Ladies and gentlemen, it is an honour to take part in this fifteenth-anniversary symposium of the Japan Society for International Development. It is a privilege as well to salute our colleagues in the Japan International Cooperation Agency, and the Institute for International Cooperation. I thank you all for your generous hospitality—and for Japan’s important contributions to international development.

My subject today is “learning for the future”. But I will address a very specific kind of learning that should concern all of us: I will explore the kind of learning that has real and beneficial effect on shaping the policies of governments.

After all, you and I are not in the business of learning about development only for the pleasure of it. In the end, we want the learning that comes from development research to improve development policy. We also know that policy—in donor countries and in developing countries—too often fails to reflect what we continue to learn about democratic and sustainable development.

So I will put to you a simple question: How do we maximize the influence that research has on policy?

To answer that question, I will rely mainly on the experience of my own organization, the International Development Research Centre. And for the most part, I will draw on a recent evaluation of some 22 research projects supported by IDRC in developing countries. This was a formal evaluation that specifically examined the interactions of development research with policy-making in those countries.

The first conclusion that I can report—no surprise here—is that there are no universal solutions applicable everywhere. Nevertheless, our own assessments—and 34 years of IDRC experience in the field—lead me to propose three essential elements of policy influence for development research.
The first essential element of policy influence is intent. Researchers must be determined, from the start, to do their work, and report their results, so as to inform policy decisions and improve policy outcomes.

The second element of influence is direct engagement by researchers with the policy community. This means more than communicating information. It means that researchers must form relationships with policy-makers that can endure over many years.

The third essential element of influence is public participation. To have real and lasting influence on policy, members of the research community must become participants in democratic governance, active at every level—from community deliberation and decision-making to national and international policy-making.

Allow me to take each of these elements in turn.

First, intent. The hard evidence of many cases supports the conclusion that intent, in the minds of researchers, helps their research to influence policy outcomes.

Intent matters precisely because the confusions, tensions and accidents of the policy process, in any country, are so complicated and unpredictable. Research will only have a reliable influence on policy if it can survive all those collisions. And research influence will only survive if research is designed first, and carried out, and then translated to the policy people, with a resolute and explicit intent. This is especially true where the policy community itself is indifferent or even hostile to the research or its findings.

To repeat: Intent matters—in framing the right research question, in devising the right research methods, and in propelling research results into policy and action. Where intent at any stage is weak, influence is nearly always compromised.

That brings me to the second element of influence: engagement by researchers with the policy community. Here again, the evidence is compelling. Where researchers form personal relationships with people in policy-making, their influence on policy is both more immediate and more lasting. Where those relationships fail to develop, influence is precarious or non-existent.

Let me cite just one example.

In the Philippine province of Palawan, IDRC has supported a multi-country project known as MIMAP—for Micro Impacts of Macroeconomic and Adjustment Policies. The object is to monitor the real attributes of poverty in households and communities, and to gauge people’s responses to policy changes. There has been strong local participation by Palawan authorities from the beginning—and as a result, research findings have directly informed policy.

MIMAP has experienced similar successes in Bangladesh and Senegal, again in part
because researchers have engaged personally with policy-makers. In Bangladesh, MIMAP research has routinely informed the government’s budget process. In Senegal, MIMAP has reinforced the government’s PRSP approaches. In these and other cases, research and researchers have become integrated into the policy community.

Negative examples are also instructive. In the Andes of Peru, for instance, IDRC supported research into the special health problems suffered by miners at high altitudes. The research found links between altitude and illness. But researchers had little direct contact with policy-makers. (And anyway, policy-makers were resistant to their findings.) As a result, the research has had scarcely any influence on policy.

Engaging with the policy community is not effortless. And it seldom comes easily to those in the research community. Science takes the long view. It contemplates ambiguity, and generally measures progress with slow care. Politicians and their policy advisers want fast answers. They abhor complexity and uncertainty. And they much prefer action to reflection.

So researchers have to speak to the policy community in language that policy-makers understand. They must address policy problems as policy people see those problems. And researchers must stand ready to give advice quickly, at opportune moments in the policy process—even if their advice consists only of preliminary best guesses.

I will only add one other observation on this crucial matter of policy engagement. Quite often, the developing-country researchers supported by IDRC have themselves migrated into the policy community. For a researcher in a developing country, one way to influence policy is simply to become a policy-maker.

The third essential element of policy influence is public participation. This can mean engaging village women and men in the very earliest phases of research design—asking local people for their advice about what the right questions are, about what kinds of answers would benefit their lives, and about how to gather the information needed to find and test those answers.

But public participation in policy research can also mean informing and mobilizing public opinion at a larger scale. In all the contending pressures and stresses of governmental policy-making, influencing policy can often depend on the support of an energized and articulate constituency advocating a certain policy option. This becomes even truer as more countries achieve the noisy and disorderly quality of genuinely democratic governance.

This is, of course, an important point of principle: People are entitled to participate in the policy decisions that will govern their future. And public participation will not count for much if it is not well informed. Indeed, public-policy controversies around science-related issues—not least, the many disputes about biotechnologies—are increasingly and properly argued in public, by the public. By educating democratic deliberation, research
contributes to policy that is wiser, more legitimate, and more effective.

But besides principle, research that informs and mobilizes public support is more likely to influence policy in ways that are reliable and durable. A good idea is more likely to attract the notice of policy-makers if they notice that it already attracts public support.

Let me illustrate.

SRISTI—the Society for Research and Initiatives for Sustainable Technologies and Institutions—was established 11 years ago in the Indian state of Gujarat. Its purpose is to promote traditional agricultural knowledge in India, particularly in the interests of those left behind by the Green Revolution. Within a few years, more than 1,000 groups were members of SRISTI, and more than 5,000 innovative practices had been documented and disseminated. SRISTI is now in its third phase, defined by the theme “women, wisdom and well-being.”

What is striking about SRISTI is the extraordinary and creative extent of popular participation in its work. SRISTI has developed a lively and sophisticated media strategy. But it has also installed a network of picture-based computer kiosks, so that illiterate villagers can take part in its activities and discoveries. SRISTI attends to high policy on issues like intellectual property rights, and circulates CD-ROMs to politicians and policy bureaucrats. But it also engages local farmers, and women’s NGOs, on such practical matters as the application of herbal pesticides, and family health, and care of livestock.

As a consequence, communities of poor people are building new capacities for learning, organization and action. And evidence-based policy proposals win support from an informed and mobilized public. This is “learning for the future”—with real effect.

So these, in summary, are three essential elements of policy influence for development research: Intent, to influence policy from the first phases of research design. Engagement, by researchers, with the policy community, to answer policy problems with pragmatic solutions. And public participation, empowering people through research to inform and advance the processes of democratic policy-making.

In closing, I will only say again that it has been an honour and a pleasure to join you here today.

Thank you.