Linking research with policy: experiences and lessons from South Asia

- Linking research with policy is a major concern in South Asia, where few politicians and policymakers base their decisions on evidence. Reasons for this include weak research planning, poor dissemination of research findings, ineffective use of media outlets, and a lack of engagement by researchers with policymakers. This issue of evidence for policy shows how NCCR North-South research in South Asia has contributed to policymaking and change processes by following a proper planning and dissemination strategy, mobilising media effectively to disseminate findings, and by proactively engaging researchers with media and policymakers.

Policy message

- Consultative research processes are crucial to improve the impact of research on policy. Research findings are more likely to be used in policymaking if concerned stakeholders – researchers, practitioners, policy and political decision makers, and government officials – come together to define problems and help design research.
- Dissemination strategies are very important. Findings must be translated into simple, short, readable, and attractive messages and communicated via appropriate means.
- Mechanisms such as regular roundtables, discussion forums, workshops, conferences, and radio and TV programmes bring policymakers, media and researchers together and help research findings reach the policy community.

- Connecting research and the policy community
  - Evidence-based policymaking connects research with the policy community, as research is one of the major sources of evidence on which policymaking relies. The information generated through research is considered to be apolitical, neutral and objective, so it has high credibility and acceptability (Jones 2011, Sutcliffe and Court 2005).
  - NCCR North-South’s decade-long research partnership in South Asia shows that an appropriate research planning and dissemination strategy helps to connect research with the policy community.
  - One effective way to do so is to involve policymakers and politicians in planning research. Ways to do this include holding periodic meetings and briefings, inviting suggestions, and where feasible incorporating them into research objectives, themes, and the choice of study sites. This develops ownership and so contributes to evidence-based policymaking (Sutcliffe and Court 2005, Upreti et al. 2007).

Strengthening relations between researchers and policymakers

Relationships between researchers and policymakers may be hindered by existing attitudes and mutual biases, and a lack of understanding of potential mutual benefits and the complementary role of research and policy. These barriers can be overcome by bringing researchers and
Table 1. Publicity tools and their influence on policymaking and effect on public awareness

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<tr>
<th>Publicity tool</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Public awareness</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy briefs, discussion papers</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opinion articles in daily newspapers</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
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<td>Books in local language</td>
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to policy. Policymakers use various criteria in deciding whether to accept or reject evidence: its quality (accuracy and objectivity), credibility (analytical rigour, clear presentation of conclusions), relevance (timely and topical evidence, generalisability), practicalities (accessible to policymakers, feasible and affordable), and the cost for policymaking (Sutcliffe and Court 2005). Researchers should consider these criteria if they aim to influence policymaking.

Policymaking is influenced by many factors: the policymakers’ knowledge and skills, experience, expertise, and judgment; the policy institutions’ capacity, resources, policy, and priority; the external context (e.g., urgency, donor conditions, etc.); and the priorities of the ruling political parties. In this context, policymaking is a political process. To be relevant to policy, researchers have to engage in this political process.

Definitions

Dissemination: refers to a process of spreading useful messages or information extracted from research findings to wider audiences through appropriate channels.

Policy: refers to a set of principles, rules, plans, and procedures for a course of action intended to guide decision-makers or persons with the authority to achieve the stated goals. It includes stated commitments to a plan of action or guidelines among those in government, the private sector, research, and academic organisations.
Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

Research planning process
Developing mutual trust and relationships between policymakers and researchers requires commitment, time, and the right procedures. Reliable, quality research results are vital for developing trust. Research planning should ensure quality results and facilitate positive interactions between researchers and policymakers.

Dissemination strategy and skills
Packaging research results suitable for policy audiences is a skill. No matter how topicaly relevant and methodologically sound the research is, it will have no effect if it does not reach policy circles. Using the media should be an integral part of a dissemination strategy.

Establishing structures and mechanisms
Enhancing linkages and cooperation between research and policy requires ways for researchers and policymakers to engage in discussion and reflections, provide feedback, and develop mutual understanding. Research institutes have to establish such mechanisms. They may include periodic roundtables and discussion forums, planning meetings and workshops, annual conferences and review meetings where policymakers, media, and researchers participate and reflect.

Building researchers’ capacity to engage with policymakers
Researchers often work on their own, with limited engagement beyond their disciplinary areas. They need to develop their capacity in engaging with the policy community.

Further reading

The National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South is a worldwide research network including six partner institutions in Switzerland and some 140 universities, research institutions, and development organisations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Approximately 350 researchers worldwide contribute to the activities of the NCCR North-South.