

THE POLICY ADVISOR'S DILEMMA

By Roger A. Pielke, Jr.



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More than 65 years ago the sociologist [Robert K. Merton](#) described a key challenge faced by policy analysts: An analyst must achieve a balance between being close to decision makers to ensure that the advice is deemed relevant and useful while, at the same time, maintaining a degree of independence in order to exercise judgments based on the merits of the issue rather than political expedience. Merton explained that while relevance required the analyst to become "part of a bureaucratic power structure," such participation may lead the analyst "to abdicate his privilege of exploring policy possibilities which he regards as significant."

Yet, an analyst seeking to maintain independence "in order to provide full opportunity of choice" will typically find that "he has neither the resources to carry through his investigations on an appropriate scale nor any strong likelihood of having his findings accepted by policy makers as a basis for action." An analyst cannot resolve this dilemma alone, as policy makers must create (or at least tolerate) policy advisory mechanisms that provide independent judgments, even when these are uncomfortable or challenging.

Consider the recent case of one major climate adaptation and mitigation research project in Europe, as described in a [forthcoming paper](#) in *Science and Public Policy* by [Eva Lövbrand](#) of [Linköping University](#) (disclaimer, Eva is a collaborator and her project was supported by a grant on which I was PI). The [ADAM project](#) (short for "Adaptation and Mitigation Strategies: Supporting European Climate Policy") was an €18 million research project funded by the EU from 2006 to 2009 with an objective, as its title suggests, of conducting research in support of European climate policy.

Lövbrand documents several efforts by ADAM to perform policy-relevant research, and carefully emphasizes that her work examines only a small set of experiences in the rich and varied implementation of the ADAM project. Her analysis documents several instances of tensions arising from the very close connection between ADAM and EU climate-policy makers.

For instance, when ADAM organized its first stakeholder workshop in January, 2008, it found little interest in the project among the decision makers whom it had targeted. One reason for this, Lövbrand suggests, is the fact that two days before the workshop [DG Environment](#) had released its "[Climate action and renewable energy package](#)," intended to guide European attainment of its 20 percent emissions-reduction target by 2020. Having already committed to a policy proposal, the policy makers had little desire to see the project's varied policy analyses. Instead, they needed information that would be useful in advocating the course of action to which they had already made a commitment. As Lövbrand writes: "To open up the policy debate to new ideas may not appear particularly useful to policy practitioners who are in the process of closing it."

Lövbrand provides a second example from the ADAM experience, one that highlights the project's responsiveness to the expressed needs of decision makers. As climate negotiations proceeded, Lövbrand explains that EC officials had asked ADAM's leader to reorient their research agenda to reflect the increasing political importance of low stabilization targets. Lövbrand explains that the officials "hoped that the ADAM research might lend support to the lowest of the [emissions scenarios] considered by the IPCC" ([Intergovernmental Panel of Climate Change](#)). ADAM was responsive to the policy makers' requests, meaning that: "In order to be useful for the EC in the ongoing UN negotiations on climate change, the ADAM researchers were asked to give scientific support to, rather than to challenge, the policy goals formulated by the EU."

There are several different and perhaps even incompatible ways of evaluating the experiences of the ADAM project's interactions with decision makers, as recounted by Lövbrand. From one perspective, the project was a model of effective interaction between researchers and decision makers, as the research community was willing to adapt its work to supply information being requested by decision makers. In the jargon of the academic community, this experience represents a healthy "coproduction" of knowledge. ADAM successfully provided "useful" research.

But in another sense the ADAM experience is troubling. Its top-line conclusions about the feasibility of meeting a 2 degree C temperature target, while accepted in the European political discourse, were far from universally accepted; indeed, from today's vantage point they look to have been overly optimistic. In my own judgment, the achievement of such targets and their utility in policy is highly questionable (for details, see my book [The Climate Fix](#), Basic Books, 2010). From this perspective, while ADAM delivered the research results that EU decision makers *may have wanted* in the politics of the moment, it was far from the information that these decision *makers may actually have needed* to achieve the ultimate climate-policy goals.

Contrast the ADAM experience with the intelligence on weapons of mass destruction provided to the administration to George W. Bush. When the US CIA provided information that was equivocal and uncertain about the presence of WMDs, the Bush administration rejected the advice and instead established a separate mechanism of intelligence analysis within the White House. Unsurprisingly, the new, much less independent organization helpfully provided information that was more conducive to the desired decision. Such knowledge was "coproduced" as well.

What is the difference between the case of WMDs, where policy analysis was provided in response to the stated needs of decision makers, and the case of ADAM in which policy analysis was similarly provided in response to the stated needs of decision makers?

Some might assert that the difference lies in the quality of the information provided. There were no WMDs in Iraq, while one could always maintain the plausibility of achieving a 2 degree target, based on an alternative analysis of the facts. But for purposes of discussion, let's simply assume that a 2 degree target is, in fact, unachievable. In such a case, what then would be the difference between the two examples?

It would be tempting to compare the worthiness of the different policy goals - invading Iraq versus stabilizing carbon dioxide - as an arbiter of the effectiveness of policy advice. Advice provided in support of desired policy objectives is

evaluated by standards different from those applied to advice that supports undesired policy objectives. Such a stance ultimately leads to an unhealthy politicization of expert advice, in which judgments about the worthiness of ends to be achieved are substituted for a careful evaluation of the policies to be employed in reaching those ends.

Of course, to expect a project such as ADAM to challenge policy commitments or framings would be to look in the wrong place. Unlike the CIA, ADAM was never expected to produce independent advice, much less advice that would critique or expand policy options. Had ADAM taken a more adversarial position, or even introduced a broader range of knowledge into the political discussions, it might simply have found its contributions ignored by policy makers.

A more effective approach - both in the case of ADAM and of US military intelligence - would be to ensure that the relevant advisory process is diverse and connected to formal decision processes, with policy analysts sitting at varied distances from the machinery of decision making.

Creating mechanisms that include the possible introduction of uncomfortable, or even adversarial, policy advice into the political process will likely test the mettle of even the most public-spirited politician - which suggests the need to institutionalize analytical diversity as part of the policy process. Ultimately, resolving the policy analyst's dilemma requires that policy makers commit to hearing what analysts have to say and not simply what the policy maker wants to hear - presenting policy makers with a dilemma of their own.

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