

# **Bridging Research and Policy**

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# Bridging Research and Policy

## Introduction

This paper is about the relationship between research and policy – specifically about how research impacts on policy, and about how policy draws on research. It might be thought that the relationship is straightforward, with good research designed to be relevant to policy, and its results delivered in an accessible form to policy-makers – and with good policy-making securely and rationally based on relevant research findings. In fact, this is far from the case. As a taster, Box 1 gives ten reasons why the link from research to policy might not be straightforward.

Sometimes research is not designed to be relevant to policy. Sometimes it is so designed, but fails to have an impact because of problems associated with timeliness, presentation, or manner of communication. Sometimes (probably quite often) policy-makers do not see research findings as central to their decision-making. The relationship between research and policy is often tenuous, quite often fraught.

To observe as much is not new. There are literatures on the question in many social science disciplines – in political science, sociology, anthropology, and management, to name a few. Our purpose here is to review some of these literatures and to draw out the implications for both researchers and policy-makers.<sup>1</sup> The starting point is a discussion of what is meant by ‘policy’ and the ‘policy process’. The rational, linear model of policy-making – which summarises a logical sequence from problem definition, through analysis of alternatives, to decision, implementation, and review – is the traditional approach. We will see shortly what is wrong with this. Accordingly, the paper begins (Section 2) with a brief review of thinking on policy, presenting alternative models, and setting out a framework for thinking about the interaction between research and policy. It then deals successively with the challenge facing researchers (Section 3) and policy-makers (Section 4). Can the range of advice already offered to researchers be extended? And can policy-makers be helped by new ideas such as evidence-based policy-making and performance-based evaluation? The Conclusion (Section 5) draws these threads together, suggesting that the impact of research is uncertain and contingent on social and political context.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a much longer document reviewing the literature. The bibliography presented here provides more sources than addressed in this paper but nevertheless, gives some indication of the scale of available sources on knowledge utilization.

### Ten Ways of Conceiving the Research-Policy Dynamic

1. The problem can be defined as a *public goods problem*, where there is an inadequate supply of policy relevant research.
2. The problem can be defined as one of a *lack of access* to research, data and analysis for both researchers and policy makers. Recommendations to improve both access to and the diffusion of knowledge follow.
3. The problem can be defined as the *poor policy comprehension of researchers* towards both the policy process and how research might be relevant to this process. 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.
4. The problem can be represented as *ineffective communication by researchers* their work. Improved communications strategies are consequently encouraged.
5. The problem can be defined as *societal disconnection* of both researchers and decision-makers from those who the research is about or intended for, to the extent that effective implementation is undermined. The appropriate focus is on (for example) ‘participatory rural analysis’, ‘street-level bureaucracy’ and encouraging ‘public understanding of science’.
6. The problem can be defined as the *ignorance of politicians* about the existence of policy relevant research, or the incapacity of over-stretched bureaucrats to absorb research. The solution – ‘building bridges’ or constructing ‘conveyor belts’ – takes form, for example, of conferences and workshops, or the appointment of specialists to government committees
7. The problem can be conceived in terms of policy makers and leaders being dismissive, unresponsive or incapable of using research. This problem requires improvement in *governmental capacity* to recognise and absorb research, as well as in the capacities, personnel and resources of the state structure more generally.
8. The problem can be conceived of as not simply a question of research having a direct policy impact, but one of broader patterns of socio-political, economic and cultural influence. This leads to questioning of the *domains of research relevance*, impact and influence, and requires the adoption of a longer-term perspective where research may take a generation to exert real influence.

9. The problem can be defined as one of *power relations*. This generates concerns about the contested validity of knowledge(s), issues of censorship and control, and the question of ideology.
10. The problem can be viewed as one of the *validity of research*, and problems relating to the question: what is knowable? Attention is then focused on different epistemologies and 'ways of knowing'.

## 2. Policy Processes and Decision Making

### 2.1 Four Models of Knowledge Utilisation

#### 2.1.1 The Rational Model

The rational (or rational-comprehensive) model is ‘rational’ in the sense that it follows a logical and ordered sequence of policy-making phases. It is ‘comprehensive’ in the sense that it canvases, assesses and compares all options, calculating all the social, political and economic costs and benefits of a public policy. The central principle is the collection and analysis of all data. This is intended to provide policy-makers with certainty. Extensive communication and consultation is required, and because policy-making is construed of as ‘problem-solving’, so is ‘expert’ participation. The role of the researcher (or policy analyst) is to research and present all policy options. As this model encourages the full examination of all policy options it mitigates tendencies for conservatism and habit in policy-making. One example of this approach, that of ‘evidence-based policy-making’, is further outlined in Appendix 1.

However, this model assumes that researchers have both time and access to full information, and that this information will allow the best policy option to be identified. Knowledge is seen as neutral or apolitical, and consequently technocracy and cliques of ‘experts’ can emerge. This model also assumes that decision-makers will be persuaded by the most accurate or scientifically plausible option. However, the aims of policy-makers are often limited to satisfying immediate public demands, not to maximising long-term social gains. Rather than searching out all policy alternatives, research often stops as soon as a workable option is identified. Furthermore, the combination of ‘sunk costs’ in existing policies, the cost (time and resources) of compiling and assessing information, and the (generally) poor predictive capacity of (social) science result in less than ‘comprehensive’ outcomes from the policy-making process.

#### 2.1.2 ‘Muddling Through’

Recognising that there are practical constraints on rational decision-making Herbert Simon developed a model of the policy process premised on the notions of ‘bounded rationality’ and ‘satisficing’. This approach focuses on the boundary between rational and the non-rational aspects of human social behaviour. Decision-makers, accepting the limits of their situation, choose compromise policies that satisfy (rather than maximise) organisational goals, and which are acceptable in the face of competing demands. Individual and organisational rationality are limited by:

- People’s unconscious skills, habits and reflexes.
- Their values and cultural conceptions.
- Limitations to knowledge and information.
- Limits to the ability to compare options or evaluate the range of research findings.

- Difficulty in identifying the correct decision.
- Organisational constraints on the pursuit of certain courses of action.
- The need to have a correct perception of organisational goals.
- The need to be correctly informed of both organisational constraints and goals.

Lindblom (1980) has extensively criticised the rational model for being a poor guide to policy-making reality. In Lindblom's conception, policy-making is viewed as a series of steps in which policies are gradually modified ('incrementalism'). Lindblom took up the notion of 'satisficing', arguing that policy-makers are generally conservative in decision-making, and that policy is generally a matter of 'muddling through'. There is rarely the time, resources or inclination to conduct comprehensive research with the aim of informing the policy-making process. Civil servants and politicians are entirely pragmatic, aiming to ensure that government can function, cope with pressure group demands, and deal with crises as they arise. Pragmatism in policy-making tends toward the avoidance of costly innovation or departures from routine practice, and either the marginal alteration of existing policies or reactive policies to problems that have already arisen. Researchers consequently are likely to be sidelined in the policy-making process. Dror (1984) outlines some of the problems of 'incrementalism' for researchers:

- Incremental policy processes reinforce pro-inertia and anti-innovation forces
- Creativity is discounted and stifled
- New ideas or research can be discounted as unrealistic
- There is low emphasis on developing clear goals and plans
- Difficult problems requiring radical changes to resolve are ignored
- Even crucial research findings may be ignored given costly investments in existing policies
- Political crises (scandals or tragedies) are required before a major re-evaluation of policy occurs

### **2.1.3 The Knowledge Utilisation School**

The knowledge utilisation school (Sundquist 1978; Weiss 1978) view knowledge as cumulative. Knowledge, over time, becomes incorporated into practice, in a process termed 'enlightenment'. While research is rarely convincing or comprehensive enough to exercise a determining impact on policy-making, accumulated research findings gradually alters decision-makers perceptions of both the causes of problems and the likely effects of policy interventions. The activities of numerous research and policy-making actors, including Commissions of Inquiry, individual policy entrepreneurs, the research staff of government agencies, the media, interest groups and issue networks are important in this process (Weiss 1990: 101-05). Advancement in knowledge will therefore eventually be reflected in incremental changes in policy.

However, as in the rational school, knowledge is viewed as apolitical, and it is assumed that authoritative knowledge will eventually prevail. Consequently, this perspective outlines the processes by which knowledge is simplified and transmitted, but does not analyse the dynamics of what kind of knowledge finds its way into policy and who influences which knowledge is utilised. The social and political context in which

knowledge is created and used is effectively excluded (Restivo & Laughlin 1987: 489; Singer 1990: 429).

#### 2.1.4 Policy Paradigms

A ‘policy paradigm’ is “an overarching framework of ideas that structures policy making in a particular field” (Hall 1990: 59). Through these paradigms (or dominant sets of ideas) researchers, and crucially, policy-makers, view politics, economics and society, as well as their own role in these spheres. The paradigm serves to define the problems that are to be addressed, and what policies or instruments are appropriate to resolving them. In this approach socio-economic and political factors become the main determinants of whether knowledge is acceptable. Ruling coalitions or powerful political interest groups exercise a crucial impact on the kind of research, analysis and advice that is selected in policy-making through their influence over these paradigms. Research becomes subordinate to political interests, a resource to be used in furthering those interests.

