Working Paper 269

# What Political and Institutional Context Issues Matter for Bridging Research and Policy?
# A literature review and discussion of data collection approaches

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# Acknowledgements

ODI's RAPID programme aims to improve the use of research in development policy and practice through improved knowledge about: research/policy links; improved knowledge management and learning systems; improved communication; and improved awareness of the importance of research. Further information about the programme is available at www.odi.org.uk/rapid.

The Global Development Network was launched in 1999 to support and link research and policy institutes involved in development. Its aim is to help these institutes generate and share knowledge for development and bridge the gap between the development of ideas and their practical implementation. The GDN Bridging Research and Policy project started in 2002 and the findings of Phase II are just being completed. Further information is available at: www.gdnet.org/rapnet.

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# Acronyms and Abbreviations

| | |
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| BRP | Bridging Research and Policy |
| CGM | Credit Guarantee Corporation (Egypt) |
| CIDCM | Center for International Development and Conflict Management |
| EIU | Economist Intelligence Unit |
| DELIVERI | Decentralised Livestock Services in the Eastern Regions of Indonesia |
| DFID | Department for International Development (UK) |
| GDN | Global Development Network |
| HTA | Health Technology Assessment |
| ICRG | International Country Risk Guide |
| IDEA | International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance |
| IDRC | International Development Research Centre (Canada) |
| IFPRI | International Food Policy Research Institute |
| IIED | International Institute for Environment and Development |
| INSCR | Integrated Network for Societal Conflict Research |
| LGI | Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative |
| M&E | Monitoring and Evaluation |
| MLSP | Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (Bulgaria) |
| MoF | Ministry of Finance (Egypt) |
| MoF TI | Ministry of Foreign Trade and Industry (Egypt) |
| MoI | Ministry of Investment (Egypt) |
| NAO | National Audit Office (UK) |
| NGO | Non-Governmental Organisation |
| ODI | Overseas Development Institute |
| OECD | Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development |
| PIOOM | Interdisciplinary Research on Root Causes of Gross Human Rights Violations |
| PLA | Participatory Learning and Action |
| RAPID | ODI's Research and Policy in Development Programme |
| SMEs | Small and Medium-Scale Enterprises |
| SMEPOL | Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises Policy Development (Egypt) |
| SPEECH | Society for the People's Education and Economic Change (India) |
| SWOT | Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats (a management tool) |
| UKES | UK Evaluation Society |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| WGA | World Governance Assessment |
| WIP | Well Informed Person |

# Executive Summary

Existing evidence clearly indicates that political and institutional context issues are the most important set of factors affecting the interface between research and policy. These issues usually explain why research does, or usually does not, lead to policy change. Unfortunately, we do not yet have a systematic understanding of when, why and how political context matters for bridging research and policy (BRP) in developing countries. Is bridging research and policy easier in democratic countries? Do different issues matter in different components of policy processes (e.g. agenda setting, formulation or implementation)? Is using research to inform policy easier in a context of crisis? What makes bureaucrats more susceptible to changing practice based on research evidence?

This paper reviews the relevant literature on politics, policy processes and institutions in order to identify the key issues that may affect research-policy links. The aim is to generate understanding about the research-policy nexus in order to provide practical advice for developing and transition countries. The paper is a joint output of the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme and the Global Development Network (GDN) Bridging Research and Policy project.

The rationale for focusing on political context is threefold. First, as outlined above, political and institutional context issues are critical to any discussion of research-policy links. Secondly, there is a gap in the literature regarding the impact of political and institutional factors on research uptake in developing countries. This is important as political and institutional contexts in the developing world differ greatly from those described in existing literature on OECD countries – and there is a massive diversity across developing countries. Thirdly, understanding political contexts better should enable researchers and other stakeholders to respond in ways which maximise their chances of policy influence.

The paper has two main sections. The first provides a review of the theory and existing case study evidence on politics and institutions to try to outline how they affect research-policy links. We draw on a range of disciplines, including political science, economics, sociology, anthropology and psychology. To facilitate a discussion, the key points are clustered into five areas. For each of these we identify a preliminary long list of the types of issues that might matter most to those interested in research-policy links in developing countries.

The five areas – and some of the key issues within them – are:
(i) **Macro-political context**: extent of democracy and political freedoms; academic and media freedoms; pro-poor commitment of the elite or government; culture of evidence use; impact of civil society; volatility of the national political context; and extent of conflict.
(ii) **Specific policy context**: stage of the policy process (agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation); extent of policymaker demand; degree of consensus or resistance; climate of rationality; openness of the policy processes and importance of the issue to society.
(iii) **Implementation**: nature of bureaucratic processes (transparency, accountability, participation, corruption); incentives, capacity and flexibility of organisations to implement policy or not; degree of contestation; existence or not of specific mechanisms to draw in evidence in policy implementation; feasibility and perceived legitimacy of a specific policy reform.
(iv) **Decisive moments in the policy process**: character of policy process on an issue (i.e. extent the issue requires routine decisions or fundamental changes or whether it is a completely new policy area); predictability of the policy process; existence of policy windows; and sense of crisis on an issue.
(v) **The way policymakers think**: extent to which policy objectives and cause-effect relationships are clear; openness to new evidence; capacity to process information; policymaker motivations; and types of evidence they find convincing.

The second section outlines the challenges of collecting data on political and institutional issues and discusses approaches to collecting systematic data on issues that matter for research uptake. This is not an area that has received much attention, so there is very little of direct relevance. Where possible, we outline existing data on relevant topics – for example, cross-country data on democracy and governance issues. In general, however, specific projects, studies or initiatives will need to generate their own data on political context issues. As a result, we also highlight approaches and specific tools – including interviews, surveys, focus groups, policy mapping and stakeholder analysis – which might be valuable in assessing contexts in terms of their impact on research-policy interactions. We give information on the different approaches and also provide examples of how they can be brought together to map a political context. The key point to ensure credibility is that any initiative aiming to understand and act on political context should use a range of methods and triangulate the findings.

A major challenge involves the diversity of contexts, and whether it is possible to capture some general rules. How can we characterise different policy contexts – across countries and within countries over time? What issues are most important in different contexts? How can we link context issues to measures of the influence research has on policy? We emphasise that we are not providing answers at this stage. We provide a menu of issues that have emerged from the literature and preliminary work (What to look for?). We also provide a menu of approaches to collecting political context data (How to assess it?).

The paper is intended to provide a base for initiatives in studying political context, but also specifically to bring together an empirical synthesis of the findings of the specific studies in the GDN programme. Drawing on the preliminary insights here plus a synthesis of the findings should enable the project to identify what types of approaches work best in different contexts; to reveal which issues are fundamental; and to make suggestions on how to maximise the chances of bridging research and policy. It will not be easy, but generating a more systematic understanding on the ways political context issues affect research-policy links will be a substantial contribution to the literature. It would likely also have significant practical implications for the ways policymakers, civil society groups, international donors and, of course, researchers work to inform and improve policy processes in developing countries.

# 1 Introduction

Bridging research and policy matters. Better utilisation of research and evidence in policy and practice can help accelerate economic growth, reduce poverty and improve livelihoods. Given the scale of the challenges, this matters most for developing and transition countries. We know an increasing amount about the sets of factors that affect research-policy linkages in developing countries (Court and Young, 2003; Court et al, 2005; Stone and Maxwell, 2005; Court and Maxwell, 2005). However, we remain some way from having a systematic and empirically grounded understanding of the research-policy interface in developing countries. This is particularly the case regarding issues of political context and how they affect research uptake into policy.

The paper is a joint output of the ODI RAPID programme[1] and the GDN Bridging Research and Policy study.[2] These initiatives, along with recent work by the International Development Research Center (IDRC), are significant as they represent large-scale research efforts on the topic of bridging research and policy and they concentrate on developing and transition countries. These initiatives all aim to improve understanding of the research-policy nexus in order to produce and provide practical advice to both researchers and policymakers. The key questions are: how can policymakers best use research and move towards evidence-based policymaking; how can researchers best use their findings in order to influence policy; and how can the interaction between researchers and policymakers be improved?

The challenge is that there are many different ways of studying research-policy links around the developing world. These include surveys; case studies; country studies; episode studies; action-research; sector studies and good practice studies. Given the very different kinds of study, one size will not fit all and therefore specific methods will need to differ. The orientation of this paper reflects the need to provide a review and guidance for those undertaking studies of research-policy interface or who want to assess political context for related initiatives.

Literature review and case study work at ODI and GDN led to the development of an analytical framework that clusters into four domains the sets of issues that matter for uptake of research into policy (Court, Hovland and Young, 2005). These are external influences, political context, evidence and links – see Figure 1. Of these sets of issues, the existing literature and case study work clearly indicate that political and institutional context variables are the most crucial in influencing the uptake (or not) of research into policy (Court et al, 2005).[3] Although we often know the specific political or institutional context issues that tend to matter in specific cases at specific times, what is missing is a more systematic understanding regarding the common sets of issues that tend to matter in developing countries. In short, we know that context is crucial to bridging research and policy, but we remain far from a systematic understanding of when, why and how.

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[1] For more on the RAPID programme, please see http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid.
[2] For more on the GDN project, please see http://www.gdnet.org/rapnet.
[3] This is part of a broader literature that increasingly emphasises the importance of politics and institutions to development processes in general (Hyden et al, 2004), policy processes (Grindle and Thomas, 1991) and economic reform processes (Williamson, 1994; Knack and Keefer, 1995; Rodrik, 1996).

**Figure 1: The RAPID framework**
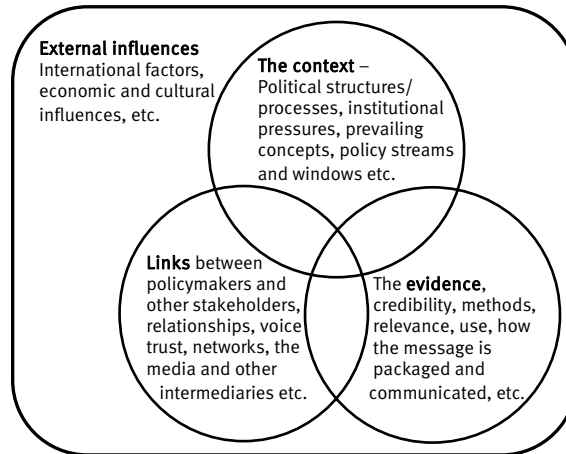


While there is a substantial literature on the impact of politics and institutions on research uptake in OECD countries (e.g. Weiss, 1977; Lindquist, 1988), there is much less regarding the same issue in developing countries. This is a serious gap: political and institutional contexts in the developing world differ greatly from the OECD and display massive diversity (see Box 1). This makes it especially difficult to draw valid generalisations and lessons from existing experience and theory.

There is also a practical rationale for this study. Experience suggests that by understanding political context better – and then responding appropriately – it is possible to maximise the chances of policy influence. Thus, there is an interest in knowing what issues to focus on and also how to improve assessment of political and institutional contexts.

This paper has three main objectives. The first is to provide a review of the theory and existing case study evidence on politics, policy processes and institutions to try to outline how these affect research-policy links. We draw on the extensive literature from developed countries as well as the much more limited literature from developing countries. We also draw on some of the existing cases studies in this area – those collected by projects of ODI, IDRC and IFPRI as well as GDN. This is the focus of Section 2, where the discussion is clustered into the following areas: (i) macro-political context; (ii) specific context of policy formulation; (iii) implementation; (iv) decisive moments in the policy process; and (v) the way policymakers think.

The second objective is to try to identify a preliminary checklist of the key issues that seem to matter most, on which those interested in research-policy links in developing countries might focus. We are not aiming for a blueprint, but rather a long list of the types of issues that might be pertinent. We provide short checklists of key issues at the end of each sub-section of Section 2. The paper intends to provide a base for initiatives in studying political context, but particularly to bring together an empirical synthesis of the findings of the specific studies in the GDN programme. Drawing on the preliminary insights here plus a synthesis of the detailed projects should enable the GDN project to identify what types of approaches work best in different contexts and to make suggestions on how to maximise the chances of bridging research and policy.

The third objective is to discuss approaches to collecting systematic data on the political and institutional issues that matter for research uptake. This is not an area that has received much attention, so there is very little that is directly appropriate. Where available, we outline existing data on topics that are relevant – i.e. particularly the cross-country data on democracy and governance issues. We also highlight approaches and specific tools for assessing political contexts that have been tried in related areas – country diagnostics, policy mapping, stakeholder analysis, etc. – and that might be valuable for assessing contexts in terms of their impact on research-policy interactions. Section 3 discusses options for collecting data on this set of issues

A major challenge involves the diversity of contexts and whether we can meaningfully capture some general rules. How can we characterise different policy contexts – across countries and within

countries over time? What issues are most important in different contexts? What data are available? How can we collect data on other issues that may matter? How can we link context issues to measures of research influence on policy? Section 4 provides a brief conclusion.

