My case study is at the other extreme and is very much about high policy in the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It is the story of how a commitment to a concept called sustainable livelihoods came into being in the 1997 White Paper on international development.

The preamble of the White Paper illustrates the salience of the concept in stating that the overall objective was the elimination of poverty and a commitment to pro-poor policy through three principal means: creating sustainable livelihoods for poor people; promoting human development and conserving the environment. The story is about how this particular concept of sustainable livelihoods came to be one of the three core pillars of that White Paper and therefore a major policy commitment of the UK government.

For those of you who are less familiar with the concept, the concept of sustainable essentially means that there are capabilities and assets which are necessary for people to get by and live their daily lives. Those capabilities and assets must be sustainable in a way which can cope with the stresses and shocks, the sudden events, droughts and disasters that might befall them, without being completely destroyed or destabilised. Sustainable also means that those capabilities can be maintained and enhanced in the future. The concept of sustainability also implies that there is something which should be passed on to the next generation, that the current generation should not achieve a livelihood at the expense of future generations and also that the natural resource base on which these livelihoods very largely depend in these countries should not be damaged. That is the essence of the concept.

The story starts with the Brundtland Commission in 1987 and culminates ten years later in the White Paper. The Brundtland Commission was the first occasion when the concept of sustainable development achieved much political salience. Though I am not sure that the concept was much used, embedded in that was also the first inklings of the concept of sustainable livelihoods. Concepts of sustainability have a more ancient history in wider and earlier thinking, particularly in the shift to more participatory approach to international development.

Sustainable livelihoods as a concept received a very powerful expression in a brief thirty-four page paper by Chambers and Conway, published by the Institute of Development Studies in 1992. The interesting thing in the interviews with people involved is that everyone can remember reading that paper. It was seminal in the sense that people said they remembered reading Chambers and Conway and it was something which really burned its message into people's minds. One cannot help thinking that the length of the paper helped, but there were other aspects of the paper which were quite interesting in terms of communication.

What followed was a process over the next few years in which two things were happening in parallel but interconnecting. Firstly, there was an acceptance and embrace of the concept by a number of agencies. Oxfam, CARE and the UNDP in particular started employing the concept in field projects that they were supporting. At the same time and in parallel, there was a programme of empirical research emerging in this country and internationally exploring and developing the concept. That was capped in the mid-1990s by DFID's decision to mount a major research programme focused on sustainable livelihoods. That research programme was launched in about 1996, but it is important to note that although it continued over the next few years during the operationalisation of the concept within DFID, it was barely underway by the time that the 1997 White Paper was being written.

In interpreting this process, one finds a very rich set of interactions between research, policy and practice. They are interactions that were characterised by a lot of personal interaction, contact and networks and quite importantly in this case, by a lot of job mobility. These ideas were being carried from the research to the policy to the practice community and also in other directions by people changing their jobs and taking their ideas, insights and contacts with them from one context to another. This is an important characteristic of the interactions between the three domains of research, policy and practice.
By the mid-1990s, it had reached a stage where sustainable livelihoods was the 'idea in good currency' in the international development community. It is important to recognise that it was only one such idea. Any particular community is rife with ideas in good currency. In this case, what really brought that idea into the mainstream of policy and made it one of the three central planks on which the 1997 White Paper rested were firstly, the process which had led in 1996 (when we still had a Conservative government) to the adoption and endorsement by the UK and other countries of the OECD's international development targets, with a very strong emphasis on reducing poverty and conserving the environment. That was a major paradigm shift from the dominant macro-economic flavour of most of the international development strategies that were being pursued up until that time by most OECD countries. In a sense it provided a broad contextual shift in thinking which was very favourable to, and which could accommodate, the sustainable livelihoods concept. The second contextual shift was the election of the new administration in 1997, and equally importantly the new Secretary of State for International Development and new people, new brooms, in search of new ideas with the inevitable commitment that all Secretary of States have to an early White Paper expressing something novel and new. It was in that context that sustainable livelihoods became attractive as a concept for implementing the international development targets which the new administration endorsed.

Exploring that, one of the mysteries of the process was that when the White Paper hit the streets and sustainable livelihoods was so prominent in it, all the people in my interviews who had been nurturing that idea were completely taken by surprise. They were delighted, of course, but could not understand why this thing that they had been privately engaged with had suddenly become the plaything of higher politics. People I interviewed wanted to know how it had happened, so this study is historically enlightening.

What was attractive about sustainable livelihoods in the context of the White Paper was threefold. Intellectually, I think it provided a coherent organising principle for the White Paper authors that brought together a range of actions which could be focused on poverty reduction. It had the novelty of being new, but it also had the synthesising quality that enabled it to be applied to pull together a whole range of actions relevant to the overall target of poverty reduction.

In political terms it was attractive in terms of its emphasis on the asset base. The inherent dynamism of it and the sense of self-help were all very 'New Labour', which helped politically. Presentationally it was attractive because it sounded proactive. As one of my interviewees, who was in a position to know, said, "You experience a life but you make a livelihood". So in a sense this was to do with taking a proactive view towards international development and the improvement of the lives of the poor.

Intellectually, politically and presentationally then, it fitted the bill.

There are four lessons which I would draw from this. Firstly, new concepts can take time to find their way into policy and practice. In this case, a decade separated the Brundtland report from the 1997 White Paper. It takes time to refine these concepts (which is largely what researchers do); it takes time to test them in the field (which is largely what practitioners do) and it takes time for them to become politically understood and accepted and to find their attraction. Some of the percolation models about how ideas percolate into policy and practice would seem to be exemplified by this case study.

The second point I would make is that in this story there are many roles being played. Sometimes the same people are playing different roles. In this case we can recognise testers, developers, champions, communicators, interpreters, advocators. People were playing different roles and the simple dichotomy between researchers on one hand and policy-makers on the other fails to represent the variety of roles which were necessary to achieving this process of translating ideas from research into practice.

Thirdly, I would make the point that new concepts are always in a competitive field. Politics is stuffed with ideas. You have to actually dislodge some of those old ideas before there is even the space for new ideas to be inserted into political thinking. There is always a competitive process and new ideas need to find a competitive advantage. That is why they need windows of opportunity, and finding those windows is very often the role of policy entrepreneurs.

Lastly, I would emphasise that even then, much is a matter of chance. In this story there were personal contacts, there were random encounters, there were job changes and things that happened which were important in moving the idea around and in moving it along its trajectory towards acceptance in policy. These things were not inevitable and if they had not happened, perhaps the process might have taken longer, or perhaps some other idea might have filled that part of the story.

It comes back to an old chestnut in political analysis of the necessary and the sufficient conditions which can be identified in these kinds of stories The conditions mentioned are necessary conditions for research to make its impact on policy, but they will not always be sufficient.
That is the story of how sustainable livelihoods succeeding in entering UK policy. There are people who know the field more than I do who are wondering if it has kept its position in recent DFID policy and practice, but that is another story.