Collaborative research, a tool for transforming public policies – Elvira Riera Gil

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The Public Administration School of Catalonia (EAPC) offered a series of sessions on the interaction between politics and science and on collaborative research during the month of February. The presentations and the videos from the sessions are available on the School website. In this post we pose a series of questions and reflections that have emerged from these sessions.

Can politics be based on scientific evidence?
If we were to conduct a survey today to ask whether public policies should be informed by scientific evidence, the majority of answers would probably be positive, whether they came from academics, decision makers and public employees or from citizens. However, the relationship between politics (and policies) and science (or research) is not that clear, and in practice it is very complex. Management of the pandemic caused by COVID-19 bears witness to this.

Firstly, science has an analytic nature (it solves questions about what the world is like), whilst politics moves between questions and normative dilemmas (about how the world should be). In other words, politics operates on certain sets of values, that often conflict, and priorities vary according to party orientations. For example, as we have witnessed in the management of COVID, some governments have tended to prioritise health over the economy and others have done the opposite. These prioritisations are not necessarily sustained in scientific evidence -and even less so in uncertain contexts- but they are legitimate, because citizens legitimise them when they vote for electoral programmes. Therefore, as David Mair told us in the first session, in this respect what science can do for politics has some limitations. It is worth reading the contribution made by the European Commission's Joint Research Centre (JRC) about this aspect of the relationship between science and politics in *Understanding our Political Nature: how to put knowledge and reason at the heart of political decision-making* (2019).

Secondly, the influence of science on politics can also be seen as limited because of pressure from lobbies, both in politics and in the management of the resulting public policies. We have also seen this in the European Union's decisions about the purchase of COVID vaccines and the subsequent management of these acquisitions.

On account of all of this, the JRC concludes that perhaps we cannot call for policies *based* on scientific evidence, but we can ask that policies are *informed* by this evidence.

What scientific evidence?
If we put aside these external factors from the scientific criteria that affect public decision making, and we put ourselves in the position of a public officials who requests evidence to guide the policies in their area of competency, we can ask ourselves at least two things: what scientific disciplines should we consider? And, within each discipline, what are the scientific voices that we need to listen to? In the COVID crisis, we have seen how epidemiologists have tended to call for increased restrictions on social interaction, economists have tended to ask for measures that reactivate the economy (with plans that do not always coincide), and sociologists, psychologists and education specialists have warned of increasing social inequalities and the effects of isolation on people, both generally and in the educational community in particular. Faced with complex social problems, varying scientific perspectives will tell us that we prioritise different policies. And different experts in each discipline will give us different analyses, connected to their professional background and their own convictions and sets of values.

This is why Ismael Peña-López told us in the first session that scientific vision should be a requirement in the selection of public decision makers, including senior officials. That officials should be multidisciplinary and should cultivate a solid network of relationships with the scientific community and maintain a constant dialogue, because it is beneficial for both parties and for society.

Is scientific knowledge the only relevant knowledge?
We know that we need science to help resolve the great challenges of society, and that the more solid the scientific basis for political decisions, the more likely that these decisions are correct, as Andreu Climent told us in the first session.

Nonetheless, public policies cannot be informed *only* by scientific evidence, understood as that provided by academic work. Academic work, especially in the case of social sciences -that are very relevant for public policies in all fields- tends to produce information about the problems and not about the solutions. Therefore, the expertise accumulated by the public policy makers themselves about what works and what does not work, or about what is viable in a given context, is essential knowledge for improving policies. Likewise, the knowledge of the public and social agents, as subjects and objects of policies, is crucial in order to be able to make better decisions.