A paradigm is largely taken for granted and rarely subject to scrutiny. However, political problems and increased policy failure generate interest in alternative paradigms, and “politicians will have particularly strong incentives to seek out and embrace ideas that challenge the policies of their opponents” (1990: 73). Policy-making under policy paradigms is characterised therefore by long periods of incremental change, punctuated by brief periods of major change.<sup>2</sup> Hall (1990) outlines three different orders of policy) change or learning that take place within this framework:

- *First order* change is based on ‘satisficing’ (minor adjustments to policies). The legitimacy of the overall policy framework is not questioned.
- *Second order* change and learning arises when ‘satisficing’ fails. Limited experimentation and new policy techniques occur, while the re-assessment of existing policy generates evaluative research, and thereby suggests further alternative approaches. However, the policy orthodoxy and its objectives are not questioned, only the way that these are achieved. Policy-learning takes place within the existing policy paradigm.
- *Third order* change (or ‘social learning’) involves a radical shift in the thinking that informs policy. If the existing policy paradigm generates problems that first and second order changes cannot resolve the authority and coherence of the paradigm is threatened, and a ‘paradigm shift’ occurs. Problems are redefined, new interpretative frameworks are developed, and policy learning from external sources takes place. The shift from Keynesianism to Neo-liberalism is an example. Crucially, a paradigm shift in policy (and/or institutions) is the basis of a new period of stability (Parsons 1995: 203-4). The role of researchers is to provide the foundations for alternative paradigms.

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<sup>2</sup> The ‘punctuated equilibria’ model is another version of paradigm change (see Parsons, 1995: 203-04).

## 2.2 The Policy Cycle

The traditional way of understanding the ‘policy cycle’ is to divide it into four neat stages – problem definition and agenda-setting, formal decision-making; policy implementation; and evaluation. It is an excessively linear view of policy. However, it is useful in outlining the different functions research might play in policy.

### 2.2.1 Agenda Setting and Decision-Making

Cobb and Elder (1972: 14) define an agenda as “a general set of political controversies that will be viewed at any point in time as falling within the range of legitimate concerns meriting the attention of the polity”. ‘Agenda setting’ is about influencing which issues receive attention and which are excluded from public discussion. The number of potential policy issues exceeds the capacity of the policy-making process, ensuring the importance of the policy agenda, and the necessity for issues (or their proponents) to compete against each other for a place on this agenda. Researchers are one small group in this process, competing against other actors to influence the policy agenda. Two different aspects of this policy agenda can be identified:

- The *public agenda* “consists of all items that are commonly perceived by members of the political community as meriting public attention and as involving matters within the legitimate jurisdiction of existing governmental activity” (Cobb & Elder, 1972: 85). These are issues with high public visibility, and which large sections of the public believe to both important and to require some kind of policy response from government. The public agenda is the primary domain of activity for groups and individuals that do not have free access to government.

Issue or problem definition is central to the public agenda. Researchers can exert influence through their role in establishing the ‘received wisdom’ (what constitutes relevant and accepted knowledge). This can have a significant impact upon problem definition (see 2.1.4 above) and on public opinion in regard to alternative ideas.

- The *formal agenda* is “that set of items explicitly up for the active and serious consideration of authoritative decision makers” (Cobb & Elder, 1972: 86).<sup>3</sup> These items are issues that decision-makers accept require their attention, and policy problems given attention to by officials and politicians in any section or level of government. However, just because an item reaches the formal agenda does not mean a decision will be made. Prevarication or delaying tactics may be used.

Researchers rarely exercise a decisive impact on policy agendas through the inherent force of their scientific work. Other factors can be much more important. Crises can force an issue in or out of the public domain. For example, the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS and

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<sup>3</sup> Some writers (eg Kingdon, 1984: 174)) add a third type – the decision agenda that consists of matters requiring immediate resolution – proposals considered for legislative enactment, or subjects under review for imminent decision by executives or departmental secretaries.



growing public, governmental and global awareness of the extent of the epidemic obliged many governments to act on this issue whether they wanted to or not.

According to Downs (1972), no single domestic political issue (even crucial issues) remains high on the public agenda for extended periods of time. Downs argued that a systematic “issue-attention cycle” influences public attitudes towards most domestic political issues and problems (1972: 38). Factors like technological change or the perception of a ‘crisis’ are important ‘dynamics’ in the increased public prominence of an issue. Public realisation of the intractability and cost of particular policy solutions are ‘dynamics’ explaining the decline of public interest. Prior to the decline however new institutions, programs and policies may be created and then persist even after public attention has faded.

### **2.2.2 Implementation**

The literature on ‘bridging research and policy’ has tended to neglect those who are responsible for implementing policy. However, the implementation phase embodies a wealth of knowledge about the practical applicability of both research and policy. There is an ‘implementation gap’ (Sharpe 1985: 362) in the execution of policy is the difference between the policy-makers objectives and what actually happens at the point of policy delivery. Policy-makers have a ‘control deficit’ that results from not implementing the policies themselves. Consequently, a simple hierarchical view of policy implementation cannot be assumed (Self 1985: 150). The implementation of policy and research recommendations produces unanticipated problems, and may not produce intended outcomes or stated objectives. Issues to be considered include:

- Bureaucratic incompetence
- Bureaucratic resistance
- Inadequate resources, infrastructure or expertise
- Inevitable modification of policy in the implementation phase

Policy failure, therefore, might result from one or more of several factors – inaccurate or incomplete research, flawed policy design, insufficient resources, or problematic implementation. The principles underlying a policy may not survive their reduction into workable detail, and failure to plan for implementation creates space for bargaining between pressure groups, civil servants and politicians over the details of administration. Consequently, the distinction between administration and politics is meaningless, as obstacles to implementation are part of the complexity of policy making.

Scarce resources and opposition to policy programs are a fact of political and economic life. There will always be bargaining and coercion in the implementation of research based policy. Implementation is not a purely technical matter, and models that portray it as such both over-emphasise the impact of policy objectives announced by political leaders, and ignore the role of other actors further down the line (for example street-level bureaucrats). Researchers need to identify the implementation problems that policy-makers must overcome.

### 2.2.3 Monitoring and Evaluation

Monitoring is a further aspect of the policy process over which researchers can have a significant impact. The ratification and monitoring of international agreements, for example, potentially requires research and analysis. International organisations, furthermore, often lack the means to either enforce and or assess policy compliance.

Evaluative research into policy also has the potential to generate knowledge that is of use to future policy-makers. The sheer volume of expertise and advice can however prevent evaluative knowledge regarding policy successes and failures from being incorporated into future policy, and creates the potential for incoherence, conflict and gridlock. Evaluation is usually undertaken by national bureaucracies ('in-house'), but in global spheres – and for some developing countries – evaluation comes from a variety of sources:

- Consultants
- Scientific advisers and other 'experts'
- NGOs and social movements (often unsolicited evaluation)
- International financial institutions (particularly the financial domain)

The evaluation of research is far less extensive than evaluations of public policy. Research evaluation has for decades been left to the academic community, and has taken place primarily through processes of peer review. However, governments, private foundations, corporations and charities are increasingly imposing requirements on research institutions to account for their use of funds and the relevance of their research. Indeed, there are a number of reports and reviews seeking to understand and assess the impact of research on policy (see *inter alia*: Hainsworth & Eden-Green, 2000; McGann & Weaver, 2000; Stares & Weaver, 2001; Stone, 1996; Keeley & Scoones, 1999).<sup>4</sup>

### 2.2.4 Problems with the Policy Cycle Approach

The model of the policy cycle depicts a linear model of policy moving from one stage to the next. In reality, policy making is messy. As Clay and Schaffer (1984) argue, a "divided, dichotomous and linear sequence" of policy making from problem identification through analysis to implementation is unrealistic. It is more accurate to conceptualise the policy process as "a chaos of purposes and accidents", in which "policy implementers interact with policy-makers, by adapting new policies, co-opting the embodied project designs, or simply ignoring new policies..." (Juma and Clarke 1995). Alternative approaches are briefly outlined below:

- '*Garbage can*' explanations of the policy process are developed by John Kingdon to portray a chaotic policy process. These explanations emphasise opportunism, time constraints, and limitations on research, and view policy-making as confused and fragmented rather than composed of neat 'stages'. In this model, decisions are made as if decision-makers reach into a garbage can

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<sup>4</sup> The Bibliography provides a more extended list of sources on the subject than are cited in the text.

– drawing a problem with one hand and a solution with the other, and the two are joined together. Existing proposals (for example, old or rejected Cabinet submissions) can be passed off as solutions to new problems. Privatisation is an example of a pre-conceived solution looking for or manipulating problems.

