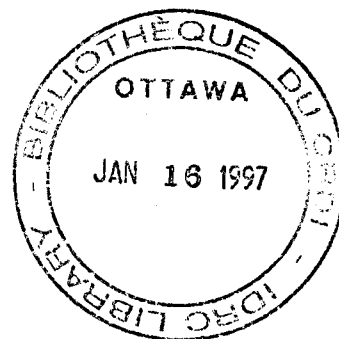


***THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION ON POLICY
FORMULATION***

Latin America and the Caribbean

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ABSTRACT

This presentation will discuss the methodologies used in some ongoing research projects, for assessing the impact of information on policy formulation. The emphasis here will be on Latin America and the Caribbean.

The assessments are aimed at providing policy makers and managers with objective measures for further development of the systems involved and for determining priorities for research allocation. At the same time it is expected that the results of the research will permit generalizations to other systems operating under similar conditions and circumstances.

The concentration on developing linkages between impact assessment and policy formulation is one which is of particular concern to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and to most national and regional development agencies. IDRC's concern with supporting research and development is consequently closely linked with developing capacity for defining appropriate channels for the process of information as an input to policy formulation and for strengthening the research policy linkages.

The case studies discussed are based on the following assumptions: sectoral policy analysts play a key role in repackaging information and channelling it into the policy making process; research results in priority areas need to be adequately repackaged and channelled in relation to the needs and activities of the policy makers; ordinal numbers are an important means of providing objective measures; and current constraints to information use need to be recognized and adjustments sought in the repositioning of the information systems.

Information and communication technologies are also recognized as providing new opportunities for communication and interaction between information systems and users. The impact of access to these technologies on the use of information and the productivity and competitiveness of institutions and enterprises is therefore another issue which is being researched in the projects being supported by IDRC.

As the case studies are ongoing it is not yet possible to analyze the results. We can, however, begin to gain an understanding of the many issues involved in developing and testing the **Preliminary Framework of Impact Assessment** developed with support from IDRC.

THE IMPACT OF INFORMATION ON POLICY FORMULATION

Latin America and the Caribbean

The question of measuring the impact of information is increasingly being presented as an important issue in Latin America and the Caribbean, questions are being posed by the ministries or organizations responsible for coordinating the science and technology sector, higher education, planning and finance and for the assessment and re-positioning of individual information systems and networks.

Research which has begun to put some methodologies into practice, provides a means of understanding some of the many aspects of the question and of providing inputs to the information policy making process.

If we examine previous experiences in measuring the impact of information, some experiences have been found in the area of business. Questions of measuring the impact of advertising have been around in the business world for some time as business managers have sought to assess and to measure the impact of information particularly advertising, on business development. The literature on measuring the impact of advertising seeks to isolate the impact of advertising from the impact of other business events and also to determine the factors which ensure a positive and measurable contribution from advertising.

Research into the impact of information on policy formulation also requires that these issues be considered and that there be a means of measuring the impact of information as a positive and measurable contribution to policy formulation and other activities.

Latin America is currently experiencing a dramatic expansion of the information sector. This has resulted from the increased offering of information and communication technologies, and the greater awareness by the user clientele of the variety of means of obtaining information. Exploiting the variety of offerings requires that there be a means of identifying and evaluating information policy options, as a basis for the development of the national and organizational information infrastructures, and for determining appropriate allocation of resources. Reviews of the literature show that this was a new area which has been expanded since 1992 with the consultations spearheaded by IDRC in the course of creating the Preliminary Framework for Measuring the Impact of Information (Menou, 1993).

The experience in researching the impact of information on development has demonstrated one means of providing inputs into the policy formulation process, with the participation of some members of the policy making community. The assumption is that this process needs to be informed by actual experiences in using information,

in various development processes, and therefore research into the impact of information needs to be based on the use of existing systems and networks and the impact on the clientele.

The experiences provide a preliminary basis for understanding what works, and as consequence, the research discussed in this paper examines some experiences in assessing the impact of information on a specific area of development - the definition and formulation of policies. Information for policy formulation is one area in which several national and regional institutions are currently working, as they enter the process of defining and assessing their information systems via feedback on their performance. The initiatives for assessing the impact of information on policy formulation are therefore complementing mandates and missions of the participating organizations, and are expected to play an integral role in the incorporation of the research results into the further development and management of the systems.

The three projects discussed are:

Assessing the impact of information on policy formulation in the Caribbean.
University of the West Indies, Institute of Social and Economic Research;

Information for Decision Making in the Caribbean Community
(CARICOM) Secretariat

Assessing the impact of CIDE's¹ education information network (REDUC)² on
education policy analysts in Mexico and Central America.

