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# Capacities, Contexts, Conditions: The Influence of IDRC - Supported Research on Policy Processes

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by Fred Carden, Director of Evaluation, IDRC

The notion that research should be carried out expressly to influence public policy leaves some people feeling a little uneasy. They believe it is wrong that scientific inquiry should be driven by an external agenda. Instead, they insist, research ought to be free and unfettered.

Other people, meanwhile, believe that it is perfectly legitimate to conduct research that is motivated by hopes for the betterment of humankind. In fact, the mandate of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is to build capacity for “engaged” research, and to support researchers and networks to carry it out.

Providing research information for the benefit of government policymakers, however, can be a risky business; for one thing, social science often produces findings that appear to be contradictory. As educator Carol Weiss noted, “...since social scientists acknowledge the fragility and time- and situation-bound character of most research, there are serious questions about what it is that we expect government officials to plug into their decisions.”

IDRC is eager to understand how the research that it supports does influence the policy-making process, and it has conducted a comprehensive internal review of this very question. The strategic evaluation was directed to map the way that IDRC-supported knowledge is put to practical use. The study sought to learn how researchers channel ideas to decision-makers, and, on the other hand, how decision-makers get access to the ideas that they need.

## Strategic evaluation: the framework

Because of the diverse nature of its programming, IDRC had not developed a common language for thinking about these issues. Often, when people at IDRC talked about policy influence, they were talking about different things.

The purpose of the strategic evaluation was to find this common language. The study was designed to discover what is meant by “policy influence,” what are the key factors in the research-to-policy process, and in what contexts IDRC-supported research has had such influence.

At the beginning of its evaluation, IDRC developed a framework outlining what policy influence was imagined to be. This framework proposed three different types of influence:

\* *Expanding policy capacities.* Research can support the development of innovative ideas and the skills to communicate them, and develop new talent for doing issues-based research and analysis. In other words, research can improve the institutional framework surrounding policy-making.

\* *Broadening policy horizons.* Research can introduce new ideas to the agenda, ensure that knowledge is provided to decision-makers in a form they can use, and nourish dialogues among researchers and decision-makers. To put it another way, research can improve the intellectual framework surrounding policy-making.

\* *Affecting policy regimes.* Research findings can modify the development of laws, regulations, programs, or structures. In actual fact, such a process is rare and normally circuitous, and only in a few instances can change be attributed, visibly and directly, to the inspiration of research alone.

The crucial point about these types of influence is that they go well beyond changing policies themselves. They include building the capacities of both researchers and decision-makers in using knowledge to make policy, and broadening the conceptual boundaries of the whole research-to-policy process.

## **22 case studies: the findings**

The evaluation analyzed 22 case studies cutting across IDRC's three program areas and six regions. Out of this wealth of material, a few specific points emerged clearly:

\* There are no "best practices" when it comes to doing research that will influence policy; rather, a confluence of dynamic factors interact in complex ways. It must be accepted that there is no single planning tool.

\* Relationships are critical. Regardless of the formal government or bureaucratic systems in which they operate, the personal and professional links among individual researchers and decision-makers are decisive in affecting policy influence.

\* IDRC believes that local ownership of research processes and findings is essential. It supports research that is locally driven and locally used.

In addition, the findings from the case studies were classified, broadly, into these categories:

- *what we do* – the values and principles that guide IDRC's support for research
- *where we work* – the institutional environment, or context, where research is carried out
- *how we work* – the organization and management of actual projects

This brief focuses on the category "where we work," in particular on the way that the knowledge process intersects with the policy-making process.

## Context matters: external factors

The survey found that five dimensions of the research context that are external to projects and networks influence the process of policy influence. These factors relate to the situation in the country and in its decision-making bodies. Not much can be done to change these factors, but taking them into consideration may help when deciding where and when to concentrate efforts.

### *1. The stability of decision-making institutions*

In several cases, low policy influence appears to result from instability in the policy-making structures—for example, budgets are cut, or agencies are eliminated or restructured. In most instances this instability became apparent only after the research had been completed and it was time to implement the recommendations.

Sometimes it may be possible to identify more stable decision-making structures—for example, higher or lower levels of government—and to focus energies on collaborating with these bodies.

### *2. The capacity of policymakers to use research*

Policy influence may be less pronounced, or slower, where policymakers either need basic training to understand the research findings or they are torn by competing interests.

It has happened that some policymakers provided with IDRC-funded research were unfamiliar with concepts used in it, and therefore could not use it. In such cases, researchers may have had to devote attention to the basic education of these officials.

It has also happened that officials from developing countries that depend on the International Monetary fund or the World Bank were timid in using research findings to propose changes in international financial policy-making.

### *3. Decentralization versus tight government control*

Whether decentralization helps or hinders policy influence depends on whether the project aims speak to the level at which official decisions on the issue are made; that is to say, the project's overall framework should mesh smoothly with the country's basic constitutional structure. Likewise, tight central government control can be either beneficial or detrimental for policy influence depending on the nature of the project. The research team should take this into account in planning strategies and relationships.