- *'New Institutionalism'* or New Institutional Economics approaches issues of research development, dissemination, uptake, and impact with an emphasis on the role of institutions (organisations or rules) (Dorwood et al: 2000: 97). These include the costs of acquiring information, and the way in which 'sunk costs' in existing programs, policies and approaches limit the impact of research ('path dependency'). In many developing countries institutions are weak or non-existent, so both information costs and 'sunk costs' may be higher. Difficulties in acquiring new information, for example, leads to the call for 'institutional fixes' in developing countries, with the aim of reducing these costs or risks, and to provide incentives for organisations or individuals to utilise and disseminate research (2000: 98-103).
- *'Advocacy coalitions'* are groups of policy actors who share policy beliefs within a particular policy sector (for example, health, education or defence). These interaction of these coalitions form policy subsystems. Competition between these coalitions may result in policy changes. This approach focuses on the belief systems of policy elites, and the conditions under which policy-oriented learning takes place. While the core beliefs of policy elites are resistant to change, second and first order beliefs might be influenced by research or other sources of knowledge. By stressing the importance of core beliefs and learning within coalition, this approach 'neglects' or de-emphasises policy actor interests. (Sabatier, 1991: 153). It is a radical reordering of policy analysis from interests to belief systems (Busch 2000: 18). The presence of competing coalitions can result in situations where expertise is not seen as 'objective knowledge' but as 'contested information', turning policy-making into a battle of ideas.
- *Constructivist* approaches focus on the social construction of policy problems, policy belief systems and identity. The emphasis is on processes through which 'inter-subjective knowledge' (common understandings and shared identities) is developed and becomes a dynamic for change. This positive identification among actors (whether it be states engaged in international negotiations or policy makers in policy communities (Knoepfel & Kissling Näf, 1998)) views interests as evolving and formed by interactions over time rather than as fixed. Institutions and policies are based on mutual understanding, and policy change is explained by changes in the meaning that states or individual policy actors attribute to an action or development, or by from an increased propensity for co-operation and collective action. Researchers are one set of these actors, producing and articulating shared sets of meaning. Learning and identity forms within a policy community from

social interactions rather than in response to external events (as in the advocacy coalition literature).

- *Post-modern* approaches emphasise how language or discourse shapes the policy agenda, and how problems and solutions are understood. It is not external events that cause policy change, but how these events are perceived, interpreted and articulated (Hajer, 1993). Development discourses represent a way of thinking. Consequently, developing ‘policy narratives’ that become the conventional wisdom are an important strategy in communicating research (Roe, 1994). Policy narratives simplify complex development problems into specific stories. These stories are sub-sets of development discourses that encompass a wider set of values or way of thinking. Research can be influential in providing knowledge that supports the policy preferences of political leaders, or in providing a foundation for ‘counter-discourses’, alternative identities and sites of resistance. These approaches do not separate the world of research and the world of policy-making, as knowledge and power are seen as inter-related. The aim of ‘bridging research and policy’ therefore makes the problematic assumption that a dichotomy exists between two autonomous communities (researchers, scientists and experts in a scholarly realm versus the political realm of politicians, administrators and appointed officials).

## Summary

1. Convincing arguments and scientific consensus are not sufficient to shift policy. The rational-comprehensive approach is an ideal that does not conform to reality.
2. Incrementalism is a feature of most political systems. Research knowledge may come to determine policy decisions in the long run (‘enlightenment’).
3. Research groups may need to target public agendas in addition to official decision-makers to warm up public opinion. Public debate adds to the legitimacy of research.
4. The ‘normal’ manner in which research is utilised constitutes a paradigm. Extreme political pressure or crises may cause a paradigm shift.
5. Issue-attention cycle suggests that old ideas or research needs to re-packaged in new language or jargon, or as in the ‘garbage can model’, old ideas or research is attached to new problems.
6. Different models of knowledge utilisation suggest varying strategies for making research matter in policy.
7. Research is compromised where implementation may distort and undermine research recommendations.

### 3. Towards Policy Entrepreneurship?

Researchers cannot expect that policy-makers will systematically trawl the research literature for relevant findings, and use them rationally and objectively. The real world is more complex. What then should researchers do? The answers range from ‘nothing’ to ‘better dissemination’ to ‘active policy entrepreneurship’. Again, there is no shortage of literature on this subject. The key finding is that for researchers interested in policy impact, ‘do nothing’ is not an option. ‘Better dissemination’ is better but still only a partial answer. ‘Policy entrepreneurship’ seems to be the way forward.

#### 3.1 Five Research Roles

Different kinds of people and groups do social science research. They include:

- Universities
- Philanthropic/Corporate Foundations
- Think-tanks & research institutes
- Scientific laboratories
- Research departments (trade unions, business/professional associations)
- Political parties
- Research departments (law firms, financial institutions, credit rating agencies)
- Consultancy firms
- Pressure Groups and NGOs (Non-governmental organisations)
- International organisations
- Special Advisors, Investigators and ‘spin doctors’
- Non-departmental public bodies (Quangos)
- Government departments
- Civil service colleges
- Policy units attached to the executive
- Commissions of Inquiry
- International Blue Ribbon Commissions
- Media
- Parliaments/Legislative Committees
- Global public policy network

These different types of researchers and research organisations have very different abilities to access policy-makers at various levels. However it is possible to characterise these researchers into five different roles based on the type of relationship that they have with policy makers – contract researchers, in-house researchers, political advisors, civil society researchers, and the disinterested researcher.

- 1) *Contract researchers.* Governments, businesses, and international organisations contract out research work. This allows external researchers in universities or think tanks to have some policy impact. These researchers may be brought within official domains as consultants, expert advisors, members of a government committee or

inquiry, or be attached to policy units or non-departmental public bodies (quangos).

- 2) *'In-house' researchers* are usually public servants, for example those working in statistical offices, attached to the executive, or located in quangos. Various international organisations (e.g. the IMF Institute) may also employ experts as in-house researchers.
- 3) *Political advisors* are appointed by or to political leaders, and likely to share their political and ideological interests. They may come from a scientific or scholarly background.
- 4) *Civil society researchers* exercise influence through private think tanks and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). This is an 'out-house' strategy designed to compensate for a lack of government research in a particular field or to present critical alternatives to government policy.
- 5) *Disinterested research* is that of pursuing knowledge for its own sake. Most of these researchers operate outside or on the margins of policy making. They are likely to be unconcerned with the policy applications of their research, and to focus on scientific discovery, analysis or critique. Such research can still be relevant to policy making, however, disinterested researchers are probably not the most appropriate agents to be disseminating their research finding.

## 3.2 Conduits of Advice

Targeting research requires different presentation and dissemination strategies. Professional associations, think tanks and pressure groups for example use many different mediums to make research policy relevant and publicly accessible.

### 3.2.1 The Legislative Route

Parliamentary or Legislative Committees and Inquiries represent institutional targets for researchers both outside and within government. Commissions or Inquiries have an automatic route of bureaucratic and political access, as they are usually required to submit a report to parliament. They can also take access internal resources and personnel including 'in-house' researchers. In democratic political systems Inquiries may utilise consultative mechanisms which give external researchers the opportunity to influence findings (through inviting written submissions for example). However, these committees favour 'expert' opinions, and their deliberations are usually subject to political party discipline or other forms of control. Inquiries can also take years to run their course, and be significantly altered or abandoned after a change of government. Finally, Governments frequently ignore the findings of an inquiry, attempt to 'water down' recommendations, or try to delay policy response.

### **3.2.2 Bureaucratic Access**

In some political systems legislatures can act merely as a ‘rubber stamp’ for executive decisions. An alternative route for researchers is to cultivate relationships with senior bureaucrats and party advisors, either through informal interactions or within policy communities (see Appendix 2). Section 4 addresses the nature of the relationship between research and bureaucracy in more detail.

### **3.2.3 Educational Avenues**

Academic institutes tend to focus on workshops, conferences and the publication of books or scholarly articles, rather than on the dissemination of policy relevant ideas. There tends to be little communication across disciplines, or even within sub-fields of the discipline. Existing practices and standards of excellence in the social science disciplines encourage scholarly policy research that may not be of immediately relevant to policy. The peer review process furthermore means that academic journals can actually dampen genuinely new ideas. In economics for example, research meets academic standards excellence without either reflecting the needs of policy makers or being useful in solving policy problems. In general, “economics that is usable for advising on public policy is at about the level of the introductory undergraduate course” (Frey & Eichberger 1997: 28).

The degree of incorporation of university academics into policy-making processes depends on local dynamics and political culture. The strength of the higher education sector within a country also affects the ability of researchers to communicate research findings. In the USA for example ample resources for higher education generates many policy researchers, while other countries under-fund this sector. Again, the culture of higher education varies from region to region: American social science is seen as pragmatic and empirical; the European tradition theoretical and less amenable to policy application (Bulmer, 1987: 11).

The movement of foreign students has consequences for the diffusion of knowledge, policy transmission, and the long-term impact on public policies, though this is not well understood. Long-standing schemes of international student exchange (the Columbo scheme, Rhodes scholarships, Fulbright fellowships, or the more recent Soros scholarship scheme) are significant channels for the international movement of ideas, policy and practice. Indeed, significant numbers of graduate students are sponsored by their home governments (or even a specific ministry) to undertake policy or economically relevant degrees in Europe or North America, and increasingly, in India and Japan (see Barber *et al.*, 1984).

### **3.2.4 The Climate of Opinion**

Another strategy for influence is to change the general climate of thinking about an issue or policy, and thereby the political context in which decisions are made (James 2000: 162). Appealing to the public or to civil society in order to shape the ‘climate of opinion’ is a long-term and indirect tactic for affecting policy change. Researchers need to market

their research findings and policy ideas so as to reach a public rather than a political or bureaucratic audience. This may mean producing ‘sound-bites’ for electronic media (and images for television), or crafting ‘opinion-editorials’, eye-catching headlines or short-concise statements for the print media. Indeed, research in the mainstream media is focused toward certain types of presentation and audiences, and in general towards simplifying problems for mass audiences. NGOs often advocate policy positions, so their research tends to reflect their policy bias. Their aim of accessing print and television media (to influence the climate of opinion) is reflected in their dissemination or presentation strategies.

