Bridging research and policy in international development: an analytical and practical framework

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Why research – policy links matter

> *'The whole life of policy is a chaos of purposes and accidents. It is not at all a matter of the rational implementation of the so-called decisions through selected strategies'. (Edward Clay, 1984)*

> *'Most policy research on African agriculture is irrelevant to agricultural and overall economic policy in Africa'. (Steve Were Omamo, 2003)*

> *Policy makers 'seem to regard "research" as the opposite of "action" rather than the opposite of "ignorance"'. (Martin Surr, 2002)*

> *'Donor countries spend over US$2bn annually on development research. Is this value for money?' (RAPID Programme, 2003)*

It often seems that researchers, practitioners, and policy makers live in parallel universes. Researchers cannot understand why there is resistance to policy change despite clear and convincing evidence for it. Policy makers bemoan the inability of many researchers to make their findings accessible and digestible in time for policy decisions. Practitioners often just get on with things.

Yet better application of research and evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty, and improve the quality of life. For example, the results of household disease surveys in rural Tanzania informed a process of health-service reforms that contributed to reducing infant mortality in two districts by over 40 per cent between 2000 and 2003.

Indeed, the impact of research and evidence on development policy is not only beneficial – it is crucial. The HIV/AIDS crisis has deepened in some countries because of the reluctance of governments to implement effective control programmes despite clear evidence of what causes the disease and how to prevent it spreading.

What influences research to policy uptake? The RAPID framework

Often, the link between research and policy, or evidence and practice, is viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings or lessons shift from the 'research sphere' to the 'policy sphere', and then has some impact on policy makers' decisions and programmes on

the ground. Reality tends to be much more dynamic and complex, with two-way processes between research, policy, and practice, shaped by multiple relations and reservoirs of knowledge. The traditional question: 'How can research be transported from the research to the policy sphere?' has been replaced by a more complex question: 'Why are some of the ideas that circulate in the research and policy networks picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?'

The theoretical, case-study, and practical work undertaken by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has identified a wide range of inter-related factors that determine whether research-based and other forms of evidence are likely to be adopted by policy makers and practitioners. These factors can broadly be divided into three overlapping areas: the political context; the evidence; and the links between policy and research communities. These reside within a fourth set of factors: the external context. The interplay of these four areas is laid out in Table 1, which illustrates the RAPID framework. The framework should be seen as a generic, perhaps ideal, model. In some cases there will not be much overlap between the different spheres; in others the overlap may vary considerably.

Political context: politics and institutions

Research – policy links are dramatically shaped by the political context. The policy process and the production of research are in themselves political processes from start to finish. Key influencing factors include:

- The extent of civil and political freedoms in a given country.
- Political contestation, institutional pressures, and vested interests.
- Attitudes and incentives among officials, their room for manoeuvre, local history, and power relations.

In some cases the political strategies and power relations are obvious, and are tied to specific institutional pressures. Ideas that are circulating may be discarded by the majority of staff in an organisation if those ideas elicit disapproval from the leadership.

Evidence: credibility and communication

Our findings and experience suggest that the quality of the research is important if it is to affect policy. Influence over policy is affected by topical relevance and, as importantly, the operational usefulness of an idea; it helps if a new approach has been piloted and the resulting document can clearly demonstrate its value as a policy option. A critical factor that affects uptake is whether research has provided a solution to a problem.

The other key set of issues concerns communication. The sources and conveyors of evidence, the way new messages are packaged (especially if they are couched in familiar terms) and targeted, can all make a big difference. For example, marketing is based on the insight that people's reaction to a new product or idea is often determined by the packaging rather than by the content as such. The message is that communication is a very demanding process and it is best to take an interactive approach. Continuous interaction leads to greater chances of successful communication than does a simple or linear approach.

Links: influence and legitimacy

Third, our work emphasises the importance of links – of communities, networks, and intermediaries (for example, the media and campaigning groups) – in affecting policy change. Some of

the current literature focuses explicitly on various types of networks, such as policy communities, epistemic communities, and advocacy coalitions. While systematic understanding remains limited, issues of trust, legitimacy, openness, and the formalisation of networks have emerged as important. Existing theory stresses the role of translators and communicators. It seems that there is often an under-appreciation of the extent and ways that intermediary organisations and networks influence formal policy guidance documents, which in turn influence officials.

External influences

Finally, a synthesis of the RAPID experience emphasises the impact of external forces and donors' actions on research - policy interactions. While many questions remain, key issues here include the impact of international politics and processes, as well as the impact of general donor policies and specific research-funding instruments. Broad incentives, such as EU accession or the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) process, can have a substantial impact on the demand for research by policy makers. Trends towards democratisation and liberalisation, and donor support for civil society, are also having an impact. Much of the research on development issues is undertaken in the North, which raises concerns about relevance and about beneficiaries' access to the findings. A substantial amount of research undertaken in the world's poorest countries is funded by international donors, which also raises a range of issues concerning ownership, whose priorities have prevailed, the use of external consultants, and the perceived legitimacy of the process and outcome. As policy processes become increasingly global, this arena will increase in importance.

