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Enriching Policy with Research

Abstract

{Excerpt} The failure of researchers to link evidence to policy and practice produces evidence that no one uses, impedes innovation, and leads to mediocre or even detrimental development policies. To help improve the definition, design, and implementation of policy research, researchers should adopt a strategic outcome-oriented approach.

In the development sector, research in science, technologies, and ideas can make a difference if they identify what tools, methods, and approaches no longer work; test new ways of doing things; and link knowledge of that in ways that inform policy and practice. Research, the systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge, has innumerable applications. For this reason, educational institutions, governments, and philanthropic organizations—the three major purveyors of money—spend billions of dollars on research every year. A propos developing countries, where utilitarian science policy is favored, proponents contend persuasively that it can help save lives, reduce poverty, and improve the quality of human existence.

Keywords

Asian Development Bank, ADB, poverty, economic growth, sustainability, development

Comments

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Enriching Policy with Research

By Arnaldo Pellini and Olivier Serrat

The Promise of Research in Development

In the 2010s, global, regional, and national challenges and their local effects will impact all and the poorest most.¹ In the development sector, research in science, technologies, and ideas can make a difference if they identify what tools, methods, and approaches no longer work; test new ways of doing things; and link knowledge of that in ways that inform policy and practice. (Here, policy is taken to mean a deliberate course of action to guide decisions and achieve outcomes.)²

Research, the systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge, has innumerable applications. For this reason, educational institutions, governments, and philanthropic organizations—the three major purveyors of money—spend billions of dollars on research every year. A propos developing countries, where utilitarian science policy³ is favored, proponents contend persuasively that it can help save lives, reduce poverty, and improve the quality of human existence.⁴ (Utilitarian research is more likely to be funded as it costs less and pledges more.)

Even so, if most people agree that science and research deserve support, consensus

The failure of researchers to link evidence to policy and practice produces evidence that no one uses, impedes innovation, and leads to mediocre or even detrimental development policies. To help improve the definition, design, and implementation of policy research, researchers should adopt a strategic outcome-oriented approach.



¹ In aid agencies, the short list includes climate and environment, food and agriculture, health, education, governance and social development, growth and investment, and trade. The *Knowledge Solutions* on sparking social innovations paint a fuller (and darker) picture.

² Policy change can be (i) discursive—involving new concepts and terminology, (ii) procedural—altering the way policy makers do things, (iii) content-oriented—inducing modifications in strategy or policy documents, or (iv) behavioral—transforming attitudes.

³ Utilitarian science prioritizes projects that can reduce large amounts of suffering for many people. Basic science, on the other hand, tries to stimulate breakthroughs. Scholastic conservation, the third kind of science policy, aims to efficiently impart all available knowledge to whoever can use it. Monumental science sponsors science for the sake of science, often through large projects. Technology development, the fifth branch of science policy, advances the application of science mainly through engineering.

⁴ The Department for International Development of the United Kingdom, for one, announced in 2008 that it would double its commitment and invest up to £1 billion in development research over the next 5 years. (It will channel that to six priority areas: growth; sustainable agriculture, particularly in Africa; climate change; health; governance in challenging environments; and future challenges and opportunities.)

The important thing in science is not so much to obtain new facts as to discover new ways of thinking about them.

—Lawrence Bragg

about their benefits quickly breaks down beyond that. In truth, researchers routinely miss opportunities to turn their inquiries into lasting change. The cause of this is the weak rapport between their investigations and recommendations and the real world of policy making. (In the meantime, practitioners just get on with it.) A non-linear analytical and practical framework to enrich policy with research is missing.⁵ These *Knowledge Solutions* showcase (and draw liberally from) the work that the Overseas Development Institute⁶ conducts to bridge research and policy, and help thereby improve practice for better outcomes.

Bridging Research and Policy

Theory would have decision makers know what kinds of research—that have already delivered results—can help them make the right choices. It would have them base these on the best experience and knowledge available.



Yet, reality begs to differ: poor research circulates and is acted upon while good research is ignored and disappears. Why?