We emphasise that we are not providing answers at this stage, but instead drawing together a menu of issues that have emerged from the literature and preliminary work. The theories and factors outlined below do not provide a comprehensive review of the literature (nor a theory or model that explains the maximum number of cases), but they are intended to reflect a broad cross-section of the disciplinary and theoretical approaches. They will hopefully provide some illustrative insights into the key aspects regarding political and institutional contexts that affect issues of bridging research and policy.

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**Box 1: How political context in developing countries may differ from OECD countries**

A number of commentators have noted that policy processes in developing countries have some distinct differences from those in the OECD (Grindle and Thomas, 1991; Porter, 1998) that may be important for our focus here. There is, of course, a great diversity, but some of the more common characteristics of developing countries include:

- Less representation and weaker structures for aggregating and arbitrating interests in society – even in countries seen as democratic (Grindle, 1980; Hyden et al, 2004).
- Remote and inaccessible policymaking processes – limited scope for input except at implementation stage (Grindle, 1980: 15).
- Limited processes for participation (these are viewed by political leaders as 'illegitimate' or 'inefficient') yet many policies have direct distributive/redistributive implications (ibid: 17).
- Greater competition owing to resource scarcity (ibid: 15).
- Centralised and relatively closed policy processes, especially in terms of policy formulation.
- The availability of information and access to it having long been associated with power (Grindle and Thomas, 1991).
- Information, critical in the decision-making process, is generally in short supply and is often unreliable, so decision makers are often operating within 'structures of uncertainty' (ibid).
- Policy elites play much more decisive roles in policymaking.
- Donors play a particularly large role in some developing countries' policy processes.

It may also be that these issues are more conducive to research uptake in some cases – e.g. centralisation may increase scope and speed of research uptake into policy.

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# 2  Political Context: Review of the Literature

## 2.1  Preliminary comments

A great range of issues emerge regarding the ways political context influence the uptake of research (or not). Policymakers work within organisations and institutions with complex political, economic, institutional, cultural and structural dimensions. Degree of democracy, academic and media freedom, vested interests, history and political machinery all influence room for manoeuvre. Government systems and the incentives for bureaucrats influence how policies are put into practice. Policymakers are a diverse group and include, among others, government officials, legislators, civil servants, civil society, and the judiciary. Education, attitudes, beliefs, prevailing ideas, time pressures and personalities all influence how individuals behave and respond to new ideas.

Weiss (1995) provides probably the most useful categorisation at the broad level, arguing that policy and practice depend on four 'i's: information, interests, ideologies and institutions:

- **Information**: 'the range of knowledge and ideas that help people make sense of the current state of affairs, why things happen as they do, and which new initiatives will help or hinder'.

- **Interests**: i.e. 'self-interests'.

- **Ideologies**: 'philosophies, principles, values and political orientation'.

- **Institutions**: 'first, the institutional environment shapes the way in which participants interpret their own interests, ideologies, and information. [...] Second, organisational arrangements affect the decision process itself, such as who is empowered to make decisions.'

Over time, the four 'i's interact with each other in a dynamic manner. Although information – and research is included here – does matter, it is clear that there are other major issues impacting on policy. It is these other issues – institutions, ideologies and interests – that are the focus of this paper.

The theoretical diversity within the policy sciences reflects not only the multiple levels of analysis involved but also the multiple disciplines from which such analyses have developed. Political scientists may emphasise power relationships in explaining policy choices and dominant political ideologies. Sociologists and organisational theorists, by contrast, tend to emphasise structured or institutionalised norms. Psychology focuses on the individual actor but views motivation in terms of psychological needs and processes rather than 'objective' self-interest (see Haas, 1999: 12). As Ostrom suggests (1999), these different starting points and languages make 'meaningful communication across the social sciences extremely difficult to achieve'.

There are many debates within the literature about the relative importance of structure and agency, and about the relationship between power and knowledge, individuals and institutions, rationality and irrationality, interests and values. There are difficulties in relating analysis of the way individual policymakers act to the diverse and multiple contexts within which they operate; this suggests that framing the debate in terms of simple dichotomies is likely to obscure more than it reveals. Rather, as Haas suggests (1999: 12), there is a need to consider contributions from a wide spectrum of theory, rather than to 'pit these divergent formulations against each other as explanations of human choice'.

Given the breadth scope in terms of relevant sources – and the different types of study on the topic of bridging research and policy – this paper does not provide a single coherent approach. Rather, it highlights sets of issues and approaches that may be helpful. The aim is that researchers compare and select from these menus to suit their own purposes.

In order to help facilitate a discussion, we cluster the range of context issues that matter for bridging research and policy into the following five areas:

- **Macro-political context – and influence on research-policy linkages**: issues of democracy and governance at the national level.

- **Specific context of policy formulation – and influence on research-policy linkages**: the nature of specific policy processes.

- **Implementation – and influence on research-policy linkages**: the institutional context within bureaucracies.

- **Decisive moments in the policy process – and influence on research-policy linkages**.

- **The way policymakers think – and influence research-policy linkages**.

This categorisation is based partly on streams in the literature (de Vibe et al, 2002), but also on sets of issues that emerged in the synthesis of 50 short case studies collected by GDN (Court and Young, 2005). The five sets of issues are discussed in turn below.

## 2.2    Macro-political context: governance and civil and political freedoms

It is commonly thought that the macro-political context, particularly issues of democracy and good governance, are of central importance to the nature of research-policy linkages. The challenge is to find out: Is this the case? How can we broadly characterise different political contexts – across countries – and within countries over time? What issues matter most?

Much of the existing theory is from developed countries and is based on assumptions about the existence of liberal democracy with political and civil freedoms, including academic and media freedoms. Although the number of 'democratic' regimes more than doubled,[4] from under 40 to over 80 between 1976 and 1999, many developing countries remain undemocratic and many countries have deficits in these areas even if they are seen as democratic in form (Hyden et al, 2004). The existing literature is thus seen as much less relevant to developing countries, since it does not address some of the key challenges of macro-political context.

The rest of this section highlights a few strands from the general literature on the topic, focusing on that with specific relevance for research-policy links. It also highlights sources of data, where available. A starting point is that it is very unlikely that research will feed into policy (or development processes more generally) in situations of violent conflict. What are some of the most important dimensions? One set of issues concerns the scale and intensity of inter-state and intra-state wars. However, low-intensity conflicts and violent political conflicts also cause socioeconomic turmoil and threats to personal security. It is clearly difficult to undertake research or carry out public policy formulation and implementation processes in situations of conflict or insecurity. There are a number of groups monitoring conflict and generating relevant data.[5] Although conflicts today are significantly fewer in number than they were 10 years ago, Africa remains the most troubled continent (Mack, 2005).

It seems plausible that democratic countries would be more likely to use research in making policy. The reasons include factors on both the supply and demand side as well as the relationship between them. In terms of the supply of evidence, open political systems allow evidence to be freely gathered, assessed and communicated. In terms of demand, democracies imply a greater accountability of governments and therefore a greater incentive to improve policy and performance. Democratic contexts also imply the existence of more open entry-points into the policymaking process, and there are fewer constraints on communication. In contrast, autocratic regimes often tend to limit the gathering and communication of evidence and have weak accountability mechanisms. For example, a case study from Uruguay charted the negative effect the dictatorship had on the use of research in health policy (Salvatella et al, 2000).

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[4] Gurr et al (2001) state that democracy is defined as a political system with institutionalised procedures for open and competitive political participation, where chief executives are chosen in competitive elections and where substantial limits are imposed on the powers of the chief executive.

[5] These include the Integrated Network for Societal Conflict Research (INSCR); the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM), University of Maryland; the Conflict Data Project of the Department of Peace and Research at Uppsala University; the Heidelberg Institute for International Conflict Research, Germany; PIOOM at Leiden University in the Netherlands.

The initial GDN findings also suggest that research is most likely to influence policy in open, transparent, accountable democratic contexts with strong academic and civil society institutions, free media and good information systems. Chile provides an 'ideal' case example where international research and local technical expertise contributed to the improvement of fiscal policy within a context of a democratic polity. However, as in the literature, most GDN cases were from basically open political systems. This makes it difficult to say anything systematic at this point about research-policy links in contexts of weaker governance.

The limited number of cases from non-democratic contexts makes it too soon to tell exactly how a closed political system affects the impact of research on policymaking. In some cases, there are clearly constraints to using research in policymaking (e.g. Iran and Morocco). In other cases from closed contexts, there can still be a significant impact (e.g. Saudi Arabia and Ukraine). The example of China is also interesting: while far from democratic, there are often good links between research and policy. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences alone has over 3,500 researchers and its work often has a policy impact.

There is an increasing amount of cross-country data on national political contexts, some of it longitudinal (see Box 6 and discussion below). There has not been an explicit effort to use such data systematically to test whether political systems make a difference. There is also very little evidence from the broader democracy and governance literature about the specific question of impact of democracy and good governance on the uptake of research into policy in developing countries.

In addition to general democracy and governance assessments and ratings, some other specific issues are relevant here. Academic freedom is an issue that is likely to be critical for issues of bridging research and policy at specific policy level as well as at national level.[6] For example, in some countries, it is more feasible to conduct economic research than it is to undertake research on democracy or human rights. In recent years, Human Rights Watch has set up an academic freedom programme to 'monitor, expose, and mobilise concerted action to challenge threats to academic freedom worldwide'.[7] However, there is no systematic data available yet on this issue.

Secondly, media freedom would presumably be a key factor in communicating ideas into policy and practice. Freedom of information may be valued in its own right, but information and press freedoms have also been linked persuasively by Amartya Sen to the state's willingness to intervene in famine prevention, particularly in India (Sen, 1999). Since 1980, Freedom House has conducted an annual press freedom survey to track trends in media freedom worldwide.[8] The work 'provides numerical rankings and rates each country's media as 'Free', 'Partly Free', or 'Not Free'.' Country narratives examine the legal environment for the media, political pressures that influence reporting, and economic factors that affect access to information. In addition, Reporters Without Borders creates a Press Freedom Index. This measures 'the amount of freedom journalists and the media have in each country and the efforts made by governments to see that press freedom is respected'.[9]

Thirdly, civil society plays a part in most political systems: this is where people get familiar with and interested in public issues and the ways in which rules tend to affect the articulation of their interests. Key issues here include the conditions under which citizens can express their opinions, organise themselves for collective action and compete for influence. There is also much evidence to suggest that civil society is an important link between research and policy (Court and Young, 2003; Court and Maxwell, 2005). Recent evidence suggests that civil society is important in affecting the impact of agricultural research on poverty reduction: relevant issues emerged related to trust, NGOs and informal social groups (Meinzen-Dick et al, 2003). New specific data for some countries are being developed by CIVICUS as part of the Civil Society Index, which generates measures for the structure, environment, values and impact of civil society at national level.[10]

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[6] For various pertinent aspects see http://www.aaup.org.
[7] See http://www.hrw.org/advocacy/academic.
[8] See http://www.freedomhouse.org/research/pressurvey.htm.
[9] See http://www.rsf.org/article.php3?id_article=4118.
[10] See http://www.civicus.org.

The political context can, and often does, change very quickly in developing countries. For example, the Phase I GDN cases show how crises can affect the impact of research on policy (with examples of both increases and decreases). The fall of autocratic regimes enabled research to have an unexpectedly large impact in cases from Peru and Indonesia. In terms of increasing impact, crises seem to work in two ways. First, they generate a demand for solutions to problems (e.g. DELIVERI case in Indonesia). Secondly, they remove barriers to solutions that might have been on the shelf (e.g. Peru). However, political volatility tends to have a negative impact on research-policy links. The lack of impact of an EU project in Lithuania was directly attributed to the fact it was carried out 'at a very turbulent time when the Government position was frequently changing (it was exposed to institutional changes and policy pressure from the EU and the domestic interest groups)'. Changes of context in India (slate mining case) led to a complete cut of links between research and policy. It has also been noted that policymaker responses to shocks are particularly 'non-linear' (Davis, 2003).

