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Research and Policy in Development

Bridging Research and Policy in International Development

An analytical and practical framework

Better use of research-based evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life. But for this to happen more effectively researchers need to do three things:

First, they need to develop a detailed understanding of i) the policymaking process – what are the key influencing factors, and how do they relate to each other? ii) the nature of the evidence they have, or hope to get – is it credible, practical and operationally useful? and iii) all the other stakeholders involved in the policy area – who else can help to get the message across?

Second, they need to develop an overall strategy for their work – identify political supporters and opponents, keep an eye out for,

and be able to react to policy windows, ensure the evidence is credible and practically useful, and build coalitions with like-minded groups.

Third, they need to be entrepreneurial – get to know, and work with the policymakers, build long term programmes of credible research, communicate effectively, use participatory approaches, identify key networkers and sales-men and use shadow networks.

Based on over five years of theoretical and case study research, ODI's Research and Policy in Development programme has developed a simple analytical framework and practical tools that can help researchers to do this.

Why research-policy links matter

Often it seems that researchers, practitioners and policymakers live in parallel universes. Researchers cannot understand why there is resistance to policy change despite clear and convincing evidence. Policymakers bemoan the inability of many researchers to make their findings accessible and digestible in time for policy decisions. Practitioners often just get on with things.

Yet better utilisation 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 over 40% reductions in infant mortality between 2000 and 2003 in two districts.

Indeed, the impact of research and evidence on development policy is not only beneficial – it is crucial. The HIV/AIDS crisis has deepened

The problem

The Policy Process: 'The whole life of policy is a chaos of purposes and accidents. It is not at all a matter of the rational implementation of the so-called decisions through selected strategies' – Edward Clay, 1984
Relevance: 'Most policy research on African agriculture is irrelevant to agricultural and overall economic policy in Africa' – Steve Were Omamo, 2003
Policy Uptake: policymakers 'seem to regard "research" as the opposite of "action" rather than the opposite of "ignorance".' – Martin Surr, 2002
Cost Effectiveness of Donor Resources: 'Donor countries spend over US$2bn annually on development research. Is this value for money?' – RAPID Programme, 2003

in some countries because of the reluctance of governments to implement effective control programmes despite clear evidence of what causes the disease and how to prevent it spreading.

What influences research to policy uptake? The RAPID framework

Often, the link between research and policy, or evidence and practice, is viewed as a linear process, whereby a set of research findings or lessons shift from the 'research sphere' over to the 'policy sphere', and then has some impact on policymakers' decisions and practical programmes. Reality tends to be much more dynamic and complex, with two-way processes between research, policy and practice, shaped by multiple relations and reservoirs of knowledge.

The traditional question 'How can research be transported from the research to the policy sphere?' has been replaced by a more complex question: 'Why are some of the ideas that circulate in the research/policy networks picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?'.

ODI's theoretical, case study and practical work has identified a wide range of inter-related factors, which determine whether research-based and other forms of evidence are likely to be adopted by policymakers and practitioners. These factors can broadly be divided into three overlapping areas: the political context; the evidence; and the links between policy and research communities, within a fourth set of factors: the external context. The interplay of these four areas is laid out in Figure 1: The RAPID framework. The framework should be seen as a generic, perhaps ideal, model. In some cases there will not be much overlap between the different spheres; in others the overlap may vary considerably.

Political context: politics and institutions

Research-policy links are dramatically shaped by the political context. The policy process and the production of research are in themselves political processes from start to finish. Key influencing factors include:

- The extent of civil and political freedoms in a country;
- Political contestation, institutional pressures and vested interests;
- The attitudes and incentives among officials, their room for manoeuvre, local history, and power relations.

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.

