

# Introduction

**Nicola Francesco Dotti**

---

## OBJECTIVE

The objective of the book is to provide theories, experiences, reflections and future directions for social scientists who want to engage in policy-oriented research. Students and early career researchers are the primary targets for this book to reflect on how to carry out policy-relevant research and seek to understand the research–policy nexus from the scholars’ viewpoint. The ‘policy learning’ perspective will be discussed focusing on actors promoting ‘policy-relevant knowledge’ and how this knowledge can contribute to policymaking. Specifically, the focus is on how scholars are (or can be) ‘agents of learning’ for cities and regions. In this perspective, the book also aims to provide some insights for policymakers and practitioners interested in research-based approaches to policymaking (see especially Chapter 1 of this book).

Theoretically, this book draws on multi-disciplinary approaches to public policy, such as from policy studies, planning, political science, geography, urban studies, regional economics and public administration. Learning here also involves overcoming inter-disciplinary boundaries and thus achieving a more holistic picture of the nature and functioning of policymaking processes (see mainly Chapters 2 and 3). Keeping on the backcloth a reference to the multi-level nature of policymaking, we primarily focus on the scale of cities and regions focusing on the spatial dimensions of policymaking (see also Chapter 4 on this). While multi-level governance and collaborative policy practices are already extensively discussed in the literature, the book aims to explore the way policy actors can learn to enhance the way they ‘do things’ together, i.e. how cities and regions learn how to make policies through policy-oriented research. In this respect, case studies are presented by scholars directly engaged in the processes they discuss (see mainly Part II of this book). Empirically, the book draws on a range of case studies of policy analysis from across Europe (plus one from Mexico), mainly in the context of city and region. Furthermore, a specific section is devoted to the use of information,

namely big and open data, for policymaking at the level of cities and regions (see Part III). The use of big and open data is an already emerging revolution on the way information contributes to policymaking, yet the way information is turned into policy-relevant knowledge is an open issue that we explore mainly through case studies. Finally, we will propose some reflections on knowledge, policymaking and learning providing a framework to interpret existing practices and define future research fields (see Part IV).

The book will achieve its goal if readers acquire critical notions of policy learning assuming the perspective of city and region. Hopefully, editor and contributors have been able to provide insights on the research–policy nexus critically questioning this relationship that is too often taken for granted. Our goal is to bridge the gap between policy studies, which have already extensively discussed this issue, and those working in policymaking for cities and regions who come from a different disciplinary background. This goal is based on the idea that scholars are already providing policy-relevant knowledge, yet it is not always recognised as such, and many policy-relevant studies are not able to improve policymaking as needed. From the other perspective, scholars already engaged in policy-oriented research will have opportunities to reflect on their own experiences by comparing with other cases and discussing theoretical frameworks. In conclusion, the book aims to stimulate questions rather than providing answers.

## THE KEYWORD IS ‘DIALOGUE’

The book does not have a unique research question with a dummy answer. On the contrary, the book focuses on the ‘how’, ‘why’ and ‘when’ research can contribute to making ‘better’ policy, thus leading to a better world.

The keyword for the whole volume is ‘dialogue’. The etymology of this word (from Greek: διά- λογος, dia-logos) is our starting point. In Greek, *dia-* means ‘through’ or ‘between’, and it usually refers to something ‘in-between’ two different entities. More complex to translate, the word *logos* is probably the most symbolic word of ancient Greek philosophy: *logos* means something like ‘word’, ‘thought’, ‘ratio’, and by extension ‘knowledge’ and ‘rationality’. While a semantic discussion would be outside the scope of this volume, our perspective is on what happens ‘between rationalities’ when they meet with the purpose of exchanging something to address collective issues (see also Dotti 2016). Despite being different ‘logos’, these two rationalities (research and policymaking) meet to understand each other, not just to speak (otherwise, it would be a ‘monologue’,

a mono-logos). The ultimate goal of policy learning refers here to the contribution that scholars can (and do) give to cities and regions to deal with complex collective issues.

In fact:

the boundaries between research and policy are often much more fluid (and largely rhetorical) than the two communities tradition seems to acknowledge. What needs to be analysed is not only how the boundaries can be bridged, but how – and at what moments – these boundaries are maintained, redrawn or re-established – and for what purposes (Wehrens 2014: 547).

