IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER? OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS OF SCIENTIFIC POLICY ANALYSIS FOR AGRICULTURE

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Title: In the eye of the beholder? Opportunities and constraints of scientific policy analysis for agriculture

Abstract: This paper examines the opportunities for and constraints imposed on the conduct of scientific agri-economic policy research from various viewpoints. We conclude that, regardless of the viewpoint taken, the activity is characterised by *both* opportunities and constraints, and confers both opportunities and constraints on the researchers concerned. The nature of the opportunities and constraints, however, varies with the stance of the beholder.

1. Introduction

Agricultural policy research, both to serve the needs of decision-making and policy-monitoring institutions and to improve understanding of the way policies work, has been continuously increasing in recent decades in Europe and is currently in great demand. It is a good moment therefore to perform a 'health check' on this activity, and to investigate the opportunities for and constraints involved in pursuing this type of research.

The notions of 'opportunity' and 'constraint' generally imply some kind of comparison. In other words, they suggest a context in which current conditions are examined relative to particular goals or benchmarks. For example, when these concepts are applied to the situation of a firm, it is usually assumed that the firm's goal is profitability and/or expansion, and thus 'opportunities' are those factors and developments that favour attainment of the firm's goal whereas 'constraints' are those that make the goal more difficult to reach. So the question arises: when considering opportunities and constraints in the context of scientific policy research, what is the standard or goal relative to which they should be defined and measured?

A first approach might be to ask: What are the ideal circumstances for conducting scientific research? What factors are more – or less – conducive to reproducing these ideal conditions? Opportunities and constraints inherent in our everyday lives as policy researchers could then be examined relative to this ideal situation. However, it seems highly doubtful that consensus among researchers could ever be reached about what these ideal circumstances might be, and in any case such an ideal situation is hardly relevant to real-world conditions.

Having rejected this option, we have looked for a more concrete but still relativistic context in which to address this question. This has finally led us to formulate the general proposition:

'Opportunities and constraints' are in the eye of the beholder. *What* they are, and *whether* the opportunities outweigh the constraints, depends on *who* the beholder is and *how* the beholder interprets the context of the question.

This multiple viewpoint allows us to address a large number of the issues associated with scientific policy research in our discipline. Moreover, by breaking down the discussion over a number of possible interpretations and situations we hope to be able to reach some partial, if tentative, conclusions on certain issues. Where this is not possible, it may at least help us to identify areas of strong debate where conflicting priorities and signals make it impossible to offer any kind of general conclusion.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 explains how we define the key terminology used in the discussion, and provides information on the extent of the 'market' for agri-economic

policy research in Europe. Section 3 identifies and discusses opportunities and constraints that emerge as relevant according to five specific viewpoints, each of which implies a different comparison or benchmark. Some factors or characteristics may appear as an opportunity according to one viewpoint and as a constraint according to another. The fact that this can occasionally happen supports the choice of a multiple relativistic approach, which allows the issue to be addressed without oversimplifying its complexity and potential conflicts. Section 4 contains our conclusions and reflections.

2. Concepts and context

2.1 Definition of terminology

Opportunities and constraints
'Opportunities' and 'constraints' usually relate to an action, and distinguish factors that favour or promote the action from those that inhibit, limit or discourage the action. By contrast, 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' describe outcomes that arise from the action, or that are conferred on those who engage in the action.

Although this distinction seems clear in abstract terms, in the current context the boundary between 'opportunities and constraints', on the one hand, and 'advantages and disadvantage', on the other, is sometimes blurred. This is because advantages and disadvantages arising from policy research, or accruing to those who engage in it, can also act as incentives to engage in policy research or promote its attractiveness, thereby in certain context enhancing perception of the opportunities offered by this kind of research. Similarly, disadvantages associated with scientific policy research can be perceived as constraints imposed on those who engage in it, and could qualify as constraints. Because of this, aspects that might also be described as 'advantages' and 'disadvantages' are also represented in our discussion.