Evidence: credibility and communication

Our findings and experience suggest that the quality of the research is 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. 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 evidence, the way new messages are packaged (especially if they are couched in familiar terms) and targeted can all make a big difference. For example, marketing is based on the insight that people's reaction to a new product or idea is often determined by the packaging rather than the content in and of itself. The key message is that communication is a very demanding process and it is best to take an interactive approach. Continuous interaction leads to greater chances of successful communication than a simple or linear approach.
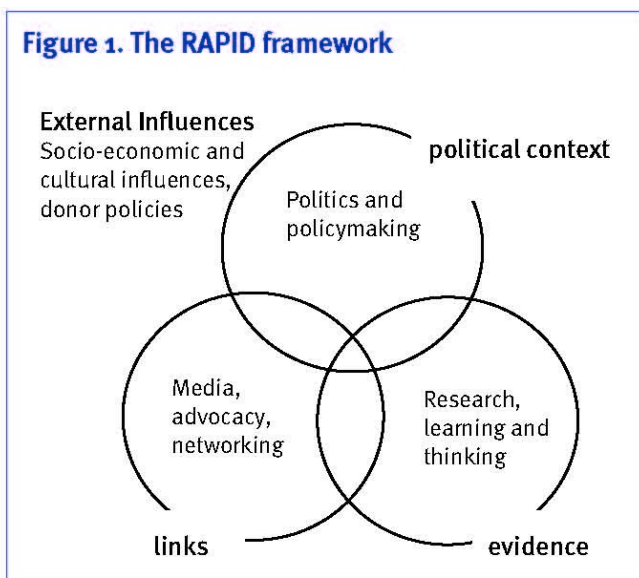
Links: influence and legitimacy

Third, our work emphasises the importance of links; of communities, networks and intermediaries (for example, 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, epistemic communities, and advocacy coalitions. While systematic understanding remains limited, issues of trust, legitimacy, openness and the formalisation of networks have emerged as important. Existing theory stresses the role of translators and communicators. 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

Finally, a synthesis of the RAPID experience emphasises the impact of external forces and donors

Figure 1. The RAPID framework

External Influences
Socio-economic and cultural influences, donor policies

political context

Politics and policymaking

Media, advocacy, networking

Research, learning and thinking

links   evidence

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. Trends towards democratisation and liberalisation and donor support for civil society are also having an impact. Much of the research on development issues is undertaken in the North, raising concerns of relevance and beneficiaries' access to the findings. 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.

However, although evidence clearly matters, there has been very limited systematic understanding of when, how and why evidence informs policy. This Briefing Paper provides a synthesis of the main conclusions of recent ODI work in this area and makes recommendations for how research can better contribute to pro-poor policy and practice.

PRSPs: a case study of research-policy linkages

In September 1999, the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) adopted a new approach to aid – Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). 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? An ODI case study traces the various factors that contributed to this far-reaching policy shift.

Political Context: The most important contextual factor that shaped the PRSP initiative was the convergence of debates and controversies in the field of international development in the late 1990s. This led to a widespread sense of there being 'a problem' within the international development policy field even though policymakers did not agree on the exact nature of the problem. The challenges that needed to be addressed – particularly by the World Bank and the IMF – included:

- The questioning of the mandates of the IMF and World Bank – in the light of the 1997 Asia Crisis and the failure of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) to resolve Africa's development problems;
- The 1999 Review of the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) Initiative and the campaign to make debt relief 'broader, deeper, faster, better';
- The need to operationalise the new conceptual framework for aid put forward by World Bank President James Wolfensohn's Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF).

Examples of ODI work on research-policy linkages

ODI has used this framework extensively in its research and advisory work, including:

- to analyse four major policy events: the adoption of PRSPs; the development of an ethical charter by humanitarian agencies; animal health policies in Kenya; the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach;
- to analyse 50 summary cases studies as part of Phase I of the GDN Bridging Research and Policy Project (Court and Young, 2003);
- to structure literature reviews focusing on communications issues, knowledge management, the role of Civil Society Organizations, and how networks work;
- in a study of research-policy interaction in HIV/AIDS in developing countries;
- in evaluations of the impact of internal policy papers on bilateral donor policy;
- in workshops and seminars with researchers, practitioners and policymakers in Botswana, Morocco, India, Moldova, Kenya, UK and USA.