Finally, the GDN cases highlight the importance of the degree to which the policymaking community is committed to development goals. Policymakers committed to development seem more likely to be interested in improving policies and learning from evidence. This is often implicit in the cases, and mentioned explicitly in the Philippines and Peru CPI cases. Development commitment cannot always be assumed (e.g. Peru and Indonesia before the change of regime) and may not exist at all (e.g. Dhauladhar Himalayas), but it does seem significantly to affect the nature of research uptake. This issue of commitment seems to lead to a demand for research that might improve development performance (we discuss the importance of demand in detail below). However, it is also worth looking further at whether it is the lack of funding to implement research findings rather than the lack of commitment that is the key issue.

**Checklist 1: Key macro-political issues**

| Issue | Data source (and starting year) |
|---|---|
| (i) Extent of democracy/political freedom | IDEA (1945), Freedom House (1972), Polity IV (1800-2002), Kaufmann (1996) |
| (ii) Extent of academic freedom | |
| (iii) Extent of media freedom | Freedom House (1979), Reporters without Borders (2002) |
| (iv) Extent of development commitment of ruling elite (especially to the poorest) | WGA (2006) |
| (v) Extent of culture of evidence use | |
| (vi) Extent civil society groups have an input into the making of policy | CIVICUS (2005) |
| (vii) Extent of political volatility | Political risk ratings: ICRG (1980), EIU |
| (viii) Extent of conflict or insecurity | INSCR, CIDCM, PIOOM |

## 2.3  Specific policy context

In this section we focus on the political context around specific policy processes, drawing on the substantial literature (Weiss, 1977; Hill, 1993, 1997; Sabatier, 1999; Sutton; 1999). This includes a discussion of the different functional components of policy processes. The section then focuses on the particular issues affecting the ways in which policy agendas are set and how specific policies are formulated and selected. These include issues such as problems, political pressures, the extent of demand for policy reform; and sources of resistance (interests, ideology, cost of reform).

We focus our discussion on the fundamental components of the policy processes outlined in the literature on public administration. The policy process is usually considered to include the following components:

- **Agenda setting**: Awareness of and priority given to an issue or problem.
- **Policy formulation**: How (analytical and political) options and strategies are constructed.
- **Decision making**: The ways decisions are made about alternatives.

- **Policy implementation**: The forms and nature of policy administration and activities on the ground.

- **Policy evaluation**: The nature of monitoring and evaluation of policy need, design, implementation and impact.

We are not saying that policymaking is linear and works logically through these stages. Like others (Grindle and Thomas, 1990), we have argued that policymaking tends to involve dynamic complex processes, shaped by multiple interactions. Nevertheless, we believe this conceptualisation provides one useful entry point for BRP issues: since it can be argued that policy processes tend to have similar functional elements it is likely that research will impact in different ways on the various aspects of the process. The conceptualisation is useful because it can be taken out from the broader elements of context which may affect it – and therefore compared easily across cases. Its value is that it is not tied to a particular set of institutions, thus enabling analysis of a range of actors (not just government) and the way they interact across issue, component of the process and time. We believe this categorisation makes analysis of the policy process more manageable and may therefore enable more focused study on how research can impact specific components of the policy process.

It is worthwhile focusing in further detail on specific aspects of policy processes. Regarding **agenda setting**, Kingdon (1984) provides one of the most coherent analyses. He sees the agenda-setting process as the result of three streams:

- The problem stream, i.e. to get on agendas issues must be recognised as significant problems – and ones where policymakers are able to provide a solution.

- The policy stream, i.e. this stream relates to those putting forward options, alternatives and solutions – what is regarded as 'good advice' at a given time.

- The political stream, which refers to the wider political environment of elections, government changes, public opinion, etc. Cultural norms and political contestation are also important in affecting the way policymakers select issues for attention.[11]

These streams do not have the same dynamics – and interact in different ways. New information can serve to reframe a situation or problem – if the policy or political streams are positive. Bridging research and policy will depend on how the research fits with the priorities of these different streams. The key question is: To what extent is the issue a priority and on decision makers' agendas? In addition, it may vary according to different actors (government, bureaucracy, NGO, etc.).

In terms of **policy formulation**, there are a number of issues. Weiss has argued (2003) that a 'climate of rationality' is important and should be encouraged – this is where policy is based on evidence, not ideology or rhetoric. There remains a question regarding whether researchers and policymakers have a shared commitment to public policy goals. It also seems clear from the literature that research findings will have 'greater impact when they are in tune with the wider developments of the time' (Hanney et al, 2003). However, 'there are also dangers that such research could sometimes be accepted and acted upon without sufficient analysis to test its validity' (ibid). There can also be problems with 'policy-based evidence' – where political processes structure evidence gathering – rather than 'evidence-based policy' (Sanderson, 2003). In policy-based evidence, governments try to find out what works towards a policy objective; the problem is that the stated goals might not be the most important – the focus is too narrow.

We deal with **implementation** separately in the next section. The final part of the policy process we focus on here is **monitoring and evaluation**. Some key questions are: Are there monitoring systems in place? Are policy impact evaluations part of the policy process? Are evaluations and their findings taken seriously? Are the findings discussed internally and/or made public? This topic was addressed in the Annual Meeting 2003 of the UK Evaluation Society (UKES) where, in addition to a huge number of northern-focused papers, there were a number of papers focused on developing countries.[12]

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[11] Hall (1996) suggests that for an issue to become an agenda item, it must rank highly in relation to criteria of legitimacy, feasibility and support.
[12] See www.evaluation.org.

What cross-cutting issues affect the specific policy context and use of research? The literature and GDN Phase I work suggest that the degree of policymaker demand is one of the main issues distinguishing cases where research is taken up from those which have little impact on policy. Research appears to have a quicker and greater impact when it is policy driven, at least to start with, or has high-level political commitment. A clear policymaker demand usually leads to research impact on policy. When there was little policymaker demand, research tended to have much less impact. Responsive research is, almost by definition, likely to be more operationally relevant and provide a solution to a problem. It seems much more difficult for policymakers to ignore the findings of research if they were the ones to commission it. The importance of policymaker demand applies in all regions and contexts. Identifying situations – and responding in a timely manner – when policymakers do require assistance is clearly an important way researchers can influence policy outcomes.[13]

Another clear finding is that the degree of political contestation also matters greatly. Schaffer (1984), drawing on the work of Max Weber, has written that 'policy is not a moral trade. It is, rather, a political craft' and while 'it must be informed in the end by moral and ethical imperatives' it necessarily involves conflict. Recent work (Court and Young, 2003; 2004) highlights the importance of political contestation in constraining the impact of research on policy.

The GDN cases illustrate that many decisions are political; research-based evidence is often completely ignored even if the evidence is convincing. There are a number of different aspects, as outlined below:

- **System/process failure**: the whole policymaking system around an issue may be corrupt or oriented away from public interests.

- **No consensus**: a system may be functional, but there may be no consensus on a proposed reform.

- **Special interests' blocking**: while the system may be functioning in general, the lack of research uptake is often attributed to blocking by the special interests of small but powerful groups or individuals. Even after decisions are made, disappointed interests can continue to campaign against an issue.

The findings of this case study evidence are consistent with much of the economic literature on policy reform. There has been increasing interest as to why (rational) policymakers will not adopt reforms towards the most efficiency enhancing policies. It essentially comes down to who gains or loses and the influence special interests and electoral systems have on policymakers – as well as technical uncertainty (discussed later) (Rodrik, 1996; Krueger, 1993). Discussions of special interests naturally are more relevant for specific issues (where they can have great impact depending on their strength). For more general policy issues, discussions of the distributional impact of reforms and public accountability mechanisms are more relevant. In either case, policymakers are likely to make some kind of political cost-benefit calculation.

It is not news that if there is contestation, reform can get delayed. Political interests vary – in their objectives and strength. The varying costs of reform can lead to a stalemate or 'war of attrition' between different groups (Alesina and Drazen, 1991). Important lessons from are that it often takes time and multiple stages to complete reform; the implication in such contexts is that bridging research and policy will not be 'one shot' but require various attempts. Another lesson is that external actors can have an impact. However, in most cases, reforms follow a political consolidation – and one group has to throw in the towel (ibid).

However, an important issue concerns uncertainty about the consequences of reform – especially if there are distributional implications. Alesina and Drazen also show how a 'war of attrition' emerges between two groups if there is uncertainty about distributional implications or costs of reform. Similarly, Fernandez and Rodrik (1991) show that individual voters would not support a reform if they did not know who would benefit, even if the would benefit the majority.

The issue of the sustainability of reform is also a common one in the literature (Rodrik, 1996). The discussion here focuses on the balance of costs and benefits and whether and how these may vary

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[13] This is not to say that all research should be driven by policy: the issue of societal need/demand (actual or potential) is pertinent. However, this matter is beyond the scope of this paper.

over the short and long term. There is little evidence to support the widespread view that reforms tend to have short-term costs and long-term benefits. It simply depends on the issue. As Rodrik notes, policy direction supported by professional economics does turn out to be good politics – but only eventually.

There are implications here for discussions of bridging research and policy. These issues affect policymakers' calculations and thus whether they are likely to reform policy based on research. Researchers interested in promoting their findings thus need to be aware of the type of context surrounding their policy issue and the implications of their reform proposals. This may affect the options they propose in terms of how they might be implemented – e.g. whether there may be ways to make reforms more palatable to the public or special interests.

It is worth closing this section with reference to a widely cited paper by Williamson (1994). One key reason for its inclusion here is that Williamson synthesises the key issues that could spur policy reform. He identifies 16 issues important for reform, which we cover in this paper because they also relate to issues of bridging research and policy. These include issues such as the importance of crises, the need for a legitimate support base, the strength of government, visionary leadership, weak opposition, a 'honeymoon' period, the implementability of reform and degree of external support (aid) – a strong political base and leadership emerged as most important. However, **none** of these issues was found to be either necessary or sufficient for successful reform. This links to his second key point – one that reinforces a key lesson from existing work to bridging research and policy (Court et al, 2005) – that there are likely to be no simple answers: the best approach will depend on the circumstances.

### Checklist 2: Specific policy issues

| Issue |
| --- |
| (i) Stage of the policy process<br>　o　Agenda setting<br>　o　Formulation<br>　o　Implementation<br>　o　Monitoring and evaluation |
| (ii) Extent of policymaker demand |
| (iii) Extent of policymaker consensus |
| (iv) Extent there is a 'climate of rationality' |
| (v) Strength of special interests for or against |
| (vi) Extent of openness in decision making on this issue |
| (vii) Importance of issue to society |

## 2.4　Policy implementation

Policy implementation is one of the key areas identified in our categorisation of the policy process. While this is partly a false divide of policy processes between formulation and implementation, we give implementation issues a separate section since (i) they are particularly important; (ii) people tend to underestimate their importance;[14] and (iii) different issues tend to be relevant.[15] This section focuses on the implementation-related issues likely to affect the uptake of research into policy. This includes: institutional incentives and pressures; accountability; the role of 'street-level bureaucrats'; and issues around room for manoeuvre and autonomy (political and administrative). There is a tendency to underestimate the importance of implementation issues in discussions of policy processes.

Why is implementation important? How bureaucracy is structured has been an issue of great significance to academics and practitioners alike ever since the work of Max Weber (1947). Case study evidence on the importance of implementation issues is supported by cross-country regression

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[14] Matthew Taylor, Head of Policy Planning in the UK Prime Minister's team, has argued that it is important for researchers to focus on application and implementation (Taylor, 2005).

[15] Based on the economic reform literature, Rodrik (1996) argues that successfully initiating reform and sustaining reform may depend on different approaches. Initiating reform often depends more on leadership and the autonomy of executive (Haggard and Kaufmann, 1995), whereas consolidating reform requires building support from legislative or interest-group bases (Williamson, 1994).

analysis (Kaufmann et al, 2003; Knack and Keefer, 1995). The main argument, articulated most clearly in Evans and Rauch (1999, 2000), is that 'replacing patronage systems for state officials by a professional bureaucracy is a necessary (though not sufficient) condition for a state to be 'developmental''. Unfortunately, there are real problems in this area. A recent study demonstrates the importance of this set of issues: the poor highlight that their experiences with bureaucrats are often unpleasant, unfair and corrupt (Narayan et al, 2000).

Lipsky examines what happens at the point where policy is translated into practice, in various human service bureaucracies such as schools, courts and welfare agencies. He argues that policy implementation in the end comes down to the people who actually implement it: the practitioners or 'street-level bureaucrats'. It is thus not enough for research to influence formal policy formulation without also paying attention to policy in practice. Lipsky (1980: 8) notes that 'street-level bureaucrats engender controversy because they must be dealt with if policy is to change' and 'the immediacy of their interactions with citizens and their impact on people's lives'. In order to impact 'what policy does', research must be able to relate to the situation of the street-level bureaucrats. This point emerges strongly in the preliminary GDN case studies. In sum, as highlighted by the SPEECH case in India, a local view of policy tends to highlight policy implementation rather than formal policy.

