

Report of CSOs, Evidence and Policy: A Workshop with Mexican and Central American Researchers

ODI, Wednesday 22nd June, 2005

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) held a one day workshop on the roles of CSOs, evidence and policy with a group of Mexican and Central American researchers in June. The workshop was designed to allow participants to present case studies, discuss their own experiences in trying to influence policy as well as to learn new strategies or techniques that might be useful to them. The workshop included a presentation by ODI's Director, Simon Maxwell (SM), who was asked to give a short presentation on running think tanks. Time was also allocated, particularly during lunch, to informal conversations.

The Workshop Agenda is outlined below:

- 10:00 – 10:20 General introductions of participants and their work; introduction to ODI, RAPID and the CSPP
- 10:20 – 11:00 Presentation of the RAPID framework highlighting the background theories on policy processes and research leading to the development of the RAPID framework and toolkit followed by discussion
- 11:00 – 11:15 Case studies of policy influence. Sharing of experience of specific examples where research has influenced policy. For instance, the TEHIP, Coalition 2000 (anti-corruption network in Bulgaria), DELIVERI and animal health in Kenya
- 11:15 – 11:30 Participants case studies. What seems to work in Latin America
- 11:30 – 11:45 Coffee break
- 11:45 – 12:00 Participants case studies. What seems to work in Latin America
- 12:00 – 13:00 Simon Maxwell on managing a think tank and the 2005 + development agenda (maybe something on global networking) and discussion
- 13:00 – 14:30 Lunch and informal discussions
- 14:30 – 15:45 Needs assessment: what do you think you need (resources and skills) to be more successful?
Brainstorm discussion in the plenary
- 15:45 – 16:00 Final discussion: how can we help you?
Brainstorm discussion

The Participants

1. Ileana Gomez, [PRISMA](#), El Salvador
2. Nelson Cuellar, [PRISMA](#), El Salvador
3. José Luis Rocha, [Instituto de Investigacion y Desarrollo Nitlapán](#), Nicaragua
4. Joaliné Pardo, Foro para el Desarrollo Sostenible, Mexico
5. Gabriela de la Mora, Concejo Civil Mexicano para la Silvicultura Sostenible, Mexico
6. Catarina Illsley, [Grupo de Estudios Ambientales](#), Mexico
7. Pedro Torres, [Red de Desarrollo Sostenible](#), Honduras
8. Nidia Tec, Protropico, Mexico
9. Iliana Moterroso, [FLACSO](#), Guatemala
10. Denise Humphreys, [IDPM](#), UK
11. Tony Bebbington, [IDPM](#), UK
12. Simon Maxwell, [ODI](#), UK
13. Enrique Mendizabal, [ODI](#), UK
14. John Young, [ODI](#), UK

The Workshop

John Young (JY) and Enrique Mendizabal (EM) from ODI facilitated the workshop, which was conducted in Spanish and English.

JY welcomed the participants and introduced them to the workshop agenda. There was a brief round of introductions where each participant offered a short description of their work. EM then presented an introduction to the ODI, the [RAPID](#) programme and the Civil Society Partnership Programme ([CSPP](#)). EM's presentations were made in Spanish, and also included the background on the policy process and the introduction of the [CEL framework](#). JY talked about the CEL Practical framework in more detail and discussed its different components as well as emphasising its [practical use](#). Towards the end of the session, there was a brief discussion on some policy impact and policy analysis [tools](#).

Just before and after the morning coffee break, EM and JY presented four case studies to show how CSOs can use evidence to influence policy processes or how policymakers make use of evidence themselves. The case studies were the [Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Programme](#) (TEHIP), the anti corruption [Coalition 2000](#) in Bulgaria, [animal health care](#) in Kenya (paravets) and the [DELIVERI](#) project in Indonesia.

The participants were then asked to present their own case studies or examples of the problems they faced when trying to influence policy.

Case study 1: Ms. Joaliné Pardo (JP) presented a very interesting case study of an informal network of small local NGOs in Chiapas (Mexico) that had come together in response to a negative policy. JP described how the various NGOs working in the region were involved in different areas of work but none worked holistically. Hence, knowledge was randomly scattered across them.

Coming together had forced them to systematically put together the different parts of the puzzle. However they lacked the capacity to do the same for all the other areas in which the NGOs worked and to use that knowledge to influence policy at the national and global level.

An interesting aspect of the network is that JP's NGO has gradually moved from the periphery to the centre, adopting the role of facilitators. JP recognised that this is not enough. They need to become, firstly, filters to better organise the knowledge embedded in the different NGOs that make up the network, then amplifiers to reach out to other groups, and finally, convenors to be able to engage and work with other interested parties within, but in particular, outside Chiapas.