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The PRSP initiative can be viewed as bringing together all these interlinked concerns, and providing answers or at least partial solutions to the issues that needed to be addressed. It therefore received broad-based support from many different parties.

Evidence: There were three main types of evidence that influenced the emergence of the PRSP initiative. First, academic research contributed, often indirectly, to the major shifts in international development discourse towards poverty reduction, participation, and aid effectiveness. Second, there were important pieces of applied policy research undertaken in the late 1990s, in particular the research related to the ESAF reviews, the HIPC review, the Strategic Partnership with Africa (SPA) Working Groups, and the NGO research on debt relief. This evidence focused more on providing policy recommendations and operational solutions. This was seen as particularly credible when it was commissioned by the IFIs themselves or other donors, demonstrated analytical rigour, and was communicated in a language that was accessible and relevant to World Bank and IMF staff and other donor agencies. Third, an extremely powerful demonstration effect was provided by the positive experience of Uganda in drafting the Poverty Eradication Action Plan (PEAP). This did much to convince policymakers of the feasibility and merits of the poverty reduction strategy model.

Links: The PRSP story is characterised by a multitude of links between policymakers and researchers in main institutional actors – the World Bank and IMF, Strategic Partnership with Africa (SPA), UK and US governments, and the NGO movement. As one interviewee put it, 'none of the players is more than two handshakes away from any of the others'. The formal and informal networks contributed to the speed with which the PRSP ideas were spread and accepted in international development policy.

Table 1: How to influence policy and practice

What researchers need to know	What researchers need to do	How to do it
Political Context: • Who are the policymakers? • Is there policymaker demand for new ideas? • What are the sources / strengths of resistance? • What is the policymaking process? • What are the opportunities and timing for input into formal processes?	• Get to know the policymakers, their agendas and their constraints. • Identify potential supporters and opponents. • Keep an eye on the horizon and prepare for opportunities in regular policy processes. • Look out for – and react to – unexpected policy windows.	• Work with the policymakers. • Seek commissions. • Line up research programmes with high-profile policy events. • Reserve resources to be able to move quickly to respond to policy windows. • Allow sufficient time and resources.
Evidence: • What is the current theory? • What are the prevailing narratives? • How divergent is the new evidence? • What sort of evidence will convince policymakers?	• Establish credibility over the long term. • Provide practical solutions to problems. • Establish legitimacy. • Build a convincing case and present clear policy options. • Package new ideas in familiar theory or narratives. • Communicate effectively.	• Build up programmes of high-quality work. • Action-research and Pilot projects to demonstrate benefits of new approaches. • Use participatory approaches to help with legitimacy and implementation. • Clear strategy for communication from the start. • Face-to-face communication.
Links: • Who are the key stakeholders? • What links and networks exist between them? • Who are the intermediaries, and do they have influence? • Whose side are they on?	• Get to know the other stakeholders. • Establish a presence in existing networks. • Build coalitions with like-minded stakeholders. • Build new policy networks.	• Partnerships between researchers, policymakers and policy end-users. • Identify key networkers and salesmen. • Use informal contacts.
External Influences: • Who are main international actors in the policy process? • What influence do they have? • What are their aid priorities? • What are their research priorities and mechanisms? • What are the policies of the donors funding the research?	• Get to know the donors, their priorities and constraints. • Identify potential supporters, key individuals and networks. • Establish credibility. • Keep an eye on donor policy and look out for policy windows.	• Develop extensive background on donor policies. • Orient communications to suit donor priorities and language. • Cooperate with donors and seek commissions. • Contact (regularly) key individuals.

When does evidence influence policy?

Emerging results from this and a synthesis of the other ODI studies seems to indicate that research-based and other forms of evidence is more likely to contribute to policy if:

• It fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures of policymakers, and resonates with their assumptions, or sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge them;

• The evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to pressing policy problems, and is packaged to attract policymakers' interest;

• Researchers and policymakers share common networks, trust each other, and communicate effectively.

