

Ethics and Policy Lab (EPL)

The Ethics and Policy Lab provides the tools and resources to enable knowledge transfer of basic research into public policy. It serves policy-relevant activities and outputs of the Center by translating research findings into policy propositions. Since the application of scientific knowledge to forge solutions to societal problems depends on values, determining the ethical dimensions of research will be key task of the EPL. The aim is that science-based solutions that inform policy will be grounded in insights from a tailored ethical analysis.

Policy is the solution offered by government and administration to societal problems. For the identification of socially-relevant problems and for the development and examination of solutions to these problems, political actors from the political-administrative nexus notionally depend on scientific knowledge and trade-offs between ethical values.

However, so far, the timely transfer of scientific findings as the decision-making basis in the political arena is only partly successful – as has become evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even if the broader public takes notice of research results that would portend urgent political action, these often have slow and limited impact on public policy. While the public and media react primarily to the novelty and surprise value of research results and take them on for information purposes, the political-administrative system has agency to respond to research and its usefulness and feasibility value with policy. The Ethics and Policy Lab will thus augment scientific research findings with ethics investigations that make the connection to policy relevance, and beyond simple science communication formats

Scientific knowledge cannot be the sole guide for political action, because political decisions are incumbent on the existing value framework they are made in. Policy recommendations based on scientific findings, must be conditional on values or at least to be explicit about the values that are presupposed. Therefore, ethics – the rational examination of values – is essential and decisive for the translation and for the interaction between science and policy generally.

The EPL will work alongside the scientific projects and systematically investigate the ethical dimension of research that can be translated into the political sphere as resilient findings. In this regard, it will employ two methodologies of investigation: First, it will explicate the values presupposed by specific research designs and relevant for policy propositions. Second, it will analyze these values and their broader meaning for society by drawing on insights from scholarly research on ethics. The lab will also address ethically-sensitive issues within research in the work packages generally and as they arise, and offer advice on meaningful ethical treatments.

The EPL is first and foremost an institution that provides services to the member of the Center for the knowledge transfer to policy practice. Key tasks in this respect are:

- providing ethical and political feasibility assessments
- identifying policy-relevant research within the Center
- supporting members of the Center in drafting policy recommendations
- providing internal training in ethics and policy design to the members of the center
- developing and teaching classes on the ethics-science-policy interface at the MA/MSc and PhD levels

The EPL will also host basic research on the ethics-science-policy interface. Possible topics include:

- research ethics: ethical constraints on experiments and field research related to infectious diseases
- ethics of public health: triage, allocation of good such as vaccines
- political ethics: side effects of restrictions imposed to reduce infections; coercion vs. voluntariness of measures
- regulation and public acceptance of preparedness measures such as sentinel and data storage
- the politics of nation-wide biodata infrastructures
- the role of scientists in policy-making in health policy in different political system contexts
- the suitability of existing knowledge transfer structures and the potential of scientific lobbying
- democratic crisis management and interdepartmental coordination
- implementability and effectiveness of public health policy and economic relief measures

To relate their work to the EPL, grant proposals are advised to outline how the planned research may result in policy-relevant findings and what ethical issues it involves.

For questions please contact Claus.Beisbart@philo.unibe.ch and fritz.sager@kpm.unibe.ch.