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RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATION: BRIDGING THE RESEARCH-POLICY GAP?

Lessons learnt through online networking

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How can evidence and learning contribute to policy change? How can learning evolve within organizations and among partners? How can society-wide learning be facilitated among a multitude of stakeholders? An online discussion facilitated by the Pelican Initiative seizes the potential of networking to explore answers to these questions.

Over the past decade, networking has gained recognition as a formal, structured opportunity for innovation. Online technology has enabled multiple venues of collaboration for those who are active in the international development cooperation sector in ways that were unheard of merely a few years ago.

Online networking poses the challenge of how to communicate emerging new ideas to policy makers, practitioners and other researchers. Among the many aspects involved in such a challenge, we can point to the importance of: simplifying complexity into plain language or visuals; translating location-specific evidence and determining to what extent its elements may be useful elsewhere; and finding ways to involve the target audiences in the development of the communication materials in order to make them more appropriate.

In February 2007, a Pelican¹ discussion entitled “Research and Communication: Bridging the Research-Policy Gap?” explored how evidence and learning can contribute to policy change; how learning can evolve within organizations and among partners; and how society-wide learning can be facilitated among a multitude of stakeholders.

The discussion, which took place throughout February and March 2007, was prompted by asking how carefully planned communication can help bridge the research-policy gap. The facilitators sought replies and reactions to three initial questions, which are stated in the following section. This article interweaves the discussion’s key messages with a summary of the most relevant contributions to it.

LAUNCHING THE DISCUSSION

Dear all,

Learning and innovation in international development takes place in various forms. In this discussion, we wish to focus on research and development projects and on how learning from research and development activities can translate into policy. Over the last few decades, research approaches began to bring together specialists, practitioners and local organizations under the umbrella of "action-research". One of the main goals of action research is to bring research into the policy domain. (...) Whether innovations arise from research projects or networks, an important challenge is the communication of emerging new ideas to policy makers, practitioners, and other researchers (...)

Over the last three decades, research approaches have shifted significantly; let's take the example of agricultural research. The early top-down 'diffusion' approach - whereby scientists experimented in laboratory conditions and disseminated results through extension workers to farmers- gradually lost ground to approaches that engage all parties in the system more closely. Farming systems research, participatory appraisal, and participatory technology development emerged as more inclusive, consultative ways of innovating. In each of these new approaches, the challenge of communicating evidence remained an important task; at the very least the evidence should be validated by the different parties as they are all part of the innovation process. More important perhaps, is the fact that communication methods are increasingly seen and used as integral parts of development programmes, not just as a tool for dissemination or as separate interventions. Today, the growing trend toward the privatization of agricultural research means that the prevailing communication approach is unidirectional social marketing, as opposed to two-way participatory learning. These contrasting uses of communication methods and media are also relevant when it comes to communicating evidence to the policy-making community.

In an earlier Pelican discussion, the example of the Fogo Island process was shared and discussed. Back in the 1960s, the Premier of Newfoundland (Canada) decided to move people from Fogo Island to the mainland of Canada, as their main source of income - fisheries - had run dry. A documentary on the lives of the people on Fogo Island started a process of participatory video-making between the people on Fogo Island and decision makers: using film as a vehicle to transfer ideas back and forth between these groups, enabled a form of policy dialogue that could never take place in a face-to-face meeting.

This Pelican discussion focuses on exploring how evidence and learning can contribute to policy change; how learning can evolve within organizations and among partners; and how society-wide learning can be facilitated among a multitude of stakeholders. In this discussion we will focus mostly on the first area by asking how carefully planned communication can help bridge the research-policy gap. While there is evidence that the relationship between evidence and policy is complex, development agencies are faced with the need to develop methods and media to create bridges between the two. This type of communication planning involves making decisions about who to involve, what materials to produce and when and where to bring them together. We are interested in hearing your comments on the following questions, and in discussing them with you:

- 1. Can you describe examples where research influenced the policy process?*
- 2. Could you identify some possible factors that could explain the success or failure of these examples?*
- 3. What was the role of communication methods and different media in the most successful examples?*

Best wishes,

Ricardo Ramirez, Wendy Quarry & Niels Keijzer

THE ONLINE HARVEST OF IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES: EXAMPLES OF RESEARCH'S INFLUENCE ON POLICY PROCESSES

As part of the online exchange, sharing and discussion, several concrete examples of research's influence on policy processes were posed.

