Forum for Food Security in Southern Africa

This paper has been produced in response to the Forum e-discussion on uptake pathways held in June 2003

Research - Policy Linkages in Policies for Food Security in Southern Africa

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Introduction

The UN appeal for US$611 million in July 2002 for emergency food and medical supplies to avert the crisis facing 12 million people in 6 countries in southern Africa highlighted the continued failure of policies intended to achieve poverty reduction and food security in the region. There are a wide range of contributory factors including disparities between donor, governments and NGO objectives; deteriorating governance and accountability of key institutions; failures in agricultural input and output markets post-liberalisation; and the underlying vulnerability of many households, exacerbated by HIV/AIDS. There has been much research on these issues over the last decade: why is so much relevant policy analysis failing to result in practical changes?

The Forum for Food Security in Southern Africa has brought together a wide range people from governments, academic institutions, NGOs and international institutions to discuss these issues in greater depth, and has generated some clear evidence-based policy recommendations. The challenge now is to get them adopted and put into practice.

This paper reviews the current understanding about how evidence contributes to policy processes and makes some specific recommendations about how Forum for Food Security processes could be extended to better promote policies for poverty reduction and food security in Southern Africa now and in the future.

The role of research-based evidence in policy

Although research-based evidence clearly matters, there remains no *systematic* understanding of what, when, why and how research feeds into development policy. While there is an extensive literature on the research-policy links in OECD countries, from disciplines as varied as economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, international relations and management, there has been much less emphasis on research-policy links in developing countries. The massive diversity of cultural, economic, and political contexts makes it especially difficult to draw valid generalizations and lessons from existing experience and theory. In addition, international actors have an exaggerated impact on research and policy processes in developing contexts.

A number of international development organisations have research programmes in this area. Impact assessments by the International Food Policy Research Institute have focused increasingly over the last few years on measuring the policy impact of its research programmes, and how it can be improved (Garrett, 1998 and IFPRI, 1999). The link between research and policy has been a key issue for the Global Development Network (GDN) since its inception in 1999. It was the theme of a series of panel discussions at the GDN Annual Conferences in Bonn (1999) and Tokyo (2000), and of a follow-up workshop held at the University of Warwick in June 2001. The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) in Canada
is undertaking a strategic evaluation of the
influence of IDRC-supported research on public policy (Nielson, 2001).

The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) has been researching research-policy linkages since 1999. Sutton (1999) identifies and describes theoretical approaches in political science, sociology, anthropology, international relations and management, and provides a 21-point checklist of what makes policies happen. Work for the International Institute for Environment and Development identified a six-point programme for improving impact (Garret and Islam, 1998). The UK Department for International Development (DFID) has recently completed a major review of work as part of its effort to develop a new research policy (Surr et al, 2002).

A wide range of models for policy processes have been developed within different disciplines, including linear, logical models rooted in classical economic theory, and more complex models based in political science and comparative literature. Most are based on research in democratic, developed countries and there are very few from developing countries. Understanding is also constrained since many studies only consider the impact of scientific or academic research on official policy documents, whereas in reality, policy makers are influenced by "evidence" generated by a much wider range of learning processes including, or especially, what they see with their own eyes. Furthermore, changing a policy document means nothing unless it is put into practice, and, in fact, many things change in practice long before they become enshrined in policy documents.

