

Helping researchers become policy entrepreneurs

How to develop engagement strategies for evidence-based policy-making

Donors spend billions of dollars on development research each year, but what is the impact on policy? What really influences policy-makers? Is it hard facts? Is it stories and anecdotes? What are they looking for, and who do they listen to, when considering policy options? Facts alone – no matter how authoritative – may not be enough.

This Briefing Paper summarises ODI's work on understanding how policy processes operate in the real world, as part of its mandate to inspire and inform policy and practice that lead to the reduction of poverty. ODI's Research and Policy in Development programme (RAPID) helps other organisations, and ODI itself, lock together high quality applied research, practical policy advice, and policy-focused dissemination and debate. RAPID also ensures organisations have the skills, capacities and networks necessary to engage successfully in policy discussions.

The paper condenses five years of work (see Box 1 overleaf) into six key lessons that are essential to any researcher or organisation wishing to generate evidence-based policy change, and an eight-step approach for policy entrepreneurs wishing to maximise the impact of research on policy. This is known as the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA).

Six lessons

First, policy processes are complex and rarely linear or logical. Simply presenting information to policy-makers and expecting them to act upon it is very unlikely to work. While many policy processes do involve sequential stages – from agenda setting through decision-making to implementation and evaluation – some stages take longer than others, and several may occur more or less simultaneously. Many actors are involved: ministers, parliament, civil servants, the private sector, civil society, the



The ROMA steps help policy entrepreneurs work in complex environments.

media, and in the development sector, also donors – all of them trying to influence the process, and each other. While Clay and Schaeffer's 1984 book, *Room for Manoeuvre*, describes 'the whole life of policy as a chaos of purposes and accidents', RAPID prefers terms like 'complex' (Ramalingam et al., 2008), 'multifactoral' and 'non-linear'. Recognising this complexity is essential for policy entrepreneurs if they are to engage with policy. Treating complex processes in a simplistic manner can undermine the chances of achieving the desired outcome. Strategies must be fluid and able to adapt to changing contexts and to take advantage of policy windows, and effective monitoring and learning systems are essential to keep abreast of the ever-changing dynamics.

Second, many policy processes are only weakly informed by research-based evidence. An ODI study of factors influencing chronic poverty in Uganda found that only two of 25 were related to information gaps (Bird et al., 2004). In a talk on evidence-based policy-making at ODI in 2003, Vincent Cable MP (Cable, 2003) said that policy-makers face difficulties when

Key points

- Researchers and policy-makers are missing chances to turn research findings into lasting change for the world's poor
- Policy processes are complex and rarely linear or logical
- Policy entrepreneurs need to be strategic, systematic and flexible in design, monitoring and learning of policy engagement

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Box 1: Development of the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA)

Over the last five years the RAPID team has worked on how research-based evidence can inform policy processes. Key projects have included:

- Compilation of over 50 case studies on successful evidence-based policy engagement.
- Development and facilitation of the Evidence-based Policy in Development Network (ebpdn), which links more than 20 institutional partners and thousands of practitioners working on evidence-based policy processes.
- Creating an array of practical toolkits designed with CSOs, researchers and progressive policy makers in mind.
- Direct support to civil society organisations (CSOs) to provide training in policy influencing and strategic communication.
- Strengthening the capacity for the UK Department for International Development (DFID) to influence other actors.

using research-based evidence because of the ‘Five Ss’: Speed – they have to make decisions fast; Superficiality – they cover a wide brief; Spin – they have to stick to a decision (at least for a reasonable period of time); Secrecy – many policy discussions are held in secret; and finally, Scientific ignorance – few policy-makers are scientists, and they may not appreciate fully the scientific concept of testing a hypothesis.

Phil Davies, former Deputy Director of the Government and Social Research Unit in the UK Cabinet Office, has described how policy-makers tend to be influenced more heavily by: their own values, experience, expertise and judgement; the influence of lobbyists and pressure groups; and pragmatism – based on the resources available – than by evidence. He has argued that researchers and policy-makers have completely different concepts of what constitutes good evidence. Researchers only consider their results to be reliable if they are proven scientifically and underpinned by theory, and are reluctant to say anything until it is. Even then, they tend to wrap their results up in caveats and qualifications. Policy-makers will take more or less anything that can help them to make a decision that seems reasonable, has a clear message and is available at the right time (Davies, 2005). Keeping the parameters and constraints of both groups in mind is an essential foundation for effective research communication.