Scientific policy research
By 'scientific research', we mean research that is based on theoretical principles, and that – using rigorous formal or empirical methodology - attempts to establish causal links between actions and outcomes, or uses prior knowledge or assumptions about such causal relationships to quantify the strength of these linkages, or projects policy outcomes based on these linkages. This definition would rule out mere descriptions of policy measures and how they have been implemented, or what they cost.

It is a little trickier and more controversial to produce a good working definition of 'policy research'. At the core of this concept is, of course, research that analyses – either *ex ante* or *ex post* – the impact of particular policy measures on their intended target, or attempts to identify/ measure unintended impacts of these measures. A wider definition would include research into the behaviour of agents or institutions that is intended to establish *whether or not* a policy response is needed, on grounds of market failure or politically unacceptable redistributive outcomes. Such research would certainly be included under a definition of 'policy-supporting' research, although it is not research on policies themselves. The trouble with a broader definition that does not exclude any policy supporting research is that all research that helps policy makers to understand better the context in which their policies operate, or that confirms them in a belief that policy is not necessary etc, could then be included under the heading 'policy research'. In other words, it is a definition with very permeable boundaries and that may leave relatively little outside those boundaries.

In launching its 'Scientific support to policies' (SSP) initiative under the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) for Research, the European Commission defined the rationale for such research as: to improve the quality of policy decisions, to speed up the decision-making process and to provide rapid response mechanisms to urgent political needs.[1] Ultimately, it *serves* the decision-making process through targeted research which must respond to the specific needs identified by policy-makers. This characterisation of research aiming at scientific policy support seems close to our core definition.

Given the above considerations, in preparing this paper we have taken a quite narrow view of scientific policy research, as meaning research embodying explicit causal mechanisms into the operation and outcome of specific policy initiatives. This definition leaves some grey areas, and is bound to be controversial. For example, it would exclude comparative research that uses sophisticated empirical methodology to compare conditions across different countries or regions with different policy environments, but where these outcomes are not themselves direct targets of policy and without invoking any explicit theory of a causal linkage. Such research can be valuable in stimulating new formal theories about policy impacts, or further more targeted empirical investigation, but would not be considered 'policy research' according to the above definition.

Having said this, it seems that most of our observations ad conclusions below are largely unchanged regardless of whether a somewhat broader view is taken.

2.2 Scientific agri-economic policy research in European Union

One can distinguish between categories of policy research: first, research that is commissioned, or at least funded, by institutions and organisations operating within the extended policy process, and second, policy research that is undertaken within academia *and* without any financial or contractual obligation to any such body.

Essentially, the first category can be divided into three blocks, according to the contractor: (a) scientific policy research demanded directly by policy-making institutions on a regional (governmental), national (governmental) or supranational (e.g. European Commission) level; (b) scientific policy research of a less targeted or time-limited nature that is supported through policy-oriented research programmes, in particular at supranational level (and here we think particularly of the Framework Programmes for Research of the European Commission)[2]; (c) scientific research carried out by lobby groups and powerful stakeholder interests who are actively involved in the policy process. Research in this first category may be conducted wholly in-house, or be entirely commissioned from external sources, or some combination of these two.

It is impossible to estimate the size of the first and third of these blocks; for the second block, figures are available for the 'Scientific support to policies' (SSP) initiative under the Sixth Framework Programme (FP6) for Research (2002-2006), which give an idea of the colossal

[1] http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp6/ssp/index_en.htm. A fourth reason is given as to promote the participation of researchers in the policy arena. This suggests a market failure rationale, and does not relate to the specific nature of the research.

[2] A borderline category is work commissioned by organisations such as the OECD, which is usually highly targeted and conducted according to tight deadlines, but which does not feed directly into the policy process of a particular government or policy-making body.

scale of research within this block. It is most convenient, even if somewhat controversial, to measure the size of this activity in financial terms.

