



Summary

Towards more evidence-based policy within the ministry of JenV

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TOWARDS MORE EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY WITHIN THE MINISTRY OF JENV

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Summary: Towards more evidence-based policy within JenV

Objective and background

The Dutch Ministry of Justice and Security (JenV; *Justitie en Veiligheid*) regards knowledge as an indispensable compass for well-founded and effective policy. A better use of knowledge would lead to the improvement of existing and new policies. Therefore, in 2017 the Ministry of JenV decided that the *strategic knowledge function* of the Ministry should be strengthened. The message was clear: knowledge management and knowledge innovation, steering for knowledge utilisation and knowledge development, should receive (more) attention within the Ministry of JenV. However, despite various recent initiatives, the notion remains that the use of the available scientific knowledge in the Ministries policy design phase could be improved. The supposed under-utilisation of available scientific knowledge is the reason for the present study, which was commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre (WODC) of the Ministry of JenV and carried out by a research team from the University of Twente, advised by a broadly composed advisory board.

- The **aim** of the present study is to gain an impression of the extent to which work activities and policymaking within JenV are 'evidence-based' and/or 'evidence-informed'.
- The **main research question** of the study is: to what extent can work activities and policymaking within the Ministry of JenV be characterised as 'evidence-based', and which institutional and contextual factors influence this?

Approach

The Ministry of JenV has many sub-domains and the number of organisational units within and outside its core department is extensive. In order to make this study manageable, the Public Prosecution Service, the police and the judiciary were not included in the study. The study furthermore probed into the perspective of the civil servants. The study did not aim to evaluate to what extent, and in what way, policy documents reflect the results of scientific research.

To answer the main research question, several research methods were used. Firstly, we conducted a *literature review* of the state of the art in the policy science literature on evidence-based work and policy. Secondly, we analysed internal and publicly available *websites* and *policy documents* to describe the legal and policy frameworks that exist to promote the use of evidence in work and policy.

Thirdly, we conducted an *online survey* and *interviews* to obtain insight in the perceptions and activities of civil servants of the Ministry of JenV related to evidence-based work activities and policymaking. We conducted the online survey among three organisational units: the core ministry (with its policy departments), the headquarters of a large implementation agency within the ministry, and a research unit of the Ministry. We conducted 23 interviews with civil servants on four different policy dossiers. The dossiers varied in their level of politicisation and uncertainty of knowledge.

‘Evidence-based’ work activities and -policymaking in the policy science literature

The idea of 'knowing more is deciding better and implementing better' is widely supported by policy scientists as well as policy makers and implementers. A scientific basis for policy is not only expected to contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of policy and policy interventions, but also to the legitimacy of the government and its democratic institutions. From the policy science literature, we distinguished three perspectives on the use of knowledge in work activities and policymaking:

1. *'Evidence-based' work activities and -policymaking.* Work activities and policymaking are primarily based on the results of independent scientific research. The use of scientific knowledge (as ‘evidence’) to support work activities and policymaking will only be possible (or desirable) in specific situations. An example is the use of scientifically validated protocols in the treatment of target groups (clients).
2. *'Evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking.* In one way or another, practical knowledge is systematically integrated with scientific knowledge and insights in work activities and policymaking. There is broad consensus in the literature on the need for the systematic integration of scientific knowledge (as ‘evidence’) with practical knowledge.

To be able to speak of ‘evidence’ in the two perspectives above, three conditions must be met:

- The outcome of the research is obtained through an accepted scientific systematic approach and method. The insights obtained are preferably embedded in a systematic and cumulative knowledge base.
- The research is performed independently, which means in dialogue with policy and government, but independent of *pressure* from policy or government.
- Research is transparent and verifiable so that it can be repeated and criticised.

When the above three conditions are not met, we speak of a third perspective on the use of knowledge in work activities and policymaking:

3. *'Practice-based' work activities and -policymaking.* Work activities and policymaking are mainly based on (systematic) practical knowledge, obtained from the professional field, or based on individual experience. In this perspective on work activities and policymaking, ‘evidence’ (as the result of independent scientific research) plays no role.

