

Research Uptake in Policymaking: From Papers to Policy

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Introduction

Recent years have seen a rapid rise in evidence based decision-making. Organisations such as 3ie and the Campbell Collaboration have produced a wealth of systematic reviews and evidence and gap maps which have enabled organisations to take a focussed approach to research by highlighting areas where there is a dearth of evidence.

However, it is vital that this rise in evidence production is complimented with a push for knowledge uptake among policymakers. Drawing from the experiences of researchers, communications experts, government personnel and knowledge brokers within international development, this paper will explore the challenges currently faced by researchers and policymakers in the uptake of research. We will look at the importance of fostering open communications channels and the key role of 'knowledge brokers' within the sector. Drawing from tangible examples from the field, we will then suggest practical ways to foster a reciprocal relationship between knowledge generation and uptake, ensuring that research is based on an in-depth understanding of the end user.

The paper is based on discussions which took place during a CEDIL workshop entitled 'Promoting the use of research findings in policy and practice: an experience sharing workshop' held on Tuesday 7th November 2017. Twelve people were in attendance from the CEDIL secretariat, Practical Action, Save the Children, The Campbell Collaboration, International Initiative for Impact evaluation, DFID's Evaluation Unit, Oxford Policy Management, African Institute for Development Policy and ICF.

What's in a Name: Knowledge Brokering as an Emerging Field

A knowledge broker can be defined as 'as persons or organizations that facilitate the creation, sharing, and use of knowledge' (Sverrisson, in Meyer, 2010, p. 119). It is a skill which is fundamental to postmodern work (Kakihara & Sorensen in Meyer, 2010, p. 119), yet knowledge-brokering often does not garner the attention to detail and resources that other skillsets enjoy, despite many job roles requiring an element of knowledge brokering.

Workshop participants identified several different job roles and titles where knowledge brokerage played a key role. These included the following:

- Researchers
- Academics
- Policy outreach professionals
- Evidence brokers
- Research communications professionals
- App developers

Furthermore, specific skills and qualities were identified for successful knowledge brokering, comprising:

Skills

- Interpersonal
- Networking
 - Ability to foster relationships
- Communication
 - The ability to express in plain language whilst preserving accuracy, integrity and intention
 - The ability to craft key messages based on the audience
 - Multilingual
 - Public speaker
- Analytical
 - The ability to interpret and synthesise long reports and assess the key points for the target audience
- Research
 - An understanding of methods and an ability to briefly explain methodologies to non-technical stakeholders.
 - An ability to keep abreast of developments in the field
- Technological
 - The ability to create tools that enable non-specialists to access data such as apps and data visualisations
 - Digital literacy

Qualities

- Trust of the community
- An understanding of research
- Independence, neutrality
- Access to key audiences
- Ability to act as an intermediary or conduit

These skills ensure that the knowledge broker is able to synthesise vast swaths of research and evidence into easily digestible ‘nuggets’ which can be repackaged and disseminated through traditional and modern communications channels.

Meyer (2010), however, emphasised that knowledge brokerage is often not acknowledged or seen as important in many organisations and, thus, it often takes place in the peripheries (Meyer, 2010, p. 122). The inadvertent nature of knowledge brokering means that many people are unaware of the number of other colleagues in partner organisations who are playing similar roles, albeit under different job titles.

Steps have been taken to encourage ‘communities of practice’ and enable knowledge brokers to liaise with one another and share best practice. Colleagues working on climate change have established the Climate Knowledge Brokers⁴ network whose vision is ‘a world

⁴ For more information, see <https://www.climateknowledgebrokers.net/>

in which people make climate sensitive decisions fully informed by the best available climate knowledge' (Bauer and Smith, 2015, p. 3). They describe their role as 'filters, interfaces and translators between knowledge producers and users, across different disciplines, fields and sectors'(Bauer and Smith, 2015, p. 5).