### **3.2.5 Peoples Participation and Local Knowledge**

In other instances, the character of the research is shaped by how it is conducted. Participatory Rural Analysis (PRA) 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. In developing countries, it is evident that traditional (informal and common) communicative structures are more useful than national (top-down) structures or the mass media, which provide information that is too general or prescriptive to assist research users (Burke 1999; McConnell 1995). The literature makes some suggestions for the utilisation of these communicative channels in disseminating research:

- Focus on personal interaction through participatory and consultative structures or the provision of technical information and training.
- Intermediaries may be of crucial importance in accessing communicative channels.
- Community meetings.
- Community based provision of electronic media such as online local databases or village payphones (WEDC 2000: 8).

The incorporation of local communities in development planning does not necessarily mean that the implementation of research ideas has an easier course. PRA has been criticised as the ‘new tyranny’ that co-opts peoples participation into established development paradigms and can reinforce existing inequalities (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

### **3.2.6 Networks**

Policy networks seek to achieve collectively held aims. They are characterised by relatively stable (and often non-heirarchical) inter-relationships between a variety of actors with common interests. Within these networks researchers co-operate and interact with decision-makers, as this is recognised as an effective way to achieve common goals. Researchers can provide important information and analytic resources, initiate and undertake research, and develop network infrastructure (such as newsletters, databases, conferences and web-sites). They also provide the conceptual language, and help create common ideas and arguments that educate network participants into the values or consensus of the network. Networks with decision-makers as active participants have the



potential to influence policy in both local and global domains. Even without such political involvement, the norms, values and aspirations of networks can have significant impact on the climate of elite opinion and culture of public debate. A number of network concepts are outlined in Appendix 2.

### **3.3 Strategies of Communication and Dissemination**

It is important to ensure that research is linked to appropriate dissemination strategies. The most general approach evident in the literature on strategies for the communication and dissemination of research revolves around the concept of ‘two communities’ – researchers and research users – and how to close the gap between (NCDDR 1996: 6-7). A variety of different techniques of communication and dissemination are recommended in the literature, and in general these aim (and thereby see the problem of dissemination as being) for researchers to maximise the distribution of their research (Jumah 1999; Abdel Jaber 1999; Ciupagea 1999; Garrett and Islam 1998).

- maximising press and media exposure
- widespread distribution of brochures and pamphlets
- immediate advertising of research results
- increasing the use of internet and other electronic means of dissemination
- publishing research papers
- engaging with policy makers through policy debates (especially on television)
- holding open seminar presentations or other forum

Treating these techniques as a prescriptive list of dissemination strategies for researchers to follow, however, presents four problems:

- 1) It conceptualises dissemination as a one-way flow from researchers to policy-makers, not as an interactive process in which communication includes feedback and an understanding of the research needs of research users.
- 2) Generalised lists of techniques to encourage the use of research often ignore the importance of targeting particular research-user groups with different dissemination strategies (see 3.6.1).
- 3) Developing states face particular problems in regard to communication and dissemination, and may require different strategies.
- 4) Dissemination occurs in a social and political vacuum, when in reality strategies that work well in one country may fail elsewhere. Furthermore, there “are few governments who like to have policy research findings appear in the media before they are disseminated within” (Jan Isaksen, GDN Priorities, 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1999).

#### **3.3.1 Campaigns**

Campaigns have the ability to influence political developments within countries both directly, or indirectly through the mobilisation of foreign governments or corporations, or through international agencies, organisations or NGOs (Florini 2000: 211; Kumar 2000: 115-6). Campaigns focus locally, nationally or globally (or some combination of these three), and may seek to influence key policy-making actors at many levels, or, attempt to

influence society more broadly and thereby indirectly affect decision-makers. The coalition of groups behind the ‘blood diamonds’ and Jubilee 2000 debt relief campaigns link researchers into social activism with NGOs, corporations, the media and others (Mbabazi, et al, 2002). Information technology and networks are crucial to the success of these campaigns. Recent campaigns against the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), and against globalisation featured protests in Seattle and Prague. Global networks comprised of many different NGOs, social movements, and campaign groups, organised these campaigns, in many instances over the internet.<sup>5</sup> There is often reluctance from researchers to become involved in these kinds of campaigns in that they are associated with advocacy and lobbying based on normative principles, rather than on ‘dispassionate’ scientific analysis.

### **3.3.2 The ‘Style’ of Dissemination**

Research must consider carefully the type of language used in communication and dissemination (NCDDR 1996; Majmuder et al 1994; Leung 1992; West and Rhoton 1992; Backer 1988; Felker 1984; Newman and Vash 1994). This can be taken literally, as often information disseminated in the local languages will broaden coverage of potential research users. More generally, however, researchers need to present findings in a non-technical form, so as to appeal to non-specialist audiences. Short, clear and action-led articles may be an effective approach to dissemination and communication. However, researchers often appear either unwilling or unable to do this (Stanley Samarasinghe, GDN Priorities, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1999). To facilitate this approach may require much stronger recognition for the ‘applied academics’ who produce such digestible reports (Geof Wood, GDN Priorities, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1999). It may be necessary to produce different versions of research findings suited to different target audiences.

### **3.3.3 Interactive Dissemination Strategies**

Conceiving of dissemination strategies as one-way communication flows (of information) from researchers to research users may actually contribute to the gap between the ‘two communities’. An alternative strategy for researchers is to engage in a constructive dialogue with research users, through a variety of techniques:

- Participation in any forum that also has government participation.
- Contacting politicians or bureaucrats and trying to involve them in research centre activities.
- Engaging in long-term dialogues with policy-makers to build trust relationships, and to ascertain their research needs.
- Forming coalitions of research organisations (i.e. global partnerships of research institutions across countries or policy sectors).

Interactive approaches suggest that more needs to be known about the needs of research users, and that ways to overcome constraints on research users accessing material need to be developed (Saywell and Cotton 1999: 48). Research staff may need to be trained in

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<sup>5</sup> For an example site that lists a myriad of organisations linked in an anti-WTO network see: <http://www.svtc.org/wto/wtopeople.htm>

marketing and management skills, so as to maximise the effectiveness of their dissemination strategies. However, if researchers simply provide research users with the information or knowledge they require then a patron-client relationship may in more extreme circumstances result. Policy advocacy should not be confused with researchers being reduced to the role of policy advocates, serving the political interests of research users (see Weiss (1991) for a lengthy discussion of this topic).

### **3.3.4 Developing Countries: Problems**

Communication and dissemination is hampered in developing countries by many problems. There is a lack of formal information centres such as libraries, and those that do exist lack (particularly current) stock (WEDC 2000: 10). A lack of funding and infrastructure makes web-based research difficult, while a low research training capacity means that researchers lack both skills and access (even to internally generated) information resources (Kazmi 1999). There are few links to external sources of information to make up for skill, funding, resource and facility shortages in the developing world (WEDC 2000: 10).

### **3.3.5 Communications Technologies & Research Reporting Services**

New information technologies are transforming businesses and economies around the world. These technologies are ideally suited to the creation and dissemination of development policy research, and indeed, the developed world is increasingly reliant on communication technologies. However, only in developed countries do stable support mechanisms or the possibility of targeting specific groups exist. The use of dissemination strategies based on technological media is limited in the developed world because of a range of infrastructural, cultural and economic factors (WEDC 2000: 10). In developing countries radio coverage is high, and is a successful mechanism for information dissemination. However, only 0.4% of the population of developing countries have phone lines, 0.7% a computer, and only 0.05% internet access (WEDC 2000: 8). Internet access is also more expensive in developing countries (Bentsi-Enchill 1999). Techniques of dissemination such as electronic-journals can therefore become 'gatekeepers' that exclude scholars in the developing world. Closing this 'digital divide' might be achieved by external funding for developing states to establish electronic information media capacity (WEDC 2000: 8). However, such investment is of questionable sustainability due to the given the cost of building and maintaining adequate supporting infrastructure, and may imply reduced funding to other areas of development (WEDC 2000: 8).

## **Summary**

1. The different types of research and different aspects of the policy-making process to which they are aimed leads to research products of varying quality, style and policy relevance.
2. Research brokers and policy entrepreneurs are essential to the communication of research into policy domains. Can policy entrepreneurship be learnt?

3. The policy impact of research is constrained by political factors such as censorship, political disinterest, an intolerant political culture, or a lack of public support for education and research.
4. Relations between 'in-house' and 'out-house' researchers can be problematic
5. Different strategies for communication/research dissemination are required to meet the needs of different research consumers in government (politicians, senior bureaucrats and implementers), in NGOs and community organisations, the media, etc.

