Translating research into policy: the case of orphans and vulnerable children in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Policies are often developed without taking into account social science research findings and recommendations, despite the plethora of such research studies. This is largely because researchers and policy makers often work in isolation, yet if they worked synergistically they could have a significant impact on implementing interventions known to work to improve the lives of populations. Several approaches have been advanced to encourage policy makers to take heed of scientific findings and to urge scientists to take into account the needs of policy makers in designing their research agenda. This paper aims to illustrate how policy has been informed using the case study of the Orphans and Vulnerable Children project in South Africa. It further highlights the successes and challenges encountered thus far with this project. In some countries, particularly those of the north, there has been major progress in bridging this gap between research and policy; however, in developing countries much remains to be done.

Keywords: policies, evidence-based research, orphans and vulnerable children (OVC), social science.

RÉSUMÉ

Bien souvent des politiques sont développées sans tenir compte des résultats et des recommandations des recherches en science sociale, ceci malgré la pléthore de telles études de recherche. Cette situation est dû au fait que les chercheurs et les décideurs de politiques travaillent souvent en isolation, alors que s'ils travaillaient ensemble, ils auraient un impact important sur la mise en œuvre des interventions qui sont connues de bien marcher afin d'améliorer les vies des populations. Plusieures approches ont été avancées avec le but d'encourager les décideurs de politiques à prendre en considération les résultats scientifiques et en même temps de conseiller fortement aux scientifiques à tenir compte des besoins de décideurs de politiques pour la préparation de leurs programmes de recherche. Cette communication a pour but de démontrer comment une politique a été fondée à partir d'un cas d'étude du projet des Orphelins et des Enfants Vulnérables en Afrique du Sud. La présente met en évidence les succès et les défis de ce projet auxquels on a dû faire face jusque-là. Certains pays, surtout ceux du nord, ont fait du progrès majeur en comblant la lacune entre la recherche et la politique, cependant, dans des pays en voie de développement, il y a encore beaucoup de travail à faire.

Mots clés: les politiques, la recherche basée sur l'évidence, les orphelins et les enfants vulnérables (OVC), la science sociale.

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BACKGROUND

Knowledge has become an essential ingredient of winning nations in the 21st century. The ability to seek, analyse and synthesise evidence-based information in the increasingly interconnected competitive global environment is linked to greater success in making policy choices that have the best potential to yield positive outcomes for individuals, communities and societies. Societies with limited capacity to source and adapt, create and apply knowledge to advance social goals have tended to be left behind in the competitive environment of the globalising world (Ramphele, 2006).

Policy in developing countries is usually found lacking on the measure of effectiveness. Bossel (1996) argues that nations have a choice between two ethical paths of development: either competition or partnership. The path of competition is a non-sustainable 'business as usual' scenario where nations pursue economic growth without regard to their contribution to global instability or the long-term survivability of the nation. Most developing countries are on a non-sustainable path of development due to striving for short-term goals that are detrimental to the future survival of the nation (Meadows, Meadows & Randers, 1992). A nation on a sustainable path of development strives for the following goals: improving the level of competence of its citizens; improving the quality of life of the citizens; and achieving the latter without harming the environment, citizens, other nations and future generations. Policy for a country focused on competition will aid the nation on its destructive path, and a country focused on partnership will aid the nation to develop whilst contributing to global stability and ensuring its long-term survivability. Thus, policy is effective if it aids the nation to attain its long-term goals of national development. Its failure on this measure can often be attributed to either inappropriate norms of the nation, or employment of policy formulation processes that do not take into consideration human behavioural constraints in managing complexity (Ryan & Mothibi, 2000). Thus, any policy formulation process and the implementation thereof depends on the political context and the specific needs at hand.

