BISA Chatham House October workshop on Africa

1. Far from an expert on Africa – most of my career spent in multilateral and European environments. But in this job and in the past I have reflected a lot on how we make policy, what the analytical basis is for doing so, and how we can use academic and think-tank expertise to its best advantage. Wherever I’ve worked I’ve always found a gap between the two worlds, and at the same time a sense of frustration that we don’t tie them up better.

2. Three themes:
   (i) Why there are differences between the policy and academic world: general
   (ii) Why Africa’s interests might get neglected in policy-making
   (iii) Some of the things we are doing to try to correct this, and some suggestions for what more we can do.

Why there are differences between policy and academic world

3. Starting point – understand inhabit different worlds. Policy is political and seeks to act, often in conditions of imperfect information or with lots of other things going on at the same time; academia seeks to analyse and to explain. It’s good if we are aware of each others’ constraints because the roles are different. Not unique to Africa. Things that are different about the policy world:
   a. Speed of decision-making: Need for quick decisions in policy world – little time for reflection. Got faster over time.
   b. Need to act. And not doing something is often not an option; need for answers/way forward not debate.
   c. Highly oral culture – need to influence by force of personality and quick points, not strength of argument. Papers need to be short and unreflective to influence.
   d. Distraction levels in policy world – hard to maintain focus. Like a searchlight, intense spotlight and then it moves on. FS engagement during the Kenya election crisis, but real slog is often after immediate crisis to consolidate and sustain progress
   e. Time must be right: however serious a problem is, and however good the potential solutions are, you can’t act politically till there is a political problem. Eg failed states after 9/11.
   f. Time: FCO hard pressed officers need convincing there is real added value in eg spending half a day at a seminar - time. This pressure is becoming more acute.

4. So need to rely to a large extent on pre-cooked analysis, by those who really know, when a problem crops up. That can be inside or can be from outside the foreign policy organisation. What’s special about Africa is probably that there are some specifics that make it more difficult to maintain and build up in-house generalist knowledge and interest,

Why might this be the case?

5. Public interest problem. Africa generates a lot of work and is clearly central to several FCO objectives, eg DSO6, but it’s not often in the public limelight. For example, around 70% UNSC time is spent on Africa, but often on areas not on a minister’s or public’s radar. Media
and public opinion is patchy – general indifference but areas of high interest (Zim, or shortlived on anywhere there is a crisis). Anglophone higher up the media scale than Francophone Africa; but overall coverage low. West Africa particularly poorly served. So overall public understanding and interest is low, there is relatively little sustained pressure to deliver results, and issues get downplayed publicly.

6. **Diplomatic career problem.** Some areas to do with diplomatic careers and incentives. In past, ambitious high flyers did not make their career in Africa. That has changed somewhat but although there is committed band of people who seek out Africa work, still generally holds true. It doesn’t help that there’s no language anchor in sub-Saharan Africa on which to base a career.

7. **Africa’s own marginalisation** from some of the issues of most concern today – eg pol mil issues, climate change negotiation, international economy – means that its interests may get neglected in the fora that deal with them. Africa’s voice is often relatively weak on the international stage. Even if they are present their concerns will be different.

**How to deal with this?**

8. **Issue for us** – you never know where you will need expertise, because it’s crises that attract interest. Often policy demanded on areas where not previously actively engaged, so need to quickly build up expertise – reactive rather than proactive. Eg Rwanda post 1994 genocide (never had had a post there); more recently the kidnap of a British national in Mali. Inevitably you have to rely on others.

9. **Things we do already:**
   a. In UK, strong (if thinned-out) RA cadre. No equivalent in any other EU member state. RA – marking 70 years of informing British policy, staffed by specialists, act as institutional memory of FCO, as analysts close to concerns of the policy desk. They also act as a link to outside experts and keep an eye on the latest research and thinking. They do this in part by organising in-house seminars and briefings to which outside experts are invited. This year for example, AfRG has held seminars on Rwanda, the Great Lakes, on the Horn, funded workshop on South Africa in advance of elections, co-funded a human rights seminar on Zimbabwe at Oxford, funded series of roundtables on the Niger Delta, held briefing lunches for outgoing heads of mission, attended the European Africa conference in Leipzig and many other events.
   b. Engagement when we can with academics. Foreign Secretary a week or so ago held a discussion with 12 experts on democratisation around the world.
   c. Strategy Unit – policy orientated, integral part of project process is engagement with academic and other experts. On Africa, SU has done projects on the Horn, DRC and now on West Africa, all of which have involved close working with academia Apart from specific projects, academia also helps influence general approaches – eg Collier’s work on the Bottom Billion and Democracy in Dangerous Places – whether you agree or not, such work does stimulate discussion and provoke thought. There is debate within the Office, not always visible, but does take place.
10. Do we need a little more Africa specialisation in the FCO?
   a. resource constraints – always have to justify time and money spent against priorities.
   b. Key FCO DSO for Africa work is on conflict. But more generally much of HMG focus on Africa is development orientated – poverty alleviation; on which DfID has the lead. Increasing awareness within DfID that this also needs political context, the FCO works closely with DfID on this.
   c. Some signs too that Africa is becoming an arena for geopolitical conflict (once again) this time around natural resources, food security. If so this will bring attention to it again.

Conclusion

11. Both academics and policy makers have to work at getting an effective relationship. More personnel exchanges (cf US system) would help, but hard in our system. [NB One analyst in AfrG is about to take up a one year fellowship at LSE to look at the very question of the interplay between academic research and policy] Particularly important in Africa because we need, for all the reasons above, particular support for us on Africa. But we are working at it.