Economic literature also has a lot to say about organisations (Coase, 1937; Williamson, 1975; Moe, 1984), highlighting issues of transaction costs and asymmetric information, among others. Principal agent theory in the private sector was adapted to help explain public sector organisations (Rose-Ackerman, 1979; Moe, 1984). In a similar way, public choice theory extends the economic view of individuals maximising their self interest to public officials. Although Fukuyama (2004) identifies problems with these economic approaches, their value is in drawing attention to issues of information, monitoring, accountability and transaction costs in public organisations.

Critical, then, are issues regarding the incentives and constraints on the bureaucrats who actually have to implement policies (the street-level bureaucrats), as these can exert enormous influence on what actually happens when new policies are put into practice. For example, in a number of GDN summary cases, change on the ground based on local research often happened before formal policy changes (Court and Young, 2003). For example, the adoption of rainwater harvesting by smallholder farmers in Tanzania 'began well before an enabling policy for its promotion by planners and development workers was in place'. After demonstration projects, the use of para-veterinarians in Kenya grew rapidly in arid areas, despite the fact it was (and remains) illegal.

Why do institutions matter? Institutional structures both constrain or guide behaviour and provide opportunities for policy change and social/political action. Organisational rules, norms and procedures are in effect intended to limit the power and scope for error of individuals within an organisation and to guide them towards the achievement of its operational goals. Therefore, institutions do not merely act to constrain behaviour, but may also incentivise. Evidence suggests that the national political and administrative culture do affect research uptake (Trostle et al, 1999). Such control, however, is not static. Changes in the external environment may influence, for example, perceptions of risk and approaches to sharing information within the organisation. In sum, institutions constrain or incentivise use of evidence – and they can be reformed to change these incentives.

From our perspective, the key issue is what institutional incentives and pressures lead to utilisation of research. We initially highlight some of the key characteristics that also seem to affect research uptake:

- **Recruitment of civil servants**: It has been noted that research and policy links are the strongest in countries where senior civil servants have had research experience or interests.[16]

- **Incentives**: As indicated through much of this paper, incentives can matter at the individual and system level (Frenk, 1992). One key issue is whether an organisation has an incentive for learning. Does the organisation foster innovation? Are the organisation and the individuals within it open-minded and consider it important to adapt to new ideas from the external world? Are there good links within agencies whereby lessons learned can be shared and acted upon? Do reward systems encourage research use in improving implementation? Is there clear **guidance from above** as to

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[16] For a review of this issue, see Hannay et al (2003). Key sources are Kogan and Henkel (2000) and Premfors (1991).

the goals of the organisation? It is often noted that bureaucracies are **risk averse**. Kogan and Henkel (1983) indicate that the willingness of officials to undertake policy analysis is important.

- **Career structures of policymakers**: There is an interesting discussion about the implications of the career structures of civil servants for issues of bridging research and policy. Hanney et al (2003) note that (i) policymaker mobility may not be easily compatible with effective research utilisation; and (ii) given the length of many research projects, the original sponsor of research is often not in place when the findings are reported.

- **Accountability**: Evidence at the macro and micro levels suggest accountability is a key issue. Control group experiments in behavioural science have, for example, investigated the relationship between accountability and information use in decision making. While knowing that a decision would have to be justified afterwards did not necessarily change the choices made, it 'leads to a distinct increase in the amount of utilised information and to a more elaborate choice process' (Huber and Seiser, 2001: 69). In the wider political context, as Hill (1993: 21) suggests, 'public accountability is more than managerial accountability writ large'. There may be a sense of mutual expectations, such that a policymaker's behaviour is influenced and reinforced by public perception of that role.[17]

- Policymakers need skills and experience both to commission and interpret the results of research, and to put the findings into practice. Grindle (1980: 10) emphasises the **capacity of bureaucratic agencies** to manage programmes successfully, including expertise, personnel, political (elite) support, resources etc.

- Does the organisation have a sufficiently **flexible** structure to enable the development of new groups or units, which will be effective in seeing through a policy change? Does the institutional environment permit any restructuring?

- **Do resources exist** within an organisation, or can they be gathered, to respond to a new way of working?

- **Do specific mechanisms exist?** Are there research units within policy institutions? Are there policy analysis units or think-tanks within policymaking bodies? What is their position and power? What is their impact compared to external institutes? Are there specific mechanisms that lead to the incorporation of research into policy instruments (e.g. Health Technology Assessments – HTAs – and clinical trials)?[18]

In addition to more organisational issues, the literature also highlights some policy-specific issues likely to affect the utilisation of research by implementing organisations:

- What is the nature of benefits of change based on research? Are potential benefits over the long term (and therefore less certain) or are **benefits immediate and visible**.

- Similarly with policy formulation, **contestation** can occur during policy implementation, particularly if bureaucrats oppose new policy directions. Is there a general consensus within the organisation that change is needed? Do decision makers exhibit consensus-seeking behaviour?

- Acceptance or opposition by practitioners may be for a variety of personal or political reasons – or because there are real problems with the **implementability** of a new policy (Grindle, 1980). There are also very **practical constraints**, such as time and lack of access to information. Policymakers also operate within organisational and situational settings that impose practical constraints in terms of the time available: to access information, to process it and to formulate policy.

- So too, Grindle emphasises the importance of the degree of **behaviour change** required in implementing the findings of new research.

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[17] This idea of external pressure on policymakers from the wider public, and the further elaboration of a political contract theory, is suggested in the theories of famine prevention put forward by Sen (1999) and de Waal (1996).
[18] It might also be worthwhile looking at issues of results-based-management.

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**Box 2: Comments on the nature of policy institutions**

Bernard Schaffer has written extensively on the key issues affecting implementation and the implications for research. He highlights a number of issues of importance to the discussion here:

- First, he criticises 'the technocratic illusion in public policy' and 'the implicit premise that the great and powerful institutions of the modern state are, or can be thought of, as neutral instruments or mechanisms subordinated to outside social forces' (p.515).
- Linked to this, he emphasises the role of **organisational interests**: 'public institutions try … to impose organisational interests, agendas and language on matters of broad public policy … so, self-maintenance or institutional survival is a primary drive of organisational actors … The trick, however, is to define the need and design the corresponding institutional output so that the problem is constantly tackled, but never quite solved'. Shaffer notes 'Institutions need policy problems even more than they need policy solutions' (p.516).
- He also notes the need for institutions to engage in **labelling** (naming 'certain sorts of problems') and establishing categories of people 'as objects for policy treatment by an external agency, which then essentially gives them something or does something to them'(p.517).
- Shaffer criticises the **myth of rationality** in which decision making is conceived as 'a process of rational consideration of informed alternatives followed by a discrete act of decision by authoritative decision makers' (p.516). He also highlights the constraints imposed by **policy discourse**: 'so that policy arguments mostly take place within technical parameters or technically described constraints' (p.517). These are discussed in detail below.
- In terms of research policy links, he calls for **critical engagement**. He not only argues for 'a necessity of engagement, but for continual tension in that engagement'. Interestingly, he calls for 'not merely 'speaking truth to power', but speaking truth to the relatively weak and the ignorant as well as to the powerful and well informed' (p.519).

*Source:* Schaffer (1984).

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**Checklist 3: Policy implementation**

| Issue |
| --- |
| (i)      Extent of **transparency** |
| (ii)      Extent of **accountability** |
| (iii)      Extent of **contestation** in implementation |
| (iv)      Extent of **flexibility** in implementation |
| (v)      Extent of **corruption** |
| (vi)      Extent bureaucrats have **capacity** to understand research |
| (vii)      Institutional **incentives** to encourage research utilisation |
| (viii)      Institutional **mechanisms** to draw in evidence in implementation |
| (ix)      **Feasibility** of new approach |
| (x)      **Legitimacy** of new approach |

## 2.5    Decisive moments in the policy process

It is often noted that 'timing is everything' in policy impact. This section focuses on the literature on how to categorise policy processes in order to identify decisive moments for bridging research and policy. We have already looked at the impact of political shifts and the implications for research in influencing policy. The discussion in this section centres on characterising different types of policy process and the implications this has for research uptake. It covers issues of stability, clarity and predictability of policy processes as well as policy windows.

Lindquist (1988) argues that decision modes in policy processes can be categorised into four types – routine, incremental, fundamental or emergent.[19]

- At one end of the spectrum, there is little scope for research influence in **routine** policy processes, since policymakers merely repeat previous decisions.

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[19] In a similar way to Lindquist, Geoff Mulgan, former Director of the Strategy Unit in the UK Cabinet Office, draws a distinction between different types of policy fields and their relationships with knowledge-stable policy fields, policy fields in flux and inherently novel policy fields (Mulgan, 2003).

- **Incremental** decision-making processes are where policymakers deal selectively with issues as they arise. Policymaking frequently involves marginal adjustments to existing options or simply 'muddling through' (Lindblom, 1959, cited in Brock et al, 2001). As such, processes may involve some new thinking. But utilisation of evidence can either be done in an *ad hoc* and disjointed manner or systematically via existing mechanisms or formal networks.[20]

- **Fundamental** decisions provide an opportunity for policymakers to rethink approaches to policy domains. There is great scope for research impact since such processes may involve a comprehensive review of all the associated issues. But there may already be interests and institutions involved which block or shape the use of research.

- **Emergent** decisions refer to situations where policymakers have to deal with completely new policy issues. There is often limited research on which to draw, but there is also substantial scope for impact since there are fewer vested interests and/or less institutionalisation.[21] Governments may keep a close eye to avoid mistakes. However, innovation is often by non-governmental agents who are less risk averse and may be better placed to learn quickly.

Each of these has different decisive moments and thus implications for the uptake of research. It is important to note that most decisions are routine or incremental (with limited or no scope for research input). Fundamental or emergent processes offer more scope for research input (but are much rarer).

Incremental policy processes are the most common – and pose both challenges and opportunities for researchers. On the one hand, policymakers in this decision-making mode are looking for analyses that can provide quick support to decisions that are already half-made, and they may be less inclined to consider evidence that would be time-consuming to understand and adapt. On the other hand, the *ad hoc* nature of decision making also implies that any new evidence which fits in and is helpful on a case-by-case basis, and which is presented at just the right moment, has a good chance of being picked up and used almost immediately. Thus, incremental policy decisions can incorporate some new thinking; the key is to ensure that research is available in the right form at the right time.

More practically, it is often the case that there are quite structured processes by which policy is made (at least formally). Parliaments often have structured ways of making laws. Budget processes are particularly important; it is often effective to try to intervene in the policy process when budgets and spending are being considered. A lesson seems to be that research can have a greater impact on policy if it is timed to coincide with key moments in the budgetary process (de Renzio, 2005).

However, crucial to the discussion here is what Kingdon (1984) calls policy windows, where more radical solutions are needed. Policy windows provide opportunities where research can have a substantial impact, but they tend to occur suddenly, by chance or as a result of an external crisis; it is difficult for researchers to predict them. It does seem the case that research findings are most likely to influence policy at a time of crisis, when policymakers for some reason feel that the traditional policies are no longer adequate for solving the problem at hand. They have the effect of increasing demand for change while reducing contestation. Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith (1999) argue that the greater the sense of crisis, the greater the chance that research can affect **core** policy changes (such as a change in perceptions or values), as opposed to **secondary** changes (such as a change in policy phrases or operational procedures). Some of the GDN cases, particularly those from Indonesia and Peru, describe how ongoing policy research activities can capitalise on these when they occur. Some policy windows may be more predictable – and thus possible to plan for. Kingdon concludes that researchers may have more luck in engaging actively with policy windows once they have occurred (rather than attempting to trigger them).

The link between crises and reform is a very strong theme in the economics literature. As Rodrik (1996: 11) notes, 'the confluence of economic crisis with reform has led to the natural supposition that crisis is the instigator of reform'. Analytically, the point is that policymakers, whether risk averse or self-

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[20] Of relevance to the discussion here is the 'garbage-can model' of policy processes. In these contexts, policymakers seek to pull solutions from the organisation's garbage can, or repertoire of stock responses to problems, which they can apply to problems as they arise.
[21] The Accasia case study by IDRC seems to be one such example (http://web.idrc.ca); another is the Ukraine case study in GDN phase I (www.gdn.org/rapnet).

interested, will only act once they are in trouble, i.e. once there is significant political imperative for improved performance. Also, crises may help break a stalemate regarding a contested policy or lead to agreement among political groups to take painful but necessary steps (Drazen and Grilli, 1993). Normally, one would not advocate inducing crises; however, it must be noted that they may lead to reforms that have welfare benefits (ibid).

