Introduction

Many organisations working in international development want to contribute to policy change. These may be small non-government organisations working to improve health care for a marginalised group or large research institutions trying to improve urban planning: whatever their size or purpose, one of the ways to cement the changes they desire is by influencing policy. Policy change can take many forms: while changes to legislation are often seen as the most concrete ways of making change happen, in fact public policy comprises many non-legislative issues, such as regulations, resource allocation and decisions about whose voices to include in debates or what evidence to base decisions on.

For the past decade, the RAPID[1] team at ODI has been working with a wide range of organisations in a wide range of contexts to understand how to foster sustainable policy change. The result is ROMA – the RAPID Outcome Mapping Approach – which is the subject of this guide. ROMA is an approach to improving your policy engagement processes, to influence change. It comprises a suite of tools that any organisation can use at any stage in their policy engagement process to improve how they diagnose the problem, understand the types of impact their work could have on policy-making, set realistic objectives for policy influence, develop a plan to achieve those objectives, monitor and learn from the progress they are making and reflect this learning back into their work. This guide to ROMA summarises what the team has learned over the years.

It is worth noting that ROMA draws heavily on the concepts underpinning Outcome Mapping (OM). Developed in the early 2000s, OM is an approach to fostering change that centres on understanding how different actors behave and how changing the behaviour of one actor fosters change in another (see Box 1). The context within which policy change happens is a complex one, happening with a range of different actors at different levels, as Chapter 1 outlines. Over the years, the RAPID team has found that OM-based approaches help organisations navigate this complexity to understand how policy change really happens and what they can realistically hope to achieve. In the team's experience, OM-based approaches perform better in this regard than approaches based largely around delivering specific outputs to specific deadlines.

Box 1: Outcome Mapping

OM was developed by Sarah Earl, Fred Carden and Terry Smutylo from the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) as a way of planning international development work and measuring its results. OM is concerned with results – or 'outcomes' – that fall strictly within the programmes sphere of influence, and it works on the principle that development is essentially about people and how they relate to each other and their environment. The focus is on changes in behaviour, relationships, actions and activities in the people, groups and organisations it works with directly. At a practical level, OM is a set of tools or guidance that steers project or programme teams through an iterative process to identify their desired change and to work collaboratively to bring it about.

For more information, visit the OM Learning Community: www.outcomemapping.ca

Box 2: Definitions of 'policy', 'influence' and 'engagement'

Policy: we define this fairly broadly as a set of decisions that give rise to specific proposals for action. Many people equate policy with legislation, but it also includes non-legislative decisions such as setting standards, allocating resources between organisations, changing the levels of subsidies or taxes or consulting specific groups in the policy-making process.

Influence: in general, we define influence as the goal to be achieved – the evidence of your influence on a decision or set of decisions.

Engagement: in general, we define this as the means of achieving that goal.

We refer to both influence and engagement, depending on the context. It is difficult to completely separate influence and engagement: greater influence may lead to improved engagement, or better engagement may lead to greater influence. It will be up to individual readers to define how they see the relationship between influence and engagement in their particular context.

1. The RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) team is one of many teams at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI). Its original mandate was to understand the links between research and policy; this has since been broadened to consider other types of knowledge, not just research.

1. THE APPROACH

ROMA consists of three main activities, each of which is broken down into a series of steps. These are set out in Figure 1, and described in detail throughout this guide.

Figure 1: The ROMA cycle

Each step is associated with a set of tools, to be used with partners and stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of what the objectives are and what needs to be done. In some cases, these tools will be a series of questions to be answered with research and analysis; in others, they will be workshop or interview techniques. Policy processes can be highly political, sometimes involving dense networks of actors and coalitions with competing values and interests. Engaging with policy in these types of environment requires a collaborative approach, and ROMA has been designed specifically to facilitate collaborative engagement. Drawing on the principles of OM, each of the stages includes tools to help groups and networks of policy actors to coordinate their work and learn together.

Chapter 1 (Identify the problem) shows how important it is to diagnose your problem thoroughly, so you address the root cause of the problem rather than its symptoms. Carrying out a thorough diagnosis will help you understand better what issues you need to work on, with whom and what their motivations might be for working with you. ROMA offers different tools for this: you can do a first approximation with the 'five whys' technique and a more detailed diagnosis with the fishbone diagram. The case study from Nepal demonstrates that changing policy is by no means the only goal: there are many other issues that need to be addressed to improve the way, for example, migrant workers are treated.

