Research Influence on Policy:
A Forum
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Snapshots
Making the Most of Research

The findings:
Case studies trace factors that contribute to policy influence

In opening remarks to *Making the Most of Research*, Dr Gordon Smith, Chair of the IDRC Board of Governors, stressed the importance of understanding how new knowledge can improve the quality of policy decisions and outcomes.

"The first reason, reflecting the urgency of development itself, is the simple imperative of putting scarce research resources to the best possible uses," he said. "The second reason is grounded in an imperative of good governance as critical to rich countries as it is to poor countries, and that is the necessity of engaging citizens and governments in policy deliberations that are fully and fairly informed by the facts."

Fred Carden, Director of IDRC's Evaluation Unit, said the two-year review of 22 case studies reflected the need to generate hypotheses on what is meant by policy influence, the types of projects that have the greatest impact and, most important, the factors that inhibit or support policy influence.

Evaluation Officer Stephanie Neilson reviewed the methodology for the case study series, noting that the research cut across IDRC's three broad program areas—information and communication technologies, environment and natural resource management, and social and economic equity—as well as the six geographic regions where the Centre is active.

The case studies used a common methodology and interview guide to support cross-case analysis. The conceptual framework for the studies divided policy influence into three broad categories: enhancing policy capacities, broadening horizons through networks and partnerships, and affecting policy regimes. Dr Carden stressed that "there really is no best practice—it's a very messy, confused, sometimes confusing process that really involves a confluence of factors" that can contribute to influence.

Out of eight key factors that served as focal points for the analysis, Dr Carden concentrated his presentation on three: the context in which research takes place, partnerships and networks, and communication. He cited a number of different issues that were brought to the forefront by different studies, including the role of advocacy, the locus of leadership within government or the research team, the role of different actors within governments, the importance of communication in various contexts, the different roles of capacity-building and advocacy networks, and researchers' own comfort with different forms of communication.

In the question period, participants and panelists discussed the factors that contribute to the success or failure of a research project, and considered different ways of measuring impact. One attendee suggested a "gap in vocabulary between the researchers and the implementers," while others noted that the ultimate impact of research is not always evident in the short term, or predictable.

Dr Carden agreed, adding that some researchers now feel they are expected to fulfill a daunting variety of roles—from brilliant researcher to public spokesperson. But he said a number of the case studies revealed situations in which researchers had gone on to positions in policy development or political decisionmaking, thereby demonstrating the role of research in creating a broad context for effective policy.

Panellist Dr Fernando Loayza said research might begin with a traditional approach to gathering and presenting data, but often ends up focusing on the link between research and policy and the relationships among researchers, civil society organizations, and policy practitioners.

Panellist Dr Diana Tussie noted that projects evolve over time, making it difficult to measure success against initial policy objectives that may have been naïve. "As a project develops and grows, the intent can change," she said. •

Fred Carden, IDRC

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Panel discusses research that works

PANELLISTS TRACED the specific policy impacts that different research projects had in the settings where they took place.

GLOBAL FINANCIAL SYSTEMS:
The G-24 Project

The research program on global financial systems proved to be "the glue that held the G-24 together," said Dr Diana Tussie, Director of the Latin American Trade Network. It provided warning signals for emerging issues and fresh ideas for the policy community, while helping to expand the policy capacity of developing countries and bring the minority viewpoint forward. Originally funded by the IDRC for three years, it has continued for close to 15.

Two distinct leadership styles have characterized the program. At first, executive directors of the G-24 countries were the primary audience. Later, the emphasis shifted to players who were believed to be in a better position to influence change. The result, Dr Tussie said, was an agenda that was supply-driven, rather than demand-driven.

Despite limited interaction among stakeholders, the program provided a seal of approval for developing country issues, she said, "and that's no small feat." The biggest lesson learned was the importance of establishing a clear plan to disseminate research results to those who are most likely to use them.