## 4. Policy Making Use of Research

Knowledge utilisation appears to be almost completely context-dependent. One particular research result may be used differently by different users. Politicians, civil servants in managing positions, and social workers can make three kinds of use of the same research result in the very same agency (Nilsson and Sunesson 1993: 29). The concept of 'decision-maker' therefore needs to be broken down. Formal policy makers include:

- Politicians
- Senior civil servants and appointed officials
- Middle ranking bureaucrats
- Street level bureaucrats
- Government appointed experts, specialists and advisors on advisory panels, attached to quasi-autonomous agencies, appointed to commissions of inquiry or in cabinet

Non-state actors can also play a decision-making role in public policy, for example foundation officials, NGO leaders, international civil servants, or corporations (BHP in Papua New Guinea). Private regimes and modes of corporate self-regulation can cultivate recognition of private forms of policy authority (see Ronit & Schneider, 2000; Sinclair 2000).

The norms and structures of an organisation are also crucial to the decision-making context (see Corwin and Louis 1982). Both organisations and individuals may become more conservative as they get older, and become more resistant to change (see Downs 1967; Oh 1997a: 30). There is evidence that people in higher positions have less time to access information and so make less use of it (see Bardach 1984; Nelson et al. 1987; Chelimsky 1987; Oh 1997a). Reports that are brief, succinct and jargon free may be of more use to such people. High-level decision-makers are also more likely to view the policy-making process as a political activity, based on compromise, negotiation and bargaining between stakeholders, so they are more likely to seek information or research that supports and legitimises their policy position (Oh 1997a: 34).

### 4.1 Decision-Makers

- *The Political Executive* (ministers or secretaries of state) generally do not have time to read lengthy research reports or regularly interact with researchers. Researchers are at the end of a long chain of gate-keepers who condense, crystallise and present (or sideline) their ideas. The favoured source of advice of the political executive may depend on factors like the leader's personal preferences (Weller 1987). Governments can also be characterised by 'closed advice circuits' where advisers and decision-makers share values and policy

approaches, effectively excluding alternatives from consideration (see Appendix 4).

- *Legislatures* – members of parliament or congress may have few personal staff (the US system being an exception). MPs generally have limited resources, cannot afford research assistance, and spend their time dealing with constituency responsibilities. Their ability to monitor policy and oversee the executive is weak compared to the bureaucracy. MPs therefore need to become self-sufficient in acquiring information and in building networks with the media and pressure groups, until they gain executive position and can draw upon bureaucratic advice. Learning about policy issues is more likely to occur through interaction with their colleagues in parliament rather than with experts or researchers.
- *Civil Servants and Appointed Officials* – Senior civil servants are an elite group usually characterised by permanence, security, high entry standards, promotion by merit, code of political neutrality and a closed character. They may discount the validity of external research as esoteric. In many political systems (especially those that inherited institutions under British colonialism) the civil service is dominated by generalists, who are not experts in specific issues or knowledge areas. Appointed officials may well acquire office on the basis of expertise and experience in a particular policy field (although appointments are usually to political priorities). These specialists may be located some distance from ministers or secretaries of state, and must use the medium of senior civil servants to impact on the policy process (or face ‘bureaucratic marginality’).
- *Street Level Bureaucrats* regularly interact with the public and have wide discretion over the distribution of benefits and sanctions. They may work in schools, hospitals, police and welfare departments, or lower courts. They play an important role in social policy implementation, and remind us that it is important to focus not only on top-level policy-makers (Lipsky 1980). They may distort research-driven policy through their practice, and might contribute substantially to understanding what does or does not work in practice.
- *Research Editors and Evaluators* are required because managing existing research is often as important as acquiring new research. Decision-makers may be aware that useful research exists, but are unable to access it effectively. Specialists are required to edit and synthesise the vast amount of data, analysis and information different researchers and organisations generate. As Keohane and Nye argue, a “plenitude of information leads to a poverty of attention. Attention becomes a scarce resource, and those who can distinguish valuable signals from white noise gain power. Editors, filters, interpreters and cue-givers become more in demand, and this is a source of power” (1998: 89). Knowledge managers acquire power as as ‘filters and interpreters’ of information.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> This paper does not do justice to the wealth of literature in the knowledge management field. A good place to start is: <http://www.uts.edu.au/fac/hss/Departments/DIS/km/Papers.htm#WiggIKM>

## 4.2 Bureaucratic Traditions and Political Culture

The bureaucratic traditions vary dramatically. In the British civil service, knowledge of the workings of government and policy experience is valued over that of external experts. Policy development, for example, may occur through “a committee of inquiry made up of distinguished practitioners in the chosen policy field with a token academic who may or may not be invited by his colleagues to organise research”. By contrast, the “epitome of the government’s response to a policy problem in the United States is to select the professor with the highest reputation in the field, give him a generous research budget and put him on a contract” (Sharpe 1978: 305). Bureaucratic styles are also noticeably different across EU countries. In Germany for example, many researchers are institutionalised into advisory roles through the party political foundations (Thunert, 2001).

Quasi-liberal or authoritarian political systems, such as might be found in Belarus or Iraq, clearly generate different opportunities for researchers. Political culture is extremely important in providing the lens through which policy problems are perceived and the nature of the policy response. The influence of political culture is evident in the distinctive set of traditions found in East Asia. Confucianism, for example, sees good governance as grounded in good advice. Strong emphasis is placed upon the value of education, and the role of the scholar-bureaucrat is to give sound policy advice. The recent economic successes of East Asian political economy are sometimes attributed to the quality of this advice, which enabled (authoritarian) political leaders to choose and implement efficient public policies (Mo 2001). However, the dominance of the bureaucracy in East Asia often resulted in the exclusion of non-state sources of research and policy analysis. While the growth of civil society in these states has increased the influence of alternative sources of advice, private think tanks and institutes do not as yet challenge state research capacity in terms of resources and impact. In China the traditional patron-client relationship of *guanxi* (social connection) is an important determinant of the relationship between intellectuals and researchers, and state officials (Shai 2000). For researchers in state institutes and the academies of science, career development and prospects of influence often rests on *guanxi*, and they must develop clientelist relations with political patrons. Researchers (the scholar-literati) are or become subservient to the state.

Independent sources of research are encouraged by freedom of speech, by a strong and articulate civil society, and by political and public tolerance of alternative perspectives in public debate. Researchers in developing countries may be incorporated into the governing regime’s agenda or be excluded altogether. The Western media and many NGOs have argued that the recent conviction and imprisonment in Egypt of Saad Eddin Ibrahim, the founder of Ibn Khaldun Center for Development Studies, as well as a number of his colleagues, is an example of such exclusionary processes (see MacFarquhar 2001; Ibrahim 2001). In terms of the incorporation of researchers into a regime’s agenda, the problem is not one of ‘bridging research and policy’, but of

generating the capacity for researchers in developing countries to exist “independent from government” (Akifumi Kuchiki, GDN Priorities, 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1999).

In Central and Eastern European countries previously under communist party control, ‘scientists were helpless against the party line and could not change policies’ (Sobiech, 2001). A clear division existed between the scientific community and government experts, with researchers generally avoiding the issue of policy application. However, the opposition movement did generate an underground research counter-culture. The break up of the Soviet Union, the dissolution of central party control, problems with developing market economies, the lack of policy and implementation skills in the new governments and the rapid growth of civil society created opportunities for policy research entrepreneurs. Western donor agencies were often eager to fund such research, prompting the regional think tank boom (see *inter alia*, James, 2000; Krastev, 2000; Manaev 2000; Struyk, 1999). Foreign researchers, consultants and experts were also brought in to provide technical assistance with programmes organised by the IFIs, international foundations, or multilateral aid agencies.

### **4.3 Closed Policy Advisory Loops**

Closed policy advisory loops (or ‘group think’) occur because political leaders tend to rely on advice only from those that are known and trusted (see Waardenburg 2001: 9). This can severely restrict policy learning, especially over the longer term. ‘Group think’ may result from crises such as civil unrest or persistent criticisms, or develop in governments that have been in office for a long time. These loops can be broken by elections, as new governments use different sources of advice, by external pressure (from the media or social movements for example), or by changes in organisational culture. It is important for political elites and policy-makers within bureaucracies to interact with external sources of policy advice to avoid ‘group think’ (see Appendix 4).

### **4.4 Reception to Research Communication**

Policy-makers are not always receptive towards research communication. However, they generally see the benefits of the communication and dissemination of research and information. For example, ‘Communication for development’ involves any activity (whether using media or interpersonal channels) that provides a two-way flow of information between those responsible for planning and implementing development activities, and the people who should benefit (Fraser 1994). Fraser’s study found:

- Unanimous recognition by decision-makers over the general importance of communication in the field of development
- Communication crucial to establishing concepts, technology and skill needs
- Central to consensus building
- Crucial to turning complex information into easily understandable elements
- Linked to the building of civil society
- Can impart a sense of ownership over the development process



The World Bank has attempted to evaluate the access and use of electronic information by policy-makers in developing countries (MacDonald 2000). In this research, policy-makers ranked the Internet as the least important source of information about development (discussions with colleagues and advice from experts ranked first, followed by newspapers and journals). However, recent research organised by the Global Development Network (GDN) into developing country think tanks found strong demand for electronic information media services.<sup>7</sup> MacDonald explains this by pointing to the different types of research users in developing countries. Senior policy makers (the sample for the first survey) are too busy to search out information themselves, and rely on others to do it for them. These others – researchers and their managers (the sample for the second survey) – are more likely therefore to embrace electronic information media. Consequently, McDonald argues that if World Bank research is available online to the second group, and to other opinion movers such as journalists, it could be influential in shaping development policy even though the policy-makers themselves do not use the Internet and do not regard it as important (MacDonald 2000).

