

Impact on Policy: what can researchers and practitioners do?

Background

Sometimes it 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. 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 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 over 40% reductions in infant mortality between 2000 and 2003 in two districts. 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.

A Theoretical Framework

ODI has been working on these issues for several years. Traditionally, the link between research and policy, or evidence and practice has been viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings or lessons is shifted from the 'research sphere' over to the 'policy sphere', and then has some impact on policy-makers' decisions and practical programmes. Opinion is now shifting away from this model towards a more dynamic and complex view that emphasises a two-way process 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 has been replaced by a more complex question: 'Why are some of the ideas that circulate in the research/policy networks picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?'

ODI's theoretical and case study work since then has identified a wide range of inter-related factors, which determine whether research-based and other forms of evidence are likely to be adopted by policymakers and practitioners. These factors can broadly be divided into three overlapping areas: the political context; the credibility of the evidence; and the links between policy and research communities, within a fourth set of factors: the external context. Some of these factors are shown in Figure 1: ODI's Policy Process Framework. ODI has used this framework extensively:

- to analyse four major policy events: the adoption of PRSPs; the development of an ethical charter by humanitarian agencies; animal health policies in Kenya; the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach

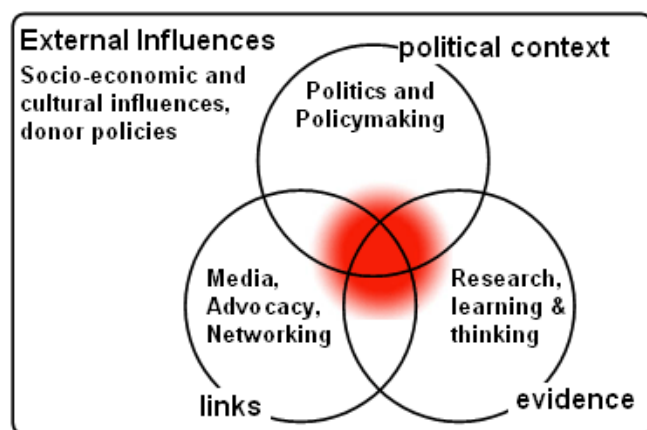


Fig 1 – ODI's Policy Process Framework

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- to analyse 50 summary cases studies as part of Phase I of the GDN Bridging Research and Policy Project (Court and Young, 2003);
 - to structure literature reviews focusing on communications issues, knowledge management, the role of Civil Society Organizations, and networks;
 - a study of research-policy interaction in HIV/AIDS in developing countries
 - evaluations of the impact of internal policy papers on bilateral donor policy; and
 - workshops and seminars with researchers, practitioners and policy makers in Botswana, Morocco, India, Moldova, Kenya, UK and USA.

Animal Health Services in Kenya

The Animal Health Services in Kenya study illustrates how the framework can be used to understand how policies emerge. 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 grass-roots 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 arrival of a new Director of Veterinary Services created a new set of political obstacles. It took

another four years during which the approach spread throughout northern Kenya to force the issue out in the open, and a multi-stakeholder process to develop a new policy framework. Which is still opposed by private practitioners, and have still not been ratified.



Using the framework it is easy to see what should have been done. NGOs developing and testing the new approach should have worked more closely with veterinary policy makers earlier on. They should have collected more empirical data to prove the value and effectiveness of the approach, and a campaign, using this evidence, could

have convinced policy makers of the value of developing community-based services alongside the new privatisation programme.

When does evidence influence policy?

Emerging results from this and the other ODI studies seems to indicate that research-based and other forms of evidence 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 assumptions, or sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge them;
- 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, represent the interests of all stakeholders and communicate effectively.

But these three conditions are rarely met in practice, and 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 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.

What should they do?

Evidence from ODI's work so far provides preliminary recommendations in four areas. First, there are some things researchers need to know about the political context within which they are working, the issue they are working on (the evidence) and the other key actors and networks involved in the same geographical and sectoral area (the 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 Table 1: How to Influence Policy and Practice:

What you need to know	What you need to do	How to do it
<p>Political Context:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Who are the policymakers? ▪ Is there policymaker 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? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Get to know the policymakers, 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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 & resources
<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 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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 & implementation. ▪ Clear strategy and resources for communication from start. ▪ Face-to-face communication.
<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? ▪ Whose 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, policy makers and communities. ▪ Identify key networkers and salesmen. ▪ Use informal contacts.
<p>External Influences:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ 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.

Table 1: How to influence policy and practice

Groundwater management in India

In early 2004, ODI 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 policymakers 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 faced 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:

- Engaging with the key policy makers, and determining how best to convince them
- Capitalising on political opportunities offered by the new government and bilateral projects
- 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.

Practical tools for policy entrepreneurs

The range of activities described in Table 1 highlight the fact that although high quality research is an essential re-requisite for evidence-based policy, successful policy entrepreneurs need a wide range of other skills. ODI's Policy Entrepreneur Questionnaire identifies four essential skills: storytelling, networking, engineering (building coherent programmes) and "fixing" (political maneuvering). The worlds of marketing, management, lobbying, communication and the media provide a wide range of well-developed tools that researchers and practitioners can to help with most of these. ODI is currently compiling some of these into a 'Policy Entrepreneurs Toolkit' for researchers and practitioners that want to increase the impact of their work on policy and practice. The toolkit will include tools for assessing political contexts, generating and collating evidence, effective communication, lobbying, marketing and policy advocacy. ODI is testing these approaches and tools with researchers and practitioners in local organisations, national governments and donors is to see if they can help to ensure generate better policies for achieving the overarching goals of international development: to reduce poverty, alleviate suffering, and save lives.