Intervenor Dr Barry Carin, Associate Director of the Centre for Global Studies at the University of Victoria, stressed the need to "empathize with your enemy." Understanding who makes the decisions—and who influences the decisionmakers—is paramount. He said an incremental approach is most successful, with dialogue focused at the sub-ministerial level. He stressed the importance of effectively framing an issue, noting that researchers and policymakers must devise credible solutions that are affordable and doable. Partnerships are key, and timing is critical.

HEALTH RESOURCES PLANNING:
The Tanzania Essential Health Interventions Project (TEHIP)

Many enabling factors contributed to the success of TEHIP, explained Terry Smutylo, Special Advisor and founding Director of IDRC's Evaluation Unit. Most important was the fact that the project became a partner in an existing system, collaborating with Tanzania's Ministry of Health.

The project provided leverage by supplying additional resources—topping up health care spending—in two districts of the county. It worked both upstream and downstream, producing knowledge and disseminating it down to the community level. It made scientific knowledge understandable and actionable by the population and health workers alike, developing tools in direct response to community-identified needs.

By documenting early and ultimate results, the project team provided stakeholders with proof of its success, while allowing the team to improve the project as it progressed. Capacity building was an integral and important part of the process.

The spectacular results of the project (a decline in childhood mortality that exceeded national averages by 17–20%) create challenges for researchers and funders to build capacity in an affordable manner across the country, said Mr Smutylo. "TEHIP was successful in developing the tools and means at the district level."

IDRC is supporting an exit strategy for TEHIP, noted intervenor Dr Harun Kasale, Project Director, TEHIP, but is leaving the Tanzanian government with a moral dilemma. The Ministry of Health does not have all the required resources for the capacity building that must be done—even though TEHIP proved effective in saving lives.

MINING, HEALTH & THE ENVIRONMENT:
High-Altitude Mining and Copper Mining in Southern Peru

Fernando Loayza, Founder and Principal Executive of the Andean Investment Corporation, presented two case studies on mining in Peru—one dealing with high-altitude mining, the other with copper mining and water resources in the southern part of the country.

The first study had little impact, Dr Loayza said, due to an unforeseeable change in the policy and political context as well as a lack of strategy for influencing policy. Research results were poorly disseminated and were disconnected from mining reform, and no effort was made to adjust policy-related activities in response to a shifting context. "It is not strange that this research failed to influence policy," Loayza said.

The second study took place in a more favourable policy setting. Even more important, a strategy was in place to get support from key stakeholders and media. The research was the basis for a strong response to the Southern Peru Copper Corporation's environmental practices from the second International Water Tribunal.

"Policy influence is not a spontaneous by-product of good quality research," Dr Loayza pointed out. To influence policy, research teams must be

Lalla Ben Barka
IDRC Governor

Faith Mitchell
The National Academies

Implications for research support:
Audiences, engagement, and a willingness to hear

ALAN BERNSTEIN of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research stressed the significant disconnects between the lay world and the research community.

When researchers argue in public over the interpretation of facts and politicians "cherry-pick" issues according to their political needs, he said the public may conclude that research is gobbledygook or politically biased. This demonstrates the need to engage the public, and to foster an understanding of the context of research.

Universities value and reward publications, not knowledge transfer, and the vertical nature of university disciplines is at odds with the multidisciplinary needs of public policymaking, Dr Bernstein added. He expressed optimism about the ability of teams across broad faculties to address the important issues of the future.

Faith Mitchell of The National Academies observed that great research will not be influential simply because it is good. She urged participants to understand the actual or potential audience for research if it is to influence policy.

Research is "a voice in a noisy room" for policymakers who have many demands on their time and decisions, she said. They must be taught to understand research and how to use it, and researchers must learn how to communicate effectively with policy audiences.

Janice Stein of the Munk Centre for International Studies declared that research is not neutral, adding that "policy influence" is just another word for politics. She emphasized that ideas require wheels to travel, and what is therefore needed is a set of tracks — the kind of tracks depends on the political context.

If policymakers are ready and willing, she said, there is an "open policy window" and change is easy. If policymakers are willing but have limited resources, or if they are actively hostile and the "policy window" is closed, researchers will need more time and resources to generate more modest results.