- A participant introduced ODI's RAPID programme and the 'Research into Use' (RIU) programme. While RAPID has been running for a number of years and has resulted in a wealth of outputs, cases and findings, RIU was established in July 2006. This effort aims to better integrate the supply 'push' and demand 'pull' elements of national and regional 'innovation systems', and through an emphasis on "information markets" aims to pay attention to both the demand and supply sides.
<http://www.researchintouse.com/>
- A participant introduced Healthlink's website, which includes successful examples of research informing practice. This work is part of a

"Monitoring & evaluation communicating research group" which has reviewed different cases of M&E in research communication. Among the interesting case studies which can be consulted on the website are the following: Shared Care, Burkina Faso; World Wildlife Federation (WWF), People and Plants Initiative (PPI); Lao Fisheries; Panos Evaluation of Relay Programme, Southern Africa and; SciDev.Net Evaluation. The website emphasizes that as research is being increasingly recognized and valued, more attention to, and funds for, effective communication strategies between policy makers, practitioners, researchers and communities become available. http://www.healthlink.org.uk/we-do/network_me2.html

- Reference was also made to a study of 150 policy makers where attention was placed on learning how they understand and access evidence. The linked site states: "*The ICD Knowledge Sharing and Learning Programme* focuses on processes that engage policy makers. The initial stages of the programme, which included a scoping study, have shown that information and communication needs of policy makers go beyond the provision of evidence. There is a need to engage policy makers and enable them to use the evidence to inform policy." http://www.healthlink.org.uk/we-do/comms_icd.html

TWO-WEEKS INTO THE DISCUSSION

Dear all,

We thank-you for your emails! The following is a summary of the inputs from the first two weeks, following by a third question for next week.

In the first reaction to (...) this discussion, A. mentioned that action-research and other participatory approaches to development are without any doubt the way to go, and that large development organizations will only modify their policies using "evidence" if it fits to justify changes that have already been decided. He then underlined the trend whereby development agencies balk at funding participatory communication approaches but have no reservations to fund mass media campaigns. A. noted that no matter how good we are at showing what works and what doesn't work, the high-level decisions on policies are mediated by politics.

Two cases were shared that serve as interesting examples:

D. brought our attention to the importance of participatory research that not only informs adaptive policy but also authenticates it and follows-up on the policy in place. In other words, besides looking at the gap between research and policy, there is a consequent need to examine whether there is also a gap between the policy and the practice of its implementation.

Her experience focuses on the case of participatory technology development (PTD) in the context of farmer field schools (FFS). She argued that in many cases the 'direction' of participatory processes is predetermined by the project and its objectives, but shared interesting examples of innovations by farmers which were not directly related to the main objectives of the farmer field schools. D. concluded that PTD contributed to a situation where farmers were more willing to try things out -a field level example of how a policy of FFS is yielding relevant outcomes on the ground.

C. shared the experience of HelpAge International (<http://www.helpage.org>) in Moldova and in Kyrgyzstan, where programmes were developed on the basis of highly participatory needs assessment processes that sought out the voices of some of the 'least OK' older people. HelpAge organised training in participatory project management, financial management, fundraising and evidence-based advocacy /media training (with accompanying seed monies). The work led to direct evidence-based advocacy at international conferences. C. then listed some of the key factors that made this capacity-development effort work, which involved ensuring that our own commitment to the belief that people living in poverty really do have the capacity to achieve things for themselves is demonstrated through our own actions. She further commented on the need to reach out to the 'Not OK/least OK' community members in order to demonstrate this belief. This is done through: helping them speak for themselves and repeating rather than interpreting what they may say; setting up opportunities for policy makers to see positive things that people in poverty are doing for themselves; helping the poor develop specific models that the government can support; and again, facilitating their ability to speak for themselves by investing in (accurate and dedicated) translators..

(...)

We would like to invite you to continue identifying examples of where and how researchers have used communication to engage with policy makers. We are also curious to hear your views and ideas on how researchers have coped with the "politics" of the situation in some of these examples, and to focus on identifying some possible factors that could explain their success or failure.

Best wishes,

Ricardo Ramirez Wendy Quarry Niels Keijzer

As the online discussion progressed, contributions built on each other and led to a growing body of knowledge. Highlights include:

- *Action-research and other participatory approaches* to development are undoubtedly the way to go. Available examples show that large development organizations often only modify their policies using "evidence" if it fits to justify changes that have already been decided.
- No matter how good development researchers (in a broad sense) are at showing what works and what doesn't work, the *high-level decisions on policies are mediated by politics*.
- There was a difference of opinion among participants on whether and how communicators and researchers need to engage with policymakers. It was suggested that *the process of bridging the gap between policy and research is deeply political*, and that the packaging of the research 'message' is only a part of the issue. A case from a government initiative in Afghanistan was shared to illustrate the related difference between the rhetoric and practice of development policies that can often be observed. This in turn underlines the *need for increasing the understanding of the dynamics of policy formulation and implementation in different contexts*.
- *The relationship between research and policy is neither linear nor causal, in that it is influenced by many different (f)actors*. For example, competition between stakeholders that try to sell different interpretations of the same evidence to policy makers; lack of connections between the timetables and timings of policy makers and researchers; or incoherence between communicated evidence, intuition, previous commitments and mass media communications.
- Even if politics dominate policymaking, there is still a need for good evidence that is effectively communicated.
- Effective communication of research often builds on *existing relationships of trust with policy makers*, which provide the building block for more critical engagement.
- Besides looking at the gap between research and policy, there is a subsequent need to examine whether *there is also a gap between policy and the practice of its implementation*.
- There is a certain degree of understanding about how policy makers access 'evidence' on communication and development, and moreover some useful studies are available, but *there is a need to 'demystify' the policy-making process further*.
- 'We' researchers can improve how we 'communicate' our work, but we

also need to know what -if any- communication methods and mechanisms policy makers put in place to track what 'we' do.