But these three conditions are rarely met in practice. Although researchers and practitioners can control the credibility of their evidence and ensure they interact with and communicate well with policymakers, they often have limited capacity to influence the political context within which they work. Resources are also limited, and researchers and practitioners need to make choices about what they do. By making more informed, strategic choices, researchers can maximise their chances of policy influence.

What can researchers do?

Evidence from ODI's work so far provides preliminary recommendations in four areas, which are laid out in Table 1.

RAPID has been testing and developing the practical applications of this framework through a series of case studies and international workshops. It is clear that the conditions of the political context, the evidence, the links and the external factors vary greatly according to the particular situation. Further information on the use of the framework in a variety of specific contexts will be presented in subsequent Briefing Papers.

Sources and Further Information

This Briefing Paper is based on work conducted in the RAPID Programme at ODI, and particularly draws on the book: Court, J., Hovland, I. and Young, J. (2004) *Bridging Research and Policy in International Development: Evidence and the Change Process,* ITDG.

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Working with complexity: Six steps to maximise the impact of research on policy and practice

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RAPID's work on the research-policy interface has shown that it is complex, multi-factorial, non-linear, and highly context specific. What works in one context may not work in another. Developing effective strategies in complex environments is not straightforward. Simple tools such as cost benefit analysis, logical frameworks, traditional project management tools and others may not work as they fail to take into account the existing complexity. This paper describes how a series of tools can be used in sequence to develop strategies to maximize the impact of research-based evidence on policy and practice. It draws on concepts of complexity[1], on outcome mapping tools developed by the International Development Research Centre[2] and tools for policy engagement assembled and developed by the ODI Research and Policy in Development Programme[3], which have been field tested through over 30 workshops and training courses worldwide.


Starting from an intention to use some research-based evidence to promote a specific policy or practice, the first step is to **map the policy context** around that specific policy issue and identify the key factors which may influence the policy process. The RAPID framework[4] provides a useful checklist of questions for this, including questions about the key external actors (What is their agenda, and how do they influence the political context?); the political context itself (Is there political interest in change, Is there room for manoeuvre, How do policy makers perceive the problem?); the research-based evidence (Do you have it? Is it credible, Is it contested?); and the other stakeholders (Who else can help to bring it to the attention of policy makers? Who are the key organisations and individuals? Are there existing networks to use?). A range of other more sophisticated context mapping tools are also available. Many of them are described in Mapping Political Context: A Toolkit for Civil Society Organisations (Hudson et al, 2006)[5].
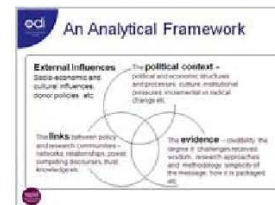
The second step is to **identify the key influential stakeholders**. RAPID's Alignment, Interest and Influence Matrix (AIIM) can be used to map actors along three dimensions: the degree of alignment with the proposed policy (on the y axis), their level of interest in the issue (on the x axis), and their ability to exert influence on the policy process (on the z axis – or by otherwise indicating their degree of influence on the 2-dimensional matrix). Actors who are highly interested and highly aligned should be natural allies and collaborators, actors who are highly interested but not aligned are potential obstacles, and need to be brought into alignment, or somehow prevented from creating obstacles. Stimulating enthusiasm among powerful actors who are highly aligned but not interested can increase the chance of success. Stimulating enthusiasm among actors who are not highly aligned risks creating more enemies unless they can also be brought into alignment. Their level of influence will help identify key target audiences.
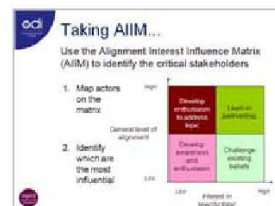

The third step is to **identify the changes needed** among the key stakeholders if they are to support the desired policy outcome. Outcome Mapping[6] emphasizes that long term impact only occurs through behavior change that surpass the life-time of the project. Focusing on those actors it is possible to influence it is important to describe as precisely as possible their current behavior, the behavior that is needed if they are contribute to the required policy process (the "Outcome Challenge") and short and medium term intermediate behaviours (or "Progress Markers") which can be monitored to ensure
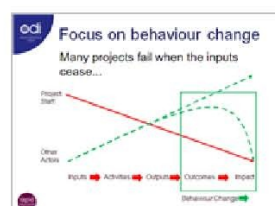
the priority stakeholders are moving in the right direction and responding to the efforts of the programme. The short term behavior change is usually a direct reaction to project activities, the medium term often demonstrate stakeholders taking the initiative, while the final behaviours should describe stakeholders influencing others.

