



Scoping the potential uses of systems thinking in developing policy on illicit drugs

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Rationale

While a great variety of systems approaches have been developed, they all have some common characteristics: a recognition of the need to deal with complex issues by looking at the 'bigger picture'; the evaluation of multiple policy options prior to (and often during and after) implementation; and exploring interconnections and potential consequences to identify and minimise unwanted 'side-effects' of policy. While this focus of systems thinking on dealing with complexity has been found to be useful in many other policy contexts, such as policing and sustainable cities, systems approaches have been used less frequently in policy making on illicit drugs. However, given that this area of policy can be highly complex, characterised by tensions between stakeholder groups and requiring difficult balances to be struck between enforcement, prevention and treatment, it seems worthwhile to explore what added value systems approaches can offer, and what barriers to their use might be encountered. This DPMP project was designed to scope the potential uses of systems thinking for developing policy on illicit drugs.

Approach

Six systems approaches were focussed on: system dynamics; viable system diagnosis; strategic assumptions surfacing and testing; interactive planning; soft systems methodology; and critical systems heuristics. Each of these approaches can be seen as a way of developing and influencing drug policy. The work had two components: in-depth interviews with experienced policy makers and a small demonstration project. The in-depth

interviews explored the six systems approaches identified above and asked policy makers to reflect on their utility, benefits and problems. The small demonstration project, run with Turning Point staff, used a combination of systems approaches to address the problem of public injecting.

Key findings

The main issues identified by the interviewees in the illicit drugs policy arena included: difficulties of involving or consulting multiple stakeholders; problems associated with assessing and using a range of evidence to inform policy; the need to account for party politics in terms of maintaining electoral support; different and competing jurisdictional boundaries restricting funding resources and opportunities for consultation; competing values impacting on policy implementation (including the subversion of policy, which more than half of the interviewees saw as positive, enabling 'harmful' policies to be neutralised); and a lack of methods for addressing these issues.

The systems approaches were seen as potentially useful to the extent that they are able to:

- Engage and manage a diversity of stakeholders in ways that allow all participants' voices to be heard, reduce polarisation and enable the emergence of consensus.
- Provide outcomes that can be acted upon, not just in the long term but also the short-to-medium term.
- Inform policy without explicitly challenging the direction identified by the government of the day.
- Identify and clarify the values underpinning different policy directions.
- Address and clarify issues relating to evidence that is taken into account in policy.
- Encourage staff working either in the policy or service provision areas to think more broadly and creatively.



The six approaches were found to have different strengths in relation to the above. For instance, approaches that rely on a researcher producing a model and generating policy recommendations were viewed as having the potential to contribute usefully to the evidence base for policy. In contrast, some of the more participative approaches were perceived as strong in terms of engaging stakeholders and clarifying values. However, despite recognition of the above strengths, a number of barriers to the potential use of systems approaches were identified, including: electoral and timing issues; perceived tensions between the values underpinning policy and the need for a robust evidence-base; workloads, the turnover of staff and career aspirations; and a need to manage the multiple and/or competing views of a wide range of stakeholders, including the media.

The findings indicate that there may be difficulties in applying systems approaches to policy making on illicit drugs. Clearly, the participative approaches pose problems for government officers who feel caught between their desire for engagement and their responsibilities to elected members. Also, those people who see values as non-rational commitments may perceive methods that are explicit about exploring values as undermining the principle of evidence-based policy. However, even those approaches (e.g. system dynamics and viable system diagnosis) that can be used by researchers in partnership with policy makers without the participation of external stakeholders may be seen as overly time-consuming by policy makers.

In exploring these difficulties with the interviewees, several ways forward were identified. All of the interviewees said that methods for facilitating debate, accommodation and value clarification would be more acceptable as part of policy *analysis* as opposed to policy *making*. In addition, the interviewees also said that systems approaches might usefully be employed in service provider and/or advocacy organisations that *influence* policy directions, and in the latter context it might be easier to enable the meaningful participation of a range of stakeholders.

Finally, although the interviewees did not raise this, the researchers can see considerable scope for using systems approaches within the context of policy *evaluation*. The second component of the research took up the challenge of working on a policy issue with an organisation that *influences* policy rather than with government policy makers themselves. Two workshops were held with Turning Point to demonstrate how participative methods could be used for their own policy analysis (and also organisational strategy) in a manner that would not threaten political and managerial control of decision-making, but could still enable the creative exploration of problems and potential policy responses.

The workshops explored the question: “what are appropriate responses to public injecting?” and included external stakeholders and Turning Point staff. The participants evaluated both workshops. There were many positive comments, and most people said that they had learned something new about the local public injecting situation and/or had a better appreciation of other people’s perspectives. Most importantly, these new insights were valued and were successfully translated into the evaluation of the policy options that were considered.

Implications

The evidence from this work suggests that systems thinking could indeed be usefully applied to policy making on illicit drugs. The interviews pointed to strengths of some of the systems approaches in terms of dealing with complexity; contributing to the generation of evidence; and enabling inclusive policy making (especially taking account of multiple values and perspectives). However, significant barriers were also identified. Some of these reflect the need for improved communications between systems thinkers and policy makers, but there are also substantial barriers that (in the view of the researchers) systems thinkers have not yet effectively addressed.



Although the utility of systems thinking has been demonstrated, the question remains: can some of the barriers to take-up be overcome in a manner that will enable systems thinking to contribute to more informed policy making in government circles, as well as in policy influencing organisations? To answer this question, future research directions are arguably best decided in collaboration with the relevant policy makers and/or non-governmental organisations.

Research team

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