In this perspective, the keyword ‘dialogue’ is intertwined with the spatiality of where this happens. For instance, a research–policy dialogue taking place in Castilla-y-León (cf. Chapter 5) is expected to lead to policy learning there, and not elsewhere. The ‘boundary organisations’ working on the research–policy nexus (Hoppe 2005) are, and have to be, embedded in their cities and regions as shown in the cases of Lombardia (Chapter 6), Brussels (Chapter 7) and Scotland (Chapter 8). Policy learning can happen ‘between’ places, yet this requires some critical reflections as discussed in Chapters 4 and 9. While these practices are evolving towards models of governance more explicitly related to knowledge (cf. the notion of ‘knowledge governance’ in Chapters 10 and 18); the ‘information revolution’ determined by new technologies, such as open and big data, is still an under-explored field (see Chapters 11–15) questioning the nexus with existing decision-making practices. Finally, the dialogical approach will be used to draw some conclusions on the research–policy nexus (see Part IV of this book) reflecting on the way knowledge (and specifically information) is used and on the governance knowledge and policy-oriented research.

## STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK: A CIRCULAR APPROACH

The book follows a ‘circular’ approach, with theoretical reflections grounded in the scientific literature at the beginning and the end, namely in Parts I and IV, while the central parts present empirical cases of policy-relevant research (Part II) and the emerging issue of big and open data (Part III).

In Part I of this book, the main theoretical elements coming from the literature are presented to provide the scientific framework. In Chapter 1, Alessandro Colombo argues for policy-oriented research as a specific profession in its own right. Grounded in the policy analysis literature, this

Chapter discusses the ‘what’, ‘who’, ‘when’ and ‘how’ of policy-relevant research, thus proposing ‘ten golden rules’ for young scholars who want to engage with this profession. Referring to Wildavsky (1979), policy-relevant research should be seen as an ‘art and craft of persuasion’ of policymakers.

In Chapter 2, Moyson and Scholten revise the literature on policy learning, describing existing approaches and future challenges. They identify three main streams in the literature: ‘managerialist’, ‘diffusion and convergence’ and ‘social learning’. Based on this review of the literature, they propose to investigate three emerging fields. First, despite the behavioural turn in policy learning research, the socio-psychological factors fostering or impeding policy learning are still underexplored. Second, policy learning should be better linked with the outcome not just regarding policy change, but also as a factor determining stability or lock-in. Third, policy learning should be related to organisational and institutional factors, beyond individual perspectives, to identify existing strategies for policy learning.

Coletti and Urso revise the main theories and methods used in policy studies to investigate the local use of knowledge and the process of policy learning in Chapter 3. Starting from the rationalistic model to the multiple streams (see Dente 2014; Peters 2015), the critical element is the identification of ‘who’ learns policymaking, thus leading to the discussion on the ‘agents of learning’ as those actors who engage in (and often lead) policy learning. Finally, they argue that policy learning should be related to the broader discussion on the use of knowledge in decision-making processes.

In the fourth chapter in the theoretical part, Stead and Pojani introduce the spatial perspective of policy learning by addressing the issue of the transferability of ‘best practices’. By critically revising the debate on policy transfer, the authors argue that, in general, it is better to provide policymakers with a compendium of practices and ideas rather than predefined policy solutions. In fact, the capacity of both receivers and producers for assessing the validity of these practices limits the transferability of best practices, conceived as a synthesis of policy knowledge acquired somewhere else.

The second part of the book presents several cases of research experiences devoted to policy purposes. In Chapter 5, Paris and de las Rivas discuss their experience on re-drafting the map of local authorities for the regional government of Castilla y León in Spain. Thanks to the long-standing experience of the urbanism institute at the University of Valladolid, they were able to provide a convincing map able to combine political needs and territorial specificities. In this case, research was explicitly applied to a policy demand, yet policymakers could rely on the presence of local researchers with previously learnt knowledge about their region.

Bandera and Cattaneo, in Chapter 6, present the case of 'Éupolis Lombardia', a boundary organisation working for the regional government of Lombardia in Italy. The rationale for the intervention of Éupolis Lombardia is based on the idea of covering the whole policy cycle combining policy-oriented research, regional statistics and training for policymakers at different levels (from general directors of the regional administration to civil servants of municipalities). The integration of these functions makes them 'government-affiliated think tanks' (see categories proposed by McGann and Johnson 2005) working on the boundaries between research and policymaking (see also Hoppe 2005).

In Chapter 7, the case of the Brussels Studies Institute (BSI) is presented and discussed by Vaesen and Wayens. The BSI is a network of university departments and research groups gathering scholars working 'on' Brussels (not just 'in' Brussels), making 'useful' research for local policymakers. The set-up of the BSI was proven difficult not just to overcome institutional, university and disciplinary cleavages, but also to identify motivations and barriers for individual researchers to engage with urban societal challenges. Nevertheless, the BSI is now established as a well-recognised academic research network able to provide policy-relevant research.