Having identified the necessary behavior changes, the fourth step is to **develop a strategy** to achieve the milestone changes in the process. There are many strategic planning tools that can be used for this. Force Field Analysis[7] is a flexible tool that can be used to identify the forces supporting and opposing the desired change and suggest concrete responses. The forces can be ranked first according to their degree of influence over the change, and then according to the degree of control it is possible for the project team to exert over them. Activities can then be identified to reduce the high negative forces and to increase low positive forces. Sometimes it is not possible to influence actors directly and it is necessary to target others who can influence them. This might mean rethinking the priority stakeholders. A Strategy Map[8] can also be a useful way of visualising the emerging strategy to identify common lines of action and facilitate coordination.
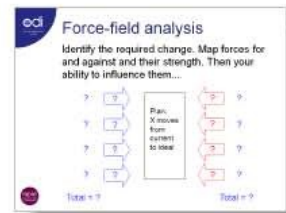
The fifth step is to **consider the competencies required** to successfully operationalise the strategy. Complexity theory conceptualizes competence as an evolving set of systems, processes and skills to enable actors to make the right decisions and act, rather than a pre-determined set of capabilities. Focusing on strategy development, learning-oriented management techniques, collaboration mechanisms, knowledge capture and storage, knowledge sharing and learning, and resource mobilisation, the 6 competencies framework can be used to identify the required competencies, the existing competencies, the steps in between, and as a capacity monitoring tool. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis is another useful tool to identify whether a project has the necessary resources to achieve its objectives, which also recognizes the potential impact of external influences[9].

The final step is to **develop a monitoring and learning system,** not only to track progress and make any necessary adjustments, and assess the effectiveness of the approach, but also to learn lessons for the future. Simply recording the results of using these planning steps, noting the attainment of progress markers and achievement of improved competency levels, and simple logs of unexpected events should allow the team to produce and use knowledge about policy content, context, the strategy and activities, outcomes (behaviour changes), the skills, competencies and systems necessary. A wide range of more complex tools for monitoring and evaluating the impact of research and policy are available in "Making a Difference: M&E of Policy Research (Hovland 2007)[10]. Crucial to the collection of knowledge is sharing it and using it. Intranet systems can be very useful, but sometimes the most basic face to face or phone to phone communications can produce the best results. Understanding how people learn is also important as learning methods need to take this into consideration.

[1] Exploring the science of complexity: Ideas and implications for development and humanitarian efforts. Ben Ramalingam et al, ODI February 2008. http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/RAPID_WP_285.html
[2] The International Development Research Centre, Canada; http://www.idrc.ca
[3] The RAPID Programme at ODI: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid
[4] Bridging Research and Policy in International Development: An Analytical and Practical Framework. RAPID Briefing Paper 1, October 2004. http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Publications/RAPID_BP_1.html
[5] Mapping Political Context: A Toolkit for Civil Society Organisations. Robert Nash, Alan Hudson and Cecilia Luttrell, ODI July 2006. http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Tools/Toolkits/Mapping_Political_Context/Index.html
[6] Outcome Mapping: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-26586-201-1-do_topic.html / http://www.outcomemapping.ca
[7] Force Field Analysis: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Tools/Toolkits/Policy_Impact/Forcefield_analysis.html
[8] Strategy Maps: http://www.idrc.ca/en/ev-28388-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html (towards the bottom of the page)
[9] SWOT Analysis: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Tools/Toolkits/Policy_Impact/SWOT_analysis.html
[10] Making a difference: M&E of policy research. Ingie Hovland, ODI Working Paper 281, July 2007: http://www.odi.org.uk/rapid/Publications/RAPID_WP_281.html