

POSITIONING EVIDENCE FOR USE:

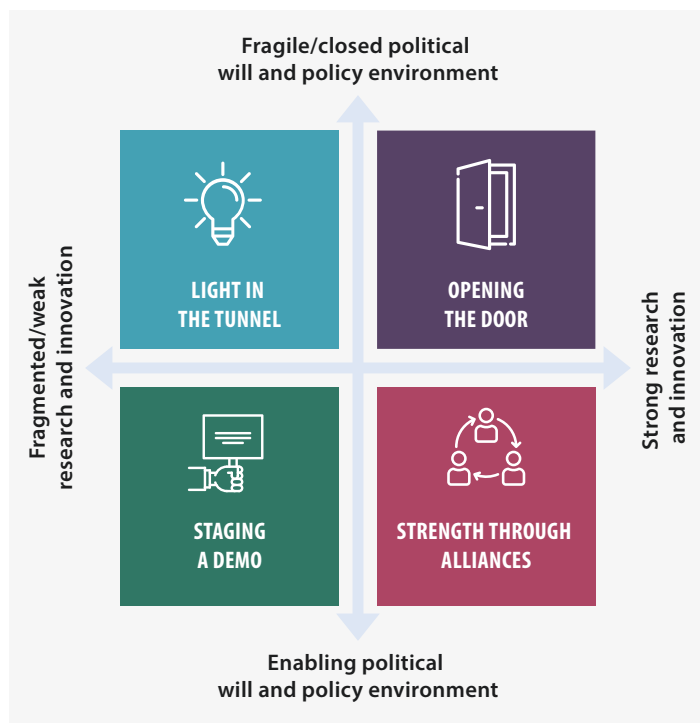
Pathways and Lessons from IDRC Research

FINDING THE RIGHT PATH FROM RESEARCH TO ACTION

Too often, an unfortunate reality of research is that it fails to connect with policy-making processes. Research that is too narrowly academic may be published in peer-reviewed journals, but may never reach policy makers. When research is applied and policy-relevant, it may not be well communicated to the right audiences. The disconnect between research and policy was among the questions examined in a recent learning evaluation done for International Development Research Centre (IDRC)'s Employment and Growth (EG) program. The evaluation assessed research quality for a representative sample of projects supported by the EG program between 2014 and 2018.¹ IDRC defines research quality widely, considering not only methodological rigor but also importance, legitimacy (gender and contextual grounding), and positioning for use². This last criterion is the focus of this issues brief: in positioning for use, what strategies can research teams pursue to better the chances for policy influence?

Positioning for use adds the 'plus' in IDRC's research quality plus framework. Preparing for use requires attention to user contexts, accessibility of products, and engagement and dissemination strategies. It requires consideration of relationships to establish before or during the research process, and platforms for making research products available to audiences and users. It also calls for strategies to integrate potential users into the research process itself, where possible. (Research Quality Plus: A Holistic Approach to Evaluating Research. IDRC, 2016)

FIGURE 1: POSITIONING EVIDENCE FOR USE



CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

An important insight that emerged from the learning evaluation is that understanding the context is everything in positioning research for use. Research teams must carry out a careful and nuanced analysis of the national and local context for research and policy development. This analysis must include such factors as the political will for change, gender dynamics, and the strength of advocacy organizations. Potentially valuable collaboration and innovation from private-sector actors and NGOs should also be part of the analysis. By going beyond the conventional research sphere to better understand the dynamics of local actors and conditions, four pathways for influencing policy can be identified. Figure 1 to the left depicts these pathways, expressed using figurative language: strength through alliances; staging a demo; opening the door; and a light in the tunnel. Denoting both the nature of the political and policy environment and the strength of research and innovation, the quadrants help to illustrate the complex interplay of research use and context. Each pathway is illustrated in the examples that follow.

¹ From 2014 to 2018, the EG program supported 87 research projects to strengthen women's economic empowerment and youth employment in the Global South.

² Lebel, J and McLean, R. 2018. A better measure of research from the Global South. Nature. 559, 23-26.



STRENGTH THROUGH ALLIANCES

Multi-stakeholder networks can be key vehicles for policy influence, particularly where local conditions provide fertile ground. Where strong research, innovation and policy allies co-exist, multi-stakeholder networks may have strong leverage. Most EG projects that ranked well in the learning evaluation adopted a multi-stakeholder network approach to governance. The funded partners were usually think-tanks with solid “on-the-ground” practitioner partners and with long-standing relationships with policy-makers and civil society organizations. Many of these stakeholders had relationships prior to the IDRC-funded research. However, the research helped deepen and extend these important networks.

