The Economic and Social Research Foundation

Bridging the Research Policy Gap: The Impact of Research on Policy Process and Practice

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Introduction

Viable and appropriate policies are necessary for sustainable growth and poverty reduction. Policies are made by policy makers, the persons bestowed with the power, either by society or a group of people in a society, to make decisions. However, research should provide an important input in policy formulation. It shouldn't be taken for granted that the relationship between research and policy is straightforward, with good research, policy design will tend to be more relevant and their results are likely to delivere the desired impact.

Why is it that more often policy making isn't research based? This brief responds to the question raised by those who wonder how better use can we make out of research in the policy-making process? The Economic and Social Research Foundation (ESRF) through TAKNET facilitated an inclusive consultation process, whereby the main objective was to discuss how research utilization can contribute to evidence based policy process and practices.

Theoretical Context

The framework in which the contributions of policy research can best be understood is that of the policy processes that includes developing, approving, and implementing policies, which essentially differs from country to country. However, some underlying processes are common to most countries. Literature (Lasswell, 1951) proposes several different theoretical frameworks to describe the policy processes. Although no single framework claims to describe the process comprehensively in all cases, most discussed frameworks do provide useful descriptions of major aspects of the process. Lasswell (ibid)[1] pioneered work on the stages of the policy process. In turn, Meier (1991)[2] built on these stages by elaborating a framework that describes the major steps in the policy development process and some of the forces acting against policy decision making (Kingdon, 1994).

As the policy formulation process begins, there are a number of policy problem questions that need to be answered. Each question necessitates researching of relevant information available plus the development of additional information when the gaps are too great in what is known and unkown. Such information can generally be clustered around three broad sets of questions. Each of these clusters is highly relevant to policy formulation, and in each, there are important opportunities for the presentation and utilization of research.

The first set of information needs revolves around an understanding of the policy issue or development problem at hand. What are the contours of this issue? How big is the problem? Is the problem larger now than before? Is there anything known about the nature of the condition? Has it changed? How well can the condition be defined? How well can the condition be measured? What are the different interpretations and understandings about the condition? What are its causes and effects? It can be realized that defining a policy problem is not an easy task as it involves a multitute of questions. The issue here, stated differently, is one of the ability of policy makers to define clearly and understand the problem or condition that they are facing and for which they are expected to develop a response.

The second cluster of questions focuses on what has taken place previously in response to this condition or problem. What programs or projects have previously been initiated to resolve the problem? How successful were the programs or interventions? Did the previous efforts address the same condition or problem as currently exists, or was it different? If it was different, how was it and why? If it was the

[1] Lasswell, H. (1951). "The Policy Orientation." In The Policy Sciences, edited by D. Lerner and H. Lasswell. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[2] Meier, G. M. (1991). Politics and Policymaking in Developing Countries: Perspectives on the New Political Economy. San Francisco: International Center for Economic Growth Press.

same, why are yet additional efforts necessary? Are the same interest groups involved? What may explain the need for policy change in the present conditions? Such questions gears towards generating evidence based policy decision making.

The third cluster of questions focus on what is known of the previous efforts and their impacts that would help one choose among present-day options. Considering trade-offs among various levels of effort in comparison to different levels of cost is but one among several kinds of data relevant to considering the policy options. There may also be data on the timeframes necessary before one could hope to see impacts.

Trade-offs between the length of the developmental stage of the program and the eventual impacts are relevant, particularly if there are considerable pressures for short-term solutions. Alternatively, if previous efforts did necessitate a considerable period of time for measurable outcomes to appear, how did the policy makers in those circumstances hold on to public support and keep the coalitions intact long enough for the results to emerge?

Such multituted of questions testfies that policy research is highly relevant to the information needs in the policy process. However, its use can be hindered by such factors; as whether or not the information exists, known to the policy community, and available in a form that makes it quickly accessible. Overcoming these obstacles does not guarantee the use of research work in the policy formulation process, but it can strongly assure that if these obstacles are resolved, the likelihood of using research for policy making becomes significanlty necessary.

Policy monitoring and evaluation is another stage of the policy process over which research can have a significant impact on policy making process. The evaluative research question such as; to what extent did the policy or programme work?, generates knowledge that is of use to future policy-makers.