Case study 2: Ms. Ileana Gomez's (IG) case study was about a successful experience in advocacy and influence in the natural resources sector. Faced with a new legislation on natural resources that was too conservative about the role of local peoples, [PRISMA](#) and other CSOs had little time to carryout proper in-depth research. Rather, they collected practical evidence and presented alternatives for each of the articles in the new legislation. They did this using a simple comparative matrix.

Furthermore, they focused on two articles, one that dealt with the categories of natural resource management and another on the settlements living within the protected areas. Focusing on these articles and presenting plausible alternatives gave them access to the Parliament's commission on environment and health. Their arguments were backed by international opinions as well as already recognised sources or research (particularly those being used by the government elsewhere).

This experience opened a door for PRISMA who now meet regularly with parliamentarians to brief them on important issues. The key lessons of this case are the need to be specific and offer practical alternatives, to use evidence from credible sources and offer comparisons and to take advantage of social networks.

Case study 3: Ms. Catarina Illsley (CI) presented a case study of an ongoing process of trying to cope with the effects of a particular policy while at the same time trying to change it. She described the case of the Mezcal plant (of which its most popular product is Tequila) that has been grown in Mexico by indigenous peoples for thousands of years. In line with the government's policies of expert promotion, the Mescal is being industrialised via a series of policies that promote large scale homogenisation of the product rather than small scale artisanal production.

CI's NGO ([Grupo de Estudios Ambientales](#)) is providing small scale farmers with technical support to access markets with an artisanal product. They want to show that this is a plausible alternative that could be taken up in other Mezcal producing regions of Mexico. Unfortunately, they do not have sufficient resources to add policy advocacy to their work. On the other hand, the strategy of pursuing a successful pilot project can have an important effect not only on policymakers but also on other Mezcal producing communities who might want to follow this approach. These, in turn, might provide sufficient leverage for policy change.

Simon Maxwell, ODI's Director, then had the opportunity to share some of the challenges faced by the director of a think tank in London. He talked about the four types of [policy entrepreneurs](#) (storytellers, networkers, fixers and engineers) and the changing context of the global policy process. He talked about the importance of engaging with the media and the different strategies that ODI has taken over the years, and in particular over the last year to participate in the run up to the 2005 agenda (the G8, the UK's presidency of the EU, the MDGs summit and the [Africa Commission's report](#)). He highlighted the need for more untied funds, particularly those intended for programmes like the CSPP which constitute core funding for long term change.

After lunch, the workshop focused on the identification of the constraints and/or challenges faced by Mexican and Central American research institutions. This session of the workshop was carried out in the form of brainstorming in which all participants were given the opportunity to voice the needs of their institutions using colour cards. These needs were then grouped into categories. These, and some of the specific challenges or needs, are shown below:

Group	Detail
More un-tied funds	
Be able to carryout impact assessments	
Networking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More effective networking • Capacity to manage and fund networks
Sharing knowledge and evidence with others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share cases and stories • Exchange ideas • Learn from others
Knowledge management internally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge management for learning • Methods and tools
Access information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access quality information • Access to databases of policy analysis • Access to scientific journals, fresh information and analysis
Be able to legitimate policy impact strategies	
Communications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better use of the media • New and better communication skills and tools • New lobbying and advocacy methodologies • Better command of the evidence in communications • Better tools to reach politicians and bureaucrats • New methods of diffusion of results • How to make use of boomerang effects by disseminating results in the North

Mapping of the external environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Map of institutions (national or regional) • Identify donors and what they are interested in
Fixing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know what to ask and who to talk to (which doors to knock) • Methodologies to improve the links between research and influence

Better communication, particularly of research results, and a better understanding of the external environment, were the two key issues brought up in the discussion. Communication in particular was identified as a challenge and a hurdle for their work. In conversations after the workshop, different communications products, means and strategies were discussed. Participants were interested in the range of products offered by ODI and the means used to communicate them. Some of them are testing new social technologies (web-portals, e-groups, blogs and newsletters) but want to learn from others and their experiences.

Understanding their external context also relates to the need to link up with other researchers and research institutions within and outside their contexts.

Possible next steps and comments

It is clear that one-size-fits-all interventions do not exist. Even among the participants, the cases presented show that they face different challenges and opportunities. Hence, the ideas and tools shared with the workshop participants need to be tried out in the participants' different contexts, adapted if necessary and feedback given to us. ODI was asked to provide a link to other experiences in other parts of the world.

Some participants made it clear that they wish to keep in touch with the CSPP. A possible way of doing this is setting up an on-line space to share more case studies, advice, tools and strategies. The use of new social technologies such as web-logs or on-line forums could be explored. The [Red de Desarrollo Sostenible](#), for instance, is already pioneering these approaches.

Another possibility is carrying out more in-depth mentoring and assistance on the use of specific policy impact tools via longer workshops or communities of practice.

There was clear interest in the work the CSPP is carrying out on research policy [networks](#). Many of the participants work within or through networks and they could benefit from the lessons drawn from work in other contexts.