

## The Political Context in Developing Countries

Julius Court – Does Evidence Matter? – ODI – 07 May 2003

The good news is that evidence can matter. The bad news is that it often does not. We often highlight the case of HIV/AIDS where despite very clear evidence about the disease, policy makers, particularly in the South, have ignored the implications. That has led us to what we think is the key question: not whether evidence matters, but when evidence matters. Particularly for developing countries, we think there is a need for a much more systematic understanding of these issues. This is where the Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme and the Global Development Network's bridging research and policy project has come from and it represents a major effort to look at this.

I will be talking about some work that John Young and I did which synthesised fifty case studies collected from the Global Development Network (GDN) project. An executive summary has been released and the research is in press at the moment and will be available on the ODI website in the near future. I will talk about the main findings, that context is crucial in determining when evidence does matter, I will highlight three sets of issues relating to the fact that there is still a lot which we do not know in this area and point to some next steps.

So, where did this all come from? The first issue is that there is a huge amount of anecdotal evidence, from policy-makers, researchers from ODI and so on, who have been highlighting that there is a gap between research and policy, but we do not have any systematic evidence on it yet. The second is that we have a huge amount of theory which is based on the study of the OECD countries and when we came to look at this area, we found that the development sector, not surprisingly, was rather distinct and that a lot of the theory and practice which you can use in the North did not apply. We highlight three issues in that regard: the diversity of Southern context; the issue of capacity; and particularly crucial, that there are a different set of relevant issues, reflected in the research of the World Bank and ODI for example, compared to those that matter in the North.

I want to emphasise that this is an exploratory piece of work which is part of a much bigger project and we are highlighting issues that we want to take forward and would welcome feedback on them.

The case studies are from all parts of the world. There are positive cases where research has fed into policy and we also have a lot of cases where it has not. We have asked the case study authors to highlight the reasons why.

We use a framework which does not just cover the political context but also looks at the evidence and the interaction between researchers and policy-makers about the growing group of non-governmental and other organisations in the middle that Vincent Cable spoke of, who mediate that interaction. Finally I will say a bit about external influences because we think this is an area which needs a lot more work.

We had fifty case studies of which I will outline five, to give you a flavour of the types of things which were in them. The first one is a case study from India regarding research on rice. The researchers had piloted the use of paddy rice production. This was a negative example, where the research fed the policy-makers' ideology that this kind of technology could be applied throughout the state in India, when actually it only applied to a very specific area where the researchers had tested it. Because it fit with their ideology and because it looked like a successful pilot, it was immediately pulled up, despite the fact that when it came to implementation it fell apart and yields plummeted in other areas where they tried it.

The second case was funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) and was regarding rainwater harvesting in Tanzania. Policy-makers' initial view of rainwater was as a threat, regarding flooding. Researchers over a fifteen or twenty year period have done studies on the ground showing how rainwater can be harvested. Because it has worked on the ground and fed upwards, the narrative has been completely turned around so that rainwater is no longer seen as a threat but much more positively and the President of Tanzania is highlighting this technology as one that should be promoted further.

The third case was in Indonesia. There were a lot of cases, in Indonesia and Peru in particular, where massive regime created entry points for all kinds of policy changes with all kinds of issues that can be changed. John Young was involved in this case study so can talk further about it.

The next case was in Kenya. Kenya has taken a large step forward in the past year, but previously we had the case of animal healthcare where the technology or approach of para-vets in arid areas had been blocked for twenty years because of vested interests in the bureaucracy, despite the fact that it was incredibly useful.

The last case study really highlights that when it comes to the crunch, it is the issue of implementation that matters. I will come back to that.

Not surprisingly, we found that context was the crucial issue when looking at the uptake of evidence into policy. It did not really matter whether it was a democratic or less democratic context, wherever you were, issues of context were the most critical in affecting whether research or evidence was pulled up. We do think that evidence is used more in a democratic system but we think that this is an area which needs more work. What was surprising to us was not that the policy process is not linear – I think that everyone believes that at the moment – but that even though people know that, they act as though they were linear. And we are not quite sure why that is. It is amazing that everyone says that the policy process is not linear, it is not rational, yet when we act as researchers or as non-governmental organisations, the assumptions that are being made show that it is taken as linear.