However, although evidence clearly matters, there has been very limited systematic understanding of when, how, and why evidence informs policy. The Briefing Paper on which this article is based synthesises the main conclusions of recent ODI work in this area and makes recommendations for how research can better contribute to pro-poor policy and practice (see Table 1).

PRSPs: a case study of research – policy linkages

In September 1999, the World Bank and IMF adopted a new approach to aid – Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). How did this idea come to be adopted? What was the role of research in this process – both 'academic research' in general and the 'applied policy research' within the international financial institutions (IFIs)? An ODI case study traces the various factors that contributed to this far-reaching policy shift.

Political context

The most important contextual factor that shaped the PRSP initiative was the convergence of debates and controversies in the field of international development in the late 1990s. This led to a widespread sense of there being 'a problem' within the policy field even though policy makers did not agree on its exact nature. The challenges that needed to be addressed – particularly by the World Bank and the IMF – included:

- The questioning of the mandates of the IFIs, particularly in the light of the 1997 Asia crisis and the failure of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) to resolve Africa's development problems;

Table 1:   How to influence policy and practice

What you need to know	What you need to do	How to do it
Political • Who are the policy makers? • Is there policy maker demand for new ideas? • What are the sources/strengths of resistance? • What is the policy-making process? • What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?	• Get to know the policy makers, their agendas and their constraints. • Identify potential supporters and opponents. • Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes. • Look out for – and react to – unexpected policy windows.	• Work with the policy makers. • Seek commissions. • Line up research programmes with high-profile policy events. • Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows. • Allow sufficient time and resources.
Evidence • What is the current theory? • What are the prevailing narratives? • How divergent is the new evidence? • What sort of evidence will convince policy makers?	• Establish credibility over the long term. • Provide practical solutions to problems. • Establish legitimacy. • Build a convincing case and present clear policy options. • Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives. • Communicate effectively.	• Build up programmes of high-quality work. • Action-research and pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches. • Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation. • Clear strategy and resources for communication from start. • Face-to-face communication.
Links • Who are the key stakeholders in the policy discourse? • What links and networks exist between them? • Who are the intermediaries and what influence do they have? • Whose side are they on?	• Get to know the other stakeholders. • Establish a presence in existing networks. • Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders. • Build new policy networks.	• Partnerships between researchers, policy makers, and communities. • Identify key networkers and salespeople. • Use informal contacts.
External influences • Who are main international actors in the policy process? • What influence do they have? • What are their aid priorities? • What are their research priorities and mechanisms?	• Get to know the donors, their priorities and constraints. Identify potential supporters, key individuals, and networks. Establish credibility. Keep an eye on donor policy and look out for policy windows.	• Develop extensive background on donor policies. • Orient communications to suit donor priorities and language. • Try to work with the donors and seek commissions. • Contact (regularly) key individuals.

- The 1999 Review of the Heavily-Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and the campaign to make debt relief 'broader, deeper, faster, better';
- The need to put into practice the new conceptual framework for aid put forward by the World Bank President James Wolfensohn in the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF).

The PRSP initiative can be viewed as bringing together all these interlinked concerns, and providing answers or at least partial solutions to the issues that needed to be addressed. It therefore received broad-based support from many different parties.

Evidence

There were three main types of evidence that influenced the emergence of the PRSP initiative. First, academic research contributed, often indirectly, to the major shifts in international development discourse towards poverty reduction, participation, and aid effectiveness. Second, there were important pieces of applied policy research undertaken in the late 1990s, in particular the research related to the ESAF reviews, the HIPC review, the Strategic Partnership with Africa (SPA) Working Groups, and the NGO research on debt relief. This evidence focused more on providing policy recommendations and operational solutions. The evidence was seen as particularly credible when the research had been commissioned by the IFIs or other donors, demonstrated analytical rigour, and was communicated in a language that was accessible and relevant to World Bank and IMF staff and other donor agencies. Third, an extremely powerful demonstration effect was provided by the positive experience of Uganda in drafting the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). This did much to convince policy makers of the feasibility and merits of the poverty-reduction strategy model.

Links

The PRSP story is characterised by a multitude of links between policy makers and researchers within the main institutional actors – the World Bank and IMF, the SPA, the UK and US governments, and the NGO movement. As one interviewee put it, 'none of the players is more than two handshakes away from any of the others'. The formal and informal networks contributed to the speed with which the PRSP ideas were spread and accepted in international development policy.

When does evidence influence policy?

Emerging results from this and a synthesis of the other ODI studies seem to indicate that research-based and other forms of evidence are more likely to contribute to policy if:

- The evidence fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures of policy makers, and resonates with their assumptions, or sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge these assumptions.
- The evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to pressing policy problems, and is packaged to attract policy makers' interest.
- Researchers and policy makers share common networks, trust each other, and communicate effectively.

But these three conditions are rarely met in practice. Although researchers and practitioners can control the credibility of their evidence and ensure they interact with and communicate well with policy makers, they often have only limited capacity to influence the political context

within which they work. Resources are also limited, and researchers and practitioners need to make choices about what they do. By making more informed, strategic choices, researchers can maximise their chances of influencing policy.

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The authors

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