Third, research-based evidence can contribute to policies that have a dramatic impact on lives. Household disease surveys undertaken by the Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Project (TEHIP) informed processes of health service reform that contributed to reductions in infant mortality between 43% and 46% in two districts in rural Tanzania between 2000 and 2003. Another example is the Decentralised Livestock Services in the Eastern Regions of Indonesia Project, in which a careful combination of pilot field-level projects, institutional research and proactive communication contributed to a 250% increase in farmer satisfaction with livestock services. Success stories quoted in DFID’s new

research strategy include a 22% reduction in neonatal mortality in Ghana as a result of helping women begin breastfeeding within one hour of giving birth, and a 43% reduction in deaths among HIV positive children using a widely available antibiotic.

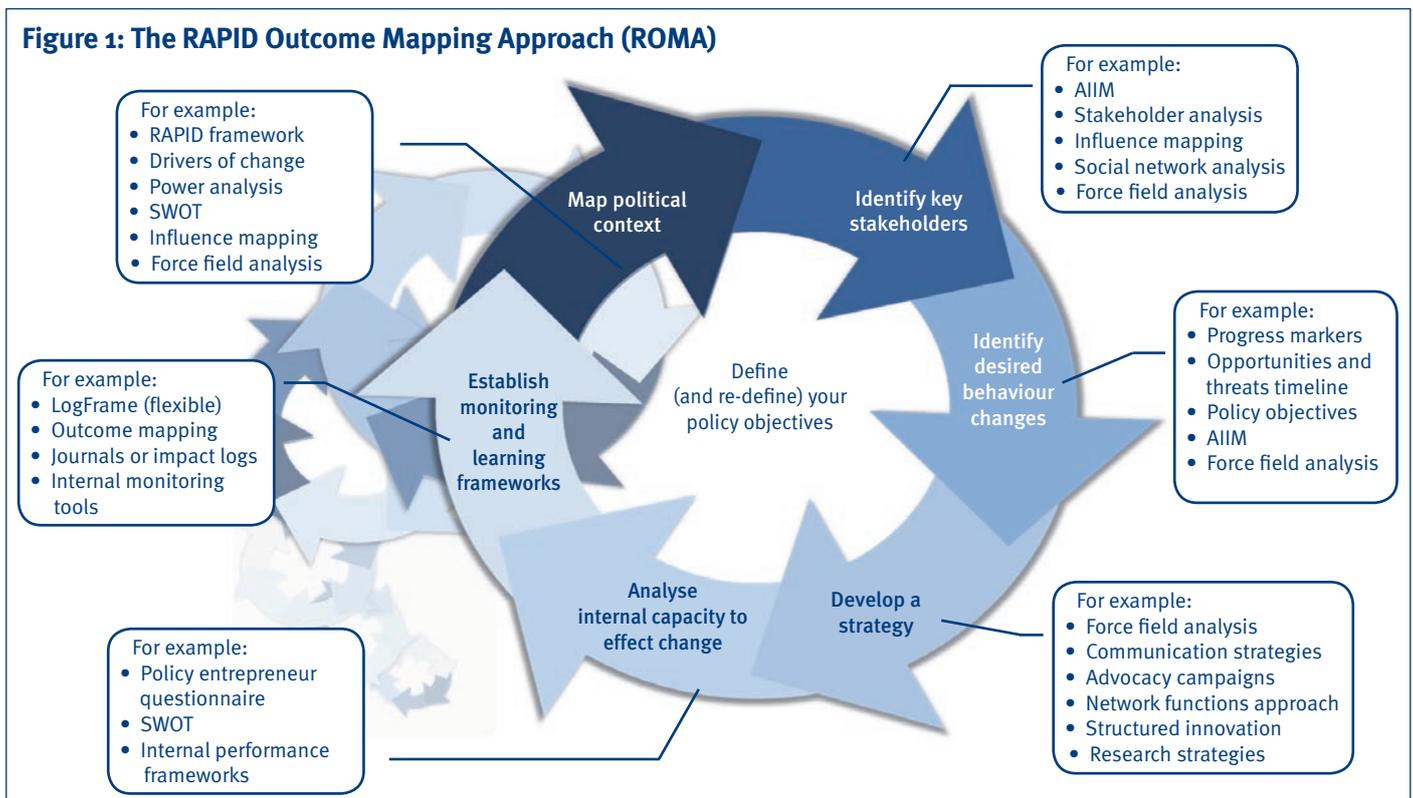
Fourth, policy entrepreneurs need a holistic understanding of the context in which they are working. While there are an infinite number of factors that affect how one does or does not influence policy, it is relatively easy to obtain enough information to make informed decisions on how to maximise the impact of research on policy and practice. ODI has developed a simple analytical framework identifying four broad groups of factors (ODI, 2004). The first group – external influences – are those factors outside the context in which the policy entrepreneur is working that affect what happens within it. Donor policies, for example, can have a huge influence in highly indebted countries and, in general, cultural and social factors might play a large role. The second – the political context – includes the people, institutions and processes involved in policy-making. The third group centres on the evidence itself, including the type, quality and contestability of the research and how it is communicated. The fourth – links – includes all of the other actors and mechanisms that affect how the evidence gets into the policy process.