Under the SSP initiative, a total of 3561 partners were funded through 355 projects with an EC financial contribution of EUR 379.8 million.[3] The agri-economic research in the SSP area was roughly EUR 30 million[4], whilst the two integrated projects SEAMLESS and SENSOR[5] accounted for a further EUR 21 million. Several other projects under different headings (which we estimate at around EUR 9 million) have to be included in this calculation, leading to a 'best guesstimate' of around EUR 10 million per year for agro-economic scientific policy analysis/research within this block from the EC alone.

According to the evaluation of the SSP for Research initiative in FP6, all Member States and Associated States, with the exception of Liechtenstein, participated in the programme. However, some countries are more successful (for example, relative to their population share) than others in participating, coordinating and receiving financial contribution (see Table 1). Unfortunately, it is outside the scope of this paper to explore the reasons for this allocation of research projects over Member States.

Table 1: Participation in the SSP research initiative of FP6, by Member State

	Number of participants		Number of projects coordinated		Total EC financial contribution		Size of population	
	Share, %	Rank	Share, %	Rank	Share, %	Rank	Share, %	Rank
UK	12.6	1	12.7	4	16.2	1	12.3	3
DE	9.9	2	15.8	2	12.8	2	16.5	1
FR	9.3	3	14.4	3	11.1	3	12.8	2
NL	7.9	4	17.5	1	9.9	4	3.2	8
IT	7.8	5	7.6	5	7.3	5	11.9	4
ES	6.2	6	3.4	7	5.1	7	9.1	5
BE	4.9	7	6.8	6	5.5	6	2.1	10

Source: http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp6/pdf/ssp_final_report_statistics_en.pdf ; Eurostat.

The major financial attribution and the high success rate of getting a contract awarded of this programme seem to be a strong incentive to form consortia, thus also improving EU research networking. Out of 1035 proposals submitted, 355 (34%) contracts were awarded, with a rather even distribution across the different calls.[6]

Regarding the second broad category (policy research that is undertaken within academia and beyond any financial or contractual obligation), it is very difficult to estimate its extent whether by financial cost, number of journal articles and reports, or any other indicator. Since PhD students working within academia may in fact be contributing to a project funded under the first category defined above, and given that a considerable share of policy-oriented journal articles are derived directly from research within that category, or are indirect spin-offs from such research, it is difficult to gain even a rough impression of the size of this activity. Indeed, over a quarter of the participants in the SSP came from higher education institutions. Nonetheless, it is clear that research in the second category – which we describe somewhat

[3] http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp6/pdf/ssp_final_report_statistics_en.pdf
[4] For a full list of agriculture-related projects see: http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp6/ssp/themes_en.htm#184
[5] http://www.biomatnet.org/secure/FP6/S1985.htm
[6] http://ec.europa.eu/research/fp6/pdf/ssp_final_report_statistics_en.pdf, p. 6

provocatively – as 'independent' or 'non-aligned' – *does* take place and can be contrasted with research that originates in some way from within the policy process.

3. Opportunities and constraints according to various viewpoints

Viewpoint 1: Opportunities and constraints of *scientific* policy research as compared to more descriptive or normative contributions

Here we examine the opportunities and constraints of policy research that falls under our definition of 'scientific', that is, based on economic theory, rigorous reasoning, with or without relevant empirical support. Such policy research has far greater publication potential in well-ranked journals and will be more trusted by policy makers than contributions that do not follow these principles. Therefore, it contributes to increasing the researcher's visibility in the research community (and – if the research is 'media-worthy – beyond that community), and hence to increasing his career opportunities.

At the same time, however, it is clear that a key aspect of policy-relevant research is that it should be available within the time-horizon of the decision-makers. The requirement of timeliness can act as a severe constraint on the scientific ambition of the researcher, and reduce opportunities for research conducted according to the most rigorous scientific standards. To the extent that this happens, it could mean that more rapid and superficial may be just as influential in the policy arena. Even if such research cannot reach scientifically supported conclusions, in so far as it opens up new questions or suggests various insights and options to policy makers, it may well be influential.