One example of this approach is seen in a Latin American initiative funded by IDRC and the Ford Foundation to increase the economic security of vulnerable people, especially women and youth, by integrating financial inclusion programs into social protection systems, public policies, and private initiatives. One of the organizations leading the project was a well-established non-profit research centre and think tank in Peru that coordinated the research, advocacy, and technical assistance. The other leading partner was a Colombia-based NGO working in 14 countries in the region and dedicated to policies, solutions and methodologies that help people at the bottom of the economic pyramid improve, grow, and protect their assets. Local financial inclusion consultants and researchers were engaged for research and other activities in each participating country. Among the public and private stakeholders in its far-reaching network were high-level policy makers, universities in Latin America, the US, and Europe, financial institutions, donor agencies such as USAID and the Inter-American Development Bank, community leaders, social protection departments, and other government departments in many of the participating countries.

One component of the project highlighted the value of taking advantage of innovation by the private sector. Partners from the private sector, particularly innovators, can be important allies since they sometimes more readily attract the interest of policy makers and politicians. In this case, a private bank collaborated with a research partner to conduct exploratory research that identified barriers and opportunities in financial inclusion and cash transfers for women and youth. A second phase used experimental research to better understand pathways to positive outcomes. Among the project’s many achievements, eight countries reached the scale-up phase, which aimed, in part, to achieve mass financial inclusion for recipients of conditional cash transfers.



STAGING A DEMO

In some cases, research capacity and innovation may be relatively weak, but a favourable policy environment can enable research and evidence to be leveraged through demonstration for potentially greater impact in the future. In such circumstances, the research project leads by demonstration.

A research partnership between universities in China and Canada that drew on a group of feminist economists to examine issues of child and eldercare, and the limits of unpaid care is a good example. Capacity in research on the care economy was quite underdeveloped in China and literature about unpaid care work and gender inequalities was scarce. The researchers partnered with local women’s movement and advocacy organizations who were well positioned to ensure that the evidence would translate into policy influence. The project found its opportunity for policy demonstration through the municipal government of Shanghai, China’s largest city. This administration showed political willingness for policy change that allowed the research results to be demonstrated in a concrete way. Shanghai’s previous policy framework had required nurseries to operate in large commercial spaces with a playground, which was a high barrier to entry. The city changed municipal policy to allow for childcare in private homes (a practice many women were already engaged in unofficially). Shanghai has often been progressive in terms of reforms and this demonstration of a path-breaking policy area provided a showcase for the rest of the country, one that could influence policymakers elsewhere in China.



Credit: IDRC/ Tom Pilston



OPENING THE DOOR

In contexts where research and innovation capacity are strong, but political will and policy allies are weak, advocacy on two fronts may be needed to ‘open the door’ to policy influence. Simply engaging stakeholders in dialogue may not be effective in achieving policy influence. That strategy is helpful when there are allies linked to governments who can reinforce efforts to build ‘insider persuasion,’ but ‘outsider pressure’ in the form of globally recognized research is also required to penetrate policy-making circles. An IDRC-funded researcher interviewed for the EG learning evaluation captured the situation well:

There are two routes to policy impact – one, get a set of high-quality academics together to do policy relevant research, and disseminate the findings in high-visibility conferences. The second route is to work with locally embedded country researchers who have good links with their own policy communities... The important conditions for both routes are high-quality, policy-relevant research and clear links with policy-makers, either at the global or national levels.

This pathway requires outsider pressure in the form of bodies of research that are recognized by influential institutions such as the UN, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund. An example is rigorous research to understand the relationship between economic growth and women’s economic empowerment. This research provided clear evidence reinforcing an emerging policy message that economic growth alone is not enough to ensure women’s economic empowerment. To achieve the latter objective, gender equity needs to be a goal in and of itself. Local researchers may not succeed in convincing their national governments to pursue this policy objective. Sometimes it is the combination of inside pressure from local research networks and outside pressure from influential academics that will lead to policy change. The legitimacy of the outside researcher can add critical weight to the efforts of local researchers for policy change. In the learning evaluation, the higher-rated projects had a mix of these two approaches.

This route to policy change tends to be a more incremental process, whereby researchers gradually influence the way in which problems are understood and eventually addressed. This research pathway may also be helpful in strategies to influence gendered social norms.



