

## Impact on Policy: what can Researchers do?

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 reforms 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 provided 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.

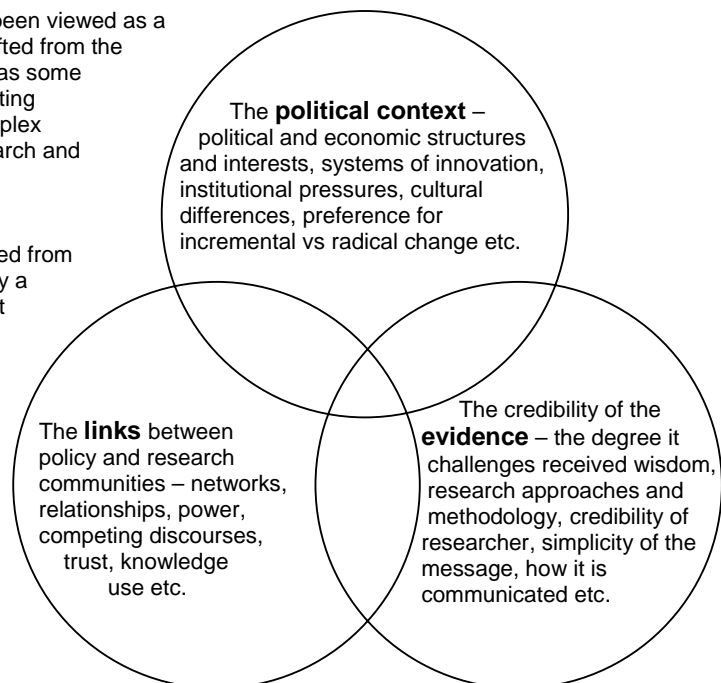
Traditionally, the link between research and policy has been viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings is shifted from the 'research sphere' over to the 'policy sphere', and then has some impact on policy-makers' decisions. Opinion is now shifting away from this model towards a more 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 question: '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.

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

- i. 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;
- ii. the evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to current policy problems, and is packaged to attract policy-makers interest;
- iii. 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. Resources are also limited, and researchers need to make choices about what they do.

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. 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.

Some of these are summarised in the following table:

What researchers need to know	What researchers need to do	How to do it
<p><b>Political Context:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Who are the policymakers?</li> <li>▪ Is there policymaker demand for new ideas?</li> <li>▪ What are the sources / strengths of resistance?</li> <li>▪ What is the policy-making process?</li> <li>▪ What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Get to know the policymakers, their agendas and the constraints they operate under.</li> <li>▪ Identify potential supporters and opponents.</li> <li>▪ Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes.</li> <li>▪ Look out for – and react to – unexpected policy windows.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Work with the policy makers.</li> <li>▪ Seek commissions.</li> <li>▪ Line up research programmes with high-profile policy events.</li> <li>▪ Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows.</li> <li>▪ Allow sufficient time &amp; resources</li> </ul>
<p><b>Evidence:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ What is the current theory?</li> <li>▪ What are the prevailing narratives?</li> <li>▪ How divergent is the new evidence?</li> <li>▪ What sort of evidence will convince policymakers?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Establish credibility over the long term.</li> <li>▪ Provide practical solutions to problems.</li> <li>▪ Establish legitimacy.</li> <li>▪ Build a convincing case and present clear policy options.</li> <li>▪ Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives.</li> <li>▪ Communicate effectively.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Build up respected programmes of high-quality work.</li> <li>▪ Action-research and Pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches.</li> <li>▪ Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy &amp; implementation.</li> <li>▪ Clear strategy and resources for communication from start.</li> <li>▪ Real communication – “seeing is believing”.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Links:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Who are the key stakeholders in the policy discourse?</li> <li>▪ What links and networks exist between them?</li> <li>▪ Who are the intermediaries and what influence do they have?</li> <li>▪ Whose side are they on?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Get to know the other stakeholders.</li> <li>▪ Establish a presence in existing networks.</li> <li>▪ Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders.</li> <li>▪ Build new policy networks.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Partnerships between researchers, policy makers and communities.</li> <li>▪ Identify key networkers and salesmen.</li> <li>▪ Use informal contacts.</li> </ul>

ODI's case studies show how new ideas from academic research, and less policy-constrained thinking contribute to the general discourse within which policy decisions are made, and how practical, policy-relevant research and pilot projects can directly influence policy. Think-tanks, do-tanks and operational agencies have more immediate policy impact than more academic research.

We 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; about multi-polar international decision-making; 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 policy-makers, 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.

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