

How major change happens

Research that could improve the lives of the poorest people often gathers dust on shelves instead of informing policies or practice. With funding from DFID and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC) among others, ODI works with partners in developing and developed countries to help them infuse complex policy processes with sound evidence.

In 2008, the work of our Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme was condensed into six key lessons on turning research into practice. These inform the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach (ROMA) to influencing policy and practice. Our tools contributed to DFID's research strategy paper in 2008, and helped assess DFID's influence on multilateral agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.

The six lessons:

- Policy processes are complex and rarely linear or logical. Simply presenting information to policy-makers or practitioners and expecting them to act on it does not work.
- Evidence plays a small role in policy processes. Policy-makers are influenced by their own values, habits and judgement, by lobbyists and marketers and by resource constraints.
- Research-based evidence contributes to policies that change lives. DFID's research strategy cites a 43% fall in deaths among HIV-positive children in Ghana through the use of simple antibiotics.
- Policy and social entrepreneurs need to grasp the big picture. ODI's framework looks at four key areas: external influences; the political context; the evidence itself; and linkages.
- Policy and social entrepreneurs need to be more than good researchers. They need to be political fixers, storytellers, networkers and engineers to build the right programmes. ODI has toolkits on these skills, field tested through more than 30 workshops and training courses worldwide.
- Policy and social entrepreneurs must want change. Turning a researcher into an expert on policy influence takes dedication, time and money. Effective influencing may require organisations to change the way they work.

The ROMA approach builds on these lessons, helping think tanks to focus their policy efforts. Combining research and practical experience, researchers are urged to ensure their analysis is sound before trying to change policy. They should define the objective, map the policy context, and identify the target audience and the influence of key stakeholders. Only then should they set out a strategy, a list of the skills needed and an action plan. Finally, a monitoring system is essential to record success and learn from failure. ODI works with think tanks worldwide to share these lessons and methods.

Drawn from ODI's Annual Report 2009, available from: www.odi.org.uk

'ODI has become a strategic partner for our institution: its committed professional support has enhanced the quality of our policy influence efforts'

Javier Portocarrero, Executive Director, Consorcio de Investigación Económica y Social (CIES), Peru

Change is complex and seldom, if ever, linear.