LIGHT IN THE TUNNEL

In countries where the political environment is quite closed and research and innovation are weak, as in fragile states and post-conflict states, standard indicators of research quality and success such as policy uptake or peer-reviewed articles may not be appropriate. In these settings, none of the suggested pathways for positioning research to influence policy may work. Strengthening the conditions for future policy influence may be the most that can be done in these circumstances. Shining the first “light in the tunnel” in an otherwise dark policy landscape may be all that researchers can hope to achieve.

The learning evaluation identified certain projects that while not highly rated for quality were able to shed some light in their specific landscapes. An example of a “light in the tunnel” was a project aiming at improving youth employment training in Tunisia. The project faced a number of challenges. For instance, attempts to partner with the private sector did not succeed owing to aversion to political risk among potential partners. However, the research was well integrated in a small network of specialists in training for employment and supported by a strong local research partner. These factors helped to ground the project and to at least open the possibility for policy influence despite the political insecurity in the country.

Another challenge in this context was to find qualified researchers. The lead researchers had to do intensive supervisory work to oversee research participants and verify the accuracy of data sets. The strategy for positioning and communicating research products was also altered to favour shorter policy briefs that were more appropriate to the capacity of the researchers and the information needs of audiences. These policy briefs were disseminated among stakeholders. The project also contributed to stronger capacity among a group of eight researchers – half of them women – to effectively participate in policy discussions and debates, and be part of the solution on issues that affect their livelihoods.

Donor support for research is still important in fragile and post-conflict settings if research capacity and policy influence are to grow. Despite the absence of a successful pathway to policy influence, nurturing research efforts in these circumstances may help to position researchers for influence in a future, more favourable policy environment.

We like to think that good evidence influences policy and policy makers, but, in reality, it just doesn’t often work that way... There are all kinds of reasons, many political, why they choose not to follow the evidence.

– IDRC-funded researcher

WHAT ARE THE KEY LESSONS?

What does the evidence from EG projects say about positioning evidence for use? Several lessons related to positioning research emerge from the evaluation that may be useful more broadly. These lessons apply generally to all four pathways, although certain lessons may be most relevant to specific pathways.

1. MAKE A CLEAR POSITIONING STRATEGY A PRIORITY.

As obvious as it may seem, for research results to serve any purpose beyond generating new knowledge, they must be used. Therefore, positioning for use must be as much a priority for research teams as other criteria for research quality such as methodological rigor. The positioning strategy must go beyond disseminating results through articles and presentations. The type of evidence put forth will vary depending on the positioning strategy. In-depth analysis of local conditions and actors will help determine the positioning strategy and identify where leverage could happen. Consideration of where research sits in the policy development system will also guide the strategy. In some contexts, for example, it may not make sense to have the research institution lead. A graphic illustration (such as figure 1 in this brief) that sketches out the political and policy environment and the health of research and innovation may be a useful tool for such analysis.

2. CONSIDER UNUSUAL SUSPECTS AND INFLUENCE BEYOND POLICY.

Other strategic partners for use and influence might include an enterprise network, local elders or media. Such unconventional partners may be able to influence positive change through other means than policy reform. Research may also support changes in awareness or gendered social norms. These forms of change are also structural, but they occur through different channels and influencers.

3. CALIBRATE THE POSITIONING AND DISSEMINATION EFFORT TO THE LOCAL CONTEXT.

In certain challenging contexts, it is better to at least make some contribution to policy dialogue than wait for the perfect window of change to open up. Where the political environment is forbidding and research capacity not especially strong, more circumscribed and targeted interventions to bring research results to the attention of policy makers may be most appropriate. This is true for the 'light in the tunnel' pathway. It is also motivational for local research communities in these contexts to have the sense of making some difference in policy debates, limited thought it may be.

Social research such as the studies on economic empowerment supported by the EG program is highly complex and nuanced, and is rooted in local gender dynamics and actors. The complexity means that different pathways to influence and leverage will be found, depending on the context. But for this to happen, adequate time and resources must be invested in finding the best pathway to positioning for use. This is a legitimate concern not only of research teams, but also of research funding organizations.



Credit: IDRC/ Shiho Fukada

This brief was prepared by Nanci Lee and Neale MacMillan based on findings from the Employment and Growth Learning Evaluation carried out by Sisters Ink Ltd. in 2018. The evaluation looked at the drivers of rigorous and grounded influential research, drivers of program effectiveness, and likely impact on the development sector.

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