Summary of The Fourth "Lunch & Learn"

"How can evaluation insights respond to and inform public debates about the energy transition?"

The Fourth Lunch and Learn session organized by Energy Evaluation Europe was held online on 26th of June. Joel Franklin (Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, and member of EEE Planning Committee) welcomed Gesche Huebner (University College London, UK) and Carine Sebi (Grenoble Ecole de Management, France) to discuss the question: "How can evaluation insights respond to and inform public debates about the energy transition?"

Panellists shared key insights from their research and experience, focusing on critical points such as:

- Hard facts vs. nice narratives: How can we turn hard facts into compelling stories?
- Validity of scientific evidence for the public
- The impartiality of narratives: Should they be? Can they be?

1. Introduction:

Gesche Huebner:

In her introduction Gesche Huebner emphasized the importance of ensuring the reliability of evaluation insights before using them to inform public debates about the energy transition. She questioned whether evaluations should be used in this way and concluded that they should, but only if the evidence is robust and trustworthy. Huebner pointed out a significant issue in academia where findings are often not reproducible, leading to a crisis of credibility (see Huebner et al. 2017 for more details). This issue arises from the pressure to publish interesting and positive results, which can compromise the quality of research.

Huebner warned that similar risks exist in policy evaluation, where there is pressure to quickly produce favorable results that show policies are effective. She stressed the need for rigorous and thorough evaluations to ensure that the findings are reliable. This involves clearly defining what is being measured, how it is measured, the duration of measurement, and the sample size.

She argued that only with solid, trustworthy evidence can evaluations effectively inform public debates. If unreliable findings are used, it could lead to the implementation of ineffective policies and damage public trust. Therefore, Huebner concluded that while evaluations can and should inform public debates, it is crucial to first ensure the evidence is credible and reliable.

Carine Sebi:

In her introduction Carine Sebi contrasted the robustness and credibility of research versus consultancy. She highlighted that research typically takes much longer because it must be trustworthy, often involving peer reviews and pre-published hypotheses. In contrast,

consultancy work tends to produce results more quickly, often aligned with client expectations.

Sebi emphasized the importance of having a reliable and transparent research process, particularly in experimental economics where hypotheses must be declared before data collection to ensure objectivity. This prevents researchers from finding correlations post hoc that might not be truly significant.

She explained that despite efforts to maintain objectivity, biases can still occur, especially when using surveys. Sebi illustrated this with an example from a recent experiment on social acceptance of onshore wind infrastructure. The experiment involved a large, representative panel and tested responses to factual statements about wind energy, both positive and negative. Unexpectedly, even participants who were not initially supportive of wind energy became more positive, likely due to an experimental effect where participants perceived the researchers as pro-wind.

This example underscored the complexity of research compared to quicker, less thorough surveys. It demonstrated the necessity of understanding underlying processes behind results and maintaining impartiality, even though complete control over bias is challenging.

2. **Discussion:**

In the following discussion with the participants, several important questions and arguments were raised.

1. **High Standards for Evidence**: There is a need for rigorous standards and norms in science, which may not be as prevalent in other sectors. The question arises about how these standards can be applied to the public sector where evaluators must support policymakers who need to make definitive decisions within time constraints.
2. **Policy vs. Academic Expectations**: Policymakers often need clear, actionable results, which can be challenging when research findings are inconclusive or complex. There is a tension between the need for quick, positive results in consultancy and the rigorous, sometimes slower process of academic research.
3. **Communication and Practical Implications**: Researchers working closely with public decision-makers must translate academic findings into practical policy recommendations. This often involves framing results in a way that policymakers can understand and use, despite potential resistance from purely academic co-authors.
4. **Negative Findings are Valuable**: Negative or null results are still important as they can prevent the waste of resources on ineffective policies. The discussion highlights the need for effective communication strategies to explain why a policy did not work and how it might be adjusted rather than discarded entirely.
5. **Iterative Process and Pragmatism**: The iterative process between academia and policy implementation can bridge the gap between theory and practice. Individuals who can navigate both worlds play a crucial role in translating rigorous academic research into pragmatic policy solutions.
6. **Narrative and Communication**: The way results are communicated is critical. A well-framed narrative that includes the value of negative findings and suggests

modifications can be more persuasive and useful to policymakers than simply presenting raw data or academic papers.

7. **Emerging Narratives and Framing**: The issue of emerging narratives in the public debate that may not align with established research findings. It was questioned whether these differing framings affect the perceived validity of strong research findings and how researchers should respond.
8. **Impact of Case Studies in Public Debate**: Public debate is often dominated by case studies, especially negative ones, which receive significant media attention. This can overshadow robust evaluations showing positive outcomes, such as properly done solid wall insulation improving energy efficiency.
9. **Salience of Case Studies**: Human tendency to be influenced by case studies because they are more salient and narrative-driven, focusing on the human element rather than abstract data.
10. **Engagement and Counter-Narratives**: The dilemma of whether to engage with misleading narratives suggests that providing counter-narratives using compelling and relatable examples might be more effective than presenting abstract data.
11. **Role of Researchers and Media**: There is a need for researchers to decide whether they have a mandate to engage in public debates and whether their voice will be effective. Sometimes, engaging with the press to present a counter-narrative or positive case studies can help balance the debate.
12. **Cultural and Political Contexts**: Understanding the beliefs, knowledge levels, and political identities of the target audience is important. Preferences for or against certain energy policies can be deeply rooted in political affiliation and personal identity.
13. **Reframing Messages**: Concluding the importance of reframing messages to align with the values and concerns of different audiences. For example, focusing on job creation, energy security, and personal benefits may be more persuasive than abstract climate goals.
14. **Educational Campaigns**: Continuous education and tailored communication strategies that address the specific concerns and identities of different groups is important. This highlights the need for ongoing research to test and refine these strategies.
15. **Political and Economic Contexts**: Broader political and economic contexts, such as the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, can drive significant changes in public behavior and policy acceptance.
16. **Challenges with Incentives**: Even financial incentives might not be enough to change the minds of those deeply opposed to certain energy policies. Understanding the underlying preferences and beliefs is crucial for effective communication and policy design. policy evaluation, independent of political influence.
17. **Initial Question on Methodology Transparency:** There's a need for developing more reliable results for business, focusing on methodology transparency and documentation. How can tools or ideas promote this?
18. **Pros and Cons of Citizen Science:** Does public participation in scientific processes make people more informed or critical about research results and methodologies? Support for open data and public participation, especially if funded by public money. Citizen science can be effective in certain areas but may not work for all types of evaluations, particularly those requiring precise measurements or specialized tools.