TAKNET Discussions

Evidence-based approaches to policy process and practices can be critical in improving policy process and development. The Government and Development partners have been putting a lot of resources into research (see DFID, 3ie). There is a good number of research work relevant to policy conducted in Tanzania, but in most cases, findings don't inform policy-making, practice or influence policy decisions.

The main question is why research in Tanzania doesn't inform policy-making or influence policy decisions? ESRF through TAKNET facilitated an inclusive consultation process, whereby the main objective was to discuss how research utilization can contribute to evidence based policy process and practices. The following questions were addressed in the discussion:
1. What strategies and interventions should be employed to improve the use of research evidence in the policy process and practices?
2. What are obstacles to evidence-based policy-making?
3. How can we encourage more effective research communication?
4. What sort of research advice information do politicians and policy-makers want?
5. What are the best practices?

The methodology used for collecting information was a lively online discussion through TAKNET, where 26 people participated with 21 entries. Below is a summary of the issues discussed:

i. **Disconnect Between Researchers and Policy Makers**

There are a number of researchers (from Universities and other Research Institutions) operating outside or on the margins of policy making. They are likely to be unconcerned with the policy implications of their research work, and focus more on their own interests, and basic understanding of issues." Research has become an industry in itself working in some cases independently" said Nec Chipfupa. He continued to argue that in order to successfully influence policy, researchers should work closely with policy makers in relevant government ministries/department.

Rugeiyamu Kahwa argued that *"research is not demand driven in the sense that it is not initiated by policy makers or implementers to inform themselves on specific problems. In this scenario even if you send research reports to the ministries or invite them to presentations the reports are likely to end up gathering dust on shelves".*

This was further emphasized by Raphael Mmasi when he pointed out that *"researchers do not understand what policy makers need and therefore, research packages do not address the requirements of policy makers. He added that "policy makers also don't communicate with researchers on the problems that are researchable so that researchers could address them".*

Donatilla Kaino gave her experience of strategies used at ESRF to bring researchers and policy makers together. She explained that once the problem which needs policy intervention is identified, the next step is to introduce and discuss it with policy makers so a common understanding is reached on the problem and see if there is need for research.

She noted that policy-makers who are consulted at the initial stages of a research project tend to be more

open and participate actively in shaping the research questions, and thereby take "ownership" of the research.

ii. Societal Disconnection

Societal disconnection of both researchers and decision-makers from those who the research is about or intended for undermines effective implementation. As Chifupa argued, "*evidence based policy means that the policy is tested and seen to meet the needs of the people for whom it is intended. It means that the people concerned/beneficiaries if you like, are the centre of the policy research*".

The appropriate focus should be on (for example) 'participatory analysis', through encouraging public understanding and participation. Participatory methods combines research and practice, thereby addressing implementation and monitoring problems at the same time as testing research and policy ideas. This 'grass-roots' or participatory style of research also helps build relations between researchers and those whom the research is about or for whom it is intended. Japhet Mokongo emphasized that "*there is an increasing disconnect between the research agenda and the real needs at community level in terms of priorities, and the practicability for operationalizing some of the research findings*".

Marjorie Mbilinyi argues that the concept of animation or participatory action research calls for the democratisation of decision-making processes about policies, strategies and resources. Researchers find out what are the key priorities of the marginalised and oppressed segments of society, including marginalised women, and carry out analysis and research using a variety of methods. However their first audience or 'clientele' are the marginalised groups with whom they are working.

In this approach, the research becomes part of an advocacy or activist strategy, linked in many cases to media strategies, to ensure that the public is informed about the results of the studies and can use the information to demand change in the area of concern. Individual allies in government are part of the process, and indeed, engagement with policy and budget processes at local and national [and regional level] may well be part of the overall advocacy strategy.

iii. Packaging and Acceptability of Research Results

Research results, no matter how good they are, if policymakers do not accept and act on them, remain nothing better than a wishful list. This has been true to a number of research outputs in Tanzania. Besides doing research, researchers need to repackage their findings in a language and format acceptable to policymakers. "Besides *disseminating research reports, there is need to prepare 1-2 pages "policy briefs" outlining key findings and recommendations in a simple and straight forward language (both English and Kiswahili)* argued Japhet Makongo. This argument was also echoed by Marjorie Mbilinyi who pointed out that "*information produced by animation should be packaged in many different ways in order to reach different kinds of 'target' groups, including mass communications on social media [blogs, sms messages, etc] as well as policy briefs in English and Kiswahili*".