An interesting question is therefore whether the influence of policy research on decision-making is always positively linked to its degree of scientific robustness and maturity. In general, policy makers prefer to support their decision-making with research that is well accepted within the research community. This implies that the research method has been published in scientific journals or presented on scientific conferences. However, policy researchers may fear, with or without cause, that beyond a certain degree of complexity, their work becomes more difficult to communicate and justify to a wider, less scientific audience, and that thereby it *loses* influence. Policy decisions that have to be taken quickly, and in the heat of a fierce political debate, may be more influenced by easily communicable and more plausible interpretations and recommendations, even if their scientific content is rather low. Hard evidence on this issue is lacking, and there is anecdotal evidence supporting both sides of this question.

Viewpoint 2: Opportunities and constraints of scientific policy research in the field of *agriculture*/*agricultural markets* compared with other areas (e.g. transport, education)

If we take the share of FP6 funding allocated to agriculture-related policy studies (13-14%) as a rough guide, it suggests that the relative demand for policy research in this area far exceeds the importance of agriculture's contribution to GDP in the European Union. On the other hand, the opportunities may seem surprisingly small in relation to agriculture's share of the EU budget. Thus, whether there are more or fewer opportunities for policy research in the agri-economic area than in other areas depends, again, on the benchmark taken.

What cannot be disputed is the existence, within the agricultural sector, of extensive data collections and a well-stocked tool kit of indicators for use by agricultural policy researchers.

On the perennial targets of agricultural policy – producer prices, farm incomes, trade flows and so on – a wealth of data exist for quantifying and analysing policy outcomes. By contrast, researchers in areas like educational or health policy are often hampered by the difficulty of defining – even at a conceptual level - robust indicators of policy outputs, and the data for monitoring policy effects, even if with somewhat controversial methodologies, are often not collected in a systematic or continuous way.

On the other hand, the field of agricultural policy research is rendered extremely complicated by the heterogeneity of the sector, which arises because of multiple outputs, very diverse agro-climatic conditions and increasingly targeted policy measures, and a huge variety of constantly changing policy instruments and settings of policy instruments. It can be argued that it is often easier to measure policy impacts *ex post* if the policies themselves have been varying, at least if this variation is independent of – or at least not highly collinear with – other non-policy variables that influence the sector. However, this diversity and constant evolution renders the task of rigorous policy research in the sector very complex. This can act as a severe constraint on efforts to provide well-supported 'global' or 'EU-wide' answers to policy makers' questions.

At the same time, the diversity of the agricultural sector and its linkages with other disciplines has always called for a broad, generalist approach from agri-economists. This characteristic creates a wide range of possibilities for researchers to provide policy-oriented research to neighbouring research areas as diverse as environment, trade and veterinary epidemiology.

Viewpoint 3: Opportunities and constraints of scientific research on agricultural *policy* compared with scientific research into more basic research questions such as producer behaviour, functioning of markets or agriculture-environment interactions

When the question of opportunities and constraints is viewed from this perspective, a large number of issues on both sides of the balance emerge. The opportunities offered by research into policy issues as opposed to more basic research questions related to the agricultural sector are extensive. However, it must be stressed that these opportunities seem to be greatly enhanced when the policy research fall into the first category defined above, namely that of research that is commissioned and funded from within the extended policy process.

Externally funded agricultural policy research represents a major source of research funding for a large number of research organizations and university departments, upon which many of them now depend. This external income source can, where budget flexibility allows, permit the cross-financing of other more basic research and help to safeguard the continuity of research staff. In addition, it may provide the longer-term flow of funding that permits researchers to invest in developing large-scale research tools (such as the CAPRI, ESIM and AGMEMOD models). When policy makers themselves also invest in understanding and interpreting the output of these tools, it leads to their repeated use and ensures a longer productive life-cycle for them than they might otherwise have if not used specifically for policy support.

Furthermore, there can often be a spillover from contracted research, which finances the development of these tools, to uncontracted research applications of the same tools (possibly with a more controversial or more discipline-related scope) that more easily finds its way into refereed journals. Of course, it is also true that policy research based on large

multidisciplinary teams and large-scale research tools is often more difficult to package for peer-reviewed journals.

