

## **IGPS lecture: 'Evidence for agile policy-makers'**

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New government policies must be thought of as “invading a pre-existing policy ecosystem” and their value assessed in light of how they modify those other programmes.

That was the message from Professor Graham Room, of the University of Bath, as he gave a lecture to the Institute for Governance and Policy Studies.

The idea that policies could be evaluated in isolation, like new drugs in clinical trials, was “appealingly simple and straightforward”. This was the orthodox “paradigm” of evaluation. However, social policies generally “engage a whole range of constituents and groups”: this means that they are delivered differently in each context, making such simple judgements difficult. This required a very different paradigm of evaluation, especially if the subjects of intervention were particularly “active or agile” and were involved in shaping public services.

More than this, however, any policy evaluation had to acknowledge that new programmes could both modify and be modified by existing programmes. They “evolved” together – just as, say, flowers and insects co-evolved in Darwin’s account of evolution. This implied a third paradigm, based on the idea of the policy “eco-system”. “Policy interventions cannot, in general, be looked at in isolation from each other ... We have to think of a policy eco-system, and any new policy you introduce must be thought of as an invader within a policy eco-system.”

In at least some cases therefore, evaluation needed to focus on how policies reinforced or negated each other, Room said. For instance, a programme to get sole parents back into the workforce might be dependent on another programme to build up the community organisations that would help with informal childcare arrangements.

Ultimately, policy-makers and evaluators needed to choose from among the three paradigms outlined above. If programmes were likely to affect each other strongly, the “eco-system” approach was needed. If they weren’t likely to affect other programmes, but would be shaped by their recipients and other factors, the second should be used. Only if the proposed policy was likely to be working independently and in isolation and could be delivered uniformly should the first paradigm be used.

The “eco-system” paradigm, Room added, required “real-time watching and learning by doing”, so that policy-makers could assess the programme as it evolved. They needed to look at how they could “tune” the policy in real-time, probing its success and sometimes modifying its operations.

Policy-makers also needed to look for “trigger points” where people shifted from what they saw as “ordinary” situations, requiring habitual responses, to “anomalous or extraordinary” situations where they had to devise a particular coping strategy.

Policies could not be evaluated simply on the basis of evidence of “what works”, Room added, because there was always the question “works for whom?” Some policies would “work” for certain groups and not others – and that was an inherently political decision.

“There’s a big danger when we talk about evidence for policy that we think about policy in a technocratic sense. We depoliticise policy-making, and that’s very dangerous.”

**Max Rashbrooke**