#### **4.5 Science and Policy-Makers**

The complex, technical, uncertain or theoretical nature of many policy problems – nuclear energy, genetically modified organisms on agriculture and food, issues to do with public health, or atmospheric decay – means that policy makers need scientific advice and judgement to inform or guide decision-making. However, this does not mean that “scientists establish the facts about environmental realities, and policy-makers come up with policy options in the light of the facts” (Keeley and Scoones 1999: 7).

Technocracy – where experts or specialists are given the status and position to objectively generate policy responses – may seem highly efficient in a complex society. However, in many countries the public has become distrustful of scientists and facts, knowledge and authority (for example, in relation to UK BSE crisis, Keeley & Scoones 1999: 11-13). Many groups are also aware that scientific knowledge can be utilised as a kind of power, with scientific evidence “routinely used to back up, or to attack, common-sense views, government policies, and other matters of public debate” (Woodward and Watt 2000: 34). Indeed, many in the scientific community are wary this role. Science clearly cannot answer all questions, and scientific disputes often prevail in the face of ambiguity and conflicting evidence. Scientists may therefore be reluctant to provide clear and unambiguous conclusions to inform commercial and political decisions. This is generally understood by politicians and senior civil servants, who when reflecting on controversies like BSE are often “candid about the inherently provisional character of most scientific understanding of environmental problems, and that these understandings can be radically revised in the light of new evidence” (ESRC 1999: 7). Nevertheless, when new political crises arise (such as in relation to GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms)) “there

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.gdnet.org/>

appears less enthusiasm for admitting the limits to the relevant scientific knowledge” (1999: 7)

#### **4.6 Policy-Makers in Developing Countries**

By contrast to the resources at the disposal of western governments and international development agencies, many developing countries lack both in-house research capacity and administrative personnel with the skill to utilise research findings (Prakash Raj Sapkota, GDN Priorities, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1999; Davis and Carden 1998: 7). The capacity of bureaucracies to absorb, interpret and synthesise research, and so to mount effective mission-oriented research programs or diffuse improved technology to users is however crucially dependent on these internal factors (Davis and Carden 1988: 7).

The dialogue between bureaucrats and researchers could not be enhanced, until and unless bold public sector reforms are implemented in typical developing countries. Key ministries and departments should possess research and analysis wing, which can interact with civil society organizations, policy institutes and think tank groups (Prakash Raj Sapkota, GDN Priorities, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1999).

Furthermore, many developing countries cannot afford the ‘luxury’ of pure research. Research spending must yield an economic or social return in order for development objectives to be accomplished. Consequently, it is often easier and cheaper for developing countries “to procure science embodied in imported technology, sparing themselves the cost, effort, and risk of dealing with local technoscientific talent” (Davis & Carden 1998: 13). Research is therefore unlikely to receive funding in developing countries unless it can either demonstrate practical utility, or arrange for political protectionism (through clientelism for example). However, it is often far easier to obtain political protection than it is to demonstrate research utility. Consequently, resource allocation procedures to research in developing countries “can be so opaque and so highly personalized” (1998: 14).

#### **Summary**

1. Researchers must pay attention to research demand from policy-makers. Such research needs to be presented in an easily digestible format.
2. Policy-makers need research to help make decisions but also to support policy positions. Consequently, research can be distorted to political ends
3. Internal incentive structures are needed for politicians, bureaucrats and organisations to effectively absorb and utilise research or interact with researchers.
4. Different political systems and cultures give different opportunities to different types of research.

## **Conclusions: The Uncertain Impact of Policy Research**

In this overview of the manner in which research is (or is not) incorporated into the policy process, the diversity of products and publication in this area is apparent. Products range from 'gdnet' and 'eldis' on the virtual front to numerous books and papers in a more traditional medium. Many research institutes and think tanks have conducted in-house analyses of how to 'sell' policy analysis or influence governments. Examples include: the Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council (RAWOO) in 2001; Feulner, 1985 for the Heritage Foundation; Garret & Islam for the International Institute for Environment and Development; Scott, 2000 for the Science Policy Research Unit; Keeley 1999, for the Institute of Development Studies; and Kostoff, 1997 for the US Office of Naval Defence. There is no shortage of analysis on this subject but there is a need to go beyond 'checklist approaches' designed to assist research make ideas matter (see Appendix 5).

The plethora of studies in this field suggests that evaluations of how research connects to policy are part of the process of organisational learning. Although rehearsing the 'bridging research and policy' questions may result in a duplication of effort and the reproduction of similar studies, this kind of evaluation helps organisations and individuals to promote research, and to reflect on some of the purposes, successes and failures of that research. This process of self-reflection through evaluation can lead to the development of innovative programmes.

New thinking and new approaches to 'bridging research and policy' are important. However, it is equally important to understand the various interpretations of how research feeds into policy, the different programmes that attempt to 'bridge research and policy', and the wide range of resources already available to build linkages across these two domains. A critical assessment of these endeavours is also needed. To some extent they can be portrayed as part of an impossible quest for 'truth' (as in the rationalist framework), a desire for certainty where uncertainty, chaos or crisis prevails, and an impulse for order and control in 'knowable' world. Furthermore, if there is an inherently normative dimension to the research process it is important for researchers to recognise this, and to critically reflect upon about the power of knowledge and the interests served by research.

### **5.1 Research for Whom?**

Both researchers and policy makers are responsible for the image of research as taking place in an 'ivory tower', at arms length from government as well as detached from society. This 'other worldly' image leads to the notion that research and policy need to be bridged, as it suggests that there is a field of inquiry or scholarly pursuit that is unsullied and pure compared to the world of policy where compromise, bargaining and politicking prevail. The degree of integration between research and policy-making is however underestimated. Policy makers, furthermore, are not 'empty vessels' into which

knowledge or research is poured (Nustad and Sending 2000). For example, ‘when economists are trying to explain the world, they are scientists; when they are trying to improve it, they are policy makers’ (N. Gregory Mankiw quoted in Picciotto 2000: 10). Indeed, in this sense many researchers of different types are policy actors. For example, research brokers or policy entrepreneurs make ideas matter and use their intellectual authority to verify certain forms of knowledge as more accurate, persuasive or objective. The ‘bridging research and policy’ metaphor is not appropriate if the knowledge and policy praxis is to be regarded as mutually constitutive.

Knowledge organisations are also shaped and constrained by the socio-cultural, political and legal environment in which they operate. Complete autonomy and independence for researchers is illusory. Self-generated research agendas, financial autonomy, a dispassionate scholarly focus and retaining organisational distance from official forums may bolster intellectual integrity but it also undermines the potential for policy relevance and input. The independence of any organisation or research group is also linked to funding arrangements. However, administrative and financial independence may not equate with research freedom and intellectual autonomy, particularly under authoritarian or illiberal regimes where censorship and control may prevail.

## **5.2 The Validity of Research**

The credibility of research can not be taken for granted. Certain practices are essential to maintaining the public stature of knowledge producers. Some research is more rigorous, professional and scholarly, adhering to recognised standards of peer review. Such standards need to be cultivated and protected as policy-makers and other users usually require policy research and analysis produced in a professional context. In other words, they want research findings that help legitimate policy, and these come from recognised institutions and experts.

Attracting foundation support or funding from (social) science regimes bestows credibility. One strategy to enhance their legitimacy is rhetorical resort to the professional and scientific norms of scholarly discovery, intellectual investigation and impartial advice. This is particularly important to think tanks and consultancies, in order to set themselves apart from NGOs and advocacy groups, thereby highlighting their superior knowledge base, professional standing or development experience. Professional language and the jargon inherent to science are however exclusionary. Peer review and professional accreditation are processes by which only those with the relevant credentials can participate.

There are issues of representation and participation and the status of different kinds of research or knowledge. Foundations, professional associations, scientific assemblies, and actuarial bodies all advocate their own intrinsic intellectual value, policy relevance and knowledge capacities. In a sense, they have vested interest in promoting their own scholarly or elite knowledge. Researchers and their institutions have an interest in making research that is influential (as it aids career and institutional advancements, securing

future grants, acquiring political or business patronage). However, as noted by one Eastern European observer of the policy research community, they also have an interest in ‘faking influence’ (Krstev, 2000).

### **5.3 The Absence of Proof and the Possibility of Irrelevance**

Determining the relevance, impact or influence of new knowledge is often a subjective exercise. The criteria or indicators are multiple. An organisation may have huge impact on the media but little or no input into policy development. A government agency consulting and commissioning researchers will not necessarily adopt and incorporate the resulting scientific advice into decision-making. Furthermore, in those instances where ideas or policy recommendations from outside government are seriously considered, they are invariably modified and adapted by internal bureaucratic dynamics and other political considerations.

