

The best policy-making often comes out of crises, when different disciplines must work together to find solutions.

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The last decade has seen the rise of evidence-based policy making across government, and while such a model can be effective, it leads to some disciplines being consulted more closely than others. Using the response to various animal disease outbreaks over the past 20 years as examples, [Katy Wilkinson](#) argues that times of crisis can often be good for policy making, as experts from many disciplines are consulted on the basis of need, rather than through their traditional roles in the policy-making process.



Can a crisis ever be good for government? In one corner of the civil service at least, the answer is yes. An emergency can bring about new ways of solving problems and new means of bringing critical outsiders into government, which ultimately reshape the future of policy formation in that field. In the wake of such events we might see completely new policy communities emerge as new stakeholders are recognised and new types of evidence considered. But how can civil servants avoid slipping back into the old habits of endless rounds of consultations when the panic recedes? And how can those interested in providing expertise to government capitalise on these turbulent times?

My research in the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) shows that different models of evidence-based policy-making are used according to different circumstances. Part of Defra's remit is to deal with outbreaks of animal diseases, preventing them from occurring in the first instance and taking charge of their eradication if and when they emerge. Perhaps the most familiar of these outbreaks are the BSE (mad cow disease) crisis of the 1980s and 1990s, the foot and mouth disease outbreak of 2001, and the various bird flu scares of the mid 2000s.

In 'peace time' – the name given to periods when the country is disease free – Defra relies upon the now-familiar model of policy formation that we commonly associate with evidence-based policy-making (EBPM). In practice this means define the question; gather the evidence; apply the evidence to the question; and make a policy decision. To policy analysts this may seem hopelessly naive, even disingenuous; many a controversial political decision has been shrouded in the veil of objectivity that EBPM provides. And government recognises this too. Comparing policy documents from five years ago to those of the present day (for example, "Delivering the Evidence: Defra's Science and Innovation Strategy 2003-2006" and "[Defra's Evidence Investment Strategy: 2010-2013 and Beyond](#)") reveals a widespread recognition of the realities of policy-making, particularly the inherent uncertainty in many policy fields that no amount of evidence can wish away.

More interesting, however, is the model of policy-making that is deployed in 'war time' – disease outbreaks – when hierarchies are swept away and experts are consulted on the basis of their contribution to decision making, rather than their traditional role in the policy process. Flexibility in policy formation means that veterinary advice might be prioritised over that of scientific modellers, or social science advice might be brought in to inform understanding of public responses to disease control measures or levels of farmer compliance. The laborious process of passing through the stages of EBPM is disregarded in favour of pragmatism and expediency.

A crisis, then, can be good for shaking up established advisory hierarchies and injecting dynamism into policy-making. A problem remains, however, in firmly consolidating the role of social science advice in Defra's policy process. A turning point for social scientists came in the aftermath of the 2001 Foot and Mouth epidemic, largely because it was an outbreak that conclusively demonstrated the interconnections between agriculture and society. This was not just a matter of swaying public opinion to favour the culling of millions of animals. Dealing with the disease involved understanding the impacts that control measures would have on the tourism industry, public health, and the cultural value of the landscape and traditional livestock breeds. Defra realised the need for deeper engagement with social science, and many initiatives began to increase the links between government and academics, not least through the [report on social science in Defra](#) led by the Science Advisory Council.

Nevertheless, social scientists are in danger of playing second fiddle to their counterparts in the natural sciences if the conventional model of EBPM continues to dominate. EBPM favours expertise that gives clear cut 'yes or no' answers, and operates on the assumption that if uncertainty remains, it is only a matter of

gathering more evidence. The gains made during war time- bringing a wider range of experts into the process- can be lost in peace time as government, under fear of public scrutiny of their reasoning process, favours evidence that can be marketed as objective and definitive, not qualitative and ambiguous.

Rather than continuing the fruitless struggle to convince policy-makers that either natural or social science expertise should predominate, some academics are embracing interdisciplinary research as a way to embed a broader perspective earlier in the evidence-gathering process. Too often, social scientists will be consulted, but only to find ways of communicating existing scientific advice to the public, or to convince sceptical farmers to co-operate with the latest biosecurity advice. Interdisciplinarity embraces the truth that genuine collaboration begins at the research design stage and does not involve the co-option of one discipline to validate the findings of another.

Perhaps the best example of work in this area can be found in the projects funded under the [Rural Economy and Land Use \(RELU\)](#) programme. RELU only fund projects that are truly interdisciplinary and – equally importantly – will produce the highest calibre research. A recent tranche of animal and plant disease projects have demonstrated what this collaboration can look like. To take one example, the [Governance of Livestock Diseases](#) project included colleagues from political science, economics and the life sciences working together to understand disease spread in its political and regulatory context. Members of the project spent time work shadowing staff in Defra to witness policy-making first hand and Defra staff had the opportunity to be visiting fellows at academic institutions in return. The difficulties of communicating between disciplines, producing meaningful outputs that encapsulate all of the differing perspectives, and designing research that takes a holistic view of the problem are challenges that can be met by the researchers. To a department suffering budgetary pressures, public scrutiny, and the difficulty of ‘joined up working’ across their many policy divisions, this can only be a welcome development.

So, can a crisis ever be good for government? Yes, if it brings about new ways of thinking about policy-making and fresh opportunities for engaging with the work of long-marginalised social scientists. There is much encouragement to be taken from the new links being forged between government and academia, and it is now up to us to embrace our interdisciplinary future.

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This post is a version of a longer article, Wilkinson, K. (2011) [‘Organised Chaos: An interpretive approach to evidence based policy-making in Defra’](#); *Political Studies* 59.4

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