The second part of Chapter 1 helps you further diagnose complex issues. ROMA offers you a clear analytical framework for building your problem diagnosis in some detail into your objective and approach. Larger programmes could carry this out as an in-depth analysis, but smaller projects and programmes may not have the resources to do this. However, discussions around the different headings (such as whether capacity to implement change is centralised or distributed) will help you focus on key challenges and raise issues that can be further addressed as you work through the rest of the ROMA process.

Jump to Chapter 1

Chapter 2 (Develop a strategy) is the heart of ROMA: a set of workshop-based tools to engage your stakeholders around a clear objective and develop your plan. The tools can be used separately or together, and in any order: each builds on the other to add layers of analysis. The centre of ROMA is the idea, taken from OM, that sustainable change often results from incremental changes in people's behaviours, not just in the outputs they produce. Once you have described your initial objective, setting out the changes you would expect, like and love to see is a useful way to think about the outcomes and impacts your work can deliver. The process provides a useful first check on how realistic your initial objective is and explains the theory of how change is likely to come about.

Good communication is central to ROMA and throughout the life of any policy-influencing project. Communication serves different purposes: influence will not come about by simply disseminating the results of your work and hoping they will be picked up. The more complex the problem you are addressing, the more likely it is you will need to adopt a knowledge-brokering approach. This will involve strengthening communications within networks of people and organisations, facilitating a collaborative approach to problem-solving and being involved in debates about change and how it happens. ROMA helps you understand what sort of communication and knowledge-brokering roles you could choose and what sorts of effects they are likely to have.

Jump to Chapter 2

Chapter 3 (Develop a monitoring and learning plan) helps you ensure you learn, efficiently and effectively, about the strategies you have put in place to achieve your objective and how to improve them. Traditional monitoring approaches, which rely on predefined indicators, do not work well in complex situations where the context changes (sometimes rapidly), new stakeholders come in and out of the picture or new evidence emerges. ROMA helps you develop a monitoring strategy that is appropriate to your purpose, the scale of your project and the context within which you are working.

This does not mean it is a light-touch approach: far from it. ROMA helps you prioritise your needs for monitoring; how you balance the need to be accountable to funders with the need to build trust among your stakeholders or how to balance the need to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your operations with the need to deepen your understanding of the particular context you are working in. There are no fixed answers. Instead, ROMA helps you make a reasoned judgement, and decide on the different tools you could use to collect the information you need and make sense of it.

As suggested by Figure 1, ROMA is full of feedback loops. It is a process that encourages constant reflection on how you have characterised the policy problem, your plan for approaching it and how you manage the implementation of that plan. Within each chapter we provide internal links, encouraging you to move between the chapters.

Jump to Chapter 3

2. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ROMA

ROMA did not spring from a grand theory of how uptake and impact could be achieved. It evolved over a long period and through the documentation of more than 100 case studies on how research has or has not contributed to changes in policy and practice. It is worth understanding how this evolution happened, as it continues to this day.

The programme of work that developed into ROMA began in 2004 with the idea of 'policy entrepreneurship' – the idea that researchers can move beyond simply producing and disseminating knowledge to directly engaging with policy-makers from the earliest stages of research in order to influence their decisions. This early work proposed that the uptake and use of research-based evidence in policy did not depend just on the quality of the evidence but also on three other factors. Together, these factors were called the RAPID Context, Evidence, Links (CEL) framework.

