Beyond 'Butler Impact': Global debate on drug policy proves research impact is more than just service delivery.

blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/05/08/global-debate-on-drug-policy-lse-ideas/

An expert report on the economics of drug policy has been written to help governments around the world limit the damage of drug trade. **Nicholas Kitchen** *reflects on how to determine the impact of such an interdisciplinary and multifaceted academic coordination effort. As universities look for neat ways to codify impact, service delivery to the UK government has taken centre stage at the expense of other more complicated social processes. Prioritising this narrow form 'butler impact' has clear limitations.*

This week LSE IDEAS released *Ending the Drug Wars*, the blue ribbon report of the Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy. The Expert Group built on the International Drug Policy Project's previous report, *Governing the Global Drug Wars*, which dealt with the historical roots of international drug control policies. *Ending the Drug Wars* outlines the enormous negative outcomes and collateral damage from the 'war on drugs'. Its high-profile signatories, including five Nobel Prize economists, call on governments to redirect resources away from enforcement-led and prohibition-focused strategies, toward effective, evidence-based policies underpinned by rigorous economic analysis.

The report launched with a front-page op-ed in the Financial Times by George Soros. Global media, alerted well in advance, picked up on the story, buttressed by a coordinated campaign of blog posts and interviews. The drug policy community, using its traditional #drugpolicy hashtag, went into overdrive on Twitter. At the LSE, Guatemala's interior minister officially received the report from Professor Danny Quah, the Chair of the Expert Group, at an event attended by scores of international and national policymakers. All this as officials from governments across the world prepare for the UN General Assembly's convening of a special session on drugs in 2016, in order to review the functioning of the international drug control system.
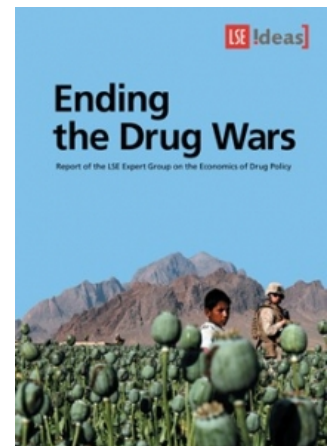
But what impact will this report have? The simple answer is that we don't know. The slightly more complex answer is it's difficult to tell. Research councils, taking their lead from the REF, are fixated on evidence of impact; as a result universities have been pushed into narrow definitions of impact that often exclude the type of pathways to impact that a report like *Ending the Drug Wars* might take. This happens in a number of ways. In their preparations for the 2014 REF submission, universities began to overlay an assumed hierarchy of impacts onto the REF guidelines, that had not suggested particular types of impact should be prioritized over others. As a result, 'impact on policy' came to be viewed as somehow 'better' than 'stimulating debate'. Impact case studies tended to coalesce around a particular pathway to impact – that of service delivery to government.

This model of impact has a clear and transparent pathway that translates neatly into case-study form. Governments faced with a policy issue solicit academic researchers to provide guidance on public policy issues. Policymakers then cite, and usually commend, the findings and recommendations, before legislating in some form. This is impact 101, and a slam-dunk for department heads tasked with selecting which case studies should go forward.

But it's a model that has problems. Governments may want academic research in the first place as much to provide political cover as to genuinely inform. There's no control variable – would the legislation have been any different without the input from researchers? And there may even be a tendency for research to become an instrument of a policy process, as opposed to impacting upon it. This is the 'butler' model of impact – research that delivers a service. That's not to say that butlers don't challenge, or that they don't have influence; but it is to say they have

masters (full disclosure, the LSE IDEAS International Drug Policy Project has been funded by Open Society Foundations, who have an explicit advocacy component to their work on this issue).

The second difficulty, related to the prioritisation of policy impact over other forms, is that impact on the public policy of national governments is prioritised over impact that happens outside of that framework. This can happen within states, where particular parts of government are more likely to utilise (or admit to utilising) academic research than others; but it most obviously happens when policies are being decided between states. Here the impact pathways become more complex and the norms of international diplomacy render them more opaque. It's more difficult, essentially, to evidence a policy impact across multiple international actors than it is within a single national government.

Most importantly, our social world is not just about the policies of governments or international institutions. Fundamentally it's about what people across the world think about the way their societies should be organized: it's the process of argument and the direction the balance of opinion travels. That's why the LSE's invitation (summons?) – to join the global debate – is so apposite, and why we should advocate an understanding of impact that goes beyond mere policy advice.

So where does this leave research that actively seeks to engage that global debate? We can of course write a story about dissemination and conversation, but only if we reaffirm that debate itself shows impact. And there are of course metrics we can use to help assess our contribution, from media insertions and citations in official literature to testimonials, retweets and event attendances. All have their flaws, and can only give us a snapshot of an ever-shifting picture. Sometimes it reflects well on us as social scientists to admit that we don't have very good data.

There is mounting evidence that attitudes towards drug policy among publics and governments are changing. LSE IDEAS' reports have documented that. We are confident that they've also made a contribution. As HEFCE reviews REF2014 with a view to writing the guidelines for 2020, they should look at projects like IDPP and ask: would this have made a good case study?

Featured Image credit: U.S. Marines *via* ISAFmedia (Wikimedia, public domain)
Top right image: LSE IDEAS, The Expert Group on the Economics of Drug Policy

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our Comments Policy if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

Dr Nicholas Kitchen is Research Fellow and Editor in Chief at LSE IDEAS.