Serafin Pazos-Vidal discusses the case of Scotland as a thriving environment for policy entrepreneurship in Chapter 8. By reviewing the Scottish tradition and the high density of actors, the factors enabling policy entrepreneurship are identified in the sufficient capacity of governmental bodies, the longstanding tradition of Scottish institutions, the availability of data and know-how as well as sufficient financial and institutional autonomy enabling a competition of policy ideas. Even though these factors do not automatically lead to better policy outcomes, the identification of context-specific factors promoting policy entrepreneurship contributes to identifying how to create a learning-prone environment.

In Chapter 9, Stead and Pojani provide an empirical analysis of policy mobility. In urban planning, the Dutch model benefits from a global reputation, and many policy officials, academics and experts look at the Netherlands as a source of inspiration and best practices (see also Chapter 4 of this book by the same authors). By studying this kind of 'policy tourism' to the Netherlands, they identify the main motivations for policy transfer: solving local problems, framing sustainable development discourses, and identifying new mentors are the main motivations of policymakers and experts who travel to the Netherlands. However, several limitations exist in the process of policy transfer such as the unclear degree of comparability (the 'apples and oranges' analogy), instrumental use in political discussions and superficial understanding of Dutch specificities (so-called 'policy skimming').

Gerritsen, Stuiver and Termeer compare three cases of knowledge governance in sustainable development projects in Chapter 10. By comparing two Dutch cases (Northern Frisian and the North Sea region) and a non-European case (the Metropolitan Food Cluster in Mexico City), they show a new type of governance based on knowledge. The 'knowledge governance' approach (see Gerritsen et al. 2013) can be seen as an example of local strategies promoting policy learning by directly linking this with policy implementation.

The Part III of the book addresses the upcoming 'information revolution' of big and open data, looking at the way these are already influencing city and regional policymaking. In Chapter 11, Sarah Giest sets the framework, showing the growing trend in the use of big data and related information technology, mainly through the outsourcing to the private companies that own and have the know-how to use them. Coming mainly from the Anglo-Saxon world, this trend seems to be critical because of its efficiency-driven logic, whereas how to reconcile big data with policymaking is still an open and unclear field. Specifically, the choice of outsourcing the use of big data to private companies seems to conflict with a policy learning approach, especially in the case of urban and regional policymakers who have structural constraints.

In Chapter 12, Tamara Metze proposes an empirical analysis on the visual framing of a contested policy issue (the case of shale gas in the Netherlands). Based on the distinction between 'referential' and 'condensational' symbols (see Edelman 1964; Sapir 1934), her results show that, in contrast to what is often argued, the 'eye of the public' is not only emotional, irrational or normative. Her study of visual framings demonstrates that all sorts of actors produce referential, informational images – such as maps, graphs and tables – to stir emotions and convey normative messages. This analysis leads to arguing that also the visual framing should be considered in local policymaking processes.

In Chapter 13, Eckardt, Velderman and Benneworth present another study from the Netherlands on the use of non-experts' knowledge in the case of shale gas. Starting from the notion of 'smart citizens', which presumes new forms of citizen engagement thanks to technologies developed for 'smart cities', local citizens had difficulties in putting forward their knowledge because this knowledge did not have a 'formalised' status. Based on this case study, they argue that policymakers should look at experts' knowledge beyond formal status because citizens can provide policy-relevant knowledge, and this is a way to include citizens in the smart cities debate.

Benneworth, Bakker and Velderman discuss the use of open data in the case of the Twente region in the Netherlands in Chapter 14. In fact, the

Netherlands has been pioneering the use of open data by public authorities, adopting a legal framework already in 2015. The goal of increasing transparency by encouraging the third-party use of publicly provided data was part of a general effort to create a new culture of interactive policymaking in municipalities towards a new wave of ‘smart’ local and regional policymaking. Various experiences from the Twente region are discussed in Chapter 14, arguing that these can be seen as positive experiences to improve the quality of decision-making.

Herschel, in Chapter 15, reflects on the somehow fuzzy notion of ‘smartness’ for city-regional governance that was addressed in Part III (namely, Chapters 11–14). Beyond efficiency-oriented technology-led transformations, he argues that city-regional governance should evolve building on existing institutional settings to become more flexible and adaptable thanks to new ‘smart’ technologies. Referring to the (often neglected) debate that took place during the 1990s on ‘learning regions’ (Asheim 2012; Cooke and Schienstock 2000; Morgan 1997), he conceptualises ‘smart governance’ as a way to reconcile technology-led efficiency with democratic legitimacy and political accountability.

Part IV presents more theoretical reflections proposing some possible synthesis and future directions. In Chapter 16, Dan Greenwood conceptualises policy learning in the framework of governance by comparing the approaches of Hayek and Lindblom. By referring to these seminal contributions, policy learning is conceived as an issue of coordination that Hayek defines as a kind of market system, while Lindblom emphasises the potential for political and non-market institutions to facilitate this. For both authors, policy learning is conceptualised as a governance issue, which implies that it cannot be directly related to policy outcome, i.e. policy learning and outcome are not in a linear relationship, but relationships that are more complex should be considered when evaluating these dynamics.