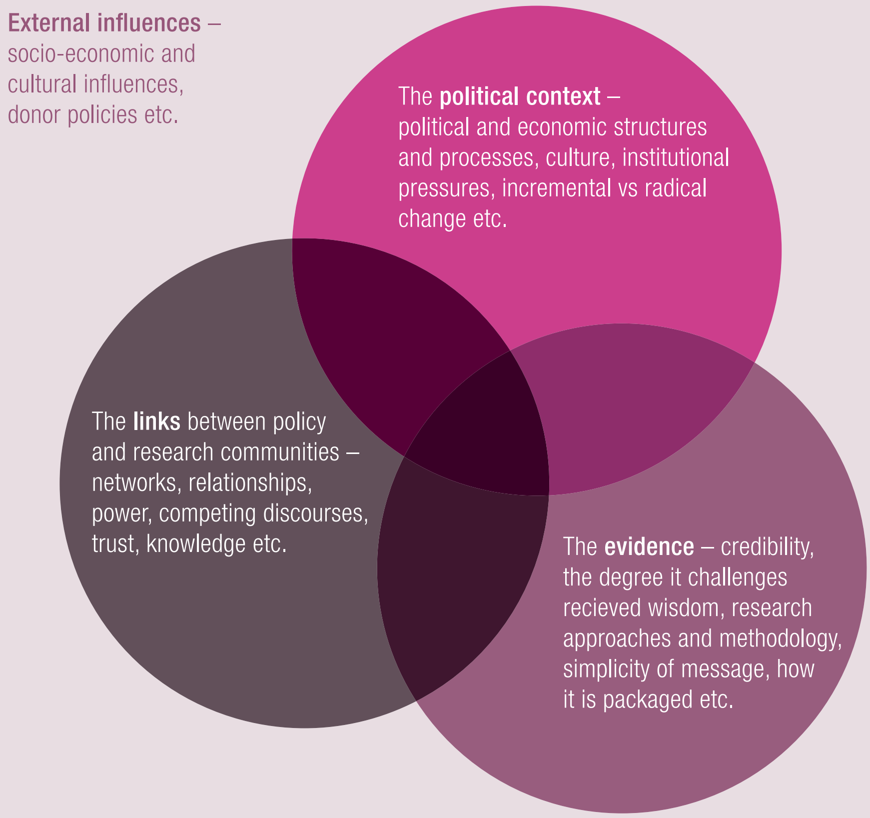

Figure 2: RAPID's CEL framework remains a useful way of conceiving of the major factors influencing the uptake and use of research evidence in policy

Formulating the CEL framework led to a series of policy entrepreneur workshops. The idea was that, once equipped with a set of simple steps to formulate and implement a plan, sufficient skills and appropriate tools, researchers or others seeking to effect change could navigate this complex environment and improve the likelihood of their evidence being listened to and incorporated into policy and practice.

In 2005, the RAPID team was introduced to the concept of OM. OM offered a complete narrative that helped bring together the somewhat fragmented set of policy entrepreneurship tools. By focusing on change, particularly behaviour change, it provided a new way of thinking about the objectives of policy work as changes in the behaviour of those who inform, make, implement and evaluate policy (as opposed to the previous idea that change was only really encapsulated in statements in policy documents). Importantly, OM introduced two crucial ideas to RAPID's emerging approach. First was the notion of 'boundary partners' — those people or organisations that become direct working partners. This helped narrow the universe of potential stakeholders to those who were appropriate to target. Second, the concept of 'progress markers' made it clear change generally happens in small steps.

Together, these ideas helped shift the emerging approach away from one of planning with final impact indicators in mind, towards one of focusing first on the more immediate ones with an emphasis on monitoring and feedback. The RAPID team began to consolidate ROMA into a series of steps, centred on the constant definition and redefinition of the long-term objectives of policy engagement. Tools for stakeholder identification, strategy development, monitoring and learning, communication and internal capacity supported these steps.

The team worked with a wide variety of organisations, ensuring ROMA carried on incorporating new tools and refining existing ones. As different people joined the team, ROMA expanded to include tools to help analyse the political context and improve research communications, theories of change and knowledge-brokering. A key thread throughout was the team's attempts to better understand complexity and the challenges of working in complex environments. This underpinned what had been an essentially evolutionary approach.

At its heart, ROMA remains an analysis- and workshop-based technique that encourages feedback from teams working on very different issues and in very different contexts, and inspires experimentation with new techniques. Indeed, the process of writing this guide has helped the authors think more critically about what ROMA is and how to incorporate new issues and insights into the approach.