The question is potent. One cannot just transport research to the policy sphere. In a world shaped by complexity, policy makers have to deal with the pros and cons of policy decisions daily. Various interrelated factors interact dynamically to determine what sort of evidence, namely, information indicating whether a belief or assertion is true or valid, is likely to be adopted by policy makers who some see are driven by the Five S's of speed, superficiality, spin, secrecy, and scientific ignorance.⁷

According to the Overseas Development Institute, the factors that define courses of action fall into three overlapping areas: (i) the political context, (ii) the evidence, and (iii) the links between policy and research communities, within a fourth set of factors: external influences. Admittedly, this framework is a generic, perhaps ideal, explanatory model: in instances, there will not be much overlap between the different spheres; in others the overlap may vary considerably. Notwithstanding, the framework holds explanatory power. It provides clear (yet flexible) guidance as to what researchers need to know, what they need to do, and how they should go about it. It suggests that research-based and other forms of evidence is more likely to enrich policy and thence (hopefully) practice if:

- 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.

⁵ Policy processes are complex and rarely linear or logical: simply presenting information to policy makers and expecting them to act upon it is not likely to work. Summarizing the gap, researchers typically propound “scientific” (objective) evidence that is proven empirically and theoretically driven, even if it is conducted over as long as it takes and is then offered with caveats and qualifications. However, policy makers need evidence that is “colloquial” (linked to context); seems policy relevant, reasonable, and timely; and delivers a clear message. Put differently, in a chaos of purposes and accidents, policy makers do not—certainly, not often—identify the problem, commission research, analyze the results, choose the best option, establish the policy, implement the policy, and monitor evaluate the policy. They are not at all preoccupied with the rational implementation of so-called “decisions” through selected strategies. Source: Phil Davies. 2005. *Evidence-Based Policy at the Cabinet Office*. Impact and Insight Workshops. 17 October. London. Overseas Development Institute. Available: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/events/impact_insight/presentation_1/davies.html

⁶ The Overseas Development Institute is the United Kingdom’s leading independent think tank on international development and humanitarian issues. Thanks to its Research and Policy in Development program, the institute works with partners in developing and developed countries at the intersection of research, policy, and practice to promote better outcomes for the poor. The program seeks to clarify (i) the role of knowledge in policy and practice, and (ii) the skills and capacities needed for researchers and organizations to effectively translate knowledge into action.

⁷ This indictment needs moderation. Factors other than the Five S’s and evidence condition uptake: they are experience and expertise, judgment, values and policy context, pragmatics and contingencies, resources, habits and tradition, and lobbyists and pressure groups. Source: Vincent Cable. 2003. *Does Evidence Matter?* Meeting Series. 7 May. London. Overseas Development Institute. Available: www.odi.org.uk/rapid/meetings/evidence/presentation_3/cable.html

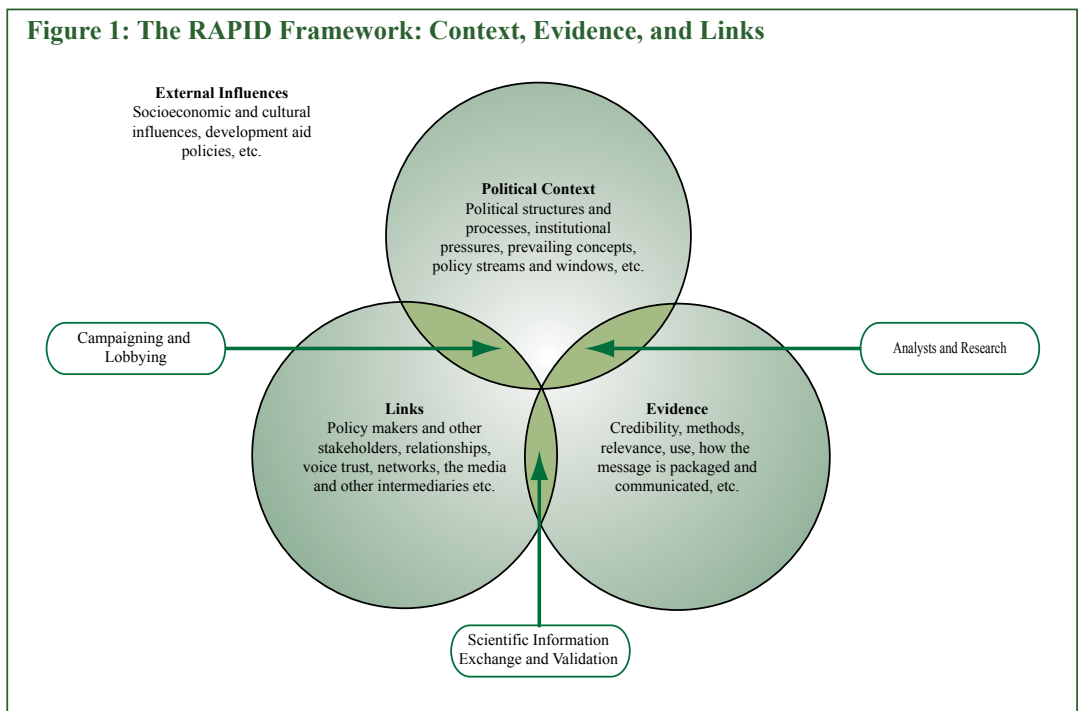
- The evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to pressing policy problems, and is packaged to attract the interest of policy makers.
- Researchers and policy makers share common networks, trust one another, and communicate effectively.