Dr Stein said IDRC should be strategic and deliberate with its research funding, but suggested that focusing on the easy payoff of "open policy windows" would have negative results in the long-term. She said research teams should be protected from the potential risks of influencing policy and equipped with the tools to contest ideas in a political context.

Judith Maxwell of Canadian Policy Research Networks identified person-to-person communication as the primary channel for transmitting research to policymakers. Researchers can either explain their findings on a one-to-one basis with policymakers or present them in public fora. Other channels include advocates, who rely on specific tools like the Internet, and media, which present an excellent venue to start conversations but tend to focus on conflict, rather than content.

From this starting point, Ms Maxwell said the most important investments for researchers are skilled, well-informed spokespersons, and an ability to get research "in the air," or talked about. She acknowledged that transmission requires a significant investment of resources if it is to be effective, and that being deliberate from the beginning of a process can help establish the conditions for future influence. ●

Shekhar Singh
IDRC Governor

IDRC President **Maureen O'Neil & André Saumier,** Policy Implementation Assistance Project

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able to generate knowledge and manage stakeholders. He stressed the importance of disseminating research results and linking local research projects with the broader policy community.

Research Support in Viet Nam

André Saumier, Deputy Director General of the Policy Implementation Assistance Project in Viet Nam, gave a vivid description of the context in which IDRC intervened with the Viet Nam Sustainable Economic Development program (VISED) in the early 1990s.

Departing from the established practice of sending in foreign experts to do the research while local researchers "learned by watching," IDRC chose to train Vietnamese partners to do the research and provide policy advice. The Centre came up with a creative approach to the task, and patiently implemented it over a 10-year period. Later, through the Viet Nam Economic and Environment Management program (VEEM), it supported a series of small but related projects.
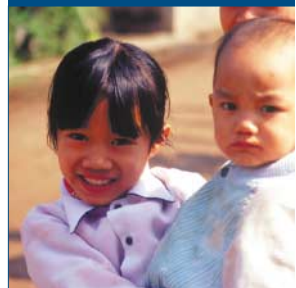
Although they looked unfocused, Mr Saumier said the projects had "an almost traceable policy impact" and helped Vietnamese researchers discover the possibility of working in interdisciplinary teams and networks. It also convinced the Vietnamese government that there was no hidden agenda, taking the projects a long way toward establishing the trust that is needed to influence policy. ●

Forum participants

VOX POPULI

"Coming from a developing country where a lot of research has been going on, I think it's very, very important to know how it influences policy. Developing countries are always looking for a way forward, and governments are looking at how they can use research that is targeted to solve problems in agriculture, in health, in industry. The question is, what impact does research have? How is it utilized? Does it go to waste, and is there any way it could be done better so that the enormous mass of research that we already have can do what it was intended to do, and not just sit around and be forgotten and gather dust?" – NAIROBI

"In order for organizations such as IDRC to be relevant, they must understand how it is that they are currently and can potentially influence policy, both in Canada and in the developing world. I've seen research that was done with a very narrow focus that resulted in good technical knowledge, but its implementation was constrained by a lack of understanding of how it fit into the policy environment in the developing country. You need to do research with your eyes open as to how it fits into the larger picture. What are the policy crossroads and avenues that have to be explored to make your research robust and relevant in the real world?" – GATINEAU

"Speaking from inside IDRC, this research is invaluable in terms of engaging in discussion with my partners about how to think about research and situate it in a larger context, whether by enlarging the public debate or achieving concrete policy change. That will depend on the context, the problem, and the research itself. But the contribution this research makes is that it's the first exploration of how research-to-policy influence occurs in developing countries. That makes it a landmark." – OTTAWA

"We have to ask these questions. It's all very nice to fund research, but how can we actually look back and see the influence that research is having? It's an interesting approach to look at case studies and draw out some best practices. I'm looking forward to further discussions and a better understanding of how to get at those issues." – OTTAWA

"Everyone is talking about increasing the ability to understand how policy influence happens, and the sharing doesn't happen enough…So this is a wonderful opportunity to look at concrete examples. I'm hoping to develop a better understanding of who in Canada is looking at this in a serious way and how we can develop a community of people to share information on a regular basis." – OTTAWA