In the second session of the series, Tobias Buser told us that there are three types of relevant knowledge when addressing complex social challenges: **systems knowledge**, which refers to problems that are usually analytical and descriptive, and come from science; **target knowledge**, which is based on values and norms and that should arise from deliberation between various social actors; and **transformation knowledge**, which refers to how to achieve these goals and includes strategies and steps to follow. To activate and connect this knowledge we need to conduct collaborative research.
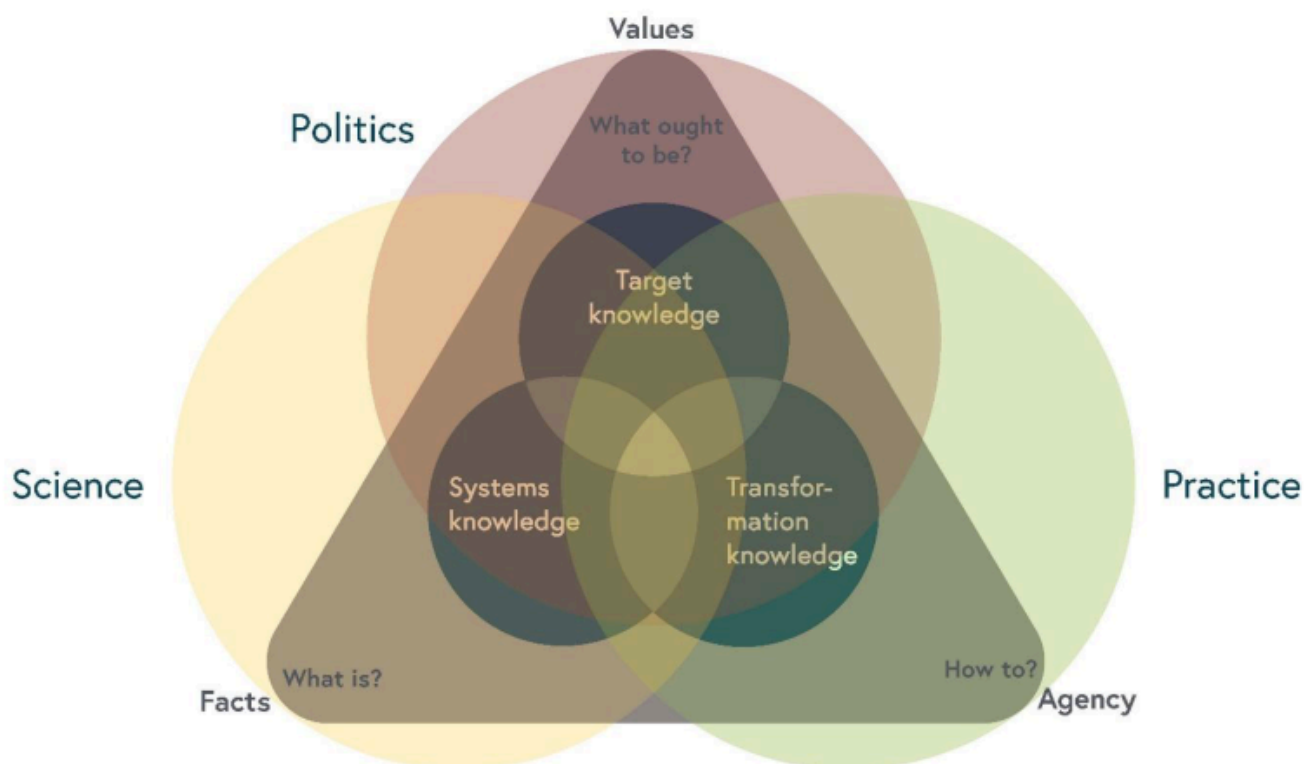
Intersecting spaces between the three types of knowledge, the relationship between facts, values and agency, and the three spheres of influence. Created by: Flurina Schneider and the University of Basel New Media Center, CC BY 4.0

Why is collaborative research necessary?
Collaborative research is a tool for public policy transformation. If public policies are to serve to address complex social challenges, we need to generate collective knowledge among all relevant social agents. As defined by Tobias Buser, collaborative or transdisciplinary research crosses the boundaries between scientific disciplines, and between science and practice, to develop knowledge that helps to resolve, mitigate or prevent these social challenges. It produces knowledge about both problems and solutions, and with this objective it includes all the relevant stakeholders, whether academics, decision makers or societal actors, from the very moment of research design.
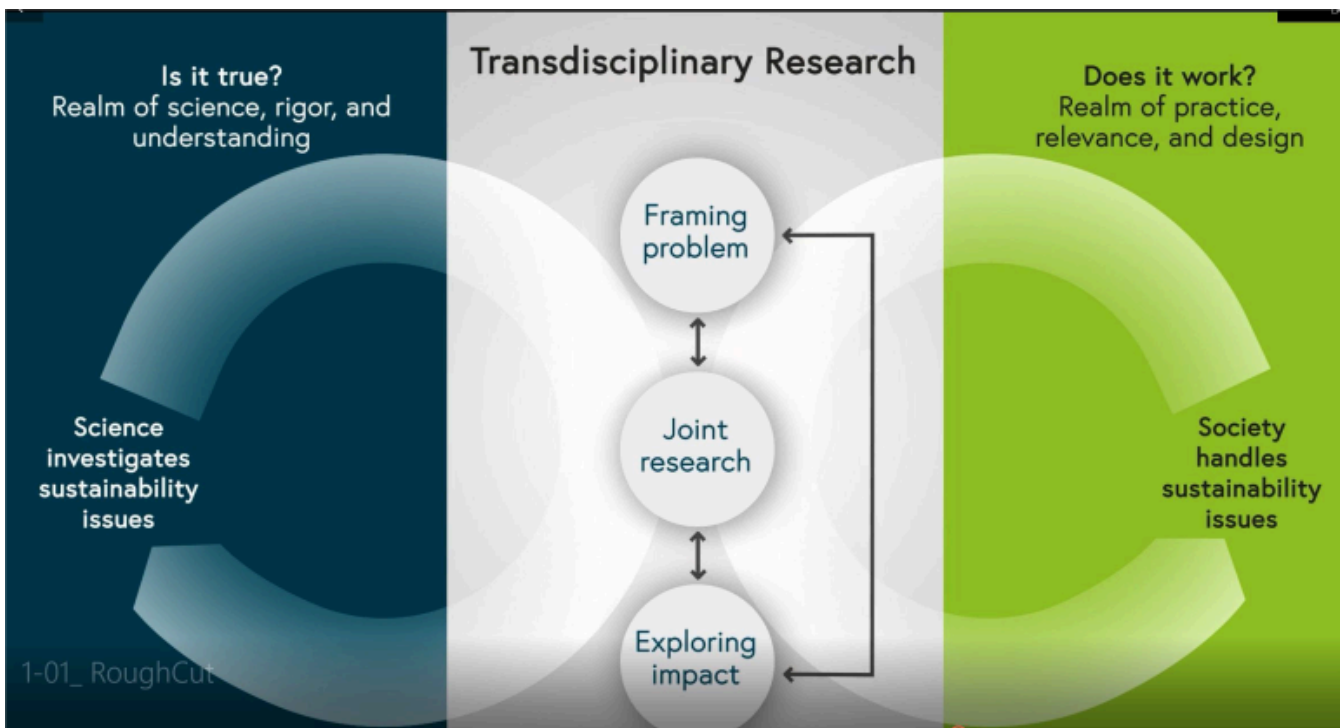
The three phases of interdisciplinary research. Created by Christian Pohl et al. and the University of Basel New Media Center, CC BY 4.0

