

Promoting evidenced-based development policy

This presentation will focus around two key areas in the promotion of evidence-based development policy:

- 1) How research funders can strengthen research-to-policy linkages
- 2) Using communication and research reporting services to disseminate findings and policy recommendations.

While the RAPID “Context, Evidence and Links” analytical framework provides a useful way of thinking about promoting evidence-based development policy and practical strategies aimed at researchers, the roles played by research funders and communication & research reporting services are crucial in research-to policy linkages.

The points made here aren't definitive but are designed to stimulate discussion around how research funders and the use of development communications and research reporting services can promote evidence-based policy.

This is informed by my experience as a development researcher, having conducted a consultancy on Knowledge Management in Research for DFID's Education Department and worked for a number of years (until recently) as a writer and editor with the id21 development research reporting service.

How can research funders strengthen research to policy linkages?

Whereas the RAPID framework focuses on how researchers can influence policy and practice, I want to highlight what research funders - specifically DFID – can do to improve the links between development research and policy and practice. DFID's new research strategy and newly-centralised research funding provides an opportunity to strengthen these linkages, and to formulate a consistent approach across all sectors of development research.

These findings are taken largely from a 2002 survey commissioned by DFID of UK-based researchers working on education in developing countries and id21 subscribers. They have been selected, however, for their general applicability:

- 1) Improved consultation on research priorities with stakeholders in the South – The need to focus as much on research processes as on research products, and to involve a greater range of stakeholders in identifying research priorities and in knowledge production. For research to be pro-poor it needs to involve poor people. Improved consultation with developing countries and research users in the South at the outset of the research process – both in terms of scope and mechanisms – will strengthen the demand-responsiveness of research commissioned.
- 2) Making the research funding process more open to researchers/institutions in the South - More equal research partnerships between North and South. Make the research funding process more accessible to researchers/institutions in the South by advertising more widely in developing countries and providing adequate timeframes from invitations to proposal submission for researchers in the South to respond. Fostering more equal partnerships will strengthen research capacity in the developing countries (and well as in the North), increase the sustainability of context-sensitive knowledge production and the potential of locally-generated research to influence policy and practice.

- 3) 'Best practice' guide to dissemination/outreach activities – Research funders could issue researchers with a 'best practice' guide (perhaps a RAPID output?) at the proposal stage of commissioning research. Not only should dissemination/outreach activities geared towards influencing policy and practice form an integral part of proposal assessment but they should also be monitored and evaluated throughout the duration of the project.
- 4) Improving the accessibility of research findings and recommendations for policy and practice – Locating research reports and summaries for ease of accessibility on funders' websites – by country and by theme. Also, a database of projects being funded currently. Policy analysis reports at the country office level to be available on central websites. Greater centralisation of information would promote institutional memory, often lost after advisors change posts.

Using communication and research reporting services to disseminate findings and policy recommendations

The RAPID framework outlines broad strategies and useful checklists of activities that researchers can employ to maximise the potential policy impact of their research. When it comes to communicating research findings and policy recommendations to a wide audience, however, UK development researchers face an incentive problem in that they are time-squeezed and assessed by their output of papers published in peer-reviewed journals. Despite these constraints many researchers do conduct a range of effective dissemination and outreach activities, but increasingly communication and research reporting services are providing new pathways for dissemination.

It's difficult to talk about communication and research reporting services in general – as they have proliferated in recent years and vary considerably in terms of products and services - so I'm going to draw on id21 as a case study which since it was established in 1997 has developed a reputation as an effective communicator of UK-funded development research.

Hosted at IDS and funded by DFID, at present id21 is subdivided into four subject strands – Society & Economy, Health, Education and Urban Poverty with a fifth – Natural Resource and Rural Livelihoods to be launched shortly. All four produce their own subject specific versions of id21's principal products:

- Research Highlights – summaries of the latest UK-funded development research, written in a jargon-free style, quality checked by authors to ensure that key research findings and recommendations are emphasised, links to the original research reports where possible, and made available through a freely accessible and searchable online database.
- Insights – a regular and thematic print product, mailed to a worldwide distribution list, as well as made available online.
- id21News – a bi-weekly subscription email alert service providing tasters of the latest research highlights and links to the summaries in full.

Lessons from id21 include:

- To engage a wider audience beyond other researchers – including policy-makers, practitioners and the media - research needs to be communicated in an easy-to-read and concise format.
- Use a variety of channels to emphasise key research findings and policy recommendations.
- Tailor products to target audiences – get feedback from users and potential users.