Learning Brief

Bridging the gap between research and policy

This learning brief is based on a paper which reviews the literature assessing how research impacts on policy, and how policy draws on research. The paper seeks to answer two questions:

- How does research impact on policy?

- How does policy draw upon research?

The authors conclude that the relationship is not straightforward - research is not always designed to be relevant to policy, with results packaged appropriately and accessibly for policymakers. Sometimes research is designed to do this, but fails because of lack of timeliness, bad presentation, or poor communication. Similarly, policy making is not always rationally based on relevant research findings, and policy makers do not always see research as central to their decision-making.

The paper provides insight into the various modes of advocacy that researchers can adopt, methods of communication and dissemination they can use, and a number of new lessons about knowledge utilisation.

Research that influences policy: How to become a 'policy entrepreneur'

Researchers cannot expect that policy-makers will systematically trawl the research literature for relevant findings and use them rationally and objectively. The real world is more complex. What then, should researchers do? The answers range from 'nothing' to 'better dissemination' to 'active policy entrepreneurship'. There is no shortage of literature on this subject. The key finding is that for researchers interested in policy impact, 'do nothing' is not an option. 'Better dissemination' is better but still only a partial answer. 'Policy entrepreneurship' seems to be the way forward for the researcher. It must be remembered, however, that there are also options for policy makers to become more intelligent customers of research.

Targeting research to a particular audience requires different presentation and dissemination strategies. Professional associations, think tanks and pressure groups for example, use many different mediums to make research policy relevant and publicly accessible.

The legislative route

Parliamentary or Legislative Committees and Inquiries represent institutional targets for researchers both outside and within government. Inquiries often utilise consultative mechanisms which give external researchers the opportunity to influence findings (by, for example, inviting written submissions). Unfortunately, Inquiries can take years to run their course and be significantly altered or abandoned after a change of government. In addition, governments frequently ignore findings and attempt to water-down the recommendations, or try to delay the policy response.

Bureaucratic access

Researchers can cultivate relationships with senior bureaucrats either through informal interactions or within policy communities and sometimes will have input into policy agendas. Interaction with 'street level bureaucrats' can build constructive relationships that inform policy implementation and service delivery with research insights.

Educational avenues

The movement of foreign students has consequences for the diffusion of knowledge, policy transmission, and the long-term impact on public policies, though this is not well understood. International student exchange schemes are significant channels for the international movement of ideas, policy and practice.

The climate of opinion

A further strategy for influencing policy is to change the general climate of thinking about an issue or policy, and thereby the political context in which decisions are made. Appealing to the public or to civil society in order to shape the 'climate of opinion' is a long-term and indirect tactic for affecting policy change. Researchers need to market their research findings and policy ideas so as to reach a public rather than a political or bureaucratic audience. This could include producing 'sound-bytes' for electronic media (and images for television), or crafting 'opinion editorials', eye-catching headlines or short, concise statements for the print media.

Community participation and local knowledge

In some instances, the character of a piece of research is shaped by how it is conducted. Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) combines research and practice, thereby addressing implementation and monitoring problems at the same time as testing research and policy ideas. This grass-roots or participatory style of research also helps build relations between researchers and those whom the research is about or for whom it is intended. In developing countries, often traditional (informal and common) communicative structures are more useful than national (top-down) structures or the mass media, which provide information that is too general or prescriptive to assist research users. This literature makes some suggestions for the utilisation of these communicative channels in disseminating research:

- Focus on personal interaction through participatory and consultative structures of the provision of technical information and training.

- Intermediaries may be of crucial importance in accessing communicative channels.

- Community meetings.

- Community-based provision of electronic media such as online local databases or village payphones.

Networks

Policy research networks with decision-makers as active participants have the potential to influence policy in both the local and global domains. Such alliances can connect both researchers and decision-makers with counterparts elsewhere in the world when policy increasingly has transnational causes and consequences. Even without such political involvement, the norms, values and aspirations of leading networks can have significant impact on the climate of elite opinion and culture of public debate.

Communication and dissemination strategies

It is important to ensure that research is linked to appropriate dissemination strategies. A variety of techniques for communication and dissemination are recommended in the literature. In general, these aim at researchers maximising the distribution of their research. Strategies include:

- Maximising press and media exposure

- Widespread distribution of brochures and pamphlets

- Immediate advertising of research results

- Increasing the use of the internet and other electronic means of dissemination

- Publishing research papers

- Engaging with policy makers through policy debates

- Holding open seminar presentations or other forum.

However, these techniques should not be viewed as a prescriptive list of strategies for a number of reasons:

- Dissemination does not occur as a one-way flow from researcher to policy maker - it is an interactive process in which communication includes feedback and an understanding of the research needs of research users.

- Lists of techniques to encourage the utilisation of research often ignore the importance of targeting particular research-user groups with different dissemination strategies.

- Dissemination does not occur in a social and political vacuum - strategies that work well in one country may fail elsewhere.

Conclusions

New thinking and new approaches to 'bridging research and policy' are important. However, it is equally important to understand the various interpretations of how research feeds into policy, the different programmes that attempt to 'bridge research and policy', and the wide range of resources already available to build linkages across these two domains. A critical assessment and evaluative procedures of these endeavours is also needed.

Lessons learned

- Convincing arguments and scientific consensus are not sufficient to shift policy. The notion of 'truth speaking to power' is an ideal that does not conform to reality.

- 'Incrementalism' is a feature of most political systems - research knowledge may trickle into policy decisions in the long term.

- Research groups may need to target public agendas in addition to official decision-makers to excite public opinion. Public debate adds to the legitimacy of research.

- The 'normal' manner in which research is utilised constitutes a paradigm. Extreme political pressure or crises may cause a paradigm shift opening new ways of thinking.

- The issue-attention cycle suggests that old ideas or research either need to be repackaged in new ways, or attached to new problems.

- Different models of knowledge utilisation suggest varying strategies for making research matter in policy.

- Research is compromised where implementation may distort and undermine research recommendations.

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A copy of the full paper can be obtained from:
http://nt1.ids.ac.uk/gdn/fulltext/Bridging.pdf