In our study we do not attach a value judgement to each of the three perspectives. It is the context, such as the specific task to be performed, that determines how 'evidence' can be used in work activities and policymaking. This does not alter the fact that the use of the results of independent scientific research is regarded as desirable from both a content perspective as well as from the perspective of the rule of law. In terms of *content*, managers, policymakers, and professionals can better substantiate their policy choices and interventions based on scientific insights. The expectation is that this scientific basis will enhance the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of policy. From the perspective of the *rule of law*, scientifically underpinning policy contributes to transparency, accountability, and the principles of good governance, and can thus enhance the quality and legitimacy of political judgements.

Perceptions of evidence-based work activities and -policymaking of the civil servants of the Ministry of JenV

An important sub-question of the study concerns the question what the employees of the Ministry of JenV understand by 'evidence-based' work activities and policymaking. We have described these perceptions on the basis of answers to questions in the surveys and the 23 interviews with civil servants. From the surveys of almost 350 employees in total a clear picture emerges.

Conclusion 1. From the perspective of the civil servants of the Ministry of JenV 'evidence-based' work activities and -policymaking connect science to practice.

Almost all employees of the Ministry of JenV associate 'evidence-based' work activities and policymaking with the use of independently obtained scientific knowledge. However, a majority of civil servants also considers practical knowledge to be part of 'evidence'. They relate this to the integration of scientific knowledge and practical knowledge as "evidence". This is in line with our definition of "evidence-informed" work activities and -policymaking. The interviews show that "evidence-based" or "evidence-informed" work activities and -policymaking are not really an important theme for many interviewees. Scientific evidence is regarded as evidence when it can potentially support one's own work.

The above conclusion is not absolute. An exception is, for example, a specialist organisational unit that we came across in our interviews. Employees of this unit do associate the term 'evidence-based' with work activities and policymaking being based primarily on scientific knowledge. This concerns a part of the organisation in which activities are strongly protocol driven.

Actual use of knowledge in work activities and policymaking at the Ministry of JenV

Despite the pleas to use scientific knowledge, the policy science literature shows that scientific knowledge is regularly ignored in practice. The present study confirms this general finding from the literature.

Conclusion 2. There is limited use of scientific knowledge within the Ministry of JenV by civil servants.

Hardly any of the JenV employees work 'evidence-based'. This is evident from both the self-reported answers to the survey and the interviews. They do work 'evidence-informed' at the Ministry, but the extent to which they do so varies between organisational units. The interviews revealed that civil servants do not systematically and transparently integrate professional and scientific knowledge to substantiate their work activities and policymaking. A number of the civil servants explicitly stated that they work 'practice-based', i.e. without the input of scientific knowledge.

The surveys show that civil servants who deal with policy issues that are highly politicised, make little use of available scientific and practical knowledge. The interviews also revealed that both available scientific knowledge and practical knowledge are regularly set aside when such knowledge does not fit in well with political principles or (proposed) policy. This particularly concerns the phases of agenda-setting, policy design and evaluation.

The most important sources for the civil servants' work activities and policymaking appear to be practical experience, policy documents, case law and instructions from managers. The use of scientific knowledge sources lags far behind.

There are also exceptions. The specialist organisational unit we discussed in the previous subsection uses explicit 'evidence-based' protocols in its operational work and is very active in setting up and translating independent scientific research.

Motives and barriers to 'evidence-based' work activities and -policymaking

The study has identified several factors that could impede or promote the use of scientific knowledge within the Ministry of JenV.

Conclusion 3. The work unit in the department forms an important link in knowledge-intensive working within the Ministry of JenV.

The culture and common practices within departmental work units largely determine the use of scientific knowledge within the Ministry of JenV. The main bottleneck is the limited time that is available for this in the work unit in the department (resulting from a lack of priority or short-term political pressure).

There are also exceptions. Some work units in the departments, of specific implementation agencies, work strictly 'evidence-based' based on their specific function. These are units where professionals use strict protocols, supported by knowledge organisations that feed them with specialist scientific insights. In the knowledge-intensive departments, not only is more scientific knowledge used, but also practical knowledge and knowledge from policy documents. In these departments, 'evidence-based' and 'evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking are actively encouraged.

Conclusion 4. Civil servants of policy departments often consider scientific knowledge to be less relevant for policymaking.