In addition, however, policy research can pinpoint new areas where basic research is needed. This may stimulate new research programmes designed to explore more basic behavioural and institutional questions and open new research agendas of primarily scientific (academic) interest. An example of this phenomenon is the flurry of academic papers into whether, or under what conditions, direct payments to farmers can be considered decoupled. This question arose in the policy arena but its in-depth, scientific treatment has required a more reflective research effort that is less constrained by the timetable of policy decision making. Since those actively engaged in policy research will be the first to become aware of such gaps in the underlying scientific knowledge, they are better placed to respond to them ahead of their competitors.

Finally, policy research has the attractive characteristic that its social relevance is obvious, and the chance that it will prove useful in a practical context is perceived as higher than for much non policy-related research. Researchers who are motivated by seeing an impact of their work in the real world welcome this opportunity to test the relevance of their output.

Alongside these clear opportunities, policy research – again, more especially, when commissioned by those active in the policy process – confronts constraints that are generally absent in other types of research. First, as already touched on above, deadlines are often tight which may involve the sacrifice of some rigour and there may be little scope or incentive to develop new theory or methodology that would provide a more robust answer to the question asked. This can certainly lead to a feeling of frustration among policy researchers, who fear they are being forced into the role of consultants. It may also impede publication and career advancement, and generally slow down the development of the discipline. This danger can be increased by the fact that some policy questions (whether *ex ante* or *ex post*) are invariably running ahead of available data or appropriate methodology, yet researchers are under pressure, either directly from policy makers or simply from the immediacy of the policy agenda, to provide output at the relevant moment. Research that is not driven by the evolution of a policy agenda can develop at a more leisurely pace, as the necessary tools and data for handling the question asked come on stream.

Second, much policy research – unless it contains an element of innovation or a contribution to the discipline – becomes dated relatively quickly, so that even when it has been published citations may dry up rather quickly.

Given the above constraints faced by policy researchers, the question arises as to whether a research area with an extensive and well-remunerated share of policy researchers may actually suffer, in terms of its creativity, heterogeneity of approaches and research questions addressed, and the general long-term development of the underlying discipline or disciplines that support it. Is there a threshold above which it becomes unhealthy for the profession to commit additional resources into researching policy issues rather than conducting more basic, more enduring questions?

Viewpoint 4: Opportunities and constraints scientific agricultural policy research *now* compared with the past?

Over the last 50 years, there has been a dramatic increase in Europe in the demand for agricultural policy research specifically to serve the needs of decision-making and policy-monitoring in the institutions responsible for it. During that time, the appreciation of how scientific research can contribute to agricultural policy formation has grown from a very low base. This contrasts with the US experience where land grant universities and in particular the Economic Research Service and its predecessor agencies[7] within the US Department of Agriculture have been active in supplying the policy process with the data and analytical research needed to support policy making for over a century.

This is not to say that scientific policy research in agricultural economics was not conducted by previous generations of European agricultural economists. However, until well into the 1980s, it belonged very largely in the second category of research, that is, non-contractual research carried out in academia to answer policy-related research questions selected by researchers themselves. For example, in Britain, agricultural economists were interested in the effects of agricultural policies on the allocation of resources and welfare, and tended to be quite critical of policy initiatives. An excellent example of this research stance is Buckwell et al. (1982)[8], which for the first time provided a rigorous analysis of the deadweight losses and implicit budget transfers triggered by the CAP. In France, the emphasis was more on longer-term structural developments, agriculture's role in a political economy context and distributional issues. According to Petit (1982)[9], '…probably the majority of French agricultural economists today call themselves Marxists…'. Petit contrasted what he considered the predominant French view of the agricultural policy economist's role with that of the 'neo-classical economics' school, namely that '… the State is exogenous to the economic system and the role of the economist is to tell policy-makers how the economic system works, in particular to predict the consequences on the economy of possible policy alternatives' (p.330).