In some areas of research, the implementation of evidence-based decision-making has been successful, and particularly became a touchstone of health care in the 1990s. Scientists, practitioners, policy makers and managers congregated to discuss how to conduct research that makes an impact on the quality of lives of people. At a conference held in Canada, researchers and those running the health system aimed to undertake research that makes a difference; that is, to help people to produce, find and apply new knowledge to improve management and policy decisions, while ensuring that both parties influence each other's work (Canadian Health Services Foundation, 2004). The idea of better informing practice with research findings has spread from medicine to management and policy decisions. The expectation therefore is that those allocating funding and those designing and running health services, as well as those delivering care to patients, use the most up-to-date research to inform their decisions (Lomas, 2003). Further, much of the evidence-based work originates from meta-analytic approaches emanating from the social sciences, especially psychology and education. The formation of the Campbell Collaboration, (Shadish, Chacon-Moscoso & Sanchez-Meca, 2005) in the social sciences to augment the Cochrane Collaboration Centers, which focus on the clinical sciences, is a welcome development. This initiative will raise the bar in determining the nature of the evidence needed to inform policy.

Even so, clear research findings are not always a passport to successful policy adoption, let alone implementation. Therefore constructive collaboration with policy makers is necessary to enhance the process of informing policy making (Davis & Howden-Chapman, 1996). Results of research ideally are used to improve policy and practice (Puchner, 2001), but there are many reasons why research findings do not inform policy development successfully. Often decision makers accuse researchers of irrelevant, poorly communicated research recommendations; and researchers accuse decision-makers of political expediency that results in irrational outcomes (Lomas, 2003). Other reasons for failure of research to inform policy implementation do not arise from conduct and attitudes of researchers and policy makers, but from the inability of scientists to communicate scientific information in a timely and accessible manner. Scientists may lack the skills to identify key issues of importance to policy makers and translate them into policy options. Researchers rarely proactively identify key issues to be researched and make recommendations before key decisions are taken.

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Evidence also is unlikely to be used unless the context is appropriate. Thus 'the path from generation of evidence to knowledge utilization in policy formulation is not as straightforward as it may appear. It seldom results from a rational process of conducting a study, analyzing the findings, preparing policy options and politicians choosing among the given options and then mandating their departments to implement the chosen option' (Shisana, 2000, p.1). It may result from a political process that involves negotiation, bargaining and accommodating different interests (Walt, 1994). The process involves interest groups, often with varying agendas. 'These partners include politicians, members of the executives, scientists and academicians, NGO's activists, donors, private sector and multilateral organizations. It is vital for scientists and academicians to understand the process of policy formulation so they should know when and how to engage in this process' (Shisana, 2000, p.1).

Even when they do identify the key issues, conduct relevant research, and subsequently package their findings for policy makers, they may still lack the skills to present their ideas in a focused manner, according to policy analysts. Researchers may fail to communicate their perspective on the issues or to provide convincing arguments as to why the current policy needs to be changed and why, among a variety of policy alternatives, the suggested policy alternative is the preferred one (The Policy Brief, 2004).

Language is also very important in successfully communicating research results; researchers often communicate in jargon that is unintelligible to policy makers, and fail to engage in their language when deliberating the specifics of the policy in question. Furthermore, researchers tend to bury their recommendations in voluminous research reports, rather than put together accessible policy briefs summarising the critical research findings relevant to policy making (The Policy Brief, 2004).

Shortcomings do not lie only on the side of researchers. Policy makers often fail to clearly articulate the key research questions needing investigation, and seldom invite scientists to participate in agenda-setting forums, or to dialogue on the kind of research necessary for public policy. Not enough investment is made in research and development, which is often under-budgetted for, notwithstanding the expectation of good science and valid scientific findings from the research community. However, even when researchers generate critical, relevant and timely information for policy and programme development, policy makers often do not use the information appropriately, thus creating gaps between research and policy. Successful strategies for influencing policy makers and researchers have to take into account the various pressures limiting and enabling them, such as inflexible long-term project planning, resource shortages and fierce competition for funding which discourages collaboration (Crewe & Young, 2002). It is therefore critical that there be joint development of the research agenda, joint conceptualisation of the studies and commitment to use the findings to inform policy development and programme implementation.

