

“Finding Success in Policy Arenas: An Open Session to Share Experiences and Questions,” an Open Forum at the 2003 SfAA meetings, Portland, OR

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A list of participants is appended at the end of the document.

Note: the discussion was dynamic and flowing. It did not have a fixed structure. These notes reflect that quality, although it has been rearranged to make it somewhat more coherent. Insights useful to any one reader of these notes may be scattered in various places, and themes are mentioned, dropped, and revived throughout the discussion.

1. What is “success”? There are many different levels, from access to strong rulings.

There are different models of policy involvement: advocacy, brokerage, being near the seat of power; but also success can come from an empowerment process, having a strong social movement.

The different levels are really challenging for international policy issues: how well do you represent people in Africa when you are focused on people and frameworks in Washington, D.C.?

Then, there is success at the individual level (individual advocate or issue), and success in promoting the discipline/perspective in an arena.

Another relevant question is how sustainable is the policy “success”?

2. Policy is what is in practice, not just the laws, the legislative language. It is what is in the culture, e.g., of agencies, organizations, movements.

We need a wider idea of policy: collective, public arenas; involves both power and legitimacy. We need to widen our imagination beyond just formal governing agencies of the secular nation-state.

Also see number 4 below.

3. Policy makers seldom read more than five bullet points. Besides what they read, it is helpful to inform them through having them participate in steering committees for research.

The first page is the most important. Please have your facts together, and do it quickly. But it is also good to have stories that really stick in your mind, visuals that really stick in your mind.

By carefully getting the facts together, and presenting them effectively to the key people, you can sometimes change things even in very restrictive situations.

Also, you need to disaggregate the policy discussion. The one-pager is important but not in all situations. We can imagine a matrix, made of levels of policy and types of policy approaches.

One valuable persuasive strategy is presenting the alternatives: here’s the information, here’s the context, and here are the alternatives. These are possible steps, possible outcomes, and how to make it better.

4. If it is not labeled “policy” already, there is room for opportunism--seize the issues! For example, make use of conclusions and recommendations from evaluation research.
5. A particularly important skill is the ability and willingness to communicate with people at all levels. Relax about the academic prestige hierarchy and work with people of different levels.
6. You need to know the “worker bees.” Who drafts legislation? Look for the key legislative aide, the right “policy wonk.” Organizations that have these roles also-- Council of State Governments.
7. Work with advocates; they often have an organizing tactic, linkages. Also, they keep up on the current issues that are being addressed.
InterAction--a clearinghouse for NGOs.
8. Think about the roles of the politician--this person is not an anthropologist. Their information comes from public hearings, letters, listening to advocates, aides.
9. How do we go from “in the books” policy (laws, regulations) to actual performance by agencies, society. A critical area is oversight and monitoring. Documenting inconsistency with the law is a powerful tool. So is bringing into view a good law that is not being used.
10. How can we get policy skills/knowledge into applied anthropology training?
11. The NAPA (National Association for the Practice of Anthropology; <http://www.practicinganthropology.org>) mentoring program is very useful for getting policy skills. It needs both mentors and mentees.
12. There are federal government program internships at BA, MA, and PhD levels, at GAO, Congressional Research Service, etc. These often lead to full-time jobs.

Participants (in no particular order):

Elizabeth Onjoro
Suzanne Hanchett
Nina Sperber
Barbara Pillsbury
Mary Elmendorf
Nora Haenn
Rebecca Severson
Carol Colfer
Jules Delambre
Kevin Preister
Lisa Stahl
Roger Walke
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Andrea Schuman
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