

Converting Policy Research into Policy Decisions: The Role of Communication and the Media

Klaus von Grebmer

A slightly different version of this paper will appear as: von Grebmer, Klaus. "Converting Policy Research into Policy Decisions: The Role of Communication and the Media" In S.C. Babu and A. Gulati, editors. *Economic Reforms and Food Security in South Asia: The Role of Trade and Technology*. The Haworth Press, Binghamton, NY. Forthcoming.

A major challenge in achieving food security in any given developing country is addressing the dichotomy between academic research and policy decision-making. The work that researchers conduct often does not reach policymakers because of inadequate and inappropriate policy communication. The link between research and decision-making systems remains weak. This paper explores the strategies for effective policy communication and provides some suggestions on how policy researchers can reach policymakers and the media to enhance the impact of their findings.

Competence in research and communications leads to impact

Policy research is not an end in itself. It is financed and undertaken to contribute to the progress of mankind and this honorable goal can only be achieved if the results of the research are communicated to policymakers and to those who influence them, i.e. the media. For research to have an impact outside academic circles, researchers have to leave their ivory tower. State-of-the-art research needs state-of-the-art communications to achieve impact.

Research on the production, distribution, and consumption of food can affect policy action in different ways. Results can:

- confirm the appropriateness of policy actions taken
- indicate that policy actions are needed to reduce risks/costs or increase benefits
- show in advance the probable outcomes of alternative policies
- synthesize information on how other policymakers have coped with an issue
- alert policymakers to major threats.

The right information in the right form at the right time

In general, the needs of policymakers are simple: they want the right information, in the right form, at the right time. But what sounds like a truism is difficult and sometimes cumbersome to put into practice. Consumers of research results are not alike; their communication needs can differ tremendously. The right form in which to convey information depends on a policymaker's background, perspective, and political context. But policymakers do have a common preference: they are more likely to read research results and policy implications that are timely and clearly and succinctly presented.

The right time depends very often on what stage the policymaking process is in. In general terms the policymaking process can be divided into eight stages:

1. Developing the policy agenda
2. Identifying the specific objectives and policy options
3. Evaluating the options
4. Advancing recommendations
5. Building a consensus
6. Legislation
7. Implementation
8. Policy evaluation and impact assessment.

Plainly, research results that feed into the process during stages 1-4 are likely to have the best chance of finding their way into the consensus-building, legislation, and implementation stages.

Very often, when research results are published, policymakers find them indigestible. This is unfortunate but understandable because the results have been written for a different target group, namely other researchers. All researchers have to document in a detailed way the scientific methods with which they obtain their results. It is their fundamental ethical obligation to rigorously examine and publish the results and methodology of reported research. Researchers' commitment to objectivity and disciplinary and scientific practice also obliges them to use and describe the latest scientific methods. This is in fact how science corrects mistakes and ever more closely approximates truth and understanding. Relentless double-checking and independent third-party evaluations are the cornerstones of the scientific process.

Most policymakers, however, will not read lengthy research reports, especially when these are written in a language with a different target group in mind.

An academic institution that is not concerned about policy impact can be satisfied with the publication of a research report, but for the International Food Policy Research Institute, with its vision to develop "sustainable options for ending hunger and poverty," the challenge does not end with published research. Research reports have to be simplified and condensed in close cooperation with the researchers and presented in a way that is appealing to what we at IFPRI call the market segment of "insiders." This group includes, e.g., policy advisers who give their recommendations to policymakers, experts in the donor community, and any other group that has a professional interest in a research issue. The simplification and condensation process is not an easy task as many researchers hold the opinion that simplification and condensation are a threat to the "scientific appeal" of their published work.

The "translation process" has to go even further than simplification when we want to reach policymakers directly. Publications have to get and hold their attention otherwise policymakers will not bother to read them. Policymakers have to deal with a variety of issues, and several hundred documents pass over their desks daily. The increasingly scarce resource of time makes competition for their attention even stiffer. In order to attract and hold policymakers' attention, issues and findings have to be presented well. Research results that are easy to understand, that

take account of the political arena, and that offer immediate help in pending policy decisions will interest policymakers the most.