Sometimes the problem is simply poor policy comprehension on the part of researchers towards both the policy process and how research might be relevant to this process. This leads to questioning the domains of research relevance, impact and influence. Overcoming this lack of understanding requires researchers to study the policy process, to demonstrate the

relevance of research, and to build methodologies for evaluating research relevance.

iv. Donor Influences

When a research is donor funded, then the agenda of the donor becomes a binding constraint on how much of influence can bear on government policy. The donor can treat the research study just as a disposable vehicle to be used to accomplish an interest-related mission. If the research agenda becomes non-compatible with the principal interest of the donor through a donor platform shift, then the influence weakens.

In his contribution, Festo Maro noted that donor funding dominates government and non governmental organization's activities. In so doing they have manipulated the strategic plans of institutions and the thinking of experts. The continuum of institutions and experts thinking toward the country's contextual development has been disrupted and unconnected. The development agenda is therefore dictated by donors.

v. Political Influences on Policy

It was argued that politicized development decisions overshadow research based policy making. This trend has made technicians including researchers feel that their work is worthless when it comes to policy making and some have opted to change their careers and go into politics. Consequently, this weakens research institutions. "*Every body now is aspiring to become a policitician...who will be doing evidence based research for policy making?* asked Festo Maro.

He pointed out that it was crucial for government to realize the importance of research based evidence in policy making. Structures which are created within government institutions as think

tanks might not be very effective and instead, strengthening already existing research institutions to work independently is a better approach. In this way research based policy making will be strenthened. It was argued that it's important for politician to take seriously recommendations from experts. It's also necessarily for the government to invest in long term research projects in all fields of development.

vi. Timeliness of Research

Timeliness in carrying out research is important if its findings need to influence policy. Because it is hard to predict the focus of government policy, a number of researchers work on fundamental problems without policy agendas in mind and their works are reflected in professional journals or gather dust on book selves.

It can be argued that a perfect solution that is late is a wasted effort. Much of the work done by researcher is often at the problem-identification level that needs to be digested and popularised to grasp its policy relevance. This implies that much of the work done has no immediate policy content.

vii. Dissemination of Research

A variety of techniques of communication and dissemination of research results to policy makers have been used in Tanzania. These include to a larger extent engaging with policy makers through policy debates, and holding open seminars and workshops and other consultative fora and to a lesser extent press/media exposure, distribution of brochures and pamphlets, electronic means of dissemination, and publishing of research papers.

The latter techniques however, conceptualise dissemination as a one-way flow from researchers to policymakers, not as an interactive process in which communication includes feedback and an understanding of the research needs of research users. They also often ignore the importance of targeting particular research-user groups with different dissemination strategies.

Communication and dissemination of research results is still hampered by many problems, including lack of funding and infrastructure which makes web-based interaction difficult, lack of formal information centres such as libraries, and those that do exist lack current stock, and a low research training capacity which means that researchers lack both skills and access to information resources (even internally generated). There are few links to external sources of information to make up for skill, funding, resource and facility shortages in the country.

Researchers may need to be trained in marketing skills, so as to maximize the effectiveness of their dissemination strategies. However, researchers should not be reduced to the role of policy advocates, serving the political interests of research users.

Conclusion

Different strategies for research dissemination are required to meet the needs of different research consumers in government, including policy makers and politicians, senior bureaucrats and implementers. Researchers must pay attention to research demand from policy-makers such as packaging and presenting research findings in an easily digestible format. Policy-makers need research to help make decisions using the researched support information.

From the TAKNET discussions, it is evident that in order to bridge the research-policy gap, the following should be taken into account:

- Ensuring strong ownership of the research agenda by Tanzanians and hence avoid donor driven reaserch.

- Improvement in government capacity to recognize and absorb research.

- Ensuring timeliness in carrying out research if findings are intended to influence policy.

- Ensuring that both researchers and policy makers have a connection with the society for which the reaserch findings and subsequent policies are intended.

- Improving techniques for communication and dissemination of research results.