POLICY RESEARCHERS AND POLICY MAKERS: NEVER THE TWAIN SHALL MEET?

by David Glover

In every corner of the planet, researchers are gathering and analyzing information on vital issues of sustainable development. But how do they know that their findings will actually be used in policy decisions that create positive change? Researchers and decision makers see the world, and their roles in it, in very different ways. What creates this divide between the two communities and what can be done to bridge the gap?

'DEMAND-SIDE' CHALLENGES: POLICY IN THE MAKING

By its nature, the policy making process makes it difficult for decision makers to effectively express demands for research. Rigorous research requires a clear definition of a problem and the variables to be measured. But the objectives of government policies and programs tend to be loosely defined and even contradictory. Many decisions are reached through a multilateral bargaining process in which it is difficult to obtain consensus on anything more than broad statements of principle. These bargains might break down if the costs and tradeoffs involved were exposed by a research project (Verdier, 1984). (1)

Inertia and more urgent priorities mean that governments tend to think about changing policies only when time and funding have run out. At that point, it is too late for research. Furthermore, it is only after a program has been established and a clientele created that an effective demand exists for research. For these reasons, policy implementation tends to precede rather than follow research.

Even if there is a need for research, there may not be a single agency responsible for the policy decision. bargaining. When a client agency does request advice, there is no guarantee that it will turn out to be the appropriate audience for the results (e.g. a study done for the ministry of education might find that student performance would be improved by better nutrition). Finally, governments are often afflicted with too much information, which senior policy makers have little time to absorb.

'SUPPLY SIDE' CHALLENGES OF ACADEMIC RESEARCH

Problems also exist in the research community that supplies information and analysis. University research usually takes a long time to yield results. It is often highly critical, without suggestions for action, but fitting the self-image of many academics as gadflies. In academia, a state of conflicting views and information is normal. But potential clients find their confidence undermined when two studies reach opposite conclusions. Academics often search for general laws and patterns that reveal phenomena of greater theoretical and long run importance than highly specific observations. Policy makers, however, want answers to the specific problems they face, even if such 'small' problems do not interest researchers.
While policy makers tend to emphasize distributional concerns (i.e. winners and losers) and the number of people affected, economists -- frequent advisors to government -- emphasize efficiency and financial costs and benefits. Owing partly to the vagueness of many program goals, policy makers tend to assess performance in terms of inputs rather than outputs (e.g. number of new hospital beds rather than improvements in health). They also weigh losses more heavily than gains, since "a policy that hurts five people and helps five, produces five enemies and five ingrates" (Verdier, 1984).

Finally, the issue of compensation is critical to policy makers; for economists it is usually an afterthought. Economists tend to find a solution satisfactory if, in theory, the losers could be compensated. To push a policy change through, policy makers must usually ensure that they will be compensated, and have mechanisms to do so.

**IMPACT DOWN THE ROAD**

The gap between demand and supply for research appears rather large. But this view may be too pessimistic, mainly because it uses narrow definitions of research and policy impact. Research is more than a set of data and policy impact may accumulate imperceptibly but with real effect over many years. The contribution of social science research is perhaps less in proposing specific solutions to well-defined problems, than in defining the problems and providing an array of concepts and methods for analysis. "Determining what issues are discussed ... may be the single most powerful political act." (Seekings and Fawcett, 1986)

Problem definition can take many forms. It can mean detecting problems from patterns in data, such as a trend toward worsening income distribution. It can also change the way society thinks about issues. Largely because of research, the informal sector now tends to be seen as a potential force for development, rather than a symptom of backwardness.

The most significant contribution of social science research may be in generating ideas and ideologies, which history shows can be very powerful. Raul Prebisch’s work influenced Latin American policy makers and led to a wave of import substitution that transformed the region in the 1950s and 1960s. Years later, conservative policies, also influenced by the intellectual currents of the day, had equally far-reaching effects.

**WHAT TO DO?**

How, then, can researchers and the agencies that sponsor them increase the social relevance and impact of research? Since both the problem-solving and the conceptual impacts are important, research programs should be designed to provide both by developing an understanding of basic behavioural relationships and a thorough knowledge of the data. This can then be tapped to provide short-term policy advice. In the 1980s, IDRC financed a multi-year research program looking at savings and investment behaviour and the operation of financial markets in Latin America.(2) The knowledge gained was frequently applied in policy recommendations about managing inflation and capital flight.

Donors have an important role to play in supporting theoretical research, although they are sometimes reluctant to do so. The distinction between "theoretical" and "empirical" is in no sense equivalent to "useless" and "useful." A plausible, verifiable theory about how farmers respond to increases in crop prices, or savings to changes in interest rates, is of obvious relevance to poverty and can be very useful.

Greater attention should go to publicizing findings and donors should be prepared to finance conferences, books, working papers, abstracts and the like. Researchers should convey their findings in language intelligible to practitioners, putting themselves into policy makers’ shoes when doing so. Among the recommendations made by successful policy advisors are the following (Verdier, 1984):

- learn about the history of the issue by researching previous arguments, interest groups, areas of...
disagreement and data gaps;
- get into the debate early before positions harden;
- explain which groups will be affected by the proposed measures and suggest ways to compensate those negatively affected;
- do not propose measures that are technically optimal but too complex or costly for an agency to administer; and
- Keep it simple. Emphasize the decision at hand, the underlying problem, and options to solve it.
- Minimize methodology, jargon and equations.

In the research domain, there is no single recipe for policy impact. Luck and persistence, along with good science, are vital ingredients.

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REFERENCES


ENDNOTES

1. As Hartle (1979) puts it, "[Cabinet] ministers are like undertakers: they are paid to disguise what everyone knows to be painfully true".

2. The participating research centres in this program are FEDESARROLLO (Colombia), PUC (Rio de Janeiro), CEDES (Argentina), CIEPLAN (Chile), Universidad Catolica (Bolivia). See Ahorro y Inversion en Latinoamerica, IDRC: MR207s, Ottawa, 1988.

FOR FURTHER READING


The three volumes above present case studies in Chile and Brazil that analyze social science research and the acquistion and utilization of new knowledge.


Many consequences of the emergence of the environmental industry are highlighted, with a particular emphasis on the complex relations between the economic and political aspects.

Gomaa, Salwa Sharawi. 1994. *Environmental policy making in Egypt*. American University in Cairo,
Social Research Center, Cairo.

This IDRC-funded study analyzes the cycle of an environmental issue reaching the political agenda, the decision-making process, and the impact of policy.


The author reviews social policy formulation in the Asian region, identifying priorities for future research.


The contributors argue that social policy research must be cross-sectoral and relevant to policy in order to effectively address economic change and political reform.


An exploration of the role of social science research in developing concepts and setting the policy agenda in the United States.

References to these and related publications in the collection of the IDRC Library, as well as descriptions of IDRC projects may be accessed by contacting the Library via the Internet at http://web.idrc.ca/en/ev-8564-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html. Library reference staff may be contacted at reference@idrc.ca.

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