THE PROCESS OF POLICY FORMULATION

In these case studies, the process of policy formulation is seen as the definition of programs for establishing institutions, laws, fiscal controls, subsidies and other means of determining directions. Decision making on the other hand is considered as being on a more specific level and relating to decisions on how to implement a policy. There is naturally continuity between these areas, and policy implementation and evaluation are also considered as ongoing activities of the policy making process, with decision making seen as being necessary at each stage of moving a given policy from a concept to a reality.

¹Centre for Research and Development in Education.

²Latin American Educational Information and Documentation Network.

The utilization of research and therefore information in the sphere of public policy is an extraordinarily complex phenomenon. Weiss (1979) identifies seven different meanings that have been associated with the concept of utilization. These are described as models which are knowledge-driven, problem solving, interactive, political, tactical, enlightening, with a final view of research as a part of the intellectual enterprises of society.

As the case studies treat access to information and research on actual development problems, the initial aspects of methodological definition : the definition of a sample of the user community, and the development issue or program to which the impact assessment is contributing are derived from the case studies which are in process. Validation of the linkages within the information transfer cycle has been necessary to incorporate stages such as detailed user needs analysis not covered by the current activities of the information system. This validation was usually done as preparatory activities to identify the samples of policy makers and participating users, details of their information needs, information seeking behavior, the types of services required and the capacity of the case study to link with other facets of the activities of the coordinating network or organization. The training of policy analysts in the case study of CIDE/REDUC is an example of the links established between the information system and the transfer of information via the training program of CIDE.

The information systems on which the case studies are based can be considered as mature systems in that they have accomplished the first level of selection and organization of materials, and information provision related to their main target group of users. In some cases the information systems have pro-actively disseminated specialized information in response to needs identified, but have not begun to gather measurable evidence of the impact of information. Most systems have only achieved anecdotal evidence of the impact of information on the development activities of the user clientele. Latin American Educational Information and Documentation Network (REDUC) was established with support from IDRC and other donors. This network, for example, produces analytical summaries of educational research on Latin America. The coordinating centre based at CIDE in Santiago, Chile and the associated centres answer questions and provide information as needed, and since 1991, with support from the Inter American Development Bank, the network has entered the stage of making information available to decision-makers to encourage a more efficient decision-making process in the participating countries.

The Preliminary Framework for Impact Assessment which was introduced earlier in this seminar is outlined in several works identified in the bibliography of McConnell ed (1995). The case studies are all aimed at testing the framework and taking it further into practical applications. An early activity of the research was therefore selecting

from among the indicators identified in the Framework, those most applicable to each case study.

The assessments under discussion are aimed at providing policy makers and managers at all levels, with objective measures for evaluating information systems and further development of the systems involved. In many cases a fair proportion of the target user group are also policy makers, managers or policy analysts who would be responsible for determining new developments in the systems, and for allocating resources. At the same time it is expected that the results of these case studies will permit generalizations to other systems operating under similar conditions and circumstances. The identification of participants in the research has coincided with a series of regional consultations on information management mounted by the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) Latin American Centre for Economic and Social Documentation (CLADES). These seminars discussed questions related to the repositioning of information systems, and increasing the communication among users and systems, and therefore engaged some of the members of the sample groups in discussions of the types of interaction desired between information systems and users.

In the case studies being discussed, the indicators selected have been related to types of benefits which users agreed that they expected to derive from the use of the information systems. The assessment is therefore essentially a user-driven, and ongoing process which first determines the indicators which best apply to a given situation in relation to the targets group within the user community.

Defining the services to be assessed

In the case study Assessing the Impact of Information on Policy Formulation this aspect of the methodology has perhaps been furthest developed in the analysis done by Boissiere for the Institute of Social and Economic Research (ISER). (Chambers and Boissiere, 1995). In the section of that paper on Development of Indicators, the focus is on the assessment of specific information services of the ISER:

- Flows of research results to information systems and the production of information packages tailor-made for assimilation by policy makers;
- Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service: facilitated access to information through the interface of databases with electronic information exchange systems; and
- Reference information service and online database searching service.

Issues in collecting and using the indicators

From the guidelines presented at the Nairobi Workshop of February 1992 the following are most pertinent to the processing of indicators for the case studies under discussion:

- Data collection and analysis must be as simple as possible;
- Interpretation of the indicators should be straightforward;
- The indicators should point to issues or concerns that are usually given attention by policy makers;
- The indicators should lead to straightforward but objective conclusions that should be intelligible to those who are going to act upon them.

Selecting the indicators

The experience of the UWI/ISER³ case study as documented by Chambers and Boissiere, shows indicators selected for this case study related to the consequences of use of information services provided. Some are benefits derived from access to and use of information, and seek a balance between the quantitative and qualitative. Exchange of views between the information specialists and the users, resulted in the selection of the following benefits:

Outcomes and Benefits

- User satisfaction - needs met or not met - is initially a qualitative measure, often based on anecdotal evidence;
- User satisfaction is also sub-divided into short or immediate needs for specific information, and medium term needs for awareness or more general information. This would also be balanced by needs not met.