Planning for Research Uptake

The important role of knowledge translation within research is often overlooked when organisations formulate funding proposals. Organisations should embed personnel and skills development at the project development stage to ensure an effective dissemination strategy and evidence uptake plans should be developed. The key elements of such are:

- Context analysis
- Uptake objectives
- Mapping of audience
- Engagement and communications plan with a need to consider events where the publication will be topical.

Communications strategies should be incorporated and include elements such as early dissemination of baseline findings to build understanding, trust, credibility and commitment. Evidence uptake plans should consider the most relevant communications products which can range from full reports and datasets to plain language summaries, blogs and op-eds. Dissemination can be undertaken through a variety of activities such as meetings, workshops and conferences.

Making research uptake a key determinant of success can also help to ensure that it is given the due attention that is needed. It can be incorporated into monitoring and evaluation plans and specific indicators such as numbers of downloads, citation tracking and sales figures can be taken into account.

Structure, People and Relationships

Organisations should ensure that they have an understanding of target audiences for their research as well as a clear understanding of how to reach these constituencies and what resources they will need to ensure that they can disseminate information about their research. The incorporation of stakeholder mapping into the research process is key to understanding one's audience and having an early understanding of how to access and influence them.

Furthermore, organisations should be cognisant of the structures within the government departments that they hope to influence. Decision-making processes within governments are often opaque and difficult to grasp for the uninitiated. This makes it hard for smaller or less well-known organisations to access the decision makers. It is often easier to access the lower level civil servants and the experience of CEDIL workshop attendees suggests that these early career professionals are far more likely to read the detailed content of reports compared to their colleagues in high positions of power who expect top-level findings and

short summary documents. This has been the experience of CEDIL's consortium member *The Campbell Collaboration*. For each of their systematic reviews, they produce plain language summaries - short two-pagers which have a much broader readership than the full documents, which can run into the hundreds of pages.

Researchers should package the evidence in a way that can be consumed easily, without the need for in-depth analysis. Callen et al.'s work for the Building Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE) programme found that civil servants in India and Pakistan found it hard to interpret ratios from a table looking at crop yields. Many of them misinterpreted the results and their result were no more accurate than if they had guessed the answers randomly (Callen *et al.*, 2017). The survey respondents stated that one of the main barriers to evidence use in policymaking was lack of training in data analysis and the evaluation and applicability of research findings.

Timeliness of Research

A key element of successful research uptake that was identified during CEDIL's workshop was that of timeliness. Research is most likely to be used by government if it comes at a key time in their decision-making processes.

Case Study: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation's Education (3ie) Systematic review in Nepal

Approximately 250 million children in low- and middle-income countries (L&MICs) cannot read, write or do basic maths. A range of different education interventions have been implemented to resolve what is being seen as a learning crisis and, to answer the question of whether these interventions work, 3ie carried out a comprehensive systematic review on effectiveness of education programmes in L&MICs. The review examines the impact of 216 education programmes in 52 countries. It synthesises evidence on the effects of 21 different types of education interventions on school enrolment and completion, attendance and learning.

A key remit of 3ie is to ensure that their research is used in the most effective ways. Therefore, with support from Nepal's planning commission and their education ministry, 3ie organised a day long policy dialogue around the education effectiveness review. The objective was to provide a forum for conversation among researchers, policymakers and programme managers about Nepal's education policy priorities, engage with stakeholders and draw on the education review to discuss evidence-informed solutions for the challenges identified. 3ie also wanted the education dialogue to feed into a country policy programme in Nepal.

3ie ensured that one of its key knowledge brokers, Radhika Menon, Senior Policy and Advocacy officer, was present to contextualise the report and highlight the key policy priorities for consideration in Nepal. This included assessment of student learning, teacher-

related interventions, school-based management, public-private partnerships and vocational education.

Participants were able to engage in a substantive discussion about how the evidence presented could be used to reform education policy with the country. It provided a platform for government officials, NGOs and inter-governmental organisations to exchange ideas and learning in this sector.

Such dissemination activities are key to ensuring that research reaches the right audiences and that they have the space and time to critically engage with it, outside of their busy schedules.