Fifth, policy entrepreneurs need additional skills to influence policy. They need to be political fixers, able to understand the politics and identify the key players. They need to be good storytellers, able to synthesise simple compelling stories from the results of the research. They need to be good networkers to work effectively with all the other stakeholders, and they need to be good engineers, building a programme that pulls all of this together. Or they need to work in multidisciplinary teams with others who have these skills.

Finally, policy entrepreneurs need clear intent – they need to really want to do it. Turning a researcher into a policy entrepreneur, or a research institute or department into a policy-focused think tank is not easy. It involves a fundamental re-orientation towards policy engagement rather than academic achievement; engaging much more with the policy community; developing a research agenda focusing on policy issues rather than academic interests; acquiring new skills or building multidisciplinary teams; establishing new internal systems and incentives; spending much more on communications; producing a different range of outputs; and working more in partnerships and networks. It may also involve looking at a radically different funding model.

The eight ROMA steps and associated tools

These lessons show that the relationship between research, policy and practice is complex, multifactoral, non-linear, and highly context specific. What works in one situation may not work in another. Developing effective strategies in complex

Figure 1: The RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA)

environments is not straightforward. Simple tools such as cost–benefit analysis, logical frameworks, traditional project management tools and others may not work on their own, as they fail to take into account the existing complexity.

The ROMA approach takes these lessons into account. It draws on concepts of complexity, on outcome mapping tools developed by the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and tools for policy engagement assembled and developed by RAPID, field tested through more than 40 workshops and training courses worldwide. The eight steps of the approach are shown in Figure 1 (above). It is designed so that each step systematically provides the policy entrepreneur with more information about the context s/he is working in so that s/he will be able to make better strategic choices (and be better placed to take advantage of unexpected policy windows and opportunities for change), though not all steps might be needed in all situations. Practiced policy entrepreneurs may already subconsciously follow the process, or skip steps where they are familiar with the context.

The first step is to **define a clear, overarching policy objective**. Influencing objectives need not be limited to written government policies. Rather, it may be helpful to think ‘outside the box’ of traditional policy to consider: Discursive changes (i.e. changes in language usage); Procedural changes (i.e. changing how something is done); Content changes (i.e. actual changes in written policy); Attitudinal changes (i.e. changes in perception of key stakeholders); and Behavioural changes (i.e. sustainable changes in the way something is achieved or approached).

After agreeing an objective, **map the policy context** around that issue and identify the key factors that may influence the policy process. The RAPID framework provides a useful checklist of questions. For key external actors: what is their agenda, and how do they influence the political context? In terms of the political context: is there political interest in change; is there room for manoeuvre; how do policy-makers perceive the problem? When assessing evidence: is there enough of the right sort of evidence to convince others of the need for change, and how can it best be presented? For links: who are the key organisations and individuals with access to policy-makers, are there existing networks to use? A range of other more sophisticated context mapping tools is also available (Nash et al., 2006).