That theory is worthless. It isn't even wrong!
—Wolfgang Pauli

In brief, by making more informed, strategic choices, researchers can maximize the chances that evidence will impact policy and practice.

Grooming Policy Entrepreneurs

Researchers live in a competitive environment. To remain competitive, they must become entrepreneurs who (i) operate effectively in highly political environments; (ii) distill powerful policy messages from the results of research; (iii) use networks, hubs, and partnerships and build coalitions to work effectively with all stakeholders; and (iv)



Source: Overseas Development Institute. 2010. Available: www.odi.org.uk/default.asp

In science the credit goes to the man who convinces the world, not the man to whom the idea first occurs.
—Francis Darwin

maintain long-term programs that pull all of these together. If they have clear intent,⁸ they should equip themselves with skills: they need to be fixers, storytellers, networkers, and engineers. This means they probably need to work in multidisciplinary teams with others who possess such skills.

⁸ To have intent, one needs to know what one wants to do and really want to do it. This demands that research institutes (or departments) have a clear policy objective; focused research; more communications that include simple, unexpected, concrete, credible, and emotional stories; the right incentives; the right systems; and that they engage.

Table: How to Influence Policy and Practice

What You Need to Know	What You Need to Do	How to Do It
Political Context		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who are the key policy makers? Is there a demand for research and new ideas among them? What are the sources of resistance to evidence-based policy making? What is the policy-making environment? (What are its structures, processes, legal and policy framework?) What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get to know the policy makers, 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 programs with high-profile policy events. Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows. Allow sufficient time and resources.
Evidence		
<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 policy makers? 	<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 programs of high-quality work. Action-research and pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches. Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation. Establish a clear strategy for communication from start. Conduct face-to-face communication.
Links		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who are the key stakeholders? 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"> Forge partnerships between researchers, policy makers, and policy end users. Identify key networkers and salesmen. Use informal contacts.
External Influences		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who are the main international actors in the policy process? What influence do they have? What are their aid priorities? What are their research priorities and mechanisms? What are the policies of the donors funding the research? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Get to know the donors, their priorities, and their 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 key individuals regularly.

Source: Overseas Development Institute. 2004. *Bridging Research and Policy in International Development*. Briefing Paper. Available: www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/159.pdf

None of this is easy. The Overseas Development Institute⁹ cautions that grooming policy entrepreneurs (or turning research institutes or departments into policy-focused think tanks) involves a fundamental reorientation from academic achievement to policy engagement. This entails grappling with the policy community, developing a research agenda focusing on policy issues rather than academic interests, acquiring new skills or building multidisciplinary teams, establishing new internal systems and incentives, spending much more on communications, producing a different range of outputs, and working in partnerships and networks. It may even call for radically different funding models.