Research can influence the policy process if the information presented to the policymaker

- gives him/her a good understanding of the magnitude and dynamic of the problem at stake
- explains the causes of the problem (e.g. poverty is a function of ...; malnutrition is a function of ...)
- recognizes the political context, outlines the basic actions that can be taken, and indicates the outcome.

These are the important elements of “the right information in the right form at the right time.” Research results that could have improved political decisions and could have made a tremendous impact in reducing malnutrition and poverty are often of no value once the political process is well underway. As the Prussian military thinker Carl von Clausewitz once stated: “You can conquer back lost land, but not lost time.”

When research findings attract the attention of policymakers, they are more likely to be integrated into policy decisions, especially if they support political agendas in a timely fashion. Once findings lead to policy action, research has achieved its goal. It has had impact for the benefit of the poor.

Contrary to this approach, which is cognizant of the policymakers’ needs, some people still promote the “container theory” of communication. This theory assumes an ideal situation: a “sender” packs the information he/she wants to convey into a container and passes it on to a “receiver” who unpacks it and immediately understands the full content. Companies whose presidents communicated with their staff in this way have gone bankrupt and political leaders who followed these principles either succeeded as dictators with a lack of a sense of reality or worked themselves out of a job. It is important that research results and the basic concepts behind them are explained clearly, and reinforced on a person-to-person basis with ample room for dialogue and discussion with policymakers.

Reaching out to the media

There is another important approach to conveying research results to policymakers, and that is via the media. Once the mass media take up an issue, the likelihood that policymakers will become interested in it increases dramatically. If a policy issue attains a high public profile, dealing with it generally boosts the personal or party profile of the policymakers involved. Furthermore, since policymakers read and listen to influential news outlets, IFPRI research that gets prominent news coverage will reach policymakers that we may not reach otherwise.

To get the mass media to take up a food policy issue, it has to be inherently attractive to the media or it has to be presented in a way that makes it attractive.

To increase the likelihood that issues and research findings make it into the media we have to meet and satisfy the needs of this particular market.

Inherently attractive topics for the mass media include politics, health, sex, and sports. The likelihood of news coverage increases when information is sensationalistic or deviates from the norm. It further increases when information is fresh and media outlets are first in line to report it. Competition among the media for audiences compels them to search for material that is interesting, surprising, or controversial, in short “newsworthy.”

No one will read a newspaper or watch television that reports “All flights to and from our capital have arrived on time today, our government is doing a great job and all our political parties are just fine.” A truism in journalism school is that a “Dog bites man” story will rarely get attention, whereas a “Man bites dog” story would easily get it.

If research results on food policy issues are not new or surprising, the likelihood that they are going to make headlines in the media is low. But even if the research results are new and surprising, thorough marketing is necessary to get them into the media. The issue has to get the attention of reporters, raise their interest in the subject, and spark their desire to report about it. Therefore, research results have to be further condensed and simplified and have to be put into a media-friendly context: research on water issues is more likely to make headlines when there is a water crisis and heads of state are meeting to discuss the issue. Research on the importance of cocoa production in certain countries is not an interesting topic per se; however, if it can be placed in the context of high chocolate consumption on Valentine’s Day, the media are far more likely to pick it up.

The more the media report about an issue, the higher it will climb on the political agenda, and the higher it is on the political agenda the greater will be the impact achieved by research.

In times of tight budgets, several European and Asian countries have already cut their funding for international agricultural research or are considering doing so. Some of these cuts have had an easy ride in the political arena, because international food security has not been high on the national agenda. If the general public does not know about the tremendous benefits of agricultural research, and if many members of parliament do not know about them either, budget reductions will not meet heavy political resistance and can be engineered quite easily by a small but dedicated interest group. In the end, it is the poor in developing countries who will suffer from this failure to communicate research results.

To avoid this, communication to policymakers and the media must be effective. Armed with research results they find useful and understandable, policymakers are more likely to make decisions that contribute to the increase of national and international wealth and development. Effective communication of state-of-the-art research to policymakers and the media will help to ensure that decisions on food policy issues do not become prey to populism or irrationality.

Policymaking in any given developing country, remains ad hoc and does not fully use research-based information. This is partly due to the poor linkage between the policy research community and the decision makers. Developing appropriate communication skills among researchers and analysts will bridge this gap. The important role policy communication has in enhancing the poverty reducing impact of social sciences research can hardly be overemphasized.