There is also a related literature on the shifts in context (such as changes in government) that create the conditions for change. Regime changes in particular can lead to situations where political actors enjoy a grace period or 'honeymoon' (their first few months in office). Haggard and Kaufmann (1995) and Nelson (1994) note that during the honeymoon period, interests associated with the old regime are discredited and disorganised, thus providing an opportunity for reform that would not otherwise be there.

The question here is whether crises or political shifts lead to greater opportunities for bridging research and policy. They certainly can create the possibilities for major new policy directions based on research (there are many cases studies supporting this: see Court and Young, 2003). However, we cannot answer this question in a systematic sense. We can say that it is worth looking for these events. Being aware of such situations and being able to seize such opportunities to introduce new policies can significantly enhance the uptake of research into policy. Although researchers, among others, are generally aware of this issue, they rarely take the trouble to analyse the situation carefully enough in order to maximise the use of it.

### Checklist 4: Decisive moments in the policy process

| Issue |
|---|
| (i)  Character of the policy processes regarding the issue:<br>　　o  Routine – repeats previous decisions<br>　　o  Incremental – deals selectively with small issues as they arise<br>　　o  Fundamental – opportunity to re-think approaches to policy domains<br>　　o  Emergent – new policy issues |
| (ii)  To what extent is the policy process (and thus opportunities to influence it) predictable? |
| (iii) Is the budget process predictable? |
| (iv) Is there a policy window? |
| (v)  To what extent is there a sense of policy crisis? |

## 2.6   The way policymakers think

This section looks at the way policymakers think (particularly how they view new ideas) and the implications for the links between research and policy. Policymakers are obviously influenced by the organisational and political context factors discussed in previous sections. However, the way they think and act as individuals also affects the decisions they make and reflects back on policymaking institutions. Relevant issues that might affect how policymakers behave – particularly regarding how they respond to new ideas – include their education, attitudes, beliefs, prevailing ideas, lack of time and personality. This section draws on some of the key theoretical strands within the policy sciences literature which seem to be useful in understanding the way policymakers think.

The rational actor model of the individual is probably the most systematic and commonly assumed model of the individual policymaker and underlies much of the early literature on decision making and policy choice.[22] This is the notion of an autonomous self-maximising individual making rational choices from the complete set of available alternatives designed to further the pursuit of her interests (i.e. the one that maximises his or her self-interest). This model of the individual is particularly associated with the rational decision-making or linear model of the policy process (Marinetto, 1999) in which

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[22] Common-pool resources theory, the Advocacy Coalition Framework, Punctuated Equilibrium Theory and the Multiple Streams Approach all use rationality models in so far as individuals are assumed to be goal-oriented and to act in ways they believe will make them better off (Schlager, 1999: 241).

policymaking is perceived as a largely technical exercise of selecting from a given set alternatives that course of action which is most likely to bring about a desired outcome.

The main difficulty in applying rational choice theory to policymaking is that the conditions to which it is pertinent almost never obtain. As Simon (1957) points out, the policy process is characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity; individual policy actors neither have perfect information about problems and alternatives, nor perfect computational abilities. Thompson (1967) usefully identified decision issues as involving 'two major dimensions: (i) beliefs about cause/effect relations and (ii) preferences regarding possible outcomes' (cited in Hall, 1996: 162).[23] The key variables are the degree of **certainty** about the former and the degree of **ambiguity** or organisational **consensus** about the latter. Where goals and cause and effect relationships are clear, decision making tends to proceed in an orderly fashion. The majority of policy contexts, however, are characterised by some degree of uncertainty about one or both of these.

Decision makers also display a 'bounded rationality', i.e. they intend to be rational but are vulnerable to mistaken choices owing to unclear or incomplete information (Ostrom, 1999: 46). In such cases, information (quantity and type) is the critical factor in improving the quality of decisions and strategies towards desired outcomes. In sum, the key point is that defining the problems to be addressed and choosing solutions is not straightforward, since policy choice becomes less an exercise in solving problems and more an attempt to make sense of a partially comprehensible world (Zahariadis, 1999).

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**Box 3: Knights versus knaves: altruism versus self-interest in service delivery**

A new book by Julian Le Grand (*Motivation, Agency and Public Policy: Of Knights and Knaves, Pawns and Queens*, OUP, 2003) focuses on public policy and the role of the market. A key aspect of the discussions is whether providers of service do what they consider is good for society (knights) or what they think is good for themselves (knaves). For BRP, the key is to identify which characteristic is present and concentrate on appealing to that. Unfortunately, life is not simple and public service providers may be motivated by both characteristics at once – with the implication that people will need to 'appeal to both knightly and knavish instincts' (*The Economist*, 1 November 2003).

In a similar vein, a recent book by Jeremy Paxman (*The Political Animal*, Penguin, 2002) outlines the polarised perceptions of UK policymakers. On one hand, 'in much of the popular mind, politicians are all the same. They're a bunch of egotistical, lying narcissists who sold their souls long ago and would auction their children tomorrow if they thought it would advance their career. They are selfish, manipulative, scheming, venal. You cannot trust a word any politician says and if you shake hands with them, you ought to count your fingers afterwards' (p.13). On the other hand, 'the way many politicians would like to see themselves: idealistic, noble, selfless' (p.14). 'No sensitive person can read the history of the Labour Party and fail to be moved by the heroic determination of its founders to improve the lives of the working poor' (p.14).

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While part of the literature focuses on imperfect information, the way policymakers process information is of at least equal importance. Since policymakers cannot handle simultaneously all the issues facing them, they engage in selective problem definition and agenda setting on the basis of the perceived salience of an issue, which is determined by a combination of preferences and political context (True et al, 1999). Kingdon (1984) notes that whether issues are framed as potential or actual problems depends on policymakers' values and beliefs; on the way that policymakers categorise the issues; and on the relative weight accorded to the problem through comparison with other political contexts/countries (Zahariadis, 1999: 76-8).

Political psychology has also emphasised selective processing of information. The most pervasive issues are 'availability' and 'representativeness'. Often, what is available to policymakers are their own intentions, plans and experiences (Stein, 1988: 252). The other issue is that of inaccurate comparisons resulting from the fact that 'generally, people tend to exaggerate the similarity between one event and a class of events' (ibid). All this implies that policymakers prefer to learn from experience than to take in more information/research (since ambiguity, unlike uncertainty, is characterised by multiple and apparently equal perspectives, rather than lack of information or uncertainty *per se*).

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[23] This point about the 'technical' uncertainty as to the appropriate solution in many policy areas is also highlighted in much of the economics literature (Rodrik, 1996).

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**Box 4: What determines credibility?**

Beach (1997) outlines different models that set out to explain which variables individuals use to determine credibility when faced with a decision. The first is **recognition**: individuals rely on experience from previous situations to guide them in similar new situations. A second set of variables concern the role of **scenarios, stories and arguments**. Being able to see a situation in the light of a new 'storyline' may suddenly convince individuals to rely on evidence that previously did not seem credible. Thirdly, the **incremental** nature of many decision-making processes constitutes an important variable. An individual who is in the middle of an ongoing and incremental process tends to focus on particular problems as they emerge. What is regarded as 'credible evidence' may change from problem to problem. A fourth set of variables is related to **moral and ethical values**. Ethical values, especially those adhered to at an individual level, will guide a person's perception of what evidence s/he is prepared to accept as credible.

*Source:* Beach (1997).

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There is a substantial literature on the way in which policymakers frame issues and display resistance to or rejection of information which challenges core beliefs. Chomsky (1987) highlights the necessity of understanding the 'framework of possible thought' within which policy is formulated. Beach (1997) puts forward a related argument from a psychological perspective (Box 4). Rein and Schon (1991: 263) put forward a similar argument that policy discourse reflects the frames that policymakers use to select, organise and interpret information. Discourse analysis thus seeks to understand the interplay of power and knowledge to provide insights into the way policymakers think and into how, within particular social and historical contexts, stories are created and told and particular ideas and narratives come to gain ascendancy over others (Brock et al, 2001).

Additionally, it is internal belief systems not the external context that determine individual choices and actions (Schlager, 1999: 243). Sabatier (1998) defines belief systems as 'a set of basic values, causal assumptions, and problem perceptions' which 'affect how individuals acquire, use, and incorporate information' (cited in Schlager, 1999: 243). A related argument is put forward by Lane (1962: 27) in a psychological analysis of the function of ideology in providing a significant defence mechanism in the struggle against confusion and information overload (or, in Freud's terminology, stimulus fatigue)[24] by imposing structure on a complex world. Ideologies and belief systems serve a vital cognitive function,[25] in that 'without them, no individual could organise or interpret the large amount of information potentially relevant to any problem' (Stein, 1988: 249); they also constrain and condition perceptions and guide policymaker responses to specific events and changing information environments.

Such discussions go some way towards explaining Roe's observations (1991) about the persistence of policy narratives (the stories that participants tell about policy situations). 'Policy narratives' persist and continue to inform policymaking, largely because reproducing simple narratives is a good response to information overload or because it can help avoid difficult decisions. The implications are that research will have a greater impact if it fits within a range of what can be seen as 'good advice'. New ideas need to fit within existing narratives or be very simple and convincing to replace them. Counter-evidence will not be taken seriously unless it manages to engage with policymakers within their framework of possible thought – or exerts sufficient pressure to change their conceptual framework (Box 5).

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**Box 5: Insights on 'Narratives' from the GDN summary cases**

The GDN summary case of Starter Packs in Malawi (CS32) provides a good example. It describes how policymakers at the Ministry of Agriculture who were trained in the era of Green Revolution technologies within an interventionist government were much more comfortable with the idea of subsidised inputs and new technology than with newer concepts of sustainable smallholder agriculture in the open marketplace. However, the cases of remittances in Nepal (CS14) and Rainwater Harvesting in Tanzania (CS42) both illustrate how research can challenge and replace an existing narrative over a period of time.

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[24] Freud argues that 'protection against stimuli is a more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli' (Lane, 1962: 30).
[25] Cognition refers to 'any knowledge or opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one's behaviour' (Festinger, 1957: 3).

Policy change occurs not simply through the actions of well situated individuals, but also as a result of collective action (Schlager, 1999: 248). Decision-making contexts do more than frame issues or alternatives for attention and provide procedural rules and norms for decision making. They also influence substantive choices. Rather than the view that group decisions simply reflect an averaging of individual response, studies demonstrate the decision-making group's ability to influence individuals' decisions. It was also found that group discussions may influence individuals' willingness to endorse risky strategies: see discussions of risky shift (Stoner, 1961) and 'Groupthink' (Janis, 1982).

Models of personality types have also related misperception to psychological needs and attempted to characterise the personality traits likely to predispose individuals to rejecting new or conflicting information.[26] This suggests that some policymakers are likely to be more receptive to research than others. Models of authoritarian (see Adorno et al, 1950), closed-minded and dogmatic personalities (see, for example, Rokeach, 1960) are concerned, among other things, to explain the varying tendencies of individuals to hold dogmatically to a particular belief in the face of contradictory evidence. Psychological motivations on their own, however, 'do not work reliably enough to carry the weight of explaining' or predicting policy decisions (Douglas, 1987: 31). Psychological processes are intimately linked to context: the conditions under which a decision is made;[27] interpersonal interactions of decision makers (see, for example, Brown, 1988; Aronson, 1995; Little, 1985); and organisational or social context (including rules, norms, incentives and constraints).

### Checklist 5: The way policymakers think

| Issue |
|---|
| (i)   Extent policy objectives are clear |
| (ii)  Extent cause-effect relationships are clear |
| (iii) Extent of openness to new evidence |
| (iv)  Capacity to process information |
| (v)   Extent policymakers in this area are motivated by<br>　　　o  Public interests<br>　　　o  Personal interests<br>　　　o  Special interests |
| (ii)  What convinces policymakers?<br>　　　o  Recognition from own experience<br>　　　o  Scenarios, stories and arguments<br>　　　o  Moral and ethical values<br>　　　o  Empirical data<br>　　　o  Ideology, personal interests are crucial (evidence doesn't matter) |

In the five sub-sections above, we reviewed the literature and put forward a preliminary list of factors that seem to be important regarding the influence of political context on bridging research and policy. Clearly, this list covers a diverse range of issues. Macro context is overarching by definition – and there are some existing systematic sources of data. There are some themes that are relevant to both the **policy formulation** and the **implementation** arenas (e.g. around issues of transparency and consensus). Some aspects of the **decisive moments** arena are particularly difficult to categorise (e.g. existence of policy windows). The factors regarding the **way policymakers think** cut across the other arenas. A key challenge remains to find appropriate ways of actually assessing or measuring these issues in a rigorous way.