⁹ John Young and Enrique Mendizabal. 2009. *Helping Researchers Become Policy Entrepreneurs*. Overseas Development Institute. Briefing Paper. Available: www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/1127.pdf

Box: Strengthening Research Communication at the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences

The Support for Effective Policy Making Through the Development of Scientific Evidence Based Research project will last until mid-2011 and has been implemented since 2008 by the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences. Funding is provided by the United Nations Development Programme through three mutually reinforcing streams of work: (i) strengthening research management capacity, (ii) carrying out research using the human development paradigm, and (iii) supporting researchers in linking their research with policy processes. The Overseas Development Institute is responsible for the third stream.

The Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences hosts 30 institutes and about 1,500 researchers. A needs assessment conducted in June 2009 showed that since 2005 demand on the academy for policy research has increased. The demand is greater when policy windows open due to important policy events, such as the National Congress of the Communist Party (every 5 years) or when the National Assembly convenes (twice a year).

Not surprisingly, the results of the assessment showed that the academy's researchers are perceived to have a good competency with research methods. Moreover, several institute directors mentioned that they are involved in policy making or policy discussions through their personal networks and linkages with policy makers. The results showed also an awareness of the meaning of "evidence-based policy". However, only 11% (out of a total of 700) of the respondents of the survey put policy influencing as the key focus of their research. The majority of the academy's researchers do not adopt a specific strategy to reach a policy audience with the results of their research.

As the main channel to reach policy makers are institute directors, the capacity building conducted in the academy so far focuses on planning and producing research communication outputs such as policy briefs, research briefs, and stories of change. These will help researchers and directors synthesize research results and provide policy that are then to be communicated to policy makers. Information and communication technology is also being introduced as a way for researchers to better collaborate in research projects as well as in sharing research results.

During the needs assessment conducted in the academy, one respondent recognized that "researchers have the habit of making things complicated and bore the audience". There is therefore a growing need for researchers to be equipped with knowledge about "ways to simplify messages for different audiences". In other words, as mentioned by one institute director, there is a need for researchers "to learn about simplicity". This is what the Support for Effective Policy Making Through the Development of Scientific Evidence Based Research project aims to achieve.

Source: Arnaldo Pellini.

The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach

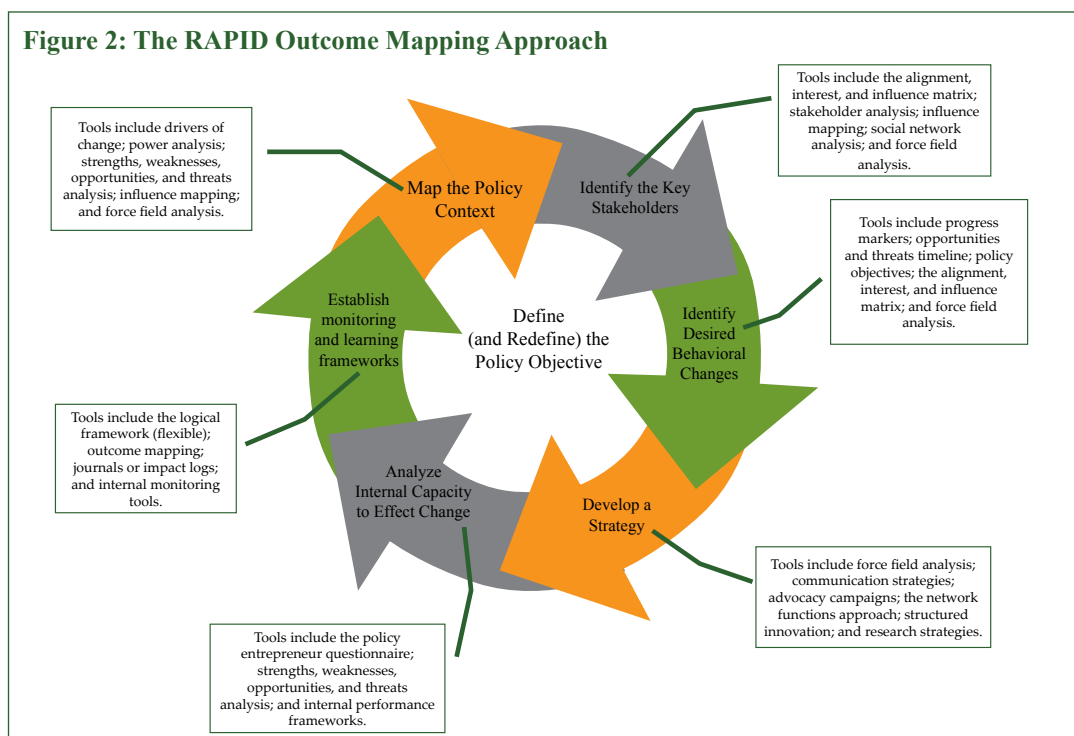
The relationship between research, policy, and practice is complex, multi-factoral, non-linear, and highly context-specific—what works in a situation may not in another. What is more, traditional project management tools such as cost–benefit analysis and logical frameworks fail to account for complexity.