This issue of volatility works both ways. You have cases in Indonesia and Peru where the uptake was great after these changes in regime. It works the other way too: we had a fascinating case from Iran where the policy-makers changed and the link between researchers and policy-makers which had worked very well in the past was basically thrown out of the window. I think the last point is rather obvious: that it is difficult to change this set of issues.

So what matters? When we looked at our case studies, two issues seemed to come back repeatedly: issues of demand and issues of contestation. What we saw as demand was direct policy-maker demand. If Vincent Cable commissions a piece of research, for example, it is much more likely to get into policy than if John Young or I commission it. So if there is a policy demand, it makes a big difference. Secondly, policy-makers do not have a monopoly on knowledge and there are other people in society who can look at issues, perceive a demand and focus on a problem and that can generate a policy demand but it does not always happen. So we distinguish between policy-maker demand and societal demand.

The second huge set of issues was to do with contestation. We divided that up and there were two crucial issues here. The first were issues of ideology, the kind of issue that came out in Joseph Stiglitz' book where he talks about the politics and ideology in the World Bank overriding evidence in decision-making. Secondly the issue of narrative, which came out in the case of Tanzania. If policy-makers were on the wrong narrative, there are certain things which you can do to shift it, but if you come from beyond their narrative, it is very hard to engage them in policy change.

The issue of vested interests is rather straight forward. A very broad summary of what we came out with is that essentially, in cases where there was policy change, it was to do with issues of demand and issues of contestation. The questions then are about how you change demand or reduce the contestation. Evidence can matter, it does not always.

Briefly, since this will mostly be known to many in this room, we always emphasise that understanding the policy process is crucial. Targeting when meetings are happening, when votes are happening and when the framework is being set and engaging at that point means you are much more likely to have an impact on policy than if you do not.

We found in a lot of cases that there was much more uptake of evidence during crisis. This issue is particularly important in the literature. Kingdom talks about 'policy windows'. They are incredibly difficult to spur but once you feel that you are in one, that is the time to go after it and that is when you are likely to have a policy change.

We have all these cases where there was a change of context and where researchers went in and actually did manage to change policy in quite dramatic ways. I would encourage you to have a look at some of these specific cases. I am doing a fifteen minute whirl through them, but some of the specific ones are fascinating and they are on the Global Development Network website.

Here I am going to concentrate on the issues of implementation. We distinguished between public policy-making, for example as in Parliament and what is happening on the ground. When it comes to the crunch, most people's

engagement with the policy process is through 'street-level bureaucrats' as they are described in the literature - healthcare or police and so on which make up the interactions that normal people have. Obviously this brings issues of bureaucratic incentives and pressures.

I want to highlight two points in particular. We found that changing the process was as important as changing the policy. In India we had a case where everything had been tried to get over a problem to do with management of eco-systems. Money had been thrown at it with absolutely no impact, but once they tried a participatory approach, it all fell into place. Another example is from the Philippines where they had some new evaluation indexes and again, using evidence and a more open participatory approach, they changed policy quite dramatically and improved outcomes, which is the ultimate goal. The second point (and we found this more in developing countries) is that policy seems to change on the ground quicker than it changes in parliament or in public policy-making. The Tanzania study emphasised this, where an approach had spread in a number of rural areas and was beginning to spread through word of mouth and being promoted by NGOs. It was only once it had worked and policy-makers began to pick it up that it got elevated to national policy. Again, the case of the paravets here in Kenya was instructive. It had spread all throughout the arid parts of northern Kenya, despite the fact that it was illegal (it is still illegal but quite widespread). So you have a distinction there between policy on the ground or policy implementation and the official policy.

Two points about theory. Some of the existing theory is useful. The work on social epidemics and tipping points by Gladwell is a gripping read and absolutely great and some other sources are good. The main point though is that we found existing theory was rather limited in a development context.