Research institutions can have some medium term impact on government in the sense that they may be a stepping stone in a political career. In other words, think tanks, universities and other civil society research institutions can serve as political training grounds, grooming emerging political leaders in policy debates prior to an opportunity arising for them to move into formal political sphere. One example is the spread of ideas or paradigms through the US education system, with ‘The Chicago Boys’ influencing Latin American policy-making with monetarist ideas (Valdes 1995). Similarly, the free market think tanks are frequently identified as a key source of ideas and thinking that helped undermine the Keynesian policy paradigm (Stone 1996; Coleman 1991; Fischer and Forrester 1993). However, long-term policy impact is difficult to prove. The changing the climate of opinion or shaping of public thinking cannot be attributed to one set of organisations.

How is the relevance, utility, and influence of research to be determined? Even these three terms – relevance, utility and influence – signify substantial problems. What may well be relevant is not necessarily influential. Research that is not of direct utility in policy may be influential a generation later. These dilemmas confound efforts to measure the influence of research. Nevertheless, research organisations need to justify to donors, to consumers of their research, and (in democratic systems) to taxpayers the social and economic value of research. Browsing through the annual reports of most research bodies reveals the indicators used to validate research relevance. Indicators of relevance:

- Column inches in newspapers or number of citations
- Number of web-site hits and/or page requests
- Incidence of interviews on radio or television
- Number of peer-reviewed publications
- Public, professional and political attendance at institute events, lectures and conferences
- Increased capacity to attract foundation grants, government contracts and other sources of funds on previous years
- Establishment of new programmes, recruitment of new staff, renewal of projects.

- Appointment of research staff to government advisory bodies
- Career progression of researchers into government or international organisations

These criteria are not proof of influence, but represent potential correlates of research recognition in public and policy venues. For example, attracting a senior politician to become involved in a research programme or conference can mean different things to the actors involved. For the research institute, it can be taken as a sign of policy relevance and governmental interest. For the politician, however, collaboration may simply offer no more than a platform with a reputable institute to further broadcast party policy.

There are no fixed points of policy impact or constant levels of influence for any set of organisations. Determining influence is as varied as the meanings that can be given to the concept of influence. Anecdotal evidence of policy impact or ‘rich description’ of the influence of policy research in case-studies can be more accurate. Such ‘stories’ can also be important to the internal culture of research organisations. Consequently, the methodologies for evaluating influence need to take into consideration that the meaning and interpretations of ‘influence’ vary considerably.

#### **5.4 Ideology and Values in Research and Policy**

Most studies outlined in the previous sections do not address the ideological functions and values inherent in the funding/commissioning of research, the values of the researcher, or the political selection and application of the research. In a self-reflective process, issues of power would be considered where knowledge, advice and expertise can shape research agendas, constrain problem conceptualisation, and favour specific routes of policy over others. Research has social consequences beyond that which is examined. Research legitimises those who commissioned or funded it. It legitimises social and economic issues as ‘public policy problems’. Moreover, the researcher or research group also gains legitimacy and credibility.

The normative dimension of research and policy making cannot be ignored. Reference to ‘knowledge’ or ‘research’ does not signify a single body of thinking, data or literature that is commonly recognised and accepted. To the contrary, it implies a struggle between different ‘knowledges’ or what are often described as ‘discourses’, ‘worldviews’ and ‘regimes of truth’. Accordingly for many, the issue is not simply the creation and dissemination of knowledge, but the kind of knowledge that is produced and the kind of knowledge that dominates. Questions about the process of policy change through research input, and the advocacy of what is deemed to be international ‘best practice’ or global knowledge, come to focus on the ‘mobilisation of bias’, and on why some ideas are selected and others systematically ignored. Furthermore, the opinions, beliefs, ideology, culture and history of the researcher inevitably bias theory and research. Theory cannot be separated from practice and objective theory building is impossible. Instead, ‘theory is always for someone and for some purpose’ (Cox, 1996: 87).

## Appendix 1 – Evidence-Based Policy

The evidence-based policy approach is a technique that is spreading from medicine into other areas of social policy.<sup>8</sup> This ‘spill-over’ is relatively recent, but is in part due to growing interest in the relationship between research evidence, practice and policy. Critical elements of the Evidence-Based Policy (EBP) approach include:

- Discover all existing evidence, information, research and literature (research papers, reports, books, government publications and legislation)
- Assess this evidence (Systematic Reviews)
- Where evidence is unsatisfactory, establish sound evidence through scientific research and evaluation
- Research approach to be collaborative with research users (politicians, policy-makers, managers, practitioners, professional institutions, consultants, workers, consumers, clients and patients) – ‘what works’ or ‘fitness for purpose’ approach.
- Present and disseminate findings in an organised and systematised manner, so as to impact on the practices of individuals/organisations (through briefing papers, systematic reviews, engagement with highest-level decision makers).

The evidence-based approach used in medicine might be considered relevant to other fields for several reasons. It is linked to ‘managerialism’ in the public services, emphasising outcomes and efficiency. It is based on positivist, empirical research and is held to have the advantages of rigour, replicability, relevance, and independence. Systematic Reviews focus on analysis of existing research so as to extract the most robust, rigorous and relevant evidence, rather than on engaging in new research. Research takes place in collaboration with research users, ensuring research that is relevant for practical and policy purposes, so best able to meet with these aims. However, the application of this approach to other policy fields has raised a number of methodological and practical concerns (see Davies, 1999; Hulme & Hulme, 2001).

### (i) Methodology

- What research methods are appropriate to and constitute evidence?
- Should they be promoted?
- Should the design and implementation of policy applications reflect particular research evaluation methods?
- Are alternative research methods excluded?
- How is ‘best scientific evidence’ conceptualised?

### (ii) Practical Issues

- Policy often conflicts with evidence
- Judgements of uncertainty, risk, trust and expedience are often unavoidable.
- EBP assumes that potential research users are oriented towards evidence-based sources in their practice.

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<sup>8</sup> (<http://www.politics.qmw.ac.uk/currentnews.shtml>); (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/knowconc.htm>); (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/EBPesrcUKcentre.htm>); (<http://www.esrc.ac.uk/ebp1.htm>)

- If research users are unconvinced by ‘evidence’ they continue existing practices.
- EBP may threaten the power, status, and identity of potential research users.
- EBP impact may be limited due to issues of dissemination.
- Systematic Reviews view useful research as solving existing problems without complicating them or creating new ones. Research is more likely to be noticed if its findings support research users’ policy positions.
- Researchers are limited and become ‘policy advocates’.
- Ironically, the EBP approach ignores research pointing to the inadequacies of the EBP approach.



## Appendix 2 – Network Concepts

**Policy Communities** are stable networks of policy actors from both inside and outside government, which are highly integrated with the policy-making process. These are based on common understandings of problems or of the decision-making process within a given policy domain. They emerge and consolidate around specific policy fields or subsystems (such as education, tax or security) and revolve around relevant institutions such as specific ministries or government agencies. A policy community can include journalists, researchers, and policy analysts, as well as elected officials and bureaucratic leaders. Experts from universities, think tanks or law are likely to be accorded ‘insider’ status if they share the central values and attitudes of the policy community. Interactions in the community are grounded in resource dependencies and constant bargaining. A policy community is the most institutionalised variant of the policy network concepts, and by definition is part of the structures of governance (Klijn, 1997).

**Global public policy network** is a term used to identify policy networks operating between and above the nation-state. These networks are ‘alliances of government agencies, international organisations, corporations and elements of civil society that join together to achieve what none can accomplish alone... and give once ignored groups a greater voice in international decision making’ (Reinicke, 1999/2000). They are relatively formal and institutionalised, and participants and policy focuses are easily identified. They tend to cohere around international organisations and governments that are organising together to deliver public policy. Examples include the Apparel Industry Partnership, the Roll Back Malaria Initiative, the ISO 1400 process, and the Global Environment Facility. Virtually all use experts and advisers as well as various NGOs, community groups and business interests specific to the policy focus of the network.

**Epistemic communities** are networks of experts with recognised expertise and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge in a particular domain. These professionals, researchers, or scientists share common policy ideas and seek access to decision-makers on the basis of their expertise. Members of the community are bound together not by vested interests or by shared backgrounds or institutions, but by shared causal beliefs. However, professional and educational standards act as socio-political barrier to the entry of others into the group. Common causal methods, professional judgement, notions of validity, and vocabulary, that is, consensual knowledge, are required, for example a commitment to ecological principles or the tenets of Keynesian economics (Haas & Haas, 1995). Epistemic communities may be ‘ad hoc’ and not outlive the policy issue which formed them, or be more constant and aim at a broader impact on ‘dominant social discourses (Adler and Haas 1992: 371). Epistemic communities have four defining features that distinguish them from other groups in the policy-making process (Haas, 1992: 3):

1. shared normative and principled beliefs which provide the value based rationales for their action;
2. shared causal beliefs or professional judgements;

3. common notions of validity based on inter-subjective, internally defined criteria for validating knowledge;
4. a common policy enterprise.