- Different organisations and initiatives that work to further some of these issues were mentioned (among others the IDRC, Healthlink WorldWide, ODI, The Research into Use Program, INCORE, and IIED). Many of the efforts by these organisations and initiatives go beyond the notion of research communication as a unidirectional process between two disconnected groups of stakeholders, and operationalise some of the issues discussed into action.
- In situations where there is a need for more open-ended and learning-oriented approaches to research, the way such processes are funded should be adjusted accordingly. Funding arrangements that require the grantees to specify their actions and desired results in advance could work against a multi-actor approach to research where the emphasis is on process rather than outputs. In other words, innovative approaches to research should not be supported by a funding mechanism that would implicitly still consider communication as a uni-directional process between disconnected groups of stakeholders.
- During the discussion, a rather broad understanding of 'research' was used, encompassing a wide range of activities be it by grassroots organisations or by universities. It was generally felt that research should primarily serve the development of societies, rather than the development of science per se, since something that is interesting from a scientific point of view could have little social relevance (e.g. highly technical epidemiological research in a context in which there is hardly an operating primary health sector).

Some less familiar approaches and examples were also shared, including:

- The use of more interdisciplinary, multi-actor research teams in natural resource management, teams that also involve 'end-users' of the topic under study;
- The experience of the Directorate-General for International Cooperation in the Netherlands, where the bridging between research and policy became an active in-house knowledge-management effort²;
- The role of collaborative learning as the central thrust for innovation.

REMAINING QUESTIONS AT THE END OF THE FORUM

Dear all:

As this discussion comes to a close, we have not only a good 'harvest' of

ideas, but also a better view of some of the remaining issues and questions. (...) In this message, we (...) propose two remaining questions.

1: What communication and information management approaches do we know of where the complex relationship between evidence and policy is explicitly harnessed? What do these approaches look like, how do they differ from more unidirectional communication approaches, at what levels do they work best, and what are some of the necessary skills for those involved?

2: If the need to make interaction and communication between researchers and policy makers more effective is accepted at a theoretical level, what examples do we have of a more balanced and healthy relationship between the two? How can we characterize such possible kinds of more mutually productive relationships to help people visualize how they could learn how to work differently?

We would like to thank you all for participating in this discussion, and hope that we will also continue our exchanges on this important topic when it features in future Pelican discussions.

Best wishes,

Ricardo, Wendy and Niels

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As outlined above, the discussion generated a shared harvest of ideas and experiences on the one hand, and a series of insights based on the group's reflections on their own practice and knowledge.

Another relevant outcome of the discussion that must be highlighted is the fact that the initial questions proposed, which were quite concrete and contained, evolved into a refined set of questions, more oriented towards comparative analysis and bridging the distance between theory and actual practice and better communicating information.

Given that the vast majority of the members of this online-forum do not work on the 'research-policy gap' on a daily basis, there was a need for pro-active facilitation of the discussion process. This involved quite a lot of 'prodding' of potential contributors to the discussion as well as input by the facilitators themselves, in the form of ideas and suggested points of views and examples in order to continuously feed the discussion.

As is described in more detail in an earlier article in *Glocal Times* about the Pelican Initiative³, the professional realities of many people who work in the field of development cooperation make it difficult for them to

participate actively in inter-organisational networks that drive on voluntarism rather than institutional commitments and deadlines.

Nevertheless, many online fora continue to be active over time, with growing numbers of members who make use of the networks' communication in different ways. Summarizing and making available major lessons from these discussions is therefore important for those members of networks who only occasionally find time to follow the communication process, as well as for other people who prefer to learn through means other than email discussions. This article represents a contribution at that level.

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1 The Pelican Initiative, started in January 2005, is an online network that brings together a growing community of over 370 development practitioners, evaluation specialists, researchers and policy makers from all parts of the world to explore issues, share experiences, ideas and all kinds of information related to learning and communication for development. See <http://www.dgroups.org/groups/pelican/> for more information.

2 See <http://www.km4dev.org/journal/index.php/km4dj/article/viewFile/75/130> for more information.

3 See <http://www.glocaltimes.k3.mah.se/viewarticle.aspx?articleID=116&issueID=14>

