

Bridging research and policy: the RAPID approach

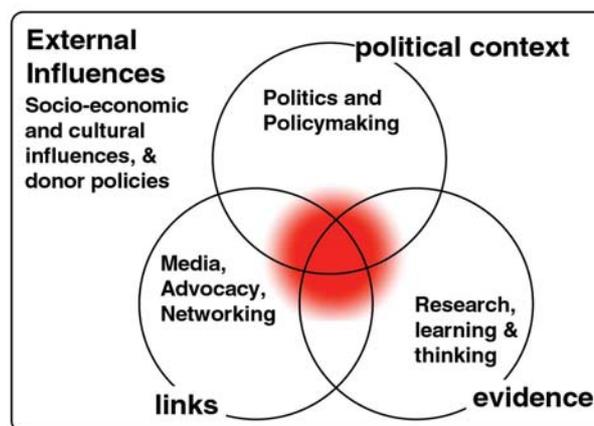
John Young

One former ODI analyst once described agricultural development policy processes as ‘a chaos of purposes and accidents ... not at all a matter of the rational implementation of decisions through selected strategies.’ That may be putting it extremely, but there is growing recognition that policy processes are complex, multidimensional and unpredictable and there is an urgent need to find mechanisms to promote the use of research-based and other forms of evidence in development policy.

The theoretical and case-study research and practical work carried out by RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) over the past three years has led to the development of a framework and practical tools designed to help with this.

The case of animal health services in Kenya illustrates how the framework can be used for assessment and practice. Despite good evidence of the value of local, community-based animal health services, accumulated over the past 20 years, such services remain illegal in Kenya. Why? Why has the government not changed its policies and practice to accommodate and promote them – especially in the more remote regions of the country?

Applying the framework to this situation revealed a complex process where much of the early evidence was generated by NGOs working at grassroots level and was initially invisible to policy makers. Then, just when enough evidence had accumulated to convince policy makers of the value of the approach, the introduction of a veterinary privatisation programme and arrival of a new Director of Veterinary Services more concerned with professional standards and ethics than the delivery of basic services created a new set of political obstacles. Four years later, the gradual spread of community-based services across northern Kenya provoked outrage among the veterinary



The RAPID Framework

profession who regarded them as a threat to the veterinary privatisation programme.

With the issue out in the open, the new Director of Veterinary Services launched a multi-stakeholder process to review veterinary service provision and developed a new policy framework allowing private and community-based veterinary services to co-exist. But despite being involved in the process of developing the new policies, the community-based veterinarians are still opposed by private practitioners, and have still not been ratified.

The framework helps illuminate the errors made. NGOs developing and testing the community-based approaches should have understood the policy context and worked more closely with veterinary policy makers earlier on. They should have collected more empirical data to prove the value and effectiveness of their approach, and to refute concerns that community-based services are unprofessional or threatened the veterinary privatisation programme. A campaign, using this evidence, could have convinced policy makers of the



A community-based veterinarian in India
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value of developing community-based services alongside the new privatisation programme. Involving a wider range of actors in a multi-stakeholder process earlier could have co-opted rather than confronted the veterinary profession.

More positively, the framework can be used to deal with problems before they arise. In January 2004, RAPID ran a workshop for stakeholders in a project aiming to improve access to groundwater for poor farmers in India. Groundwater management falls within the remit of three sectoral policies in India: water, watersheds and forestry. The three sectors have a historical legacy of poor coordination which result in poor implementation on the ground. Many of the policy measures are based on narratives with no science base, including the strong belief among policy makers that planting trees protects water resources. Political considerations and vested interests provide resistance to improved management of land and water conservation measures in watershed projects. The project faces the dual challenge of developing new policy recommendations, and overcoming this resistance to new approaches.

A wide range of researchers, policy makers and practitioners were invited. They used the framework to develop a new strategy for the final phase of the project. In place of further research, this emphasised the evidence they had already generated from pilot project sites and used existing links and networks to convince key policy makers of the need to change their policies. Specific activities included:

- Getting to know the key policy stakeholders, and determining how best to convince them;
- Capitalising on political opportunities offered by the new government and a big bilateral project;
- Taking policy makers to visit the research / demonstration project sites;
- Collaborating more closely with national programmes;
- Arranging workshops, seminars and meetings with key stakeholders;
- Generating appropriate communication materials.

Influencing policy change is an art as much as a science, but there are a wide range of tools that can provide powerful



Participants at the groundwater workshop in India
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insights and help to maximize the chances of research impact on policy. RAPID is currently compiling a 'Policy Entrepreneurs Toolkit', including tools for assessing political contexts, generating and collating evidence, communications, and policy influence.

The changing nature of international development has led to an increasing role for civil society organisations in poverty reduction policy. Experience has shown that when these CSOs are able to assemble and communicate information effectively, they have a significant impact on policy. The RAPID framework suggests that such organisations in the South would be better able to engage with their governments and international institutions if they had a good understanding of how policy processes work and the capacity to generate or access high-quality relevant research. In addition they need to be able to access and participate in Southern and Northern policy networks and able to communicate their concerns in an effective and credible manner.

ODI will be exploring these hypotheses in greater detail over the next few years under a new Partnership Programme Agreement with DFID. Work will focus on the following four outcomes:

- CSOs understanding better how evidence can contribute to pro-poor policy processes;
- Establishing regional capacity to support southern CSOs;
- Making accessible useful information on current development policy issues, and of how it can contribute to pro-poor policy;
- CSOs participating actively in Southern and Northern policy networks.

The RAPID framework provides a mechanism to promote evidence-based development policy. Further work with local organisations, national governments and donors is needed to see how it can generate better policies for achieving the overarching goals of international development: to reduce poverty, alleviate suffering, and save lives.

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