POLICY RESEARCH AND THE POLICY PROCESS:

Do the twain ever meet?

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Policy research organisations fulfil their mandates primarily through the provision of information to policymakers. Yet, especially in a time of tight government budgets, donors and clients want to know whether the research they fund makes any difference to public policy choices. They also want to know if the research has an impact not only on a government's decisions but, ultimately, on people's lives. As donors look at the allocation for foreign aid, for instance, they ask why they should commission and fund research on and in developing countries if it does not have a demonstrable impact on poverty, food insecurity, malnutrition, or environmental sustainability.

An impact assessment exercise would seem the most logical course to help a research Organisation gauge its effectiveness and to identify strategies to increase its impact on policy decisions. The assessment could also respond to concerns of clients and donors. But the methodologies for the evaluation of the impact of social science research on policy choices and policy outcomes are not yet well developed.

This paper contributes to the development of these methodologies by first summarising what we know about the policy process and the use of information in policymaking, and then suggesting what these insights imply for ways to assess the impact of research on policy choices.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

in a time of tight government budgets, donors and clients want to know whether the research they fund makes any difference to public policy choices and, ultimately, to people's lives. Yet the methodologies for evaluating the impact of social science research on policy choices and policy outcomes are not well-developed. The complexity of the policy process and the general nature of much policy research makes it difficult to attribute policy decisions or policy outcomes to specific research findings. This paper contributes to the development of these methodologies by first summarising what we know about the policy process and the use of information in policymaking, and then relying on that review to suggest ways to assess the impact of research on policymaking.

Most importantly, the paper suggests that policy research can have significant impact on policymaking, just not necessarily on discrete choices nor in the linear sequence that researchers and donors would like to see. Research is only one of many competing sources of information, which, as suggested by a descriptive review of the policy process, is itself only one of many factors that affect the final policy decision. In this milieu, policymakers frequently use research less to dictate specific solutions than to help them think about issues and define the scope of problems and possible responses. Thus, research information provides a diffuse ‘enlightenment’ function, providing an understanding and interpretation of the data and the situation that is critical to the policy decision.

Faced with the near impossibility of tracing a precise pathway from specific research effort to policy choice and outcome, this paper recommends that evaluations of the impact of social science research institutes should:

- Evaluate the quality and timeliness of research output, the contribution of research to the policy debate, including the effectiveness of a proactive communications strategy, and the potential impact of the research (rather than its actual impact) on policy outcomes.
- Evaluate contributions of the research to 'enlightenment', and not only to policy change.
- Take into account the diverse ways in which research findings enter and influence the policy process.
- Perform evaluations over time to capture the different ways and different points in time at which research influences policy actors and policy processes.

In sum, the paper recommends a mixed-method approach to evaluation that looks at output, processes, and potential outcomes, rather than focusing on actual policy outcomes. This would better reflect how researchers produce their findings and policymakers actually use research and would help to identify how the Organisation could improve its effectiveness.