is drawn up making recommendations designed to encourage policymakers to roll out innovative, effective measures on a larger scale. In 2014, the Coalition's efforts led to $75 million being invested in the First in the World Initiative which implemented innovative solutions in higher education[6].

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[1]   http://coalition4evidence.org
[2]   See 2014 thesis by Agathe Devaux-Spatarakis: *"La méthode expérimentale par assignation aléatoire : un instrument de recomposition de l'interaction entre sciences sociales et action publique en France ?"*
[3]   Massachusetts Institute of Technology
[4]   Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster and Michael Kremer, Randomized Evaluations of Interventions in Social Service Delivery, MIT.
[5]   The role of the not-for-profit sector in implementing evidence-based policy was reinforced in 2015 through the integration of the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy into the Laura and John Arnold Foundation which then went on to launch the Evidence-Based Policy and Innovation Division
[6]   Another example for the Department of Justice:
       http://coalition4evidence.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/BringingEvidenceDrivenProgresstoCrimeSubstanceAbuse.pdf

"Funding what works"[7] by promoting partnerships and local initiatives

According to Robert Gordon, former Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget, "the President is not particularly ideological; he is interested in evidence and research showing what works and what doesn't". His comments mark the cultural shift that President Obama's administration has introduced. It is so great that US journalists talk of a "quiet, evidence-based revolution"[8] which began in 2009 with the creation of a team of evidence-based policy experts at the White House. During the President's second term in office, the Evidence and Innovation Agenda[9] was created for the benefit of federal agencies.

Against this background, the Department of Housing and Department of Veterans Affairs jointly launched a pilot programme to end veteran homelessness which has been a resounding success. Eighty-four per cent of the 700 veterans targeted by the programme has found permanent lodging, which among other things has led to a very significant drop in the pressure placed on the health service by this particular population.

The federal government has also developed an innovative model in conjunction with the philanthropic sector. The Pay for Success[10] Initiative is an example of this approach, which has the backing of US Congress. Designed to improve public policy results, it funds programmes on the basis of rigorous evaluations carried out by private investors. Added to the budget in 2012, the fund will be allocated $364 million in 2016. $30 million has been earmarked for the US Department of Justice's Second Chance Act aimed at reducing recidivism and improving outcomes for people returning from state and federal prisons, local jails, and juvenile facilities.

The federal government is also planning to use the Incentive Fund to promote local programmes; as of 2016, the Fund will have a budget more or less equivalent to that of the Pay For Success initiative.

A constantly improving approach being rolled out gradually

While public policymakers are convinced of the model's merits, certain experts[11] are questioning the value of some of the evidence, including whether or not it is worthwhile rolling out a programme on the basis of a random trial carried out in a specific environment.

The federal government is therefore taking steps to improve its evidence-based policy, focusing in particular on the reliability of the scientific data provided to policymakers. One of the priorities of the Evidence and Innovation Agenda focuses on government data[12]: the goal is to improve quality and access while guaranteeing its confidentiality.

The legislative branch of government is also turning to evidence-based policy. Congress is currently looking at the Bipartisan Evidence-Based Policy Bill backed by the Democrats and Republicans[13] to establish a commission of experts in data and statistics.

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[7]   "Making a difference by funding what works", Aviva Aron-Dine, White House blog, 17 April 2015
[8]   "Inside the international effort to fund government programs that actually work", Julia Belluz & Steven Hoffman, Vox media, 28 January 2015
[9]   http://www.socialinnovationcenter.org/?p=332
[10] https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2016/assets/fact_sheets/improving-outcomes-through-pay-for-success.pdf
[11] https://www.melbourneinstitute.com/downloads/policy_briefs_series/pb2013n04.pdf
[12] https://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/omb/budget/fy2016/assets/ap_7_evidence.pdf
[13] http://www.govexec.com/management/2015/07/bipartisan-evidence-based-policy-bill-passes-house/118661/