3. WHAT ROMA IS – AND IS NOT

As noted, ROMA is an approach to improving how you engage with policy to influence change – it is not a blueprint for making policy change happen. As Chapter 1 shows, most development problems are complex and cannot be addressed by interventions based on an idea of linear change. Where the problem itself is complex, the environment within which policy is made will also be complex, and there are too many unknowns to just roll out a plan and measure predefined indicators. Learning as you go will need to be the hallmark of your strategy: using the phrase 'it's complex' should become a trigger for interesting exploration and reflection – not a means of ignoring difficult issues that do not fit your plan.

Second, ROMA is a whole system approach – not a step-by-step methodology. The steps and tools outlined in Chapter 2 fit together in different ways, and there is no single 'best' way to use them. It is important to understand all the ROMA steps and how they relate to each other before working out where to begin planning for policy influence. ROMA is also scalable: it can be applied to a small intervention, such as the promotion of research findings during an international event, or to a large multi-year programme or campaign to bring about changes in a particular sector.

Third, ROMA is a process of constant reflection and learning: it is not just a means of collecting better data or an evaluation methodology. Because it can be complex, policy engagement faces many different challenges: what the goals really are, who to engage with, how to do it and how to cope with evolving contexts. Overlaid on that are challenges any organisation faces, such as demonstrating financial accountability and good governance and achieving objectives efficiently and effectively. This means collecting information about a variety of issues over different timescales while ensuring data collection does not become an end in itself. Chapter 3 outlines the different reasons for monitoring that link learning to action.

No individual part of the ROMA toolkit will give you a single right answer to the question of how best to engage with policy. While they are probably best used in the sequence shown, at each step you will be encouraged to reflect on whether you need to revisit previous actions in the light of work completed. For example, developing your engagement strategy may reveal gaps in your change theory; revising this may lead you to add a bit of nuance to the outcomes you can expect and thus prompt you to broaden your policy objective.

Jump to Chapter 2

4. HOW TO IMPLEMENT ROMA

ROMA is implemented with a mix of workshops, rapid reviews, detailed analysis and research and time spent on reflection and learning. The RAPID team has found that, while workshops can be expensive – especially in terms of people's time – they are a cost-effective way of building joint ownership of a project or programme when several partners are involved. They also provide dedicated time to focus on the influencing project, beyond the day-to-day work environment. Individual pieces of analysis – from rapid reviews to well-resourced studies – can be done in preparation. But we have not found a good substitute for getting together in a room and grappling with the issues.

Much analysis can be done during a workshop, but it may be necessary to commission specific studies to gather more data and insight. Depending on time and resources, you must decide whether a basic analysis is sufficient or whether a separate, more formal study should be commissioned. The same is true for options for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). The implementation team can collect and analyse a lot of data but this may not be enough. Time should be earmarked for more detailed enquiry or someone commissioned to conduct this.

5. HOW TO READ THIS GUIDE

Because ROMA is not a linear approach, this guide does not need to be read from start to finish. Each chapter refers to the others and each presents the tools for addressing a particular policy-influencing problem. Some readers may have spent a long time analysing the issue already and want to fine-tune how they engage with policy to influence change; others may only be starting out. The activities, steps and tools in ROMA were designed to be useful to a broad range of people, each with potentially different requirements.

The best way to read this guide therefore is to identify your most pressing problem at the moment and dive into the appropriate chapter.

Chapter 1

offers focused analysis for problem diagnosis. It presents tools for diagnosing the root cause of a problem, describes key ideas underpinning the notion of complexity and shows how these can be applied to policy-making processes. A case study from Nepal shows how the tools apply to a real-world situation.

Chapter 2

outlines the ROMA process for planning an engagement strategy: a series of workshops that bring teams together to develop a shared understanding of their influencing strategy and to plan the process of engagement, including the critical components of communications and knowledge-brokering. It is less analytical than the previous chapter and looks instead at the questions, tools and techniques to use in the workshops. The sequence suggested in the chapter can be followed if you are just beginning to describe your policy-influencing work, but it is not mandatory. Each workshop can be used separately to refine an ongoing engagement strategy. A case study describes how a World Vision team put ROMA into practice in Zambia.

Chapter 3

provides a framework and practical tools to help readers develop a clear plan for monitoring and learning. It answers the important questions of 'why monitor?' and 'what to monitor?' before presenting a list of different techniques for collecting the relevant information. It ends with a section on different ways to make sense of all this information so teams can incorporate it into their forward work plans without feeling overwhelmed.