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[26] See, for example, DiRenzo (1967); Brewster-Smith et al (1956); Barber (1965).
[27] For example, a number of studies have shown that the ability of decision makers to appraise situations characterised by ambiguity deteriorates under conditions of stress.

# 3  Assessing and Measuring Political Context Issues

## 3.1    Rationale and assessment challenges

The previous sections of this paper have made two key sets of points. First, it outlined the importance attributed to political context in the literature on bridging research and policy issues. As context matters, it is vital to have more reliable, valid and systematic data. Schaffer, among others, particularly highlighted 'the need for concrete, detailed empirical work in understanding public policy and public institutions' (Schaffer, 1984: 518). Secondly, the paper reviewed a range of sources and identified a list of factors which seemed to be important. The aim was to provide a long list: an initial attempt to identify which issues from the discussion above were most important to discussions of bridging research and policy. This provides a preliminary indication of 'what to look for' for those studying this topic. The emphasis in this section shifts to a discussion of 'how to assess it'. How can those interested in assessing political context in order to study its impact on research uptake (or to develop a strategy to enhance the policy impact of their work) actually generate rigorous evidence?

This is not an easy task by any means. Many challenges remain in terms of effective and systematic assessment and analysis of these issues. These refer to what data are available, how new data might be collected, and how systematic analysis might occur. There seem to be (at least) five challenges to collecting and analysing systematic data on the nature of political contexts and their implications for research uptake into policy:

- The broad range of political context issues that seem to matter for uptake of research into policy. The range of issues has been highlighted above – researchers will have to assess which are relevant to their work and chose appropriate methods to address them.

- The methodological difficulties in gathering data on this set of issue.

- The diversity of types of studies on bridging research and policy – in terms of countries, sectors and types of project. It is not possible to create a 'one approach fits all' solution.

- The fact that bridging research and policy often takes time. For example, many of the GDN projects involve a historical dimension; assessing contexts over time is complicated.

- The consideration of how to link the findings of the context assessments to other aspects of the analysis: we are assuming that context assessments would not stand alone, but would be part of broader data collection.

We start by highlighting some of the particular methodological challenges. Assessing or measuring political context issues poses challenges less often encountered in the economic or social development fields. While concrete indicators of such things as economic growth or primary school enrolment exist, it is much more difficult to find and agree upon indicators of a macro-political phenomenon such as political freedom or specific issues such as contestation regarding a policy issue or accountability of civil servants. Even on macro-political issues, for many countries there is a lack of data that are widely held as credible and objective; there is an even greater shortage of data that are comparative in a meaningful way. Most existing sources of political context data are subjective.

More objective data would be helpful, but it is unclear how they could be generated. It is inevitable that the focus will be subjective. It is certainly worthwhile trying to analyse and measure such qualitative phenomenon as political context in a scientific, empirical manner. Even though such data should be treated with care, they can provide interesting insights and stimulate valuable discussion. In addition, subjective data are also important since perceptions do affect outcomes. There are also emerging lessons about the state of the art in this area, regarding using triangulated combinations of quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Only for macro-political issues are there existing categories and data sources of information on which we can draw. Therefore, actually assessing the other issues would need to be done by those conducting projects. Methods of assessment or measurement are described in the next section. The remainder of this section is divided into four sub-sections. Next, we give some examples of existing

data on macro-political context and governance issues which may be important for research uptake. In Section 3.3, we highlight different approaches to collecting data on other political context issues that might matter (specific issues, implementation, key moments). In Section 3.4, we give some examples of context mapping. In Section 3.5, we offer some analysis of political context in the GDN project.

## 3.2   Assessments of political context at the national level

### Existing data

There is an increasing amount of cross-country data on national political contexts – and some of it longitudinal (see Box 6). These tend to focus on a number of the key issues we have identified as potentially important to issues of bridging research and policy. Compared with our checklist, existing data cover different aspects of governance, democracy and media freedom.

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**Box 6: Sources of data on macro-political and governance issues**

- The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) has collected 'worldwide voter turnout statistics since 1945, for both parliamentary and presidential elections'.[28]
- The Polity IV dataset, housed at the Center for International Development and Conflict Management at the University of Maryland, contains coded annual information on regime and authority characteristics for most independent states in the global state system.
- Freedom House produces an annual survey of Freedom in the World. This focuses on political rights and civil liberties and uses a seven-point scale to rank performance.[29]
- A team led by Daniel Kaufmann at the World Bank has constructed six aggregate indexes from numerous indicators collected from 14 different sources for the years 1996-2004 (Kaufmann et al, 2003; Kaufmann et al, 2005). The aggregate indexes represent 'voice and accountability', 'political instability and violence', 'rule of law', 'graft', 'government effectiveness' and 'regulatory burden.' In particular, this document concentrates on 'voice and accountability' as a key indicator of political participation.
- Comprehensive governance assessments in 16 transitional countries were carried out as part of the World Governance Assessment project of the United Nations University. This is now being taken forward by ODI and assessments are underway in 10 countries.[30]
- Various private sector firms (EIU, ICRG) include political context indicators in their work – usually from a political risk perspective.
- The World Bank and most bilateral donors carry out systematic assessments of political and institutional contexts as part of their development assistance programmes. The findings are not usually publicly available.

*Sources:* Hyden et al (2004); Kauffman et al (2005); Sudders and Nahem (2004).

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A discussion of individual datasets is beyond the scope of this paper (see the sources outlined above for more information). If the need is for longer-term longitudinal data, there are sources for specific issues, for example Freedom House for political freedom or the risk rating agencies for more economic governance issues. For more comprehensive and detailed assessments – but with much more limited time and country focus – approaches such as the civil society index and world governance assessment are more useful. The single most useful source for such projects is likely to be the World Bank Institute dataset: this aggregates existing measures for all countries into six dimensions of governance for the period 1996-2004.

Below, we provide an example of the kind of data that the WBI dataset can generate. We use the data on one dimension (voice and accountability) for the 20 largest countries in Africa. More generally, such data might be instructive in setting the context or starting a discussion about broader context issues. It is naturally likely that this dataset is particularly suited to cross-country studies such as the two GDN studies on research-policy links (Africa and Eastern Europe).

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[28] See http://www.idea.int/vt/intro/introduction.cfm (accessed November 2003).
[29] www.freedomhouse.org (accessed November 2003).
[30] See further information at www.odi.org.uk/wga_governance.

**Figure 2: Governance data for Africa, 2004**



Voice and Accountability (World, 2004)
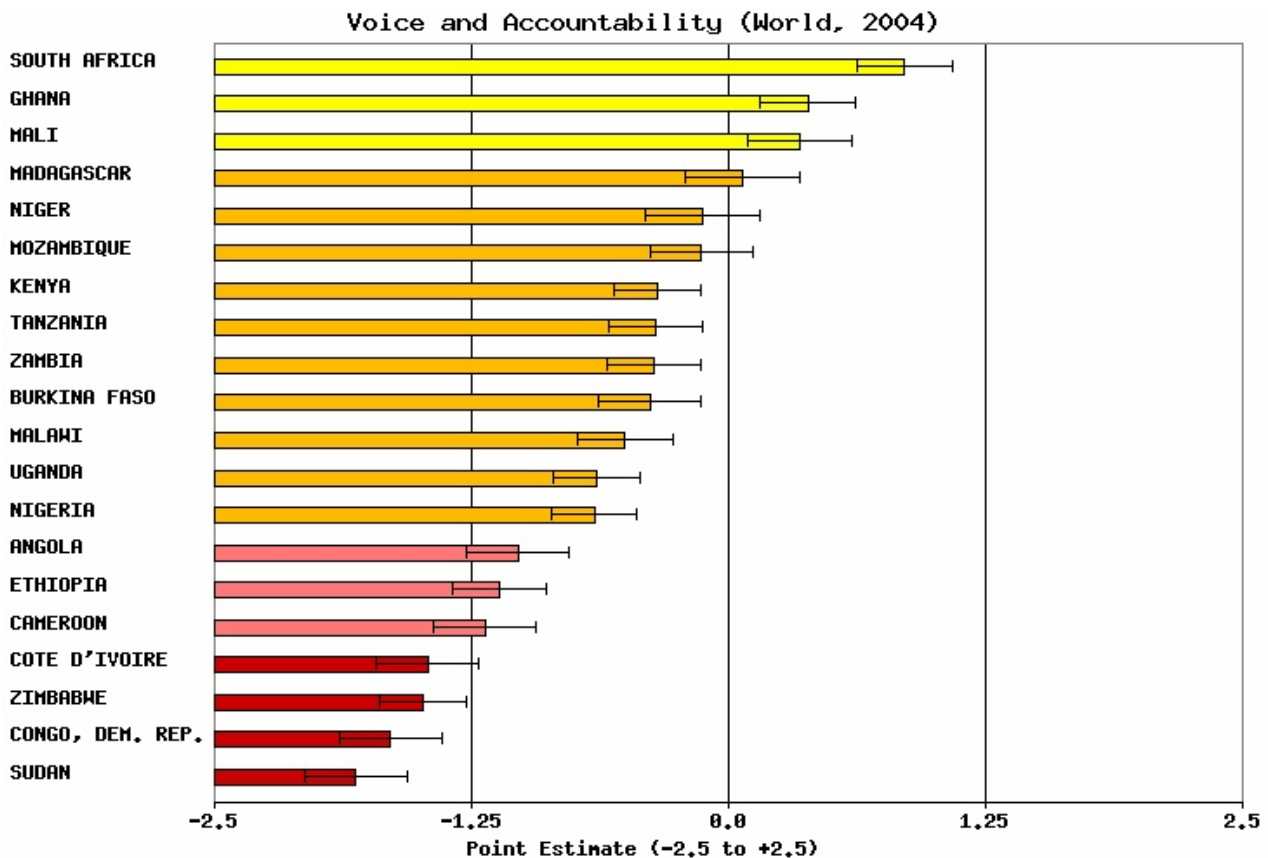
*Source:* Kaufmann et al (2005).

## Approaches to collecting new data

Existing data do not cover some of the issues identified in our checklist regarding what macro-political context issues are likely to matter for research uptake: issues such as a culture of evidence use or academic freedom. For some of these issues, academic freedom for example, this does not matter, since information is very likely to be correlated with data we do have (media freedom). For others, for example culture of evidence use, the gap may be more significant.

For the GDN project, there is probably little that can be done. The approach taken in implementing the project, i.e. generating the majority of studies via an open call, has many advantages. One disadvantage is that this method limits the scope for collecting new systematic comparative data of macro context issues. For future projects in this area, it is worth noting a number of other ways to generate systematic data. Below, we briefly mention and assess the different options.

One option would be to use an international panel of experts – similar to what Freedom House do but for a few select issues. We are probably not yet at a stage where this could be done with any theoretical grounding. It would also lack legitimacy and rigour.

A second option would be to conduct focus group discussions in each country. In terms of strengths, it is clear that this approach can generate relevant information about the background conditions affect research-policy linkages. The project could obtain a good sense of the issues that affect research-policy links in their country. Another advantage is that, because it is highly participatory, it has the potential of generating solutions to the problems identified by the group members. The focus group approach, however, also has certain disadvantages that cannot be ignored. It is very demanding and requires very skilled coordinators. Since the approach catalyses collective integrated thinking, it makes individual ratings insignificant. Another drawback is that accuracy suffers, as some individuals may not feel comfortable speaking up in public. Although it generates more location-specific data, the focus group approach yields less systematic results. Our assessment in this regard reflects the consensus

view of most researchers, i.e. that focus groups are best used to identify issues and develop surveys rather than as the only source of data. They could be part of the method for each individual study, but may not be the best approach to generating systematic data.

Another option is the approach taken in the work of Hyden et al (2004), namely, to opt for a survey of a cross-section of well informed persons (WIPs) on BRP issues in each country (those in government, parliament, bureaucracy, civil society, researchers, etc.). These would be individuals who are experienced in and informed about such issues. The premise of our approach was that they would be able to provide the most knowledgeable ratings about research-policy issues as well as qualitative comments to back up their assessments. The approach not only enables comparison across countries, but also among different groups within each country (e.g. researchers, policymakers, NGOs).

This approach would generate data using a standard context assessment questionnaire, which would include some of the key issues in the checklists above. A generic survey instrument is provided in the web version of this paper as an example of what such an instrument might look like.[31] The survey can be implemented and managed online to facilitate ease of completion and analysis.[32] There is increasing experience available on how to implement such work in a rigorous way (Hyden et al, 2004).