There is now a global commitment to improve the link between science and policy. UNESCO convened a conference on Social Policy and Research Nexus on 20 - 24 February 2006 in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Many workshops were held and one of the themes of the conference was 'Establishing mechanisms for "knowledge-brokering" between researchers and policy makers in Africa'. Resulting from the deliberations of several workshops, including the 'knowledge-brokering' one, the forum expressed its conviction that the challenges faced globally call for better and innovative ways of using existing knowledge as well as newly generated knowledge. The forum stated that better use of rigorous social science can lead to more effective policies and consequent better social development plans.

In line with the convictions stated in the Buenos Aires declaration, this paper explores how the case study of the orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) in South Africa has informed policy affecting such children; and what the factors responsible for success as well as what the challenges were in trying to use research to inform policy makers.

CHALLENGES FACING ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN

Children are a key vulnerable group in relation to HIV/AIDS, being affected by the disease in a number of ways (Ansell & Van Blerk, 2004). As many as 80% of the world's orphans reside in sub-Saharan Africa and they are orphaned as a result of AIDS (Monasch & Boerma, 2004). Based on 40 national household

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surveys carried out in sub-Saharan Africa since 1999, Monasch and Boerma (2004) reported that orphanhood was more common in the southern Africa subregion, the epicentre of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Countries currently involved in conflict also show high prevalence of orphans (Monasch & Boerma, 2004). Paternal orphans were much more common and there has been an increase of double orphans, i.e. children whose parents both have died. It has been found that orphans are cared for by their extended families (Ansell & Young, 2004). These families are often dispersed across widely separated households and many children have to move considerable distances to live with their kin (Ansell & Van Blerk, 2004). Many children engage in migration in response to sickness or death that was likely to be HIV/AIDS related (Ansell & Van Blerk, 2004), and the pressures will increase as the HIV/AIDS epidemics mature and adult mortality rises (Crampin *et al.*, 2003). Some children drop out of school and others move to new schools. A study done of orphans in Ethiopia found that girls were more affected than boys by the emotional loss and they were less likely to participate in school after maternal deaths (Bhargava, 2005). In contrast, Case (2004) examined the impact of orphanhood in ten sub-Saharan Africa countries and reported that lower enrollment for orphans was equally severe for boys and girls.

Although orphans more frequently live in female-headed households, grandparents have been found to be the main caretakers for almost half of the orphans (Monasch & Boerma, 2004). Grandparents are sometimes unable to accept children on account of poverty. Economic status of the fostering household is important for child welfare as it increases school participation, which enhances orphans' overall well-being (Bhargava, 2005).

Crampin *et al.* (2003) has found that in rural Malawi, traditional coping mechanisms based on the extended family appear to have diluted the impact on the individual child, but the impact at the level of the community could be considerable. The proportion of households caring for orphans is invariably greater than the proportion of children orphaned (Monasch & Boerma, 2004). Responses from a recent study in a South African township with regards to perceptions and treatment of OVC, noted that financial constraints limit some members of the community from taking in extra children as this would impact on their already

limited resources (Davids *et al.* 2006). They further indicate that a number of limitations and challenges exist within government departments and non-governmental organisations that offer support to OVC, which impact on their ability effectively to deliver services to their clients (Davids *et al.*, 2006).

CASE STUDY OF ORPHANS AND VULNERABLE CHILDREN

In the light of the growing number of children who are orphaned in southern Africa, many due to the AIDS epidemic, the WK Kellogg Foundation and the Human Sciences Research Council established a project to develop interventions to:

- improve social conditions, health, development and quality of life of OVC
- support families and households coping with an increased burden of care for affected and vulnerable children
- strengthen community-based support systems as an indirect means of assisting vulnerable children
- strengthen HIV and AIDS awareness as well as advocacy and policy to benefit OVC.