## **Six Strategic Issues**

This does not compete with the five 's's', but these the six issues which came out of our work. They are not quite recommendations or conclusions but they are issues which I think we would put out for discussion.

The first is that you have to be very aware of the level of the policy-maker that you are going after. If you have a macro-context which is a disaster, as in Zimbabwe, you have no choice but regime change if you want the use of research in policy, there is no other way. Whereas in other cases, for example, in the United Kingdom, we would say that on crime, despite being a democratic process, you do not have the uptake of research into policy. Again, this is very broad brush stroke but that is a distinction we would make and are looking at.

The second issue is to do with political strategy and these are the issues of demand and contestation that I mentioned and whether you would want to try to generate policy-maker demand or whether you are going to work on an issue which is more pertinent to society but which has not quite fed into the policy-making yet.

The third set of issues is to do with the way that politicians view evidence. This is a quote that I have pulled out of the Department for International Development's research report, talking about policy-makers within the Department: 'they often view research as the opposite of action rather than the opposite of ignorance'. On the other hand, DFID are frustrated with the evidence they receive from researchers – hence the review. This is a dimension of things that needs to be looked at and exactly the aim of the RAPID programme.

There is an issue of whether you engage top level policy-makers or whether you engage street-level bureaucrats. These are all slightly banal because it depends on the type of context you are in. What I am doing is putting them out for discussion.

The next set of issues are to do with processes. I have said that in a lot of our cases, a participatory approach has worked very well. In other cases that may not be the best way forward. If time is limited, if the decision is happening tomorrow, you cannot work in that way and you have to go through insider influencing, if you can.

The issue of timing and speed has been made quite forcefully and whether you go for these decisive moments or whether you have time to work up programmes, as has happened in Tanzania, or very interestingly in Ukraine - a very tricky political environment but they had piloted some work there on economic clusters and this had worked very well and was absorbed by policy-makers.

## **What we don't know?**

There are three sets of issues where we think more work is needed and which we are beginning to look at. Essentially, the context is changing very rapidly in developing countries and the critical issues are the democracy type issues and the much greater involvement in policy-making of NGOs and the private sector and crucial changes like that which are having an impact, the outcome of which we do not quite know at the moment. We are

having glimpses of what the impact might be but we are not quite sure yet. The key issue is that there is an increased role for research institutes and for the use of evidence in policy. We have found that some of these big incentives like European Union succession, PRSP processes, the WTO etc, were very important in getting policy-makers to use research more – they wanted to know what it would mean and were sucking up all kinds of use of evidence. We also had interesting cases where donors were trying to change. The Department for International Development is obviously one of them with the new research policy.

The real critical issues are how can you promote evidence use in policy-making from outside. In some cases it gives it a huge amount of credibility but in others policy-makers will reject it simply because it has come from outside. There a whole set of issues there that we are looking at through the Global Development Network project that will be crucial and we are simply not quite sure what works in different contexts.

The third set I have talked about. We know that in an open political system you can gather and communicate evidence. We know that in a democratic system preferences are aggregated and there are structures for aggregating these preferences and resolving conflicts, but in less democratic countries (which is a lot of the ones we have to work with), we are really not quite sure yet what you have to do to engage policy process.

So, future directions: the Global Development Network call is incredibly broad and diverse, it is a million dollar project which is massive and will be taking these issues further. One of the specific areas that we are quite interested in – it is one of the strategic dimensions that I have been talking about – is that we want to know much more about, and develop a taxonomy of contexts and work out what kind of evidence is pulled up in these different contexts and what are the critical issues.

One of the most interesting things I think we are going to be doing is a study on HIV/AIDS where the gap is perhaps the biggest between research and policy and also where the gap has the biggest implications. The final point is that we want to work much more with non-governmental organisations and with policy-makers. This phase has been research and we will be doing workshops in the future with both of those sets of people both in the North and in the South. If anyone wants to help guide us through this mine-field we would be very grateful.

Thank you.