A new framework

Traditionally, the link between research and policy has been viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings is shifted from the 'research sphere' over to the 'policy sphere', and then has some impact on policy-makers' decisions. At least three of the assumptions underpinning this traditional view are now being questioned. First, the assumption that research influences policy in a one-way process (the linear model); second, the assumption that there is a clear divide between researchers and policy-makers (the two communities model); and third, the assumption that the production of knowledge is confined to a set of specific findings (the positivistic model).
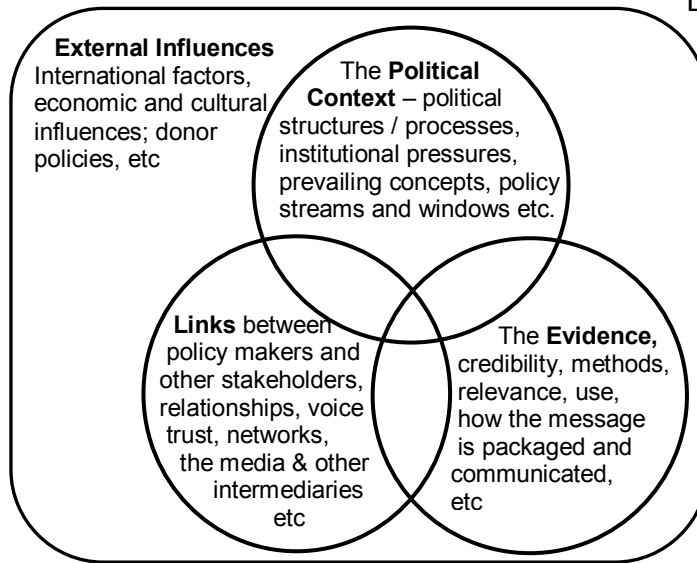
Literature on the research-policy link is now shifting away from these assumptions, towards a more dynamic and complex view that emphasises a two-way process between research and policy, shaped by multiple relations and reservoirs of knowledge.

In a new framework developed by Crewe and Young (2002) research uptake is seen as a function of the interaction of Context (politics and institutions); Evidence (approach and credibility); and Links (between researchers and policymakers) - as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Factors influencing research uptake

The political context

The research/policy link is by shaped the political context. The policy process and the production of research are in themselves political processes, from the initial agenda-setting exercise through to the final negotiation involved in implementation. Political contestation, institutional pressures and vested interests matter greatly. So too the attitudes and incentives among officials, their room for manoeuvre, local history, and power relations greatly influence policy implementation (Kingdon, 198; and Clay and Schaffer, 1984). In some cases the political strategies and power relations are obvious, and are tied to specific institutional pressures. Ideas circulating may be discarded by the majority of staff in an organisation if those ideas elicit disapproval from the leadership. At its broadest level, it seems that the degree of policy change is a function of political demand and contestation. While it is difficult to change political contexts, you can maximize your chances of influencing policy.

The evidence and communication

Experience suggests that the quality of the research is clearly important for policy uptake. Policy influence is affected by topical relevance and, as important, operational usefulness of an idea; it helps if a new approach has been piloted and the document can clearly demonstrate the value of a new option (Court and Young, 2003). A critical issue affecting uptake is whether research provides a solution to a problem. The other key set of issues here concerns communication. There are many academic fields that provide interesting contributions in this regard, including the literature on interpersonal communication, advocacy and marketing communication, media communication and information technology, and knowledge management and research relevance. These fields have gradually shifted away from various linear theories of communication (sender – message – channel – recipient) towards more interactive models. The sources and conveyors of information, the way new messages are packaged (especially if they are couched in familiar terms) and targeted can all make a big difference in how the policy document is perceived and utilised. For example, marketing is based on the insight that people's reaction to a new product/idea is often determined by the packaging rather than the content in and of itself (Williamson, 1996). The power of visual images is often a key element in effective communication – frequently, 'seeing is believing' (Philo, 1996). The key message is that communication is a very demanding process and it is best to take an interactive approach (Mattelart, A & M Mattelart, 1998). Continuous interaction leads to greater chances of successful communication than a simple or linear approach.

Links

The framework emphasises the importance of links – communities, networks and intermediaries (e.g. the media and campaigning groups) – in affecting policy change. Some of the current literature focuses explicitly on various types of networks, such as policy communities (Pross, 1986), policy streams (Kingdon, 1984), epistemic communities (Haas, 1991), and advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999). Issues of trust, legitimacy, openness and formalization of networks have emerged as important issues in GDN work. ODI work reinforces existing theory about the role of translators and communicators (Gladwell, 2000). It seems that there is often an under-appreciation of the extent and ways that intermediary organization and networks impact on how formal policy guidance documents influence officials.

Lessons for evidence-based policy

Emerging results from ODI's work so far confirm this theory, indicating that research-based evidence is more likely to contribute to policy if:

i. it fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures of policy makers, and resonates with their ideological assumptions, or sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge those limits;

ii. the evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to current policy problems, and is packaged to attract policy-makers interest;

iii. researchers and policy makers share common networks, trust each other, honestly and openly represent the interests of all stakeholders and communicate effectively.