The next step is to **identify the key influential stakeholders**. RAPID’s Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix (AIIM) can be used to map actors along three dimensions: the degree of alignment (i.e. agreement) with the proposed policy, their level of interest in the issue, and their ability to exert influence on the policy process. Actors who are very interested and aligned should be natural allies and collaborators, while those who are interested but not aligned are potential obstacles. They either need to be brought into alignment, or prevented from creating obstacles. Stimulating enthusiasm among powerful actors who are aligned but not interested can increase the chance of success. Stimulating enthusiasm among actors who are not aligned risks creating more enemies, unless they can also be brought into alignment. Their level of influence will help identify key target audiences.



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ISSN 0140-8682



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Once the target audience is decided, identify the changes needed among them if they are to support the desired policy outcome – in other words, **develop a theory of change**. Focusing on those policy actors who can be influenced, it is important to describe, as precisely as possible, their current behaviour, the behaviour that is needed if they are to contribute to the desired policy objectives (the ‘Outcome Challenge’) and short- and medium-term step-changes (or ‘Progress Markers’), which can be monitored to ensure that the priority stakeholders are moving in the right direction and responding to the efforts of the programme.

Having identified the necessary behaviour changes, the next step is to **develop a strategy** to achieve the milestone changes in the process. There are many strategic planning tools that can be used for this. Force Field Analysis is a flexible tool that can be used to further understand the forces supporting and opposing the desired policy change and suggest concrete responses. The forces can be ranked: first according to their degree of influence over the change; and then according to the degree of control it is possible for the policy entrepreneur to exert over them. Activities can then be identified to reduce the high negative forces and to increase low positive forces. Sometimes it is not possible to influence actors directly, and it is necessary to target others who can influence them. This might mean rethinking the priority stakeholders.

The sixth step is to **ensure the engagement team has the competencies required to operationalise the strategy**. Competence is an evolving set of systems, processes and skills that enables actors to make the right decisions and act accordingly.

The information gathered up to this point can then be used to **establish an action plan** for meeting the desired policy objective. Any number of tools can be used to collate this information and begin

strategy discussions, the RAPID Information matrix, DFID’s log frame and IDRC’s Outcome Mapping Strategy Map among them.

The final step is to **develop a monitoring and learning system**, not only to track progress, make any necessary adjustments and assess the effectiveness of the approach, but also to learn lessons for the future. Simply recording the results of using these planning steps, noting the attainment of progress markers and achievement of improved competency levels, and simple logs of unexpected events should allow the team to produce and use knowledge about policy content, context, the strategy and activities, outcomes (behaviour changes), the skills, competencies and systems necessary. A wide range of more complex tools for monitoring and evaluating the impact of research and policy are also available (Hovland, 2007). Crucial to the collection of knowledge is sharing it and using it. Intranet systems can be very useful, but sometimes the most basic face-to-face or phone-to-phone communications can produce the best results. Understanding how people learn is also important and learning methods need to take this into consideration.

Conclusion

Promoting more evidence-based development policy may not be possible with traditional linear tools and approaches. The systematic, reproducible ROMA steps, which work with rather than fight against complexity, provide effective sets of tools for those looking to translate critical, and often potentially life-changing, research into action for the world’s poor.

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References and useful resources

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Useful resources:

- The RAPID programme at ODI: <http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid>
 - RAPID Toolkits: <http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Tools/Toolkits/index.html>
 - Evidence-Based Policy in Development Network: <http://www.ebpdn.org>
 - Force Field Analysis: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Tools/Toolkits/Policy_Impact/Forcefield_analysis.html
 - International Development Research Centre, Canada: <http://www.idrc.ca>
 - Outcome mapping: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1-do_topic.html / <http://www.outcomemapping.ca>
 - Strategy Maps: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-28388-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html (towards the bottom of the page)
 - SWOT Analysis: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Tools/Toolkits/Policy_Impact/SWOT_analysis.html
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