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.

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- 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...
Sustainable case studies

Sustainable Development Policy Institute
Each year, this regional partner in Islamabad, Pakistan, organises a 3-day conference on sustainable development for stakeholders from South Asia. It focuses on a different theme each year. Researchers present their findings, policymakers reflect on policy deficiencies and knowledge gaps, civil-society representatives bring up societal concerns, and the media ask questions. This offers excellent opportunities for researchers to plan research, disseminate their findings, and link with policy needs. This forum has enabled researchers to contribute to changes in forest policy and prioritising food security provisions.

Land reform debate in Nepal
Another key partner, the Consortium for Land Research and Policy Dialogue, is regularly engaged with high-level land policymaking bodies such as the Ministry of Land Reform. It provides research-based evidence on land reform and agrarian transformation, and facilitates discussions among various ministries, the national parliament, the National Planning Commission, academia, and the media. This has led to provisions on landlessness in the recommendations of the High Level Land Reform Commission and to the inclusion of land issues in the new constitution.

Mobilising media to disseminate research results
The research partners in Nepal and Pakistan put a high priority on working with the media. Researchers give radio interviews, appear on television talk shows and expert panel discussions, write articles in national daily newspapers, and disseminate their results regularly as columnists, analysts, resource persons, trainers, and commentators. This engagement has connected researchers with policymakers, politicians, and the general public, improved the visibility of research, and enhanced the effects of research on policy.

To be effective, research findings must be translated into accessible forms: simple, concise, convincing, and disseminated through suitable channels, such as print and electronic media, interactive forums, pictograms, posters, documentaries, summary sheets, and fact sheets.

Matching policymakers’ expectations
Policymakers are often generalists who are extremely busy and must work under pressure. They need short, simple and politically relevant evidence. Researchers, on the other hand, often produce lengthy, complex documents in technical language, making it hard for policymakers to use them. Other actors who try to influence policymaking, such as public relation experts, consultants, and advocacy groups, produce simple, brief, and attractively presented materials, often in the local language. These depict people’s experiences and concerns, report on programme evaluations, advocate particular themes, or tell success stories. Policymakers often prefer to use these materials than scientifically written research papers. As a result, even if the findings are based on good-quality research, they will not influence policy. For example, decisions on dividing Nepal into provinces in a major government restructuring are influenced more by advocacy materials than the research-based evidence about the capability of these provinces.

Evidence generated through a rigorous and systematic process of inquiry is more credible than that based on opinion-based advocacy. But policymakers may be unaware of the research because they are not involved in it. Hence, it is important for researchers to engage policymakers in important steps in the research process (such as in stakeholder consultation meetings) so they are aware of the research and can contribute to it. The NCCR North-South has found that it is important not only to maintain methodologically sound, conceptually strong, independent research findings, but also to make them easily accessible to policymakers (Upreti et al. 2012).

Realising the determinants of policymaking
Researchers must know what determines policymaking so they can make their research findings relevant to policymakers.

Table 1. Publicity tools and their influence on policymaking and effect on public awareness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publicity tool</th>
<th>Influence</th>
<th>Public awareness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Journal articles</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy briefs, discussion papers</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Medium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion articles in daily newspapers</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Books in local language</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</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 topically relevant and methodologically and conceptually 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.