Instead of blueprinting the level of policy influence to be obtained in a project, it may be useful to investigate initially what level of influence can reasonably be expected given the circumstances.

#### *4. Special opportunities in countries in transition*

Two projects were carried out in countries in transition from communism: Ukraine and Viet Nam. These projects were effective not only in generating policy-relevant research and affecting policy, but also in teaching local researchers and policymakers new approaches to collaboration and decision-making.

For example, IDRC partners in Ukraine observed that IDRC staff had brought with them a new culture of management characterized by open information sharing, consultation with stakeholders, and decision-making based on research evidence. It appears that IDRC-funded research has a potential to affect not only what policies are made but also the way they are made.

#### *5. Economic pressures on the government*

In most cases where the government expressed strong interest in the research findings, it was responding to economic pressures. These examples suggest that the likelihood of research influence is greater if the project is linked to the economic interests of the country.

When this is not so, the project team has to be ready to undertake advocacy work to prove the project's significance to policymakers.

### **Context matters: manageable factors**

The study indicated five different types of contexts where research was known to have influenced policy. These elements are seen as being manageable: the project or network can understand and respond to these factors, and use them in building the capacity for influence.

Understanding this classification can guide a research team in planning, designing, monitoring, and evaluating future projects or networks where policy influence is a goal. This framework can help in choosing the right approach to take, for example, when deciding upon leadership structures, communications or advocacy tactics, or the institutional base for research findings.

#### *1. Government demand*

In this welcoming context, policymakers want knowledge and are ready to act on it. There is an open window of policy influence. To make an effective contribution, researchers need to have built a relationship of trust with decision-makers and to enjoy a reputation for quality research and timeliness.

In such cases, the likelihood of influence on policy is high. In addition, project teams or networks may not need to exert efforts neither on dissemination of research recommendations nor on advocacy around the findings.

## *2. Government interest, leadership gap*

Here, the window of influence is only partly open. The issue is well known to the government and is considered important, but the structures to implement the research recommendations are not in place. Government has not yet taken the lead in deciding what to do, and no clear decision-making process is evident. Here, project team or network members must play a leadership role. They must pay special attention to their communication strategies with decision-makers, and cast about for institutional structures that can bring the recommendations to life. Otherwise, the research findings may never be taken up.

In other words, a government's interest in research does not in itself guarantee its influence on policy.

## *3. Government interest, resources gap*

Again, the window of policy influence is partly open. The government does not dispute the issue and it acknowledges the need for the research. At this time, however, it has more pressing priorities, or a shortage of resources.

In this case, leadership clearly resides within the project team or network. Before the team considers undertaking research in a resource-scarce environment, the staff should aim to move the issue up the official priority list

## *4. Government neutral, research interest*

Once more, the window of influence is only slightly ajar. Either policymakers are simply not interested in the research program, or the issue may be controversial, or the issue may be “emergent” and yet to affect a key political constituency. Researchers, on the other hand, are keenly interested in proceeding with the project. In this context, vigorous advocacy is needed.

The research group must promote the agenda, not just among decision-makers, but also among diverse audiences with a range of interests in the issue. The project team may also need to establish new institutional structures to move matters forward.

In this environment, the risk of failure is high. Many of the IDRC cases fell into this category.

## *5. Government disinterest, research interest*

Here, the window of influence is definitely shut. Policymakers are busy pursuing other priorities—in fact, may even be hostile to the issue—and no lobbyists or other groups are likely to change their views.

In this environment, it may be said that the research team is ahead of its time, and therefore it must have a strong sense of purpose and a cold-eyed recognition that the project, from a policy influence viewpoint anyway, is risky.

## *Summary*

Clearly, the ideal context is when policymakers have a strong interest in research for the purposes of decision-making, and when structures and procedures to implement the findings already exist.

Therefore, in future IDRC-sponsored projects where influence on policy is a goal, the research teams should ask at the start: Among policymakers, how much interest is there in this type of research? Are there structures and procedures in place that will enable those policymakers to carry out the recommendations?

## **Evolution**

Research is a dynamic process and, over the course of their life-spans, the contexts of many of the 22 projects reviewed changed. But what is particularly striking is that none of the research remained at level 4—where government is neutral but researchers are keen to go forward. This suggests that where researchers are intent on influencing policy but relationships with the decision-making process are weak, one of two things will happen: either the research project finds some way to proceed or it fails completely.

## **Conclusion**

This brief is merely a snapshot of one key part of the complex and constantly changing research-to-policy process. Researchers who want to influence development have no choice but to work with the decision-making environment they are given. This outline suggests a way to think strategically and to maximize the opportunities for creating and fostering influence. No single factor is key; no single condition is essential. Instead, an interplay of capacities, contexts, and conditions must be monitored in order to understand how to use knowledge to inform policy.

*Highlight prepared by Patrick Kavanagh on behalf of IDRC's Evaluation Unit, March 2005.*