These days, the neo-classical approach as defined by Petit is the dominant approach, certainly for research directly commissioned by policy-makers. Serious policy research carried out for more socially or politically committed bodies like NGOs and other lobby groups also usually performs some kind of 'hard' theory-based analysis first before setting out the more normative or ideologically inspired positions that espoused by the organisation. They know they will not be taken seriously otherwise.

Thus, the increase in demand for scientific policy research has definitely expanded opportunities for policy researchers, but it has gone along with a standardisation of the product. This in turn has brought a risk of narrowing the focus and thrust of policy research and of forming a generation of policy researchers with a somewhat stereotyped view of the challenges of policy analysis. Regrettably, the cost to a researcher of 'thinking outside the box' can be his marginalisation from the policy research community and self-exclusion from lucrative research contracts.

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[7] The ERS was formally created in 1961, but claims its origins in the Office of Farm Management, founded in 1905 to examine economic aspects of farming within USDA's Bureau of Plant Industry.

[8] A.E. Buckwell, D.R. Harvey, K.J. Thompson and K.A. Parton (1982). *The Costs of the Common Agricultural Policy*.

[9] M. Petit (1982). Is there a French school of agricultural economics? *Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 33:325-337.

The increase in demand for agricultural policy research has been accompanied by a marked increase in data collected for, or relevant to, this purpose and in its accessibility to researchers in digitalised form. This represents a huge expansion in opportunities relative to the conditions faced by previous generations. Although it is hard to come up with a balancing constraint, there are nevertheless some caveats to be expressed in this context. The very rich empirical data sources that are now available make it easy for economists to be distracted away from economics (the study of human economic behaviour and decision-making) to become experts in data management, computer programming and so on. Faced with the huge task of dealing with so much data, researchers may too often take new data as given without sufficient critical checks (in terms of the collection method, precise variable definitions and compatibility with other data used). There is also a real risk of neglecting relevant theory. Given the continuous evolution of policy instruments and the expansion of policy impacts that are considered to be politically relevant, it would be a mistake to imagine that all the theoretical work needed to support today's demands for scientific policy research has already been done and is just waiting to be accessed somewhere in the literature. Development of core theoretical tools by policy researchers is also still needed.

Viewpoint 5: Opportunities and constraints of scientific agricultural policy research *as perceived by researchers working closer to the policy process* as compared with those working in a 'non-contractual' environment?

Here, we ask whether there are more, or different, opportunities and constraints relating to scientific policy research conducted within national or supranational administrations, as compared to work done in 'non-aligned' environments, such as non-contractual studies performed in academia. In fact, there is a continuum of positions between these two extremes, that includes studies carried out by academics or research institutes outside policy-making institutions *but* according to very detailed instructions from policy makers, and more open-ended and flexible projects performed by externals within, for example, the Framework programmes.

Some of the main opportunities that accrue when policy research is carried out under contract to the end-user have already been mentioned under Viewpoint 3 (source of funding, investment in large-scale, multi-use research tools, continuity of staffing and so on). In addition, considering the whole spectrum of positions, it is generally the case that the closer the researcher is to the policy process, the more opportunities there are for two-way interaction between policy makers and researchers, and the easier it is for researchers to obtain relevant information. This should – *ceteris paribus* - result in better informed research, higher researcher satisfaction, and a greater likelihood that the research is appreciated and taken into account. Proximity to the policy process means the research is more likely to be guided by clear targets (regarding timing and content), and – in theory - this should lead to improving researcher efficiency and the effectiveness of the product.

However, when the specification of the research is driven by the end user, it can easily be reduced to exploring a narrow range of technical options rather than creating genuinely new knowledge. Given the incremental nature of most policy decisions, more extreme or divergent potential policy options may have already been filtered out by policy makers when preparing the research specification, or perhaps not all stakeholders have to be considered. When research is 'pre-cooked' in this way, it might be frustrating for researchers trained to analyse

known unknowns rather than unknown knowns. Other contractual aspects, relating to ownership rights and timing of the research or stages of the research may also act as significant constraints. In these circumstances, policy researchers under contract may be very dependent on the client organisation, and the risk of decisions that should be taken according to strictly scientific criteria, being dominated by non-scientific considerations may be high. Furthermore, the contractual obligations may prevent the publication of results, or may mean long delays before results can be published.

