

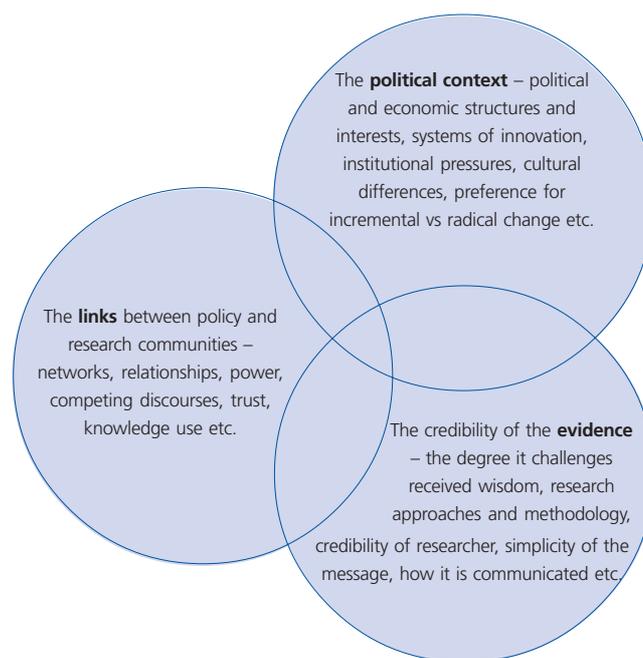
Research and policy: parallel universes?

John Young

Sometimes it seems that researchers and policy makers live in parallel universes. Researchers cannot understand why there is resistance to policy change despite clear and convincing evidence. Policy makers bemoan the inability of many researchers to make their findings accessible and digestible in time for policy decisions. Yet better utilization of research and evidence in development policy and practice can clearly 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 reform which contributed to a 28% reduction in infant mortality in two years. On the other hand, 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. Although evidence clearly matters, there is no systematic understanding of when, how and why evidence informs policy. A better understanding of how research can contribute to pro-poor policies, and systems to put it into practice, are urgently needed.

ODI has been working on these issues for several years. A literature review published in 1999 identified theoretical approaches in political science, sociology, anthropology, international relations and management, and provides a 21-point checklist of what makes policies happen. In 2002, ODI developed a new Framework for understanding research-policy links, and used it to analyse four policy events: the adoption of PRSPs by the World Bank in 1999; the development and adoption of an ethical charter by humanitarian agencies since 1997; animal health policies in Kenya since 1985 and the incorporation of the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach within the DFID White Paper in 1997. ODI also coordinated the collection and analysis of 50 short case studies based on existing knowledge about research-policy links for the Global Development Network "Bridging Research and Policy Project", and has undertaken a wide range of advisory and consultancy work on these topics.

Traditionally, the link between research and policy has been viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings is shifted from the 'research sphere' over to the



'policy sphere', and then has some impact on policymakers' decisions. Opinion is now shifting away from this model towards a more dynamic and complex view that emphasises a two-way process between research and policy, 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 set of questions 'Why are some of the ideas that circulate in the research/policy networks picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?'

The answer seems to lie in a combination of several determining influences, which can broadly be divided into three overlapping areas: the political context; the credibility of the evidence; and the links between policy and research communities (see Figure).

Emerging results from ODI's work so far confirm this, indicating that research is more likely to contribute to evidence-based policy if:

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What researchers need to know	What researchers need to do	How to do it
<p>Political context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who are the policymakers? Is there demand for new ideas? Are there contested views? What is the policy process? What are the opportunities for input into formal processes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get to know the policymakers, their agendas and their constraints. Identify potential supporters and opponents. Prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes. Look out for policy windows. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Take time and resources. Work with the policymakers. Seek commissions Line-up research outputs for high-profile policy events. Reserve resources to be able to respond to policy windows.
<p>Evidence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is the current theory? What are the prevailing narratives? How divergent is the new evidence? What sort of evidence will convince policymakers? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish long-term credibility. Provide practical solutions. Establish legitimacy. Present clear policy options. Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives. Communicate effectively 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Build up respected programmes. Use action-research and pilot projects to demonstrate benefits. Participatory approaches help with legitimacy and implementation. Clear strategy and resources for communication from start.
<p>Links:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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? Who side are they on? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get to know the other stakeholders. Establish a presence in existing networks. Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders. Build new policy networks. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships between researchers, policymakers and communities. Identify key networks and sales people. Use informal contacts.

- it fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures of policy makers, and resonates with their ideological assumptions, or sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge those limits;
- the evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to current policy problems, and is packaged to attract policymakers interest;
- researchers and policy makers share common networks, trust each other, honestly and openly represent the interests of all stakeholders and communicate effectively.

But these three conditions are rarely met in practice, and although researchers can control the credibility of their evidence and ensure they interact with and communicate well with policy makers, they often have limited capacity to influence the political context within which they work, especially in less democratic countries.

So what should researchers do if they want to achieve policy impact? Evidence from ODI's work so far provides preliminary recommendations in three areas (see Box). First, there are some things researchers need to know about the political context, issue area (evidence) and key actors and networks (links). Second, there are some things researchers need to do in each of these areas. Third, some clear evidence is emerging about the most effective way to go about things.

ODI's work so far has focused on practical, policy-relevant research, so it is perhaps not surprising that our results indicate that policy-relevant think-tanks, do-tanks and operational agencies have more policy impact than more academic research. It is clear from ODI's four case studies that new ideas from academic research, and less policy-constrained thinking do contribute enormously to the general discourse within which policy decisions are made. We need to know more about this.

We also need to know more about how different political contexts influence research-policy links, especially in less democratic countries; about how different types of networks and policy communities influence policymakers, and about how international donor policies influence national policy imperatives.

There is much more to be done. Over the next two years the RAPID Programme will work with policymakers, researchers and practitioners to undertake further research, and to develop practical guidelines on how to improve the uptake of research in different development policy contexts.