In the third session of the series, Rosa Arias presented several examples and experiences of collaborative research that apply the citizen science model, and in which citizen contributions are fundamental.

In the second session, Rosina Malagrida also insisted on the idea that research must be conducted with and for society, and she stressed that shared responsibility allows research to be more democratic and legitimate, as well as to produce better results. Likewise -she told us- when addressing complex social challenges, we must work with a systemic vision, because it will be necessary to promote changes in the entire system in order to be able to implement solutions. Therefore, collaborative research requires a solid design and iterative processes of reflection. It is neither a quick nor easy task.

What challenges does collaborative research pose to us?
The collaborative approach poses challenges, both of an exogenous and endogenous nature, to research projects.

Firstly, various external elements can make it difficult to start collaborative research projects. For example, the academic system does not offer many incentives to researchers for conducting interdisciplinary research (between academic disciplines) or for doing research *with and for society.* Most incentives in this system lead research towards the competitive publication of articles in well indexed science journals. In addition, there is not always the necessary mutual trust between scientists and politicians. On the other hand, in the case of public decision makers, lack of time caused by day-to-day emergencies, or a certain fear of decision making capacity being limited or of receiving unwanted criticism, are factors that can discourage collaboration with the academic world. Finally, in the case of civil society, the main difficulties lie in the selection of appropriate representatives, and in their availability of time and resources to be dedicated to collaborating in the research.

Secondly, various internal elements of collaborative project management also make them more complicated. As Rosa Arias, Montserrat Freixa and Tatiana Fernández explained to us in the third session of the series, the management of transdisciplinary research teams, with academic, institutional and social actors, involves preparation and effort. Working collaboratively requires establishing relationships of mutual respect and trust, agreeing on the roles -and power- of each party, making the expectations of different members explicit to identify tensions between their interests or agendas, and finding balances to reach compromise. It also involves developing certain attitudes and skills related to leadership, teamwork, communication and other aspects.

What are the next steps for our School?

Throughout the three sessions, several speakers pointed out that science, public policy and society form an ecosystem, and that institutional structures and networks must be promoted to foster interaction and collaboration within this ecosystem. In the first session, David Mair argued that boundary organisations that can connect different types of knowledge are needed. In the second, Tobias Buser recommended establishing structures and networks that foster long term relationships between science and politics. And Tatiana Fernández, in the third, told us that to address the challenges that matter to society, we need new platforms and capacities, both in public administrations and in universities.

As the School of Public Administration of Catalonia, we have set out to be a boundary organisation in this ecosystem. We believe that we must do so because of our transversal position within Catalan administrations, our responsibility for managers and public employees' learning and our responsibility for promoting research to improve public policies.

That is why our call for grants for research on Public Administration and public policies in 2021 already requires teams to be transdisciplinary. For this reason we have created a market of research challenges, proposed by public officials, to inspire projects for this call. As a boundary organisation, we aim at connecting agents in the ecosystem to share knowledge and encourage them to understand and work together to get results that help us improve administrations and policies. We want to play a part in building the collaborative research networks that have been identified as necessary in these sessions.

The draft of the future Catalonia's Science Act places the School as one of the agents of the research system of Catalonia, with the purpose of promoting public policies informed by scientific evidence, in the field of administration and public management. We have started to develop a skills framework for collaborative research, which will constitute the basis of future training and learning programmes in this field. We share aims and are in regular contact with the European Commission's Joint Research Centre. The School is open to establishing other collaborations to strengthen this research approach, an innovative perspective we consider necessary to transform public policies in line with the major social challenges we face.

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