

Good News When Researchers and Politicians Work Together

By John Young and Julius Court for PANOS Features, July 2003

Rarely has the assembly of evidence by politicians created such a storm as the one over the UK government's recent dossiers supporting the decision to go to war in Iraq. Beyond the specific controversy the case highlights the critical importance of having credible processes for using evidence in policymaking.

In the development arena, better use of research and evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life. For example, under a late 1990s collaboration between the Tanzanian health ministry and the Canadian International Development Agency, researchers surveyed which diseases were blighting the lives of villagers in Morogoro and Rufiji rural districts. They found that the amount of money local officials spent on each disease bore no relation to the harm which the disease inflicted. Malaria, for example, accounted for 30% of the years of life lost in Morogoro, but only 5% of the 1996 health budget. Their results highlighted a serious misallocation of funds within the health system – and contributed to a fundamental reform of how health care was organised – with dramatic results: a 28% reduction in infant mortality between 1999 and 2000.

Unfortunately, Tanzania is a rare example. Though HIV/AIDS is spreading like wildfire, some governments are still reluctant to tap well-proven approaches to reduce transmission. Poor communication between researchers and decision makers is a major part of the problem. Speaking recently in London, Anne Pettifor, architect of the Jubilee 2000 debt relief campaign, said "Evidence on its own does not matter at all... what is important is not the evidence, but making the evidence matter."

Now academics in the UK have started looking at ways that better use of research can improve what policy makers do and how they do it. Traditionally, the link between research and policy has been viewed as a simple logical process, where policy makers base their decisions on a rational analysis of the evidence from research. But opinion is now shifting towards a more complex view – that conflicting evidence and dynamic relationships between policy makers, researchers, the media, lobbyists and campaigners, can make it difficult for policy makers to use research to make sound decisions. Analysis of the Tanzania story, and others like it, has shown that independent research is most likely to be used by policymakers to identify which policies are most effective – and how they can best be implemented in three situations.

Firstly, evidence is more likely to influence policy if it fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures of policy makers, and resonates with their ideological assumptions – or if sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge those limits.

In the Tanzanian case the government was steadily moving away from a highly centralised health-care system towards a decentralised locally managed health system. A key issue in Tanzania was also that the research was undertaken by local researchers working in collaboration with an international organisation. Such collaborative efforts are likely to have much more influence than research undertaken solely by international development organisations.

Secondly, the evidence must also be credible and convincing, provide practical solutions to current policy problems, and be packaged to attract policy makers' interest. In recent years researchers in Indonesia worked with government officials to help small-scale livestock farmers increase their income, by providing help and advice to the farmers. The researchers marketed their ideas effectively to the government – using video, seminars and consultations with farmers – at a time of sudden political change and bureaucratic decentralisation following the fall of President Suharto.

Thirdly, evidence is more likely to contribute to better policies if 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 because researchers have limited capacity to influence the political or development context within which they work. And unfortunately political processes are probably the main obstacle to more evidence-based public policies.

Erik Millstone, from the Science Policy Research Unit at Britain's University of Sussex, believes that the Mad Cow Disease crisis which crippled Britain's beef industry in the 1990s was made much worse because "the government became addicted to its own position that knowledge was certain, the risk was negligible and their policy was robust". It was unable to respond to new evidence and change track "until things became catastrophically bad". So bad, that the government had to retreat from its position that British beef was safe for consumers to eat.

Things may be improving. David Halpern, senior policy advisor to the British prime minister, believes that the government successfully applied evidence-based policymaking in improving literacy and numeracy levels of primary school children by "building coalitions and consensus amongst a wide range of stakeholders".

We increasingly know what works. As democratisation has advanced, new spaces are being opened up for more evidence-based policymaking in the future.



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