Conclusion

briefly summarises the main lessons for the main audiences for this guide.

6. WHO IS THIS GUIDE FOR?

Team leaders in both research and implementing organisations (such as non-government organisations) need an overview of the whole process of policy-influencing. They need to be able to communicate this overview to the entire team, build on the team's knowledge to strengthen the strategy, spot weaknesses that could undermine that strategy and report on progress to partner organisations and funders. Where to begin reading will depend on where current weaknesses lie. Unless there is a specific area to focus on, we suggest team leaders begin by strengthening the diagnosis of the issue to address (Chapter 1) before looking to see whether M&E systems are providing information good enough to understand how progress is being made (Chapter 3). Only after that would we suggest changing the design of a team's engagement strategy (Chapter 2).

M&E staff will, we suggest, get more out of beginning with Chapter 3 in order to analyse current systems for M&E and work out what could be strengthened. During that process, it would be useful to reflect on the tools discussed in Chapter 2, to consider how to improve the way the engagement strategy is planned and what sort of information to feed into the monitoring system. Chapter 3 will help M&E staff understand the breadth of what could be monitored, and answer the question of how much effort should go into monitoring unintended consequences. It may also help foster a team-wide discussion about how to define the intended and unintended effects of the engagement strategy, which in turn will lead back to revising the M&E strategy.

Researchers and practitioners – those who are immersed in implementing development projects or programmes, or conducting the research – will probably gain the most out of understanding the interplay between Chapter 1 (problem diagnosis) and Chapter 2 (planning an engagement strategy). This will help refine influencing objectives and provide a series of concrete steps to take. Chapter 3 will then help researchers and practitioners to assess what is important to measure and to ensure the 'right' monitoring evidence is used to take the 'right' decisions about the direction of their project or programme.

Communication specialists will need to provide collaborative communications support to colleagues using the tools in ROMA, particularly when working with partner organisations. Chapter 2 would be a good place for communications specialists to begin. Communications specialists should also be involved in any work to improve how the particular policy problem is diagnosed – in particular, Chapter 1 helps with explaining the importance of policy research in the wider context. Chapter 3 helps you develop the M&E evidence needed to communicate to external stakeholders about progress and impact. It is also important for communication specialists to have a good overview of the whole guide to ensure the project's communications are as good internally as they are externally.

Policy-makers and **civil servants** will also find the ROMA way of engaging in policy useful. Mid-level civil servants are often tasked with engaging with colleagues, other departments or agencies to bring about certain policy outcomes (whether these be attitudes, changes in policy framework or changing practices). The RAPID team has worked with several groups of civil servants, helping them improve the influence they have within their own departments: Chapter 2 is useful in providing some practical steps on how this might be done.

Think-tank staff and **policy analysts** have a broad need to improve the ways they engage with policy-makers to bring about change. Think-tanks may be aware of the other guidance that has been written on policy-influencing,[2] but they will find ROMA's emphasis on diagnosing the problem (Chapter 1) and developing concrete and implementable monitoring and learning strategies (Chapter 3) particularly useful.

2. See Young & Quinn (2012).

Finally, **donors** and **research commissioners** face a three-way problem as they search for the most effective ways to contribute to sustainable development. Both groups are increasingly keen to ensure the monies they disburse have an impact on policy and practice, but the pressure to demonstrate value for money runs up against the complex nature of development processes. We suggest reading Chapter 1 first to understand the three characteristics of complexity, before reading Chapter 3 to understand the types of information that contribute to ongoing learning. These may be very different from the types of information usually required for quarterly or annual reports: for resource- or capacity-constrained organisations involved in policy work, it will be important to ensure the learning purpose of monitoring is not completely subsumed by the need to demonstrate and report accountability. Even within their own organisations, teams sometimes struggle to assert their influence – research commissioners will therefore find the ROMA toolkit (Chapter 2) relevant for use among colleagues.

Finally, we have written this guide for a variety of different audiences. We have therefore attempted to keep the referencing to an absolute minimum within the text, except where we refer directly to specific publications. A full bibliography is available at the end of the book, for those readers who wish to take the analysis further.