# Strategies to Enhance Research Impact

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The Overseas Development Institute is one of the UK's leading Think Tanks on International Development. Working since 1960 on a wide range of development policy issues, the organization aims to inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, by locking together high quality applied research, practical policy advice, and policy-focused dissemination and debate. Over the last five years, ODI's Research and Policy in Development programme (RAPID) has been involved in research and advisory and capacity development work with a wide range of organizations throughout the developing world keen to improve the impact of their research on policy and practice, and has produced a wide range of practical guidelines and toolkits. Here's what we've learned in six simple lessons.


The first lesson is that policy processes are fantastically complicated. They are very rarely linear and logical. Simply presenting research results to policymakers and expecting them to put it into practice is very unlikely to work. While most policy processes do involve sequential stages from agenda setting through decision-making to implementation and evaluation, sometimes some stages take a very long time, and sometimes several stages occur more or less simultaneously. Many actors are involved: ministers, parliament, civil servants, the private sector, civil society, the media etc., and in the development sector, also the donors. All busily seeking to engage in the process directly, and trying to influence each other. While Clay and Schaeffer's 1984 book Room for Manoeuvre[1] describes "*the whole life of policy as a chaos of purposes and accidents*" we prefer to use the terms complex, multifactorial and non linear.
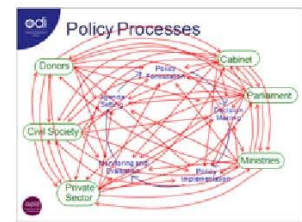
The second lesson is that research-based evidence usually plays a very minor role. A recent ODI study of factors influencing chronic poverty in Uganda found that only two of twenty five were researchable issues[2]. In a talk on evidence-based policymaking at ODI in 2003 Vincent Cable[3] said that policy makers are practically incapable of using research-based evidence because of the 5 Ss… Speed – they have to make decisions fast; Superficiality – they cover a wide brief; Spin – they have to stick to a decision, at least for a reasonable period of time; Secrecy – many policy discussions have to be held in secret; and Scientific Ignorance – few policy makers are scientists, and don't understand the scientific concept of testing a hypothesis. At another ODI meeting, Phil Davies, then Deputy Director, Government and Social Research Unit, UK Cabinet Office, described how policy makers tend to be more heavily influenced by their own values, experience, expertise and judgement, the influence of lobbyists and pressure groups and pragmatism based on the amount of resources they have available. He went on to describe how researchers and policymakers have completely different concepts of what constitutes good evidence. Researchers only consider their results to be reliable if they are proven scientifically, underpinned by theory, are reluctant to say anything until it is, and then wrap it up in caveats and qualifications. Policy makers will take more or less anything that can help them to make a decision which seems reasonable and has a clear message and is available at the right time[4].
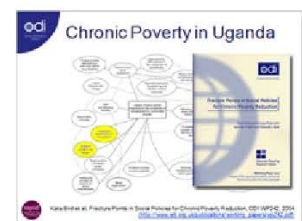

The third lesson is that it is possible. Research-based evidence can contribute to policies which can have a dramatic impact on peoples' lives. Household disease surveys undertaken by the Tanzania Integrated Health Improvement informed processes of health service reform which contributed to a 43 and 46 per cent reduction in infant mortality in two districts in rural Tanzania between 2000 and 2003."
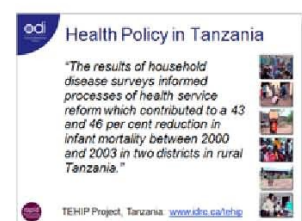
The fourth lesson is that researchers need a holistic understanding of the context they are working in. While there are an infinite number of factors which affect how research-based evidence does or doesn't influence policy, it is possible to get enough understanding to be able to make decisions about how to maximise the impact of research on policy and practice relatively easily. ODI has developed a simple analytical framework identifying four broad groups of factors[5]. The first group, which we call external influences, are those factors outside the context you are working in which affect what happens within it. Donor policies, for example, can be hugely influential in highly indebted countries. The second, the political context, includes the people, institutions and processes involved in policy making. The third are around the evidence itself, including the type, quality and contestability of the research and how it is communicated; and the fourth, which we call links, includes all of the other actors and mechanisms affecting how the evidence gets into the policy process. If researchers want to maximize the impact of their research or promote a particular policy they need to know about the key external actors: what is their agenda, and how do they influence the political context? They need to have a thorough understanding of the political context you are working in: is there political interest in change, is there room for manoeuvre, how do policy makers perceive the problem? They need to decide if you have enough of the right sort of evidence to convince them of the need to change, and how best to present it, and they need to know who else can help them to bring it to the attention of policy makers: who are the key organisations and individuals, are there existing networks to use?
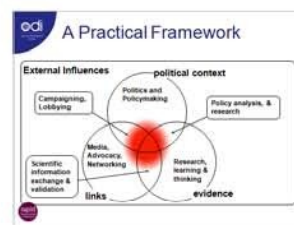
The fifth lesson is that to influence policy, researchers need additional skills. They need to be political fixers, able to understanding the politics and identify the key players. They need to be good storytellers to synthesise simple compelling stories from the results of the research. They need to be good networkers to work effectively with all the other stakeholders, and they need to be good engineers to build a programme which pulls all of this together. Or they need to work in multidisciplinary teams with others who have these skills. ODI's RAPID programme has assembled a wide range of toolkits[6] including well known and often straightforward tools to do these things.

The sixth lesson is intent – researchers need to really want to do it. Turning a researcher into a policy entrepreneur, or a research institute into a policy-focused think tank is not easy. It involves a fundamental reorientation towards policy engagement rather than academic achievement; engaging much more with the policy community; developing a research agenda focusing on policy issues rather than academic interests; acquiring new skills or building multidisciplinary teams; establishing new internal systems and incentives; spending much more on communications; producing a different range of outputs; and working more in partnerships and networks. It may also involve looking at a radically different funding model. It's not easy, but it's not impossible, and it can make a huge difference to the lives of people in the developing world

RAPID's aim now is to make the results of this work as widely accessible as possible, and contribute to the global challenge of promoting greater use of research based evidence in development policy. All of the research, including literature reviews, theoretical work, case studies, and action-research projects, and guidelines, frameworks and toolkits are published on its web site. RAPID is also supporting the development of a global network of policy research institutes and Think Tanks worldwide who are interested in doing the same – the Evidence-Based Policy in Development Network. Vist Rapid at www.odi.org.uk/rapid, or the ebpdn at www.ebpdn.org, or contact John Young at j.young@odi.org.uk if you would like to know more.

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[1] Clay & Schaffer (1984), Room for Manoeuvre; An Exploration of Public Policy in Agricultural and Rural Development, Heineman Educational Books, London
[2] Kate Bird et al, Fracture Points in Social Policies for Chronic Poverty Reduction, ODI WP242, 2004
[3] Dr Vincent Cable – MP for Twickenham, in "The Political Context", Does Evidence Matter Meeting Series, ODI, May 2003 http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Events/Evidence/Presentation_3/Cable.html
[4] Phil Davies in Impact to Insight Meeting, ODI, October 2005 http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Events/Impact_Insight/Presentation_1/Davies.html
[5] 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
[6] http://www.odi.org.uk/RAPID/Tools/Toolkits/index.html