Adrian Healy moves the discussion to the current debate on evidence-based policymaking in Chapter 17. Two opposing trends are discussed: the growing pressure on academics for having ‘impacts’ and, on the other hand, the emergence of the so-called ‘post-truth’ politics which is supposed to determine the end of evidence-based policymaking. Nevertheless, he argues that there still a space between the two, but it requires a language of rebuttal to counter the pure denialism prevailing in the current political debate. For this purpose, scholars that want to engage in policy-relevant research should better know their audience.

In Chapter 18, Gerritsen and Dotti elaborate the notion of ‘knowledge governance’ (Gerritsen et al. 2013), based on case studies of Part II (Chapters 5–10). Theoretically, the goal is to move forward the discussion on knowledge governance as a new model of governance based on the five

dimensions already identified, namely, transdisciplinarity, social learning and epistemic communities, reflexivity, self-organisation and boundary arrangements. By adding a territorial perspective, the local capacity to anchor trans-territorial knowledge flows for policy learning becomes a new crucial dimension of knowledge governance. This innovative conceptualisation is proven useful to analyse local strategies for policy learning, although selected case studies were not explicitly pursuing knowledge governance and more research is needed. Nevertheless, this seems a promising research approach to be integrated with similar ones able to include also time and space as key variables for policy learning.

Dotti and Colombino propose the notion of ‘policy resilience’ in Chapter 19, based on an evolutionary perspective on knowledge for policymaking. Grounded on the seminal contributions of Schumpeter and Hall, the cognitive-evolutionary approach (cf. Slembeck 1997) is a framework to conceptualise the different potential of policy learning leading to policy change based on new understanding of policy issues. By this new reconceptualisation, cities and regions can ‘learn how to learn’ benefiting from ‘deviant’ knowledge and avoiding pitfalls leading to path dependency. Thus, policy resilience refers to the city and regional capacity to ‘adapt’ policymaking to new and emerging needs.

Finally, Dotti and Colombo present final reflections and future research directions in Chapter 20. By summarising main lessons from previous chapters, they propose some future perspectives on policy-relevant research and, specifically, the implications of assuming a dialogical approach in the research–policy nexus. As stated earlier, the goal is not to provide a unique answer to a predefined research question but to reflect on existing practices providing a theoretical framework able to identify future challenges and help PhD students and young scholars to carry out policy-relevant research.

## REFERENCES

- Asheim, B. (2012), ‘The Changing Role of Learning Regions in the Globalizing Knowledge Economy: A Theoretical Re-examination’, *Regional Studies*, **46** (8), 993–1004.
- Cooke, P. and G. Schienstock (2000), ‘Structural Competitiveness and Learning Regions’, *Enterprise and Innovation Management Studies*, **1** (3), 265–80.
- Dente, B. (2014), *Understanding Policy Decisions*, Springer International Publishing.
- Dotti, N. F. (2016), ‘A Research–Policy Dialogue for the EU Cohesion Policy’, in N. F. Dotti (ed), *Learning from Implementation and Evaluation of the EU Cohesion Policy: Lessons from a Research–Policy Dialogue*, RSA Research Network on Cohesion Policy, pp. 26–42.

- Edelman, J. M. (1964), *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 1st edition, University of Illinois Press.
- Gerritsen, A. L., M. Stuiver and C. J. A. M. Termeer (2013), 'Knowledge Governance: An Exploration of Principles, Impact, and Barriers', *Science and Public Policy*, **40** (5), 604–15.
- Hoppe, R. (2005), 'Rethinking the Science–Policy Nexus: From Knowledge Utilization and Science Technology Studies to Types of Boundary Arrangements', *Poiesis & Praxis*, **3** (3), 199–215.
- McGann, J. G. and E. C. Johnson (2005), *Comparative Think Tanks, Politics and Public Policy*, Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Morgan, K. (1997), 'The Learning Region: Institutions, Innovation and Regional Renewal', *Regional Studies*, **31** (5), 491–503.
- Peters, G. (2015), *Advanced Introduction to Public Policy*, Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Sapir, E. (1934), 'Symbolism', in E. R. A. Seligman (ed), *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*, Macmillan and Co.
- Slembeck, T. (1997), 'The Formation of Economic Policy: A Cognitive-Evolutionary Approach to Policy-Making', *Constitutional Political Economy*, **8** (3), 225–54.
- Wehrens, R. (2014), 'Beyond two communities – from research utilization and knowledge translation to co-production?', *Public Health*, **128** (6), 545–51.
- Wildavsky, A. B. (1979), *Speaking Truth to Power: The Art and Craft of Policy Analysis*, Little, Brown, Transaction Publishers.

