

Science for Environment Policy

Urban planners' views on the role of scientific information in decision-making

Simply supplying more scientific information on the environment may not be enough to persuade urban planners to give greater consideration to the environment, suggests new research. The Dutch study suggests that environmental values also need to be made more important to municipal decision makers.

Urban planners need information on the potential environmental impacts of different [urban development](#) options in order to identify sustainable solutions. Both practitioners and academics of urban development are constantly producing such knowledge. However, studies have suggested that academics feel their input is underused by practitioners.

Generally, studies which explore this apparent research–practice divide have focused on the perspectives of academics. These providers of knowledge tend to describe the limited use of their research in terms of 'barriers' within the practitioner community, such as a lack of support from higher management to use this knowledge or a lack of training and understanding of the supplied information or tools. However, relatively little is known about how the urban planning practitioners actually perceive and use scientific knowledge in their decisions.

This new study focused on how a group of decision makers — aldermen (members of the executive council of the municipalities, who implement policy), responsible for urban development in 21 municipalities across the Netherlands — perceived the relationship between urban planning and science. The researchers asked the aldermen to complete written surveys and interviewed them over the telephone.

Most respondents supported the view that expert knowledge is a necessity. However, this view may be attributable, in part, to legal requirements, as local governments have to ensure that European and national environmental quality standards are met.

In addition, many respondents said that expert advice is important for explaining their choices as they seek public and political support for their plans. Such support is often their foremost concern. This, the researchers say, means that expert knowledge primarily serves to obtain or improve political and public support for a plan for these practitioners. They do not believe it is being used to identify the best plan on an environmental basis.

Aldermen acknowledged that experts and decision makers have different views of the environmental effects of plans, but did not see this as a problem. Instead, they saw their roles and the roles of experts as distinct and separate in the planning process. In general they felt that the knowledge offered by the experts was sufficient, but felt that experts perceive the environmental aspects (such as noise, air quality, industrial risks, etc.) of planning differently to them as decision makers.

Respondents felt that their decision-making was a rational process where they weighed up multiple planning options using expert knowledge. However, different options are not necessarily compared on the basis of environmental arguments alone, but reflect a balance of all interests, including political and public concerns. This, the study's authors say, may lead to what seem like 'irrational' outcomes to scientists.

Overall the results indicated that decision makers agreed with some views common among scientists, such as the usefulness of their knowledge, while contradicting others, such as the importance of such knowledge in the final decision-making process.

The authors say that their results suggest that where environmental impacts are being insufficiently considered, supplying more knowledge to decision makers may not be enough. Instead, the key may be to make the effects of different options on environmental quality more important to their decision making. This could be done by finding ways to make environmental quality of greater political or public concern, for example.

The authors do also caution that these results reflect the situation in the Netherlands and may not be representative of other countries.



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