**Discourse coalitions** are groups of actors sharing a ‘social construct’ (Hajer, 1993: 45) around which groups/networks frame political problems. Discourse ‘ideas, concepts and categories through which meaning is given to phenomena’ (including symbols, language and policy narratives) are essential to the ‘mobilisation of bias’. They shape understanding and can pre-determine the definition of a problem. In short, discourse coalitions create and seek to impose ‘policy narratives’ (Roe, 1994). The technocratic policy expertise of academics, think tanks and other experts interacts with the interests of political and economic elites over the wider struggle to control policy discourses. Discourse coalitions seek to impose their own discourse on the debate in different policy domains. Various knowledge actors can be characterised as discourse managers involved in manufacturing the rhetoric essential to specialised policy subsystems. Success is ‘discourse structuration’, where a discourse coalition shapes the way in which society conceptualises a particular problem. As a discourse becomes entrenched as the dominant mode of perception, it can be reflected in institutions and organisational practices as the conventional mode of reasoning. This latter process is ‘discourse institutionalisation’. A stable policy community is characterised by an institutionalised discourse.

## Appendix 3 – ‘Windows of Opportunity’

John Kingdon’s (1984) model of agenda setting is a more dynamic explanation than policy stage approaches of why issues get on the agenda. The agenda setting process can be conceptualised as three largely unrelated streams:

- Policy Stream – policy communities of advocates, researchers and other specialists that analyse problems and propose solutions. A change in research agendas results from the redirection of foundation or government funding. This stream is however the least vulnerable to dynamic fluctuations.
- Problem Stream – information about ‘real world’ problems and feedback from past government policies. This stream is fairly volatile and sometimes unpredictable, with change occurring as environmental conditions are altered.
- Political Stream – includes turnover of key administrators and legislators, and ideological contests between political parties. Change results from shifts of power, internal power struggles, elections, or constitutional crises.

The government agenda is set in the politics and problem streams – changes in these streams create ‘policy windows’ which allow for the rise and fall of issues on the agenda. Windows also present an opportunity to ‘couple’ or join the three streams. First, specialists in policy communities develop solutions. Then, policy entrepreneurs advocate these solutions and try to take advantage of political receptivity to package the solution with the problem. In other words, policies are attached to problems. Policy alternatives compete in the policy stream. If new alternatives are adopted in a community, it is through recombination rather than mutation. Wholly new ideas do not appear, as according to Kingdon “there is no new thing under the sun” (1984: 131). In an incremental manner, policy alternatives become viable for consideration after a prolonged ‘softening’ process in the policy stream (led by policy entrepreneurs).

- Advocacy – undertaken in the policy stream and designed to encourage a confluence of streams.
- Research brokers – promote ideas and attempt to push them onto the public/government agenda (‘soften’ the climate of opinion towards particular alternatives). It is important to educate – “policy communities, which tend to be inertia-bound and resistant to major changes, and larger publics, getting them used to new ideas and building acceptance for their proposals” (1984: 134).
- Form linkages – between problems, policy and politics when a policy window opens.

## Appendix 4 – Group Think

Group think is a theory of flawed group decision making. The approach was designed to help understand policy disasters and planning disasters. In certain circumstances, groups of shrewd, clever and sensible people do not properly consider issues or their consequences, and make poor decisions. This can lead to financial mismanagement, maltreatment of groups or individuals, use of disproportionate force (or violence) as well as secretive and corrupt behaviour.

The approach focuses on flaws in the operation of small, high-level decision groups. These are groups at the helm of major projects or policies that become fiascos. Examples include, the Cabinet, the executive office of a presidency, a military junta, or a group of advisors to a dictator or monarch. Small groups can worsen rather than improve on decision-making in situations where there is an excessive form of consensus seeking among members of a high prestige, tightly knit policy-making group. Group think ‘a mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, when the members’ strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action’ (Janis 1983). Reality is distorted by this group think phenomenon. Group think cultivates excessive optimism about group capability in terms of problem solving and decision making. Another consequence is stereotyping of groups outside the group. Group think may occur because:

1. Cohesiveness of the group
  - high degree of solidarity and cohesiveness
  - esprit de corps and mutual admiration
  - ideological consensus in the group
2. Structural faults or flaws in which the group operates
  - insulation of the group from outsiders
  - lack of a tradition of impartial leadership
  - lack of norms about methodical procedure
  - meetings informal without clear devices of accountability
  - homogeneity of similar backgrounds, education, social interests and ideology of group members
3. Stressful internal and external characteristics of the situation
  - “provocative situational factors”
  - routine conditions minimise the effect of group think but it is escalated in conditions of overload – crisis situations, impending war burden of dealing with morally complex and difficult decisions
  - doubts about efficacy, low self esteem, reinforced by recent policy failures
  - group provides consolation; social support; morale

The effects of group think include hasty and ill-considered decisions, as well as an unwillingness to consider alternatives and all information. There is a deterioration in the quality of deliberation, and a rejection of research that does not conform to the beliefs and perceptions of the group.

## Appendix 5 – Bridging Research and Policy Checklists

Many studies seek to explain how and why research translates into policy provide ‘checklists’. These lists provide helpful information on how to tailor research for policy purposes. In general however these studies are apolitical. They outline strategies for policy researchers divorced from any political context and without assessment of the political sensitivity of the policy research.

In addition, checklists suffer from the problems of linearity and logical sequence for which the policy cycle approach has also been criticised. Techniques to highlight the policy relevance of research and innovative dissemination strategies do not ultimately lead to knowledge utilisation. These checklist stages usually proceed from research creation to communication and dissemination and finally to knowledge utilisation. The following list is adapted from the COHRED Guide for Researchers (Porter & Prysor-Jones, 1997), the KFPE Guidelines on Research Partnerships and the IIED Policy Paper (Garrett & Islam, 1998) and summarises some of the key points found in check lists.

### *Research Creation and Policy Analysis*

- Evaluate quality and timeliness of research
- Evaluate contribution of research to policy debates and public policy problems
- Identify critical gaps in policy knowledge
- Engage potential users of the research in defining research questions
- Evaluate how research contributes to policy in a utilitarian way as well as to knowledge advancement and ‘enlightenment’
- Review the progress of research periodically
- Maintain excellence and research standards

### *Communication and Dissemination*

- Understand policy makers information needs
- Construct research results in a way that makes ideas useful (eg. timely reports, use of non-technical language, executive summaries, etc.)
- Develop clear policy recommendations in research product
- Promote policy entrepreneur skills
- Develop a systematic dissemination strategy (including advocacy and campaign techniques)
- Build channels of communication (web-sites, publications, media liaison, etc)
- Organise workshops, conferences and other public or professional events
- Tailor research products to different audiences
- Target findings to user groups or stakeholders

### *Knowledge Utilisation*

- Understand the policy process
- Build relationships of trust with subjects and users of research
- Develop links and networks with politicians and bureaucrats in policy communities
- Involve decision makers and managers in implementing, monitoring and interpreting the study
- Help build capacity within government to absorb research
- Encourage public debate and the involvement of the subjects of research in data collection and interpretation.

Checklists do not account for unique policy dynamics in specific policy fields that can only be captured in case studies. They also tend to focus on supply side concerns, that is, how to make research more useful. Less attention is given to stimulating demand for research, the incentives needed for bureaucracies to make greater use of research and the political and economic circumstances or crises that prompt policy-makers to search for new ideas or research. The RAWOO study lecture series and seminars on the 'Utilization Research for Development Cooperation' provides case-studies and analyses that draw out the social and political constraints on research. As noted by Montano Virreira (2001:51):

- Researchers work too slowly for policy makers who expect too much too quickly
- Policy makers/politicians may look upon social science research as subversive activity
- Research findings are used by policy makers/politicians for their own purposes, knowledge is not neutral
- The outcomes of socially relevant research can be a threat for the institution that carries out the research
- An individual researcher working on her own has more freedom to present independent views; on the other hand, research carried out by an individual researcher carries less weight than research carried out by an institution which can promote the utilization of its research

Programmes that would enhance political and bureaucratic capacity to both absorb and utilise research (Boer, 2001) could include:

- Sabbaticals for officials in think tanks, universities, etc
- Membership of officials on boards of academic and other research institutions
- Twinning arrangements between government departments and research institutions (eg. parliamentary fellows; shadowing schemes, etc)
- Internships for researchers
- In-service professional training regarding research management and evidence-based policy
- Establishments of policy research evaluation units

## Glossary

AKNF	African Knowledge Network Forum
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
APEC	Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation
BSE	Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy
CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
COHRED	Council on Health Research for Development
COMESA	Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa
CPP	Crop Protection Programme
DFID	Department for International Development
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
ESRC	Economic Social Research Council
EU	European Union
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GARNET	Global Applied Research Network in Water Supply and Sanitation
GDN	Global Development Network
GMOs	Genetically Modified Organisms
HIPC	Highly Indebted Poor Countries
HIV/AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
ICSSR	Indian Council of Social Science Research
IDS	Institute for Development Studies
IFI	International Financial Institution
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute

IIED	International Institute for Environment and Development
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KFPE	Swiss Commission for Research Partnership with Developing Countries
MAI	Multilateral Agreement on Investment
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NCDDR	National Center for the Dissemination of Disability Research
NGO	Non-Government Organisations
NPM	New Public Management
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PRA	Participatory Rural Analysis
PSRPs	Poverty Strategy Review Papers
Quango	Quasi Non-Government Organisation
R & D	Research and Development
RAWOO	Netherlands Development Assistance Research Council
SISERA	Secretariat for Institutional Support of Economic Research in Africa
UN	United Nations
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
US	United States
WEDC	Water Engineering and Development Centre
WHO	World Health Organisation
WTO	World Trade Organisation



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