The project entails the use of evidence generated from research to inform programme development and policy. It is currently being implemented by a team of researchers, policy makers, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community-based organisations (CBOs) and donors, collectively called the *implementation network*. The implementation is currently occurring in several districts in Botswana, South Africa and Zimbabwe. This paper, though, reports on progress made in South Africa thus far.

The research undertaken has informed programme and policy development in two ways. First, through literature reviews mainly to identify interventions that could be used to modify the existing child and family interventions (e.g. Strebel, 2003; Richter, Manegold & Pather, 2004); and second, through convening public meetings for public dialogue among the ministers of social development, researchers, NGOs, CBOs and donors on the key issues emanating from research, which have policy implications.

While recognising that the path from research to policy often meanders, and that it is usually difficult to demonstrate that research has informed policy, a systematic examination of the South African policy on

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TABLE 1. SUMMARY ARISING FROM REVIEW DONE AS PART OF THE OVC RESEARCH INTERVENTION PROJECT	SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT STRATEGY
1 Family coping capacity has been depleted, hence the need to support families	Strategy 1, which strengthens and supports the capacity of families to protect and care for OVC
2 Programmes aiming to provide support for psychosocial development of children should complement those focusing on material support	Strategy 2, which focuses on ensuring that mechanisms are in place to provide psychosocial support to OVC and their families
3 Effective support of families and communities in responding to OVC is essential	Strategy 3, which mobilises and strengthens community-based responses for the care, support and protection of OVC
4 The importance of a human rights framework for OVC work needs to be emphasised	Strategy 4, which ensures access of OVC to essential services; focuses on ensuring that service and service delivery mechanisms are based on the child rights approach; developing and strengthening programmes that make essential services accessible to OVC and supporting resource mobilisation for the implementation of programmes that make essential services accessible to OVC
5 Multisectoral collaborations between national and local government, NGOs and community structures appear to provide the most effective services	Strategy 5, which engages civil society organisations and the business community to play an active role in supporting the plight of OVC

OVC as presented to Parliament in 2005 by the Deputy Minister of Social Development shows concordance between social science research findings and the essential elements of the strategy that has been adopted to address the question of OVC. A few examples of such concordance are indicated in Table 1, for the purpose of illustration.

Each year since the project began in 2002, meetings have been organised with donors, policy makers, researchers and NGOs who are involved in the project; all gathered mainly to share experiences emanating from research, policy and experience on the ground. The one-on-one encounter consistently emerged as the most efficient way to transfer knowledge generated from research. According to Lomas (2003) such exchanges between decision makers and researchers allow for nuance and interrogation. This provided an opportunity for policy makers to hear policy recommendations based on research and on practical implementation of the strategies for orphan care programmes. Different models of service provision were discussed at these meetings, making it possible for policy makers to gain substantive appreciation of new approaches to managing OVCs. In South Africa, the Department of Social Development has developed a policy framework for orphans and other children made vulnerable by HIV and AIDS, as well as an action plan in order to operationalise the policy.

It is clear from this example that the South African OVC policy framework resonates well with evidence generated from research; this is so, especially when one reviews the references used (HSRC, 2004; Richter *et al.*, 2004) in the government's strategy. While the OVC project research findings described above were clearly not the only source that informed the South African Department of Social Development, it is likely that it had an impact, because the Minister of Social Development had over a period of 2 years personally participated in private meetings with the donor and also in public discourse focusing on the findings from the research undertaken as part of the OVC project. Moreover, research-based discourse during the many OVC meetings organised to discuss the intervention research informed his speeches (South African Government Information, 2005a). The civil servants responsible for policy development also participated in many of the meetings where the OVC project was discussed. Often they requested, on short notice, the researchers to provide information as fact sheets on the status of the impact of HIV/AIDS on children, the OVC situation, etc. Furthermore, the researchers working on OVC are cited in the strategic plan of the Department of Social Development as partners along with government departments to: (a) review current policies and legislation to identify gaps in OVC; (b) monitor, evaluate and align policies and legislation; (c) develop guidelines on implementation of policies and

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legislation; (d) build the capacity of practitioners and other service delivery agencies on policy and legislation for OVC; and (e) advocate for adequate resource allocation for implementation of policies and legislation.

