



Strengthening Scientific Policy Advice

The relationship between policymakers and the research community is often characterized by misperceptions. Many policy-oriented researchers get the impression that their findings and recommendations are selectively ignored – or misused as a fig leaf to serve political goals. Policymakers, on the other hand, argue that science-based recommendations are rarely feasible for the day-to-day decision-making process because they are either out of touch with reality or delivered too late. It is not surprising, therefore, that management consultancies have now surpassed academic experts in terms of popularity among policymakers.

This development is a threat to the sustainability of social and economic policies, which are faced with such key challenges as globalization, demographic change, technological progress, depletion of natural resources and climate change. In these times, policymaking is more than ever in need of well-founded, independent advice. While private-sector consultants certainly offer important operational advice, they cannot replace the insights gained from academic science with its long-term analytical perspective. Politicians need to realize that their work can only benefit from accompanying research when they also acknowledge the inconvenient findings and help improve this research by facilitating access to relevant data.

We must also get rid of the antiquated rituals still governing academic policy advice. In order to achieve better permeability of knowledge between science and politics, government institutions could, for instance, establish temporary contracts for full-time in-house consultants. A continuous, confidential dialogue would certainly enhance strategic political planning, whereas the long-term benefit of advisory

committees remains questionable in many cases. The incumbency of advisory boards should be confined to the duration of political terms and not be appointments for life. Staff exchange programs between government departments and economic research institutes could prove to be fruitful and stimulating for both sides. Journalists could also be included in these programs as they have the important task of communicating complex economic issues and the need for further reforms to the public.

In addition to these structural reforms, a crucial aspect of economic policy advice is the evaluation of policy programs by independent economic research institutions. Labor market policies can only be successful in the long run if their effects are continuously analyzed. It would certainly make sense to legally mandate the evaluation of all major policy programs. But to achieve these goals, politicians would first need to change their own perception of what policymaking is all about. They must become more willing to test their approaches in pilot projects before transforming them into national policies. This is why bills should be passed with an “expiration date” to facilitate the retraction of programs that – according to thorough evaluation – have failed to produce the desired effects.

Moreover, it remains clear that highest scientific standards and access to all relevant data are prerequisites to high-quality policy advice. Lowering these standards may result in hackneyed advice but will never lead to sustainable policies from which the labor market and the whole economy can profit.



Klaus F. Zimmermann



Institute for the Study of Labor



Editor: **Prof. Dr. Klaus F. Zimmermann**
 Managing Editors: **Holger Hinte, Mark Fallak**
 Address: IZA, P.O. Box 7240, 53072 Bonn, Germany
 Phone: **+49 (0) 228 - 38 94 222**
 Fax: **+49 (0) 228 - 38 94 180**
 E-Mail: **compact@iza.org**
 Web: **www.iza.org**
 Graphics/Photographs: IZA
 Printing: Güll GmbH, Lindau
 Layout: IZA