

Evidence-based policy making and the challenge of inclusion: the search for energy justice in Canada

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Abstract: Evidence based policy making was a central tenet of New Public Management (NPM). Like other reform movements before it, NPM criticized existing policy formulation and decision-making processes for lacking transparency and being influenced by non-rational factors such as experience and professional judgment. Too many decisions, it was argued, were “political” in nature rather than data driven, leading inevitably to poor outcomes. Like so many other aspects of NPM, belief in the efficacy of evidence-based policy making failed to survive contact with reality. To traditional conflicts over what should be counted as reliable evidence and the role of values in the interpretation of evidence was soon added a growing awareness that, in practice, decision makers must weigh a variety of different kinds of evidence that are not necessarily commensurable. Public management’s latest engagement with the perspectives of under-served and minority populations during public engagement and co-creation exercises has put even more strain on the idea that policy expertise can be purely data driven.

In this paper, we report on a case study of the adoption of clean energy technologies in Indigenous communities in Canada. Energy is a policy area that ought to be susceptible to evidence-based policy making. Performance and efficiency data are plentiful and established metrics exist to compare competing technologies. Interviews within the policy community suggest that Indigenous leaders do not contest or distrust this kind of evidence, but they are concerned that their problem has been framed for them by external actors, leading them to question the relevance and applicability of the evidence to their communities’ lived experience. This outcome is rather different from the concerns of the growing literature on disinformation, ‘alternative realities’, and polarization and their impact on the use of evidence in public management. In our conclusion, we suggest that more attention to the different roles that evidence plays across the policy cycle may guide public managers in their interactions with distrustful, disenchanted, or hostile populations, for example, in post-conflict situations, and dissolve the unhelpful suggestion that public managers face a dilemma between cultural sensitivity and evidence-informed public administration.