Engagement, Interaction and Influence

SUSTAINABLE PRACTICES RESEARCH GROUP

Social scientists have been studying – and in some cases, trying to influence – environmental issues and sustainability for over 30 years. Whether, how and with what effect their research has shaped policy, however, is unclear. By analysing five cases where social scientists have interacted with policy makers, this project sought to answer two questions. How do social science and public policy interact? How can social science-public policy interactions be enhanced?

In the UK, the implications of these questions extend well beyond environmental policy to many – perhaps all – areas of public policy. This is important because 'impact' on public policy is the most widely used example (and in some cases test) of the value of social science. However, more often than not related discussions are underpinned by little understanding of policy impact – what it is and how it happens.

Insights

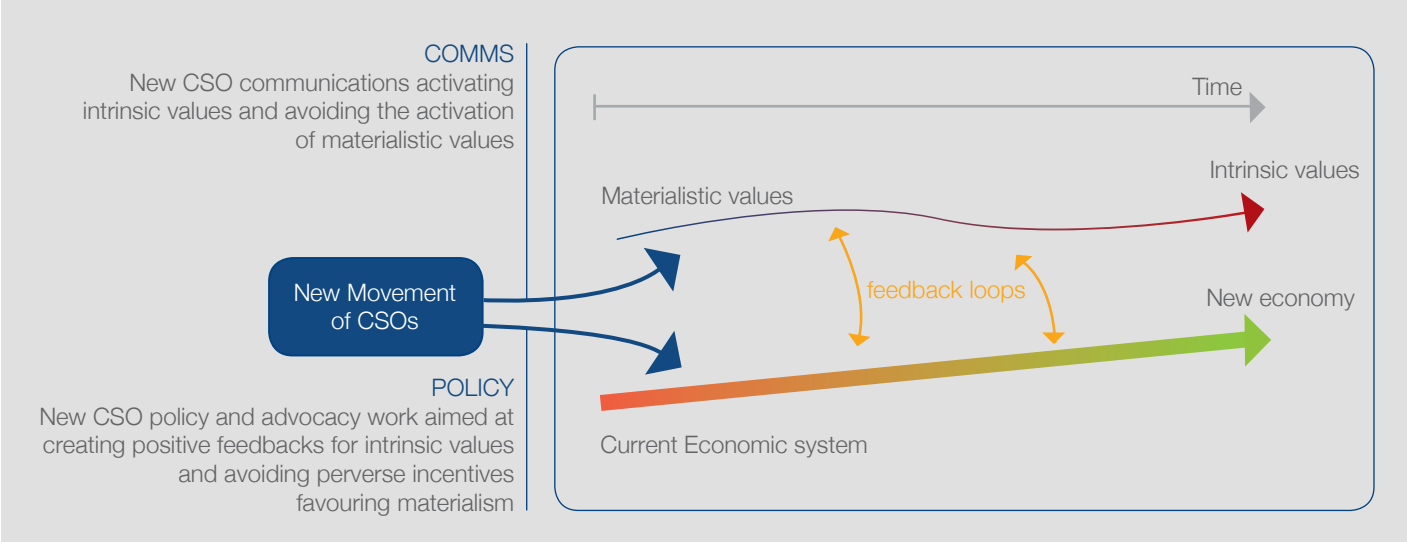
- Effective interaction between social scientists, other academic disciplines and policy actors – whose backgrounds, knowledges and perspectives can be very different – require the development of a 'trading zone'.
- Trading zones are 'spaces' – physical or symbolic – where actors from different social worlds collaborate, develop shared ways of thinking, define problems and respond to them.
- Examples of such trading zones include 'transition management' in the Netherlands (informed by innovation studies) and 'nudge' in the UK (informed by behavioural economics).
- Interactions between social scientists and policy actors take place through a range of mechanisms, including face-to-face meetings and written briefs, but to be effective require the development of a shared – trading – language.
- Early signs of such a trading language emerging can be found in the domain of research policy where 'responsible innovation' is beginning to provide a lexicon which is shared by scientists, social scientists and policy makers.
- Diagrams which pictorialise social scientific frameworks and theories can be very important. This is illustrated by the way some civil society organisations in the UK have used sociotechnical transitions research.
- Social science can also be reshaped by interactions with environmental policy, particularly when the latter is changed by wider political and economic developments.

Significance

- This research illuminates the difficulties and opportunities which accompany interactions between social science and public policy. Effective trading zones can only emerge if sufficient time and resources are available to allow and encourage interaction. This is necessary but not sufficient. Other conditions include a willingness to collaborate – across problem framings, institutional cultures and so on – to find common ground. In such situations social scientists, policy makers and other actors can co-construct policies together. This understanding of how social science and public policy interact differs from the more widespread – linear and one-directional – model of knowledge exchange.
- While shared ways of speaking, thinking and doing can emerge in trading zones it should be noted that complete agreement and perfect coordination between social science and other policy actors is not necessary. With regards to enhancing interactions, translation of research does not have to be an objective of engagement, and may even be a constraint. Partial and incomplete coordination may be enough. Appropriation and transformation of ideas is to be expected and the negotiated language of the trading zone is no less legitimate.

Messages for Policy and Practice

- No actor can import the full complexity of his or her language into a trading situation. However, we do not necessarily have to see this in terms of ideas being corrupted or misunderstood.
- Trading zones should be co-produced. However, this is not to say that they are egalitarian spaces, devoid of power – not all actors are necessarily equal.
- In any given interaction (or set of interactions) participants should openly reflect on the external forces shaping their understanding of the problem, expectations of other participants and anticipated outcomes. This in turn should be used to aid the reflexive design of further interactions.
- Trading zones are not sustained over time in the absence of face-to-face interactions, and both policy and research organisations should therefore seek to maintain 'spaces' for critical interactions.



Diagrams which pictorialise social scientific frameworks can be very important. This diagram from civil society organisation SmartCSOs[1] adapts a social psychology model. It does not pictorialise SPRG research.

1 Narberhouse,M., et al. (2011) 'Effective change strategies for the Great Transition: Five leverage points for civil society organisations' www.smart-csos.org

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