

Influential Researcher: Dr Jessica Field



Dr Jessica Field is an Early Career Researcher and holds a PhD in Humanitarianism and Conflict Response from HCRI at the University of Manchester. She is currently working as a Humanitarian Adviser for HCRI and Save the Children UK in a co-employed role that seeks to bridge the gap between academia and practice. Previously, Dr Field has worked in the International Division of Scottish Government – first on an ESRC placement scheme and subsequently as a Policy Officer – on developing their India Engagement Plan, wider social policy research, and International Development grant management. Dr Field has also consulted for the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in India for their Aapti programme, which rehabilitated survivors following the 2008 Mumbai terror

attacks.

Why do you want to communicate with public policymakers through your research?

Communicating with public policymakers is important to me for two reasons. Firstly, public policy development lacks critical thinking opportunities, as policymakers are increasingly encouraged to simply show results and do more for less. I want to contribute to bringing that head space back into policy. Secondly, I want to inject the public policy development process with more rigorous academic research so that policy decisions are better informed and more contextualised historically, socially, culturally and politically – all with a view, of course, to enhancing the positive impact and improving the reception of policy changes for those affected.

How have you engaged with public policymakers as a researcher?

I have engaged with policy makers from the early part of my PhD thanks to a Scottish Government placement opportunity afforded by the ESRC (Economic and Social Research Council). Since then I have independently worked within Scottish Government as a Policy Officer, developing their refreshed India Plan (including devising a methodology, conducting a literature review and consultations in Scotland and India). And on the International Development side of the Government I conducted extensive social policy research with a view towards the impact of Independence on the Scottish Government's International Development Team, and in the last year of my work there I undertook grant management support of some of their Malawi development projects.

Since December 2014 I have been working in the Humanitarian Affairs Team of Save the Children UK as part of a partnership with HCRI, and have undertaken critical research that is informing the development of Save the Children's upcoming long-term strategy, World Humanitarian Summit consultations, and engagements with the sector more broadly.

What are the challenges? What practical skills and strategies can help to address these?

Time pressure is the main challenge when working to inform policy, particularly in the NGO sector. Reports and research have to be done yesterday and must have clear, tangible policy recommendations – there is less patience for abstract critical thinking. It is also very difficult to carve time and space exclusively for research as, working within any organisation that has a range of different functions and managerial priorities, there are always immediate tasks that seem to have to be done first – meetings, urgent briefs, general administration, management responsibilities, event

hosting, presentations, etc. Although all of these things contribute to “policy influence” in some senses, they can also distract you from doing the kind of quality work (research and critical thinking) that you wanted to bring into policy in the first place.

Tackling these problems requires things both within and outwith your control. Firstly, good management, and a good relationship with your manager are important so you are able to negotiate space for critical research, thinking and engaging others. This can be less in your control depending on the organisation, and I have been lucky with mine, but it’s also something that can definitely be worked on through early negotiation of roles, responsibilities and personal priorities. Secondly: flexibility, self-discipline and managing your own expectations. As irritating as it can initially seem to pause an important piece of research to do an urgent brief or presentation, it is usually very useful as it keeps you grounded in the policy world with real time concerns, extends your network (and potential audience for more in-depth research) and forces you to be more concise when writing and sharing your own work.

Flexibility is needed for that constant chop and change of responsibility and self-discipline is needed to jump straight back into a critical research project when you have spent some time out doing other things. Managing your own expectations of yourself is another important thing I learnt rather painfully – what you are producing in policy terms will not be as deep, critical and reflective as work on your PhD or academia more generally. Time and resources just don’t allow for it. And that’s ok – as long as you are managing the expectations of others and yourself along the way and scale down methodologies, scope and timescales, rather than cut corners.

How has engagement with policy-makers enhanced your research and your career?

Engagement with policy makers hasn’t just enhanced my career – it now is my career, to be frank. It was not something I intended to do, as I always imagined myself seeking safety, comfort and intellectual stimulation in the dark corners of a dusty university library somewhere and teaching from time to time, but since following this path of policy engagement, I can’t imagine any other.

To begin with, I’m lucky enough to engage with policy makers on issues that I really care about – international affairs. This keeps me enthusiastic about reading and writing even if I have spent a tiresome morning doing some other obligatory task. But as well as keeping me enthusiastic, it has enhanced my research in other ways. For a start I no longer pain so much about putting words onto a blank document to kick-start writing a paper. The policy world forces you to write, and write quickly – this skill has translated well into the academic half of my world. Relatedly, my writing style has improved too – making my academic research more amenable, interesting and useful to wider audiences.

I have also learnt so much in such a short space of time, as I now have to draw on, and engage with, a variety of resources and experts that far exceeds my prior experience in the academic world. This is of course vastly improving the content of my research – even if it feels a little overwhelming sometimes. But more than that... If I can be so bold as to challenge the apparent premise of the question – I think the key transformation is not that my research has improved *per se*, nor that my career will be enhanced as a result; rather, the key transformation I feel working as an academic in the policy world is that my research is more *directed* and *useful*, beyond my own personal research agenda and career. That, to me, is a rewarding achievement.