Concerns about the representativeness and quality of data from citizen science due to potential biases and limitations in participants' equipment and training. Participation can increase interest, ownership, and awareness of the complexities involved in data collection, potentially leading to a more critical view of scientific results. However, people who are more likely to engage in citizen science might be the ones already into science, either with some scientific background or having a general interest in sciences. Calls for citizen science projects need to reach everybody.

19. **Citizen Engagement and Policy Making:** There's a need to reframe energy efficiency to highlight outcomes that matter to citizens, such as affordability and personal relevance, including health and comfort benefits. It's crucial to communicate co-benefits effectively (e.g., health, comfort) to gain public support. Successful narratives require consistent and clear policy frameworks, including strong regulations and targeted incentives. Historical context from the Yellow Vest movement in France illustrates the pitfalls of implementing regulations without clear communication on their benefits and connection to broader goals.
20. **Example with the Challenges in Energy Retrofitting:** The return on investment for retrofitting can be long-term, which may deter participation. Lobbying from landlords can impact the implementation of regulations. Energy crises have not always resulted in increased retrofitting, suggesting other factors at play.
21. **Question on Institutional Reforms:** Despite robust policy appraisal and evaluation efforts in the UK, these are often overshadowed by populist politics. Are there democratic process reforms that can compel politicians to engage more with evidence and justify their decisions?
22. **Citizen Assemblies:** There have been successful local examples of citizen assemblies generating valuable evidence and influencing government decisions. However, integrating citizen assemblies into the formal parliamentary process is a distant prospect.
23. **Role of Researchers in Public Engagement:** Researchers should make their findings more accessible to the general public and use platforms like The Conversation journal to bridge the gap between technical results and public understanding. Engaging with media affiliated with various political ideologies, even if challenging, is crucial to ensure diverse public dissemination of facts.
24. **Independent Advisory Bodies:** Independent bodies like the UK's Climate Change Committee play a crucial role in advising the government and publicly reporting on progress toward emission targets. Strengthening such organizations can enhance objective and transparent policy evaluation, independent of political influence. Similarly, the EU Climate Law established in 2021 the European Scientific Advisory Board on Climate Change.

3. Summary:

Public:
It’s necessary to maintain high standards and rigorous norms in science, which are crucial but often less prevalent in other sectors, including the public sector, where evaluators must support policymakers with definitive decisions. Important statistical data and facts might be overshadowed by dramatic narratives. Media reports on individual case studies often attract

more attention than comprehensive statistical analyses. Balancing emotionally engaging stories with scientifically robust facts is crucial. The critical role of narrative and framing in communicating results. Providing well-framed narratives and relatable examples can be more effective than presenting abstract data, especially when addressing misleading public narratives and engaging with the media. To facilitate better communication and information sharing between the agency and its stakeholders it´s important to utilize digital platforms, social media, and regular newsletters or organize stakeholder meetings, webinars, and public forums.

Policies:
The tension between the need for clear, actionable results for policymakers and the more rigorous, sometimes slower, academic research process. Policymakers often require quick, positive results, which contrasts with the thoroughness of academic research. There is a great importance of translating academic findings into practical policy recommendations that policymakers can understand and use. Effective communication is crucial, especially when conveying complex or negative findings. Highlighting the importance of negative or null results in preventing resource wastage on ineffective policies. Negative findings should be effectively communicated to explain why a policy did not work and how it can be adjusted. Ensure that policies and regulations reflect a broad range of stakeholder inputs. Establish advisory committees with diverse stakeholder representation, hold public consultations, and engage in co-creation of policy drafts. Build trust and ensure stakeholders are informed about the agency's decisions and performance. Publish regular performance reports, audit results, and decision-making rationales. Implement an open data policy for greater transparency.

More useful Information and interesting Paper on the topic:

- in English:
  - https://theconversation.com/in-france-and-germany-politics-not-nationality-dictate-energy-preferences-230164
  - https://doi.org/10.1016/j.reseneeco.2023.101392
  - Huebner, G. M., Nicolson, M. L., Fell, M. J., Kennard, H., Elam, S., Hanmer, C., ... & Shipworth, D. (2017). Are we heading towards a replicability crisis in energy efficiency research? A toolkit for improving the quality, transparency and replicability of energy efficiency impact evaluations. Proceedings of the ECEEE 2017 Summer Study.
- in French:
  - https://theconversation.com/nucleaire-eolien-quelle-evolution-du-discours-mediatique-en-france-208259
  - https://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/opinion-energie-eolienne-pourquoi-divise-t-elle-autant-2076309
  - About the ADEME position on deep renovations, here it is (in French only for the moment): https://librairie.ademe.fr/urbanisme-et-batiment/6933-avis-d-expert-sur-la-renovation-performante-des-logements.html