The Overseas Development Institute's RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach draws on concepts of complexity, outcome mapping tools developed by the International Development Research Center, and other tools for policy engagement to provide policy entrepreneurs with more information about the context they are operating in and enable them to make better strategic choices (and be better placed to take advantage of unexpected policy windows and opportunities). The approach comprises distinct steps, although not all will be needed in all situations:

- **Define a clear, overarching policy objective.** Influencing objectives need not be limited to facilitating changes in the written content of government policies. The agenda may also include discursive, procedural, attitudinal, and behavioral changes.
- **Map the policy context.** Mapping the policy context around the issue means identifying key factors that may influence the policy process. How do policies influence the local political context? How do policy makers

perceive the problem? Is there political interest in change in the country? Is there enough of the right sort of evidence to convince them of the need for change? How is it presented? Who are the key organizations and individuals with access to policy makers? What is the donor's agenda where external actors are involved? Are there existing networks to use?

- **Identify the key stakeholders.** Identifying the key influential stakeholders and target audiences involves determining what are their positions and interests in relation to the policy objective. Some can be very interested and aligned and can be considered natural allies for change. Other can be interested, though not yet aligned, and can yet be brought into the fold of reformers so they do not present obstacles.
- **Identify desired behavioral changes.** Developing a theory of change entails describing precisely the current behavior and the behavior that is needed, if the key influential stakeholders are to contribute to the achievement of the desired policy objective. It also calls for short- and medium-term step-changes that can be monitored to ensure that the priority stakeholders are moving in the right direction and responding to the efforts of the change program.
- **Develop a strategy.** Developing a strategy entails spelling out milestone changes in the policy change process. Force field analysis is a flexible tool that can be used to further understand the forces supporting and opposing the desired policy change and suggest concrete responses.
- **Analyze internal capacity to effect change.** To operationalize a strategy, one must ensure the engagement team has the competencies required. In other words, the team must have the set of systems, processes, and skills that can help inform or involve policy makers in research. The information gathered should prove useful in starting tangible actions to meet the desired policy objective. The information gathered up to this point can then be used to establish an action plan.
- **Establish a monitoring and learning framework.** The final step is to develop a monitoring and learning system not only to track progress, make necessary adjustments, and assess the effectiveness of the approach, but also to learn lessons for the future. Crucial to the collection of knowledge is sharing it and using it.



Overseas Development Institute. 2009. *Helping Researchers Become Policy Entrepreneurs*. Briefing Paper. Available: www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/1127.pdf

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Asian Development Bank

ADB's vision is an Asia and Pacific region free of poverty. Its mission is to help its developing member countries reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of their people. Despite the region's many successes, it remains home to two thirds of the world's poor: 1.8 billion people who live on less than \$2 a day, with 903 million struggling on less than \$1.25 a day. ADB is committed to reducing poverty through inclusive economic growth, environmentally sustainable growth, and regional integration.

Based in Manila, ADB is owned by 67 members, including 48 from the region. Its main instruments for helping its developing member countries are policy dialogue, loans, equity investments, guarantees, grants, and technical assistance.

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Knowledge Solutions are handy, quick reference guides to tools, methods, and approaches that propel development forward and enhance its effects. They are offered as resources to ADB staff. They may also appeal to the development community and people having interest in knowledge and learning.

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