It follows that, whether or not these constraints are present in particular cases, conducting policy research within or close to the policy process could over time affect researchers' reputation for objectivity and 'cutting edge' research procedures. Perhaps the answer is in the hands of the researcher, and lies in not specialising completely in this type of research. It has to be remembered that it is in the interest of policy-making institutions to use research that is scientifically sound and can be defended in the research community. The diversity in the continuum of policy research and increasing transparency over time suggest that policy-making institutions are striving to this end. At the level of the individual, we note that becoming scientific advisor to a policy-making body is generally seen as an ultimate award for scientific excellence.

The regular participation in contracted policy research implies the regular preparation of research proposals satisfying the various administrative demands of the contracting process intended to guarantee open competition, and writing off the investment cost of unsuccessful research proposals. Similarly, once the contract has been secured, deadweight costs - due directly to heavy administrative demands or indirectly because contracts specify a sequencing or timing of the research that are not the most conducive to an efficient conduct of the research – can be time-consuming and distracting.

In summary, when comparing opportunities and constraints as perceived from different positions along the spectrum between 'in-house' policy research and fully independent initiatives, the relevant questions focus on (i) scientific quality (ii) objectivity and perceived independence (iii) flexibility in the conduct of the research and (iv) the likelihood of the research achieving its target and positively contributing to policy-making. A number of opportunities and constraints influence the answers to these questions at each point along the spectrum, and their relative strengths vary with the distance from the end-user of the research. Whilst it is impossible to generalise, it is important that the various options for the way policy research is organised are more carefully studied so that, for each position on this spectrum, an effort is made to create conditions that maximise the opportunities created for research excellence whilst minimising the constraints currently encountered at that particular distance from the end-user. The goal is not to select one of the positions on the spectrum as being ideal and to promote it at the expense of the others, but rather, whilst keeping this diversity of institutional circumstances in which research is carried out, to ensure that conditions for high-quality research are always maximised *given* those institutional circumstances.

4. Conclusions

Regardless of the viewpoint taken, we find that there are always two sides to the coin: engaging in scientific agri-economic policy research is characterised by *both* opportunities and constraints, and confers both opportunities and constraints on the researchers concerned.

The nature of the opportunities and constraints, however, varies with the stance of the beholder.

In terms of the balance between them, we think most colleagues would agree that the ratio of opportunities to constraints is far greater now than a generation or so ago, and this is confirmed by the far greater numbers of agri-economic researchers now attracted by this kind of work (Viewpoint 4). There would probably also be little dispute that it is more rewarding – both objectively and subjectively – to be working at a high level of scientific ambition, and it is gratifying that policy-makers on the whole show a strong preference for this kind of work (Viewpoint 1). The opportunities and benefits of working specifically on agri-economic policy issues (compared to other policy areas) also seem to be considerable (Viewpoint 2) – it is an exciting and diverse area, with a constantly evolving socially-relevant research agenda. Of course, as agricultural economists, our view on this may not be completely objective!

Regarding Viewpoint 3 (opportunities and constraints of policy research rather than research unrelated to policy), our view is that – for various reasons – individual researchers benefit from having a foot in both camps, and we see few signs that full specialisation in either of these types of activity brings greater benefits to the researcher, or enjoys a higher ratio of opportunities to constraints, than a more mixed portfolio. Policy researchers who from time to time return to some more basic, non policy-related research stay closer to their disciplinary roots, with obvious benefits to their policy work. It is also good for researchers who are more attracted to non-policy related issues to be reminded occasionally that an important goal of applied economics is its social spin-off, which is often realised through its contribution to policy-making.

Viewpoint 5, which concerns the distance from the end-user at which the research is conducted, perennially arouses much debate. Our view is that there are opportunities and constraints associated both with working close to the policy process *and* with working at a greater distance, although here too the precise nature of the opportunities and constraints changes as one moves along the spectrum.

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