



Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken



UNITED NATIONS INSTITUTE
FOR DISARMAMENT
RESEARCH



Strategic Design in Public Policy: Revisiting the Knowledge-to-Action Nexus

A Joint Workshop by the United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research,
the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, and
Institute Clingendael's Conflict Research Unit

23 November, 2009



Knowledge



Strategic Design



Action

Strategic Design in Public Policy: An Overview

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THE PROBLEM

Many government agencies and international organizations (such as the OECD and the UN) are increasingly advocating evidence-based programming. Such a movement would make possible A) more effective international, national and local action and B) increase the effectiveness of organizational conduct in the attainment of some goal. It would also begin to subtly but significantly challenge the presumption that political agreement — independent of evidence — is enough to constitute legitimate grounds for action.

Academics and research institutions are responding favorably to this agenda for evidence-based programming and are making efforts to direct attention and resources to policy-relevant concerns. This is placing the knowledge-to-action nexus more squarely on the international agenda.

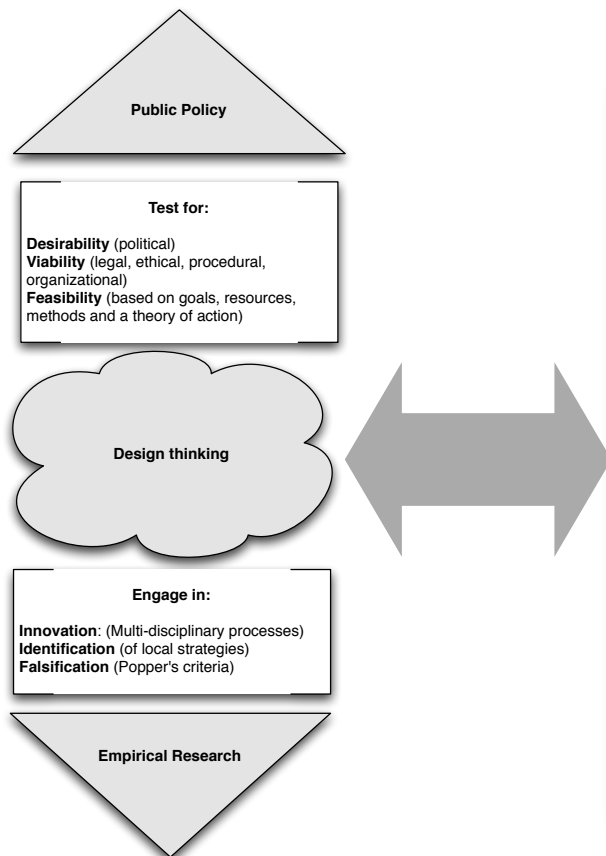
Calls for the application of knowledge carry with them the presumptions that knowledge is A) available to be applied and B) that there are known and employable mechanisms for successfully applying it. However, there are reasons for calling each of these presumptions into doubt. In many cases such knowledge does not exist, and needs to be created, or else has not been created to standards sufficient to support policy needs. Likewise, even when applicable knowledge is available, mechanisms for the systematic and deliberate application of that knowledge are generally absent and in need of development. So as a consensus is evolving around the need for more evidence-based programming, a consequential

agenda is beginning to take shape around key conceptual and procedural matters in need of attention.

For the knowledge-to-action nexus to function well, and in the service of better projects and programmes, new attention needs to be directed towards fundamental challenges in both the generation and application of knowledge in public policy that have heretofore been ignored or unrecognized. In particular, new attention needs to be directed towards the following observations:

- **The creation of knowledge is a purposeful activity and that purpose varies:** The purpose of most academic research is to contribute to the scholastic literature; it is not to answer questions posed by policymakers.
- **Knowledge does not apply itself:** The creation of applicable knowledge by academics does not ensure that it will or can be used without processes to apply it.
- **There is gap between knowledge and action in the design stage of programming that is not currently being closed:** New attention needs to be addressed to conceptual and procedural mechanisms for the application of knowledge for the benefit of designing policy action.

Currently, these concerns have not been explicitly addressed within a shared agenda between the research and policy communities. A common understanding of these challenges needs to be created, and — in due course — addressed.



The Strategic Design Approach

The strategic design approach begins with empirical research into social or natural phenomena of value for making policy decisions. The design process then makes use of applicable knowledge in a dedicated design stage by subjecting tabled options to A) falsification (to remove ungrounded options from consideration); B) Identification (of local strategies used by communities that could be mobilized as policy options), and C) innovation (using multi-disciplinary approaches to “prototyping” to generate possibilities). All designs are considered on the basis of desirability, viability, and feasibility.

THE RESPONSE

The United Nations Institute for Disarmament Research, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, and the Conflict Research Unit (CRU) of Clingendael, will co-host an event at the CRU on "strategic design in public policy" with special attention to the theme of community security.

The workshop is built around the notion of Strategic Design — as developed at the Security Needs Assessment protocol project at UNIDIR— which refers to the systematic and deliberate practice of applying conceptual, empirical, and technical knowledge to the design of social actions and processes to help achieve a desired objective or goal.

This workshop will bring together members of Network for Peace, Security and Development, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNIDIR, Institute Clingendael, and other interested parties, for a discussion of: A) Challenges to the generation of policy-relevant knowledge at universities and other research institutions; B) Challenges to the application of policy-relevant knowledge to the design of projects, programmes, and other actions pertaining to security and development matters; and C)

Challenges to the use (or adoption) of evidence-based project designs given bureaucratic, political and other relevant realities.

THE GOALS

There are three goals to the workshop:

- To share experiences of generating and applying knowledge on community security matters for the benefit of considering the challenges to doing so from both the research and policy side.
- To learn whether participants share some common understandings, or can come to some shared observations, about the challenges in closing the knowledge-to-action nexus in public policy.
- To agree, if possible, on a list of these shared observations that — in due course — could evolve into an agenda for action in addressing these challenges both in the Netherlands and further afield.

DESCRIPTION OF ACTIVITIES

Time: 23 November, 2009

Location: CRU, Bezuidenhoutseweg 161, The Hague

Agenda: Draft agenda forthcoming