A Reciprocal Approach to Research Uptake

We have seen that it is important for researchers to have the resources in place to interact with policymakers and ensure that their research is timely and effectively communicated. We must also consider another critical element - that the research is needed and necessary. Organisations often conduct research based on their own strategic priorities, which are then presented to governments and policymakers with suggestions for uptake. There is an implicit presumption within this structure of working which suggests that the researchers' role is to impart knowledge on the policymakers. Tied up in this are damaging structural norms of Northern researchers educating Southern policymakers. In order to redress the balance, a far more integrated approach is needed, where policymakers are at the heart of research and are present at all stages. This is demonstrated in the example of South Africa's DPME.

Case Study: DPME and Evidence-Based Decision-Making

The Department for Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation within the South African government shows what success can look like if government policymakers put research in the centre-stage of their decision-making. In 2015, the department embarked on their own version of evidence synthesis, enabling civil servants to quickly obtain policy-relevant research. They created an evidence map related to the Human Settlements sector, with the aim that this would inform the design of the Draft White Paper on the transition from Housing to Human Settlements in South Africa (Lenger, 2016).

The DPME partnered with academia and called in the expertise of University of Johannesburg's programme to Build Capacity to Use Research Evidence (BCURE), as well as human settlements experts, to review over 2000 pieces of evidence from the sector. They assessed the evidence's applicability to the South African context with any relevant evidence summarised and entered into an interactive database, with links to full text versions.

At its international launch, the tool garnered much support from researchers and policymakers alike, who noted that it was an innovative way of ensuring research uptake within policy.

The tool is part of a range of mechanisms within the South African government which embeds evidence use at the core of policymaking and encourage civil servants to be both producers, as well as consumers of research.

Knowledge Brokering in the Centre-Stage

Case Study: Practical Action's Approach to Research

Practical Action (then called Intermediate Technology Development Group - ITDG) was founded in the late 1960s by Fritz Schumacher with a key remit to harness the power of knowledge sharing.

From its inception, ITDG offered a Technical Enquiries Service which provided information to Governments and other development actors free of charge in response to demand. Early on, the organisation also set up a subsidiary publishing company and a consultancy company – all recognising that getting knowledge moving around the world was the best way to tackle poverty. The enquiries service, the publishing company and the consultancy all continue to exist today.

These have helped to ensure that Practical Action's knowledge services are demand driven. When organisations and individuals approach Practical Action for assistance, they respond with resources which are contextualised to the user's needs. The publishing and consultancy companies also have a business model reliant on responding to demand, rather than creating a supply which may not be relevant or necessary.

Practical Action's ability as knowledge broker is also predicated on its ability to generate knowledge, often from within their own programme experience. Most recently this has been captured in a new Framework for Change which helps the organisation focus its efforts on driving systemic change. Having identified the changes that they want to see in the world (such as energy access for all), Practical Action has planned what needs to be learned and then develops projects on the ground to generate the learning.

Practical Action's strength lies in its ability to understand the most appropriate tool for disseminating knowledge and research. It has a traditional publishing company, which publishes books for leading organisations such as Oxfam, but also utilises innovative dissemination tools. For example, Practical Action runs a low-cost call centre in Bangladesh which sits within the Ministry of Agriculture. This ensures that questions that cannot be immediately answered from a database can be referred immediately to Ministry experts. In Zimbabwe, their podcasting work takes recordings of government agriculture offices out to the communities they cannot reach, and brings back questions to the experts to answer next time.

Practical Action acknowledges that there are times when it isn't perfect. Like all organisations, they can fail to share knowledge even internally and there are big questions still remaining such as how to financially sustain a helpdesk, or indeed, to tell the story of

their own impact. Their fundamental stance, however, of putting the people they serve first and foremost, help to mitigate these issues⁵.

Conclusion/Recommendations

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⁵ For more information on Practical Action's knowledge journey, see <http://www.theimpactinitiative.net/impact-lab/collection/intermediate-technology-technology-justice>

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