

Episode Studies

Episode studies are an excellent way of investigating the influence of research on policy. Episode studies refer to a study that focuses on a clear policy change and tracks back to assess what impact research had among the variety of issues that led to the policy change. They could be focusing on a single episode or comparative episodes.

Many studies of research impact take a particular piece of research as the starting point and then follow the various impacts of it forwards over time. This can be useful (see tools on research utilisation and bibliometric techniques), but tracking forward probably overemphasises the importance of research vis a vis other factors. The crucial advantage of using an episode or tracer study is that the process of working backwards in time gives a more realistic view of the broad range of factors – other than research – that influence policy.

Detailed Outline of Process

The first step is to identify a clear policy change.

The next step is to identify the key research questions related to the issue – generally regarding what influenced policy change and what was the relative role of research. This process could draw on the RAPID framework.

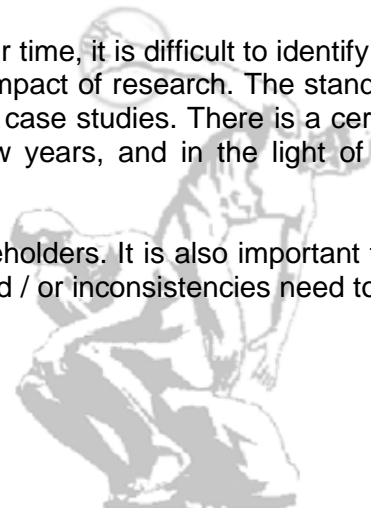
Each episode study will need to construct an historical narrative leading up to the observed policy change in question. This involves creating a timeline of key policy decisions and practices, along with important documents and events, and identifying key actors.

The next step is to explore how and why those policy decisions and practices took place, and to assess the relative role of research in that process by drawing on the framework. In the RAPID episode studies, this was done through a variety of methods:

- review of the literature
- interviews with key actors
- capturing the authors' own experience
- discussions at workshops

Since policy processes are complex, multi-layered and change over time, it is difficult to identify the key factors that caused policy to change (or not) and isolate the impact of research. The standard challenges of unconscious selection of informants are common to case studies. There is a certain risk that actors may 're-write history' after a time lapse of a few years, and in the light of the perceived failure or success of the policy in question.

It is important to seek the views of a wide range of informed stakeholders. It is also important that the process of preparing an episode study is iterative; key facts and / or inconsistencies need to be cross-checked with key informants.



A Good Example

The PRSP Initiative: Multilateral Policy Change and the Relative Role of Research

In September 1999, the World Bank and IMF adopted a new approach to aid – the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) initiative. A PRSP is a document that sets out an analysis of poverty in a country and defines the national strategy on how the government is going to reduce it. They are important because preparation of a PRSP by a low income country is an eligibility criteria for debt relief and concessional lending from the World Bank and IMF. How did the idea of the PRSP come to be adopted? What was the role of research in this process – both ‘academic research’ in general and the ‘applied policy research’ within the World Bank and IMF? This episode study traces the emergence of the PRSP initiative and the various factors, including the role and relative influence of research, that contributed to this far-reaching policy shift.

(See: http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/RAPID_WP_216.htm)

Further Information

RAPID has applied the approach to four case studies of policy change. The case studies were developed separately by their authors, but the same basic process was followed in each case and there were regular meetings to report and discuss the findings.

- Young, J., Kajume, J. and Wanyama, J. (2003) *Animal Health Care in Kenya: The Road to Community-Based Animal Health Service Delivery*, *ODI Working Paper 214*.
http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/RAPID_WP_214.htm
- Christiansen, K. with Hovland, I. (2003) *The PRSP Initiative: Multilateral Policy Change and the Relative Role of Research*, *ODI Working Paper 216*.
http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/RAPID_WP_216.htm
- Buchanan-Smith, M. (2003) *How the Sphere Project Came into Being: A Case Study of Policy-making in the Humanitarian Aid Sector and the Relative Influence of Research*, *ODI Working Paper 215*.
http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/RAPID_WP_215.htm
- Solesbury, W. (2003) *Sustainable Livelihoods: A Case Study of the Evolution of DFID Policy*, *ODI Working Paper 217*.
http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/RAPID_WP_217.htm