But these three conditions are rarely met in practice: although researchers can control the credibility of their evidence and can ensure they interact with and communicate well with policy makers, they often have limited capacity to influence the political context within which they work, especially in less democratic countries. Thus researchers need to work with a wider range of policy activists, including civil society organisations, and use the media if they wish to influence policy.

Some useful lessons about how to promote evidence-based policies are emerging from a review of over 50 cases from developing countries where research-based evidence did, or did not influence policy (ODI 2003). First, it is important to understand the political context, nature of the evidence and the available mechanisms to communicate with policy makers. Second, there are some critical steps in the process. Third, some clear evidence is emerging about the most effective approaches. Some of these are summarised in the table on the next page.

Understanding	Process	Approaches
Political Context: ▪ Who are the policymakers? ▪ Is there policymaker demand for new ideas? ▪ What are the sources / strengths of resistance? ▪ What is the policy-making process? ▪ What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?	▪ Get to know the policymakers, their agendas and the constraints they operate under. ▪ Identify potential supporters and opponents. ▪ Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes. ▪ Look out for – and react to – unexpected policy windows.	▪ Work with the policy makers. ▪ Seek commissions. ▪ Line up research programmes with high-profile policy events. ▪ Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows. ▪ Allow sufficient time & resources
Evidence: ▪ What is the current theory? ▪ What are the prevailing narratives? ▪ How divergent is the new evidence? ▪ What sort of evidence will convince policymakers?	▪ Establish credibility over the long term. ▪ Provide practical solutions to problems. ▪ Establish legitimacy. ▪ Build a convincing case and present clear policy options. ▪ Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives. ▪ Communicate effectively.	▪ Build up respected programmes of high-quality work. ▪ Action-research and Pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches. ▪ Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy & implementation. ▪ Clear strategy and resources for communication from start. ▪ Real communication – "seeing is believing".
Links: ▪ Who are the key stakeholders in the policy discourse? ▪ What links and networks exist between them? ▪ Who are the intermediaries and what influence do they have? ▪ Whose side are they on?	▪ Get to know the other stakeholders. ▪ Establish a presence in existing networks. ▪ Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders. ▪ Build new policy networks.	▪ Partnerships between researchers, policy makers and communities. ▪ Identify key networkers and salesmen. ▪ Use informal contacts.

Implications for the Forum for Food Security

The FFSSA has identified a wide range of high-level evidence-based policy options relevant to improving food security in southern Africa. These relate to market-based economic development; social protection; holistic, livelihood-focused, approaches; and better regional integration (more detailed policy recommendations for specific countries and socio-economic groups will be identified in due course) The Forum analysis and e-discussions have also identified a number of historical and political reasons why policy recommendations have not been adopted in the past, including neo-patrimonial governments, donor interference, and weak implementation systems. It has also identified how little analysis there has been in Southern Africa of the links and intermediaries between researchers or research-based evidence and the policy makers; of the distance between the new policy options and conceptual models of policymakers in the region; or of current food-security policy processes that research and analysis could feed into.

The FFSSA has brought together a community of researchers, practitioners and policymakers keen to address this issue, but if it is not to become yet another failed attempt to promote better food security policy and practice in southern Africa, it must now become focused and proactive on the following essential next steps:

1. Working with researchers, practitioners and policy makers within each country to develop clear evidence-based policy recommendations for individual countries and socio-economic groups.
2. Working with researchers, practitioners and policy makers within the region to develop clear evidence-based policy recommendations to promote greater regional integration.
3. Developing campaigns to feed evidence-based policy recommendations into key policy makers and policy processes at country and regional level.
4. Identifying the conceptual gap between current policy-makers thinking, and the principles underlying the new policy options, and developing effective communications strategies.
5. Identifying media and other intermediaries that can help to get the messages across.
6. Identifying "champions" for the new policy approaches within national governments and operational organisations.
7. Working with national policy makers and practitioners to implement pilot projects testing new policy options.
8. Working with national policy makers and practitioners to influence regional and international policy makers to promote better regional and international policies.

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