SUCCESS FACTORS ON THE PROJECT

While developed countries are more likely to use evidence to generate policy, countries of the south still struggle with this. The success factors in South Africa are probably due to the following:

Firstly, South Africa has a Minister of Social Development who believes in research as a necessary tool in informing his programmes. He attends key policy conferences where evidence is discussed. Political leadership in bridging the gap between science and policy is paramount.

Secondly, a good and trusting relationship between civil servants who develop policy and researchers is crucial in ensuring that research findings find their way into policy and strategic plans. Bringing together decision makers who can use the results of a particular piece of research in its formulation and conduct is the best predictor for seeing the findings applied. Expecting better compliance by involving local practitioners in the development of their practice guidelines is one practical manifestation of this finding. Presumably, it is more difficult to reject, discount, or ignore research results when one has contributed to them (Lomas, 2003).

Thirdly, researchers who willingly engage with policy makers are likely to have a significant impact on policy development. If this is done, whether the message given is positive or negative, and if this is done constructively in a genuine commitment to finding a solution, the message of the researcher will fall on fertile ground.

Fourthly, researchers need to be prepared to present persuasive arguments and information in understandable language. Being in tune with current developments is helpful, because the answers provided will then resonate with the policy needs.

In spite of the successes, there were also challenging moments. When civil servants were asked to provide evidence that the research informed their work, they were reluctant to admit that research informed policy. This is probably because they tend to ignore the reality that it is the availability of a combination of much information from different sources that makes it possible for one to craft a national policy that takes into account the diversity of societies and the complexity of the challenges faced by marginalised populations; and it is often difficult to demonstrate which input played a sizeable role. Social science researchers can unravel these complexities and simplify them for use by different stakeholders, including policy makers. However, scientists need not be unduly concerned, as they have been able to show that, through constructive and systematic dialogue, the research has informed policy.

Finally, research that is designed to inform policy is sometimes assigned lower status because it is not 'hard science', but rather applied science, which is often seen as inferior to basic science.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the complexities of the policy making process will assist in examining opportunities and challenges developing countries face in applying evidence to address social and development challenges.

Successful policy implementation will inevitably lead a country on a sustainable path of development. Comparative research on different policy areas is needed to understand the differences between political and institutional contexts. Research is more likely to contribute to evidence-based policy making that aims to reduce poverty, alleviate suffering or save lives, if it fits within the political and institutional limits or pressures of policy makers or researchers. Further, a meaningful contribution is evident with policy makers sharing particular kinds of networks and if outputs are based on local involvement and credible evidence and are communicated via the most appropriate channels (Crewe & Young, 2002).

Policy makers could make more constructive use of research, and researchers could communicate their findings more effectively to influence policy. If the context within which researchers, policy makers and stakeholders were understood, the links between them were improved and good quality research were disseminated more effectively, then better policy making may follow. Successful policy or programme

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implementation is thus difficult to apply in an environment comprised of conflicting and semi-overlapping concerns as well as differing motivations for involvement of all stakeholder parties participating in the process (Schroeder, 2001, p. 1). It is critical to understand these conditions and the context necessary for successful use of evidence in policy development and subsequent programme development.

Researchers, policy makers and programme developers need to work together to produce new knowledge that will contribute to solving many of the social problems experienced by society and at the same time provide intellectual fulfillment for the social scientists. Bringing research and researchers into the policymaking process also resolves conflict more readily; and increases the likelihood of consensus in the areas where research is available (Lomas, 2003).For this to happen, there must be a joining of hands among the various stakeholders, to ensure good research to meet social needs while satisfying the curiosity of scientists.

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