

The RAPID Framework for Assessing Research-Policy Links

Introduction

Better utilization of research and evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life. For example, the results of household disease surveys in rural Tanzania informed a process of health service reforms which contributed to a 28% reduction in infant mortality in two years. On the other hand, the HIV/AIDS crisis has deepened in some countries due to the reluctance of some governments to implement effective control programmes despite clear evidence of what causes the disease and how to prevent it spreading.

Although research clearly matters, there remains no *systematic* understanding of what, when, why and how research feeds into development policies. 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. ODI's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) programme aims to better understand how research can contribute to pro-poor policies and improve the use of research and evidence in development policy and practice.

RAPID has developed a framework for understanding research-policy links based on an extensive literature review (de Vibe, Hovland and Young, 2002), conceptual synthesis (Crewe and Young, 2002) and testing in both research projects and practical activities (Court and Young, 2003; Court and Young, 2004).¹ The framework clusters the issues around four broad areas:

- Context: Politics and Institutions
- Evidence: Approach and Credibility
- Links: Influence and Legitimacy
- External Influences

Definitions

In our work, we use relatively open definitions of research and policy. We consider research as "any systematic effort to increase the stock of knowledge"². This included therefore any systematic process of critical investigation and evaluation, theory building, data collection, analysis and codification related to development policy and practice. It includes action research, i.e. self-reflection by practitioners oriented toward the enhancement of direct practice.

¹ For information on RAPID research and practical projects, see: www.odi.org.uk/rapid

² This was based on and remains similar to the OECD definition – 'creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications' (OECD, 1981).

Policy also has a wide range of definitions. In collecting case studies, we considered policy to be a “course of action” including declarations or plans as well as actions on the ground. We also adopted a broader view in assessing the impact of research on policy change – one that went beyond impact on formal documents or visible practices. Following Carol Weiss (1977), it is widely recognised that although research may not have direct influence on specific policies, the production of research may still exert a powerful indirect influence through introducing new terms and shaping the policy discourse. Overall, we explore how research can influence policy-makers horizons, policy development, declared public policy regimes, funding patterns and policy implementation or practice (Lindquist, 2003).

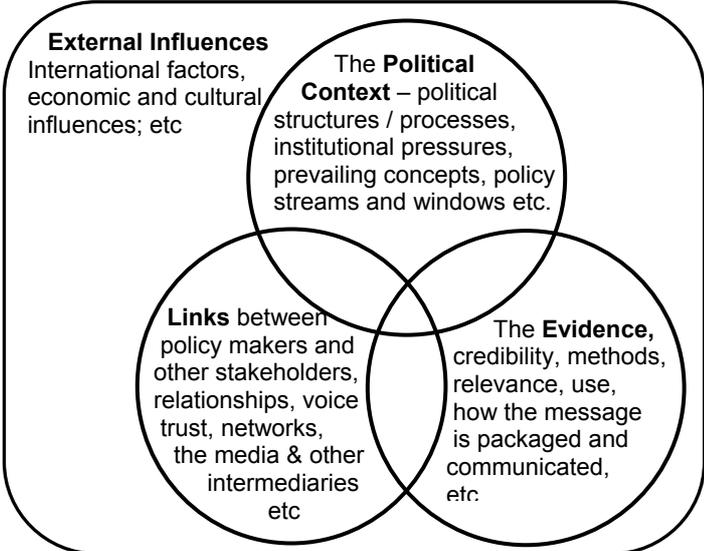
The RAPID Framework

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 (see for example Garrett and Islam, 1998; RAWOO, 2001). This shift reflects the fact that this subject area has generated greater interest in the past few years, and already a number of overviews of the research-policy linkage exist (e.g. Keeley and Scoones, 2003; Lindquist, 2003; Neilson, 2001; Stone, Maxwell and Keating, 2001; Sutton, 1999).

The RAPID framework (Crewe and Young, 2003) is shown in Figure 1. This framework should be seen as a generic, perhaps ideal, model. In many cases there will not be much overlap between the different spheres or the overlap may vary considerably.

Figure 1 The RAPID Framework: Context, Evidence and Links



The Political Context

The research/policy link is by shaped the political context. The extent of civil and political freedoms in a country does seem to make a difference for bridging research and policy. 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, 1984; 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.

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 importantly, the 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 has provided a solution to a problem. The other key set of issues here concern communication. 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 key message is that communication is a very demanding process and it is best to take an interactive approach (Mattelart and Mattelart, 1998). Continuous interaction leads to greater chances of successful communication than a simple or linear approach.

Links

Third, the framework emphasises the importance of links; of 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), epistemic communities (Haas, 1991), and advocacy coalitions (Sabatier and Jenkins-Smith, 1999). While understanding remains limited, issues of trust, legitimacy, openness and formalization of networks have emerged as important. Existing theory stresses the role of translators and communicators (Gladwell, 2000). It seems that there is often an under-appreciation of the extent and ways that intermediary organisations and networks impact on formal policy guidance documents, which in turn influence officials.

External Influences

Fourth, the framework emphasises the impact of external forces and donors actions on research-policy interactions. While many questions remain, key issues here include the impact of international politics and processes, as well as the impact of general donor policies and specific research-funding instruments. Broad incentives, such as EU Accession or the poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) process, can have a substantial impact on the demand for research by policymakers (Court and Young, 2003). Trends towards democratization and liberalization and donor support for civil society are also having an impact. Much of the research on development issues is undertaken in the North, raising issues of access and perceived relevance and legitimacy. A substantial amount of research in the poorest countries is funded by international donors, which also raises a range of issues around ownership, whose priorities, use of external consultants and perceived legitimacy. As policy processes become increasingly global, this arena will increase in importance.

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