Employees of the ministerial policy departments argue that 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking are, in addition to the lack of time, also hindered by a lack of relevance of scientific research for policy practice. More specifically, they point out:

- The poor fit of research results to current policy, partly due to a science that is too specialised and sometimes uninterested.
- That scientific knowledge is not (yet) available or that it is lagging behind.
- A perceived lack of in-house expertise to integrate scientific research with practical knowledge.

In the interviews it was noted that supply and demand of scientific knowledge do not always align with each other at the policy level. The large supply of scientific knowledge means that in some policy departments 'one cannot see the wood for the trees'. Moreover, civil servants of the ministerial policy departments indicated that they experienced a lack of expertise to translate scientific research into practice.

Conclusion 5. Politicisation prevents the use of knowledge.

In highly politicised situations, 'evidence-based' and 'evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking fade into the background and civil servants fall back on (legal) knowledge from policy documentation. Most of the respondents indicated that scientific knowledge can be used symbolically, although they did not consider this an aspect of their departmental culture. In the interviews, some civil servants indicated that political emotions sometimes make it necessary to inform their Minister or Parliament quickly, as a consequence there is no time to consult scientific knowledge. They state that political value judgements are often at odds with scientific insights, with the former often being preferred. As a result, scientific insights do not get the chance to substantiate policymaking. In highly politicised issues, legal frameworks and knowledge from policy documentation are used instead of practical knowledge.

Conclusion 6. Government-wide legislation and policy frameworks do not affect 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking within the Ministry of JenV.

Existing government-wide legislation and policy frameworks, such as the Integral Assessment Framework (IAK in Dutch) or the Accountancy Law (*Comptabiliteitswet*), offer at most indirect starting points for 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking. Departmental policy frameworks for 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking are virtually non-existent. Government-wide legislation and policy frameworks for the purpose of knowledge utilisation in work activities and policymaking hardly refer to 'evidence-based' or 'evidence-informed' work activities and -policymaking. In these documents, the concept of knowledge remains ambiguous.

The implementation of the legal and policy frameworks of the *Comptabiliteitswet* or the IAK mainly takes place at the level of the ministerial policy departments. But even there, only a third of the employees indicate that they are familiar with the IAK. In other words, the importance of the requirements of the IAK for the systematic substantiation of policy has not yet been sufficiently brought to the attention of the civil servants working in the ministerial policy departments.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions, we formulated three recommendations.

Recommendation 1. Support ‘evidence-based’ and ‘informed’ work within the Ministry of JenV.

- 1a. Create a knowledge function within the Ministry of JenV, in the form of knowledge units, which focus explicitly on supporting other civil servants with:
 - identifying and accessing useful sources of scientific research to integrate in their work activities and policymaking.
 - systematically integrating scientific knowledge and practical knowledge in work activities and policymaking.
- 1b. Allocate sufficient resources and time to these knowledge units to make this professional shift, as an expression of the importance the Ministry of JenV attaches to ‘evidence-based/-informed’ work activities and -policymaking.

Recommendation 2. Professionalise and stimulate knowledge-intensive working in the ministry.

- 2a. Stimulate leadership within units (departments) within the Ministry to encourage knowledge intensive work.
- 2b. Create sufficient (financial) capacity to allow civil servants to work ‘evidence-based’ or ‘evidence-informed’.
- 2c. Give explicit attention in personnel policy to recruiting new employees, or promoting existing employees, with competences in the field of ‘evidence-based/ -informed’ work.
- 2d. Invest in increasing the competences of employees to value scientific knowledge and systematically integrate it with practical knowledge, for example, by initiating lifelong learning courses.
- 2e. Initiate follow-up research into the process of ‘evidence-informed’ work activities and -policymaking addressing the question: how can (sometimes contradictory) sources of knowledge be optimally integrated.

Recommendation 3. Strengthen the implementation of frameworks for safeguarding the independence of scientific research and the systematic use of scientific knowledge in work activities and policymaking.

- 3a. It is essential for scientific research to be independent. In the case of the WODC, this independence is safeguarded by a Ministerial guideline and a mutual agreement framework. Make sure that independence is also guaranteed for other scientific research performed on behalf of the Ministry of JenV.
- 3b. Investigate why the Integral Assessment Framework (IAK) is so little used in Ministry practice. Make concrete efforts to improve the application of the Integral Assessment Framework within the ministry.

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