Another idea would be to carry out a systematic assessment of a number of ministries in different countries similar to studies carried out by the UK National Audit Office (NAO, 2003a; 2003b). The NAO studies looked at how European and North American governments manage research to improve service delivery and policy development. The advantages are that the approach taken could be modified relatively easily for implementation in, say, three different ministries in four countries.

## 3.3    Approaches to assessing other specific political context issues

On the other context issues (specific policy contexts, implementation, timing, the way policymakers think), there is essentially no existing data that are comparable across countries and contexts. If the GDN studies or any other stakeholders want systematic data for these specific issues, they will need to generate the data themselves. Generating and analysing such data will be challenging.

A first point is that it would be possible to use the approaches identified above, but to focus on the more specific issues highlighted here. This would be feasible for many of the indicators we identify in our checklists, although not all. These approaches would work for studies that systematically compare contexts. However, such approaches will often not be appropriate: many studies focus on a single episode or approach. In such cases, a different approach is needed to assessing context.

There is no single approach to the study of specific political contexts and their impact on research-policy linkages. Yet, studies need to assess this in as rigorous a manner as possible. There is a growing body of experience that indicates the value of using context-specific triangulated combinations of qualitative and quantitative methods. A range of empirical and qualitative tools are available, including literature and document reviews, surveys, bibliometric and/or content analysis, workshops and focus-group discussions, and individual interviews. We outline some of these below.

Given the diversity of types of study of research-policy links (the GDN project includes country studies, sector studies, episode studies, good practice studies and action research), our aim here is to highlight a wide range of approaches so that those undertaking studies in the project can select a range which can best suit their needs. Again, it is vital to use various approaches and triangulate the findings. Some of the options for assessing political context – and sources for further information on each – are outlined below.[33]

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[31] See www.odi.org.uk/rapid.
[32] For more on this approach, see www.odi.org.uk/wga_governance.
[33] This sub-section draws on the Method Note for GND project holders prepared by the author along with Eric Livny and John Young. A useful website on research methods is that developed by William Trochim (he encourages people to use it as long as they reference it): http://trochim.cornell.edu/kb/contents.htm.

## Literature/desk reviews

Although not specifically generated for studies of research-policy links, there is often literature on issues of political context for most countries, which covers some of the key issues we identify in our checklist (though less often for specific sectors). In addition to any published literature, there is also often a great deal of 'grey' literature that can be used to get an initial take on political context issues. The World Bank, UN agencies, bilateral donors and NGOs are increasingly conducting assessments of political context in specific countries and sectors. Often, the challenge is to get hold of them.

## Reviews of government documents

Analysis of government policy documents/speeches can give systematic information, not only on what policy is but also on the context – whether in the executive branch or the bureaucracy.

## Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is another option. It seeks to understand the interplay of power and knowledge to provide insights into the way policymakers think and into how, within particular social and historical contexts, stories are created and told and particular ideas and narratives come to gain ascendancy over others (Brock et al, 2001).

## Surveys

Survey techniques can help generate powerful data on research-policy links. Phase One included preliminary surveys of researchers and policymakers, highlighting the value and challenges of this approach. Some projects are likely to draw heavily on surveys, whereas others might be interested to do something quicker yet clean to test their ideas. A useful starting point is Dinello and Squire (2002).

Given the usefulness of this kind of work, we have created a generic questionnaire for issues of political context, which can be found on the web version of this paper. The questions cover the issues we have identified in our various checklists. The questionnaire could be developed further depending on the specific issues of focus in each case (the synthesis of the GDN project is also likely to help identify which of the issues are more important). The survey would also need to be administered in different ways depending on the objectives of the specific study. It would be important to gain views from different stakeholders to get a balanced picture – or to submit surveys to researchers and policymakers focusing on the same issues but from different perspectives. Such a survey was used in an exercise in Egypt in a very preliminary way (discussed below).

## Interviews

Standard interview techniques are likely to form a critical component of many of the projects in this area. 'Interviews are among the most challenging and rewarding forms of measurement' (see Trochim, footnote 33). The episode studies conducted by ODI all drew substantially on interviews and more on the specific use in each case can be accessed from the RAPID website (www.odi.org.uk/rapid).

## Focus group discussions

Focus groups provide a way to capture the views of stakeholders in a particular context. As outlined above, the approach can generate relevant information about research-policy linkages in specific cases. These are more relevant for specific studies than comparative work since they have the same strengths, but the weaknesses relating to comparative use of focus groups across countries do not apply. They do require skilled facilitators; care needs to be taken regarding power dynamics within the group. Some options for further information on focus groups include:

- A good starting point: http://www.ucc.ie/hfrg/projects/respect/urmethods/focus.htm

- Another outline resource: http://www.tsbvi.edu/cosbnews/Apr2000/focus.htm

- A useful guide: http://edf5481-01.fa02.fsu.edu/Guide6.html

## Participatory exercises

There are a range of options here, but a variety of these can provide a quick but useful way of assessing the political context issues that affect policy change and specifically the role of research in the process. They are often particularly suited to assessing organisational contexts.

- ODI conducted a participatory pair-wise approach to identify and rank the relative importance of factors influencing policy processes within DFID, and the role of research. Policymaker demand and funding were crucial; internal stakeholders also identified that the research base mattered for policy shifts. See http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/P0166_SDC/DFID_Workshop.html.

- More generally, IIED's PLA Notes is 'the world's leading series on participatory learning and action approaches and methods. It provides a forum for all those engaged in participatory work – community workers, activists and researchers – to share their experiences, conceptual reflections and methodological innovations with others.' See http://www.iied.org/sarl/pla_notes/.

- Another example of such approaches is the work RAPID carried out for the SMEpol project – a collaborative effort to improve SME policy in Egypt based on evidence. The RAPID team worked through a range of participatory exercises with project stakeholders in order to gain a better understanding of the political context factors that affected policy change in the specific sector. See http://www.odi.org.uk/Rapid/Meetings/SMEPol_Egypt/Index.html.

## Bibliometric analysis

More a measure of impact, this approach may also help to assess political contexts. For example, how often an issue is mentioned in the media may provide an indication of the prevailing public mood and push for change. A good example of this approach is provided in McNeill (forthcoming 2006).

## Stakeholder analysis

This approach is more relevant for action research projects than for academic analysis. 'Stakeholder analysis identifies people, groups and organisations that may be affected by the policy reform or that may affect the reform': http://poverty.worldbank.org/files/13002workshop_stakeholder.pdf.

- This site also provides a good overview (and can link to many other tools, e.g. forcefield analysis, grid analysis, risk analysis): http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newPPM_07.htm

- Also useful is http://www.dfid.gov.uk/FOI/tools/chapter_02.htm

- For a very simple step by step guide, see http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/stake.html

For those interested in changing policy using evidence, stakeholder analysis is an important step in assessing a context.

## Forcefield analysis

Like stakeholder analysis, this tool is more relevant for action research projects than for more academic analysis. Force Field Analysis is a technique based on the premise that change is a result of a struggle between forces of resistance (forces that impede change) and driving forces (forces that favor change). It can be used in various degrees of rigour depending on the objectives and resources available.

- For a first step, see http://erc.msh.org/quality/ittools/itffld.cfm

- See also http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newTED_06.htm

- And http://www.extension.iastate.edu/communities/tools/forcefield.html

In closing this discussion, it is worth drawing attention to the widely used book by Brinkerhoff and Crosby (2002), which includes some of these tools and examples of their use. The book also provides frameworks for mapping political contexts at the national and specific sectoral level (micro-political mapping). Although not oriented towards issues of research-policy issues, the book is an excellent source of relevant ideas.

## 3.4    Two examples of mapping political context issues

Below we highlight two examples of mapping political context issues based on work by ODI. These have been more practical in nature, with the objective of gaining an understanding of how to improve policy processes – including a better use of research and evidence – rather than academic studies of what has happened in the past. It is useful, however, to highlight these examples for two reasons. First, they were both specifically focused on mapping political context (even though not solely interested in issues of research uptake). Secondly, the projects demonstrate how information from different sources can be compiled. Often, the final analysis was based on reviews of the literature and official documents, focus groups and interviews of key informants, and participatory exercises.

### Policy mapping in Eastern Europe: Croatia and Bulgaria

These examples are taken from a fellowship programme organised by the Local Government and Public Service Reform Initiative (LGI) and mentored by the author. The studies were aimed at mapping the policy processes in participating countries and sectors of focus of the research fellows in order to identify ways of improving the policy processes. The overarching objectives of the programme were to: (i) better understand policy processes in Eastern Europe; (ii) identify the influence of different actors on policy processes; and (iii) make suggestions for how policy processes could be improved. The approaches developed were inspired by and somewhat similar to those used by Merillee Grindle in her classes at Harvard University.

The first study looked at the role of government communications in different stages of the reform policy process in Croatia – agenda setting, formulation and design, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation – and the consequences for the success or failure of reforms.[34] This required a deeper understanding of the policy process in Croatia. The mapping focused on policy process in general in Croatia, followed by an examination of two examples of recent reform efforts (pensions and labour).

**Table 1: Policy matrix of the pension reform with corresponding relevant stakeholders (Croatia)**

|  | Agenda | | Formulation | | Implementation | | M&E | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Government | / | 5 | / | 5 | / | 4 | o | 3 |
| Parliament | o | 1 | o | 2 | o | 1 | o | 1 |
| Private sector | / | 1 | / | 2 | / | 4 | / | 3 |
| Implementing agencies | o | 1 | / | 3 | / | 5 | / | 4 |
| Academic community | o | 1 | / | 5 | / | 1 | o | 1 |
| Unions | o | 1 | o | 1 | / | 3 | / | 4 |
| International actors | / | 5 | / | 4 | / | 5 | / | 3 |
| Media | o | 1 | / | 1 | / | 4 | o | 5 |
| General public | o | 1 | o | 1 | / | 3 | o | 5 |

Rating in terms of level of interest in reform success: / = interested in positive outcome, o = not interested in positive outcome.

Rating in terms of extent of influence on the reform process: 5 = very high; 4 = significant; 3 = some; 2 = very little; 1 = almost none.

Having set up a framework, the paper drew first on literature reviews (in general and on the issues of reform, policy process and communications). As a resource for analysing concrete policy changes, documents were collected from ministries and government, including on initial and subsequent legislative proposals, conclusions and minutes of discussions from government sessions and other relevant documents. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with government officials, stakeholders and journalists. Intensive one-on-one structured interviews provided in-depth analysis of the different stages of the policy process. 'Finally, following from the literature review and interviews, a stakeholder analysis was compiled and used to finalise the mapping of the policy process' (Mladineo, 2005). The mapping helped understand the process, identify key actors and their relative importance, and locate

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[34] This example is drawn from an unpublished paper by Vanja Mladineo (2005).

key weaknesses in the policy process. This enabled better selection of options and targeting of stakeholders in order to try to promote policy change based on research evidence.

The second example is from Bulgaria.[35] The paper analyses the main factors influencing the policy process and outlines major bottlenecks hampering the efficiency of the social assistance policy. It focuses particularly on the role of civil society in the policy cycle of social assistance in Bulgaria. The mapping used a range of tools. These included: desk reviews of existing regulations, reports and academic literature; key informant interviews; a small survey using a semi-standardised questionnaire; and focus group discussions. Using a generic matrix (Table 2), the researcher focused on both the different formal roles and the actual influence different stakeholders had on policy processes. A more detailed matrix is given in Table 3, focusing on only three of the government actors. The interesting issue is that the mapping systematically identified all the different stakeholders in each domain – and at both national and local level.

### Table 2: Matrix for mapping the policy process and actors (Bulgaria)

|  | Agenda setting | Formulation | Implementation | M&E |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Government  Political society  Bureaucracy  Civil society  Private sector  Judiciary |  |  |  |  |

The key point here is that it is possible to use various techniques to develop very specific analysis of policy contexts. This can then affect what research is done and how it is targeted –in terms of actors and part of the policy process – in order to maximise the chances of research uptake.