Status measures

Per capita frequency of use in the target user group and numbers of users in the wider "target population".

Other measures

- Time saved (for the user) by using the information service provided;

³UWI: University of the West Indies; ISER: Institute of Social and Economic Research.

- Improved analysis and decision making in terms of quality, coverage, and timeliness of the material informing the decision making process;
- Improvement in preparedness, skills, and effectiveness in negotiations;
- Access to information and ideas through contact with colleagues and others who have worked or may be working on the same issues in distant places.

Boissiere and Chambers consider that ordinal measures are essential to enable the recording of the status at a given time, but also to provide the ability to record changes over time, to analyze feedback, and to include improvements suggested and executed or lack of change.

For this aspect of the methodology, the scheme for recording acknowledgement of a benefit derived from using a service, ratings of the user, and ratings by weights, provide the means for weighing the results and subsequently converting the results of the users responses into quantifiable results.

The concentration on developing linkages between impact assessment and policy formulation is one which is of particular concern to the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), and to most national and regional development agencies. IDRC's concern with supporting research and development is consequently closely linked with developing capacity for defining appropriate channels for the process of information as an input to policy formulation and for strengthening the research policy linkages.

The case studies discussed have used the following assumptions:

- development and repositioning of information systems must be based on the feedback from objective analyses undertaken over time ;
- sectoral policy analysts play a key role in repackaging information and channelling it into the policy making process;
- research results in priority areas need to be adequately repackaged and channelled in close relation to the needs and activities of the policy makers;
- ordinal numbers are an important means of providing objective measures and of evaluating response over time; and
- current constraints to information use need to be recognized and adjustments sought in the repositioning of the information systems.

Objective analyses over time

The three studies have a life cycle of between two and three years and the research findings are related to several stages of consultation. In the CIDE/REDUC case study, the information on the work of the policy analysts was assessed after the analysts had returned to their regular occupations, and several months afterwards. Even then Warren Thorngate (1995) suggests that the impact should also be assessed at a later stage in terms of impact on policy implementation. This is certainly valid, but also returns us to the question of being able to isolate influences and being able to determine the attributes which are most directly influenced by the information from specific sources.

The other two case studies discussed are of three years' duration and consequently the analysis of the concepts of benefits and the needs of the users were the first stage of the identification of the indicators and the benefits anticipated by the users. This has been found to have the advantage of users becoming more involved in the case study and the assessment, and being able to relate their policy formulation activities to the access to and use of information. On the other hand the fact that the user clientele can also change jobs and positions also means that there can be experience lost from the sample. One compensatory measure could be the incorporation of the successor into the target group, or using a larger sample with the expectation that some members will not remain until the research has been completed.

In the project Information for Decision Making coordinated by the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat, Collins (1995) summarizes the approach as:

- The identification and description of the users;
- An understanding of the development problems and appreciation of the expected benefits;
- Cost-benefit analysis of the service being provided and obtained through measuring the inputs and outputs of the information system; and
- Communicating the findings to the right target audiences.

The illustrates the rationale used in that case study for developing a multi-stage analysis, and undertaking assessments over time thus in fact bringing together several stages of the information transfer cycle.

The role of policy analysts in repackaging information

At the conceptual stage of the CIDE/REDUC case study it was assumed that policy analysts hold important keys to information flows, policy design and formulation. These analysts are expected to play a role of requesting information in priority areas,

in accordance with the policy making agenda. This implies therefore that there is fluid two way communication between the information system(s) and these analysts and in fact that the analysts will be able to play a role at each of the stages identified above from the CARICOM case study. Collins (1995) also suggests that analysts are important intermediaries between policy makers and the information systems, and will no doubt offer some further insights when the completed case study is analyzed.

Repackaging of research results is has been considered important in the type of information services provided to policy makers. The sources of information tapped can range from research theses, statistical data, news released, unpublished communications, and other sources which as Weiss (1979) states when the diverse research conclusions enter the policy arena, the direction which they provide for policy is confused. Repackaging therefore means not only summarizing but also analysis and ranking of the information as it relates to the policy question being formulated.

The role of ordinal numbers

In achieving the objective of measurable indicators, there is also the need to achieve objectivity in presenting the results. The capacity to weigh the outcomes and benefits against the status measures such as use ensure that the final outcomes of the research can also be compared at stages over time to show changes in the impact of the information systems.

Adjusting for current constraints

The periodical analysis of the results also provides a means for evaluating the performance of systems and adjusting for the impact of current constraints. As the case studies all are ongoing it is not yet possible to fully analyze the results. We can, however, begin to gain an understanding of the many issues involved in developing and testing the Preliminary Framework of Impact Assessment formulated with support from IDRC and outlined in the monograph Measuring the Impact of Information on Development.

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