### Table 3: Example of mapping policy actors and processes: social policy in Bulgaria

| Levels | Agenda setting | Formulation | Implementation | M&E |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **National level: public bodies** |  |  |  |  |
| **National Assembly (parliament)** | The parliament is the national legislative body – each member of the parliament has a legislative initiative | The parliament adopts laws, decisions and declarations; it determines taxes; approves the composition of the government; ratifies international treaties, etc. |  | Mainly through 'parliamentarian control' and approval of the execution of the state budget, the Court of Auditors, controlling state budget spending, is elected by the parliament |
| **Council of Ministers (government)** | The Council of Ministers is a central collective executive power body with general competence. It is the institution responsible for the development of the overall social policy in Bulgaria | Among policy tools of the Council of Ministers are strategies, programmes, plans, decrees, regulations, ordinances and decisions | The Council of Ministers shall coordinate other public administration bodies for the sake of the implementation of a unified state policy. Apart from compulsory interaction with all state institutions, legislative body, local authorities and judiciary, the government shall have cooperation with management bodies of employers' and | Overall monitoring and control – the Council of Ministers may suspend the acts of the lower level administration |

| Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MLSP) | MLSP develops, coordinates and implements state policy in the field of social assistance | MLSP may adopt regulations, ordinances and instructions | employees' organisations, organisations for social protection and other NGOs | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | | | Management and coordination of respective subordinated bodies | Execution of overall control with respect to activities of subordinated bodies |

## *Political context of SME policy in Egypt*

This case describes the findings of a workshop to promote evidence-based policy for the small and medium-scale enterprise (SME) sector in Egypt, which included a range of approaches to assess the political context for SME policy. The workshop involved key stakeholders in the Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises Policy Development (SMEPol) project, which aims to improve the policy environment for micro, small and medium enterprise development. Full details of the workshop are available elsewhere.[36] The relevant sections here relate to the political context approaches used in the workshop in order to maximise the impact of the project.

Initially, a literature review and discussion groups identified a number of features that make bridging research and policy difficult in Egypt. Some of the key issues included: that many policies are developed only 'from the top down'; that research-based data availability and quality is very variable; that both research and policy capacity is limited; that coordination among all the different stakeholders is often poor; and that the SMEs themselves often do not trust the policymakers.

Secondly, participants used a simple mapping approach to develop a policy process map for SME policies in Egypt. This identified the key actors that were important for policy formulation (mostly central government) and for implementation (local bureaucracies). Participants also used the RAPID framework to develop a detailed understanding of: (i) the policymaking process; (ii) the nature of the evidence they have, or hope to get; (iii) all the other stakeholders involved in the policy area; and (iv) external influences. The general policy context map is shown in Table 4.

The participants completed a political context questionnaire – similar to the one in the web version of this paper – which highlighted key issues about the context for SMEs in Egypt. In some cases, this reinforced the participatory work (e.g. the fact that policies are more often informed by policymakers' own experience and opinions than by research). In others, the survey identified new important issues (e.g. that research is not very influential in policy implementation and the bureaucracy is inflexible, not transparent and not really open to new information). The findings of one question are included below (Table 5) as an indication of the rough but useful evidence that can be generated. This specific question highlights the type of evidence that tends to convince policymakers; it is important to consider this for research design (in addition to methods to ensure research quality). More specifically, generating such data can give a systematic view on the context issues that affect the uptake of research.

Finally, participants worked in groups and used a number of these approaches to analyse the specific situation and develop strategies to achieve three specific policy objectives that were particularly important to their work. These drew on their assessments of the political context. The tools included forcefield analysis and SWOT analysis. For more on these approaches, see the RAPID Tools For Policy Impact (Start and Hovland, 2003).

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[36] See www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Events/SMEPol_Egypt.

Table 4: Policy context map for the SME sector in Egypt

| Actors | Policy formulation (levels of power, 1= low; 5 = high) | Policy implementation (levels of power, 1= low; 5 = high) |
|---|---|---|
| **Government** | | |
| Council of Ministers | Coordination among economic ministries (5) | |
| MoF | SME competitiveness strategy (5) | Implementing policies (5) |
| MoFTI | Export promotion strategy (5) | Implementing policies (5) |
| MoI | No direct role (0) | Participating in one-stop-shop model (5) |
| **Political society** | | |
| National Democratic Party – Economic Committee | Formal:<br>o Develop policy issues and make recommendations (4)<br>o Raise recommendations to People's Assembly (4)<br>Informal:<br>o Advocacy (5)<br>o Support policies (large representation in People's Assembly (5)<br>o (Research) | N/A (0) |
| People's Assembly – Economic Committee | Formal:<br>o Deliberate on research and recommendations (4)<br>o Make recommendations to People's Assembly (5) | |
| **Bureaucracy** | | |
| Localities | | Execution of policies, laws, procedures (5) |
| **Civil society** | | |
| Chamber of Commerce; Federation of Industries; Business Associations; others e.g. unions and syndicates | Participate in the consultative process: discuss draft laws and policies – through advocacy groups, lobbying, representation in committees, workshops and seminars (2) | Intermediary between government and private sector; sharing information; provision of social services; networking (4) |
| **Private sector** | | |
| SMEs, Credit Guarantee Corporation (CGC) | Participate in the consultative process: discuss draft laws and policies – through advocacy groups, lobbying, representation in committees, workshops and seminars (2) | Support for policy; CGC as a tool of policy implementation; networking (4) |
| **International** | | |
| Includes donor agencies and the donor sub-group | Support policy formulation process (funding, technical assistance, capacity building, research, seminars, networking) (2) | Assistance and support to government; support for NGOs – for implementation and as intermediaries to beneficiaries (4) |

Table 5: What evidence convinces policymakers in your specific area of work (Egypt)?

| | High | Medium | Low |
|---|---|---|---|
| Recognition from their own experience | 5 | 8 | |
| Moral and ethical values | | 7 | 4 |
| Empirical data | 5 | 6 | 1 |
| Visible evidence from pilot projects that new policy options work | 7 | 6 | |

## 3.5    Options for analysis

A final set of challenges concerns linking assessments of context to discussions of research uptake into policy. Again, this is not easy. While there are some examples of individual studies, there has not been an explicit effort to test systematically whether and how political context makes a difference. There are two levels of discussion here: (i) synthesis at the level of the individual studies; and (ii) systematic synthesis of the findings – for example for the whole GDN project. We address each in turn.

### *Individual projects*

Any review should address two sets of issues. First, it needs to look at the types of political context issues that were assessed in a specific study of research-policy links – and those not. Secondly, it needs to focus on the extent the approach taken in a study addressed context issues using a range of triangulated approaches. In sum, what data exist (and what is missing) and how credible are they?

At the individual project level, it is usually possible to draw information together to give a description of the political context and assess the impact it has had on uptake of research into policy. This will depend on the type of project. Perhaps the most rigorous example is provided by the episode studies completed by ODI (Court et al, 2005). Each episode study constructed an historical narrative leading up to the observed policy change. This involved creating a timeline of key policy decisions and practices, along with important documents and events, and identifying key actors. The next step was to explore why those policy decisions and practices took place and assess, using the RAPID framework, issues of political context and the relative role of research in that process. This was done through interviews with a range of key actors and informants, reviewing the literature and policy documents, attending workshops, and cross-checking conflicting narratives.

In particular, the Young et al (2005) may be most useful for studies of developing countries. There are many other good examples of research-policy case studies (IDRC, 2005; Ryan, 1999; Court and Maxwell, 2005), but they perhaps do not address political context issues as systematically as the episode studies carried out by ODI.[37]

### *Overall political context synthesis across projects (e.g. GDN)*

A preliminary point is that the synthesis will depend on the quality of the data collected by each project on issues of political context. Once the individual projects are reviewed, there is the challenge of synthesis on political context issues (and more generally) across different studies. We discuss the challenges likely to be faced by using the GDN Bridging Research and Policy project as an example. Since the GDN studies were generated via an open call, the scope for direct, systematic comparison is limited. The exact approach will need to be developed once the sub-projects are (largely) completed so the building blocks for the synthesis are known. Regardless of the specifics, this is likely to involve four sets of activities: (i) review; (ii) typology development; (iii) elaboration of findings; and (iv) recommendations. Below are a few thoughts at this stage.

**Review:** It would help the project if someone is charged with looking at political context issues across all the completed studies and the link between context and research uptake into policy. This would look at and draw out the range of issues that emerge and identify some of the more detailed conclusions.

**Typology development:** Based on this paper and the issues that emerge from reviewing the project findings, it would be worthwhile trying to develop a simple typology of the types of political context that seem to matter for research-policy linkages. At the macro level, there is very little evidence from the literature about the specific question of impact of democracy and good governance on the uptake of research into policy in developing countries. There may be some potential for more systematic synthesis across studies, where there is enough similarity in focus and approach; realistically, this will only apply to some of the country and sector studies. The specific cases may also shed light on this issue. At the more specific levels, this paper has identified a number of issues that seem to matter. It

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[37] Early versions of the case studies are publicly available on the ODI website at: www.odi.org.uk/rapid.

will be a question of reviewing these in light of the findings generated by the project to see what issues seem to matter most in different contexts.

**Elaboration of findings**: This will be a question of outlining and supporting the typology (or typologies) with the evidence from the various GDN projects. The challenge is then to pull together the various strands of work into a coherent synthesis. This will also need to address whether and how the key findings differ from existing theory and findings on research-policy links. This can be done by an individual or a core group.

There have been a number of efforts (on a more limited scale) to pull together context issues from a variety of cases into a synthesis. Although none is yet adequate, these do provide an indication of what can be done. For example, Court et al (2005) pull together the findings for ODI's episode studies and what political context issues seem to matter for research uptake into policy. A Special Issue of the Journal for International Development focusing on bridging research and policy in international development is interesting since it contains a synthesis of political context issues drawing on papers by policymakers themselves as well as the findings from four case studies (Court and Maxwell, 2005). The first phase of the GDN project collected 50 summary cases; a synthesis of the findings on bridging research and policy is provided in Court and Young (2003). IDRC has recently completed a strategic evaluation of the policy impact of its own research work; while issues of political context were not always addressed systematically in the 16 case studies, the approach to synthesis is relevant.[38]

The IDRC project held a series of project workshops dedicated specifically to the issue of drawing out lessons across cases. This idea, or a variant of it, seems like the most effective way to proceed for the GDN project. One idea would be to have a 'writeshop' of project holders and other relevant stakeholders. The aim of this approach 'is to develop the materials, revise and put them into final form as quickly as possible, taking full advantage of the expertise of the various writeshop participants'.[39]

**Recommendations**: Based on the synthesis, the challenge will then be to draw some generic recommendations about political context and research policy links as well as more nuanced guidance about what seems to work where. Using boxes in the text and/or annexes, it will be important to provide examples of where things have worked and why – as well as 'how they did it' examples. ODI and GDN, among others, have many such focused cases to include; such cases provide interesting lessons for improving practice.

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[38] For an overview and a useful discussion, please see http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-26606-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html).
[39] For a good overview and a range of examples, see http://www.mamud.com/writeshop.htm.

# 4 Conclusion

Political context issues are crucial to any discussion on bridging research and policy. This paper has reviewed some of the relevant literature on politics, policy processes and institutions in order to try to identify the key issues that may affect research-policy links. The review has concentrated on the theory and literature from OECD countries. It has also drawn on evidence from developing countries where available. The fact that there remains little systematic work in this area is what makes the work by the RAPID programme and the GDN Bridging Research and Policy project valuable.

In order to provide a background, we have reviewed a range of literature from different disciplinary sources and identified a list of factors that seem to be the most important to discussions of bridging research and policy. Given the different disciplines and levels of analysis in the literature, we cluster our findings into five arenas that seem to be most useful. These are: (i) macro-political context; (ii) specific policy context; (iii) implementation; (iv) decisive moments in the policy process; and (v) the way policymakers think. The long list of issues in these arenas can be further refined as more empirical studies are completed.

The paper has also focused on how to assess the political context issues that matter to research-policy links. Although there are many challenges to this, there are also some possibilities. There is some existing data at the macro level that may be relevant. For most of the specific political context issues we have discussed, studies or projects will have to generate their own data. We have discussed a range of approaches to doing this – from reviews and interviews to surveys and focus groups. The key point to ensure credibility is that each study should use a range of methods and triangulate the findings.

This paper is intended to inform ongoing work. The main issues raised should very much be seen as ideas for testing rather than conclusions. The paper provides a menu of approaches for consideration on how to obtain relevant political context data. Any project or initiative will need to consider which are appropriate and adapt them accordingly.

It is probably time for a synthesis of work in this area: to look at political context issues across a range of completed studies and draw conclusions regarding the link between political context and research-policy links. In addition to desk reviews, perhaps the most productive way of generating a synthesis across the different studies will be for a workshop of researchers who have carried out relevant studies (and external experts) to reflect on these issues. It will not be easy, but generating a more systematic understanding on the ways political context issues affect research-policy links will make a substantial contribution to the literature. It would likely also have significant practical implications for the ways policymakers, civil society groups, international donors and, of course, researchers work to inform and improve policy processes in developing countries.

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