EMBRACING POLITICAL ECONOMY TO ENHANCE POLICY INFLUENCE: LESSONS FROM PIM RESEARCH

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PIM SYNTHESIS BRIEF

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Introduction

An overarching goal of the CGIAR Research Program on Policies, Institutions, and Markets (PIM) has been to influence policy outcomes in ways that lead to agricultural transformation and economic inclusion. The technical quality of this research is well recognized (CAS Secretariat 2020). Yet, high-quality, rigorous research is not sufficient to achieve policy influence in any domain. Other factors may shape policy uptake – for instance, elections may alter policy priorities, ideological biases may hinder the acceptance of research findings, and vested interest groups may lobby against data-driven or evidence-informed recommendations. A political economy perspective allows for a more holistic and realistic understanding of how policies are determined by governments and which pathways are more viable for achieving development outcomes through policy change.

This synthesis brief reviews key aspects of the political economy dynamics of the policy process that have emerged from PIM research and discusses the various ways in which PIM researchers have navigated these dynamics to enhance the influence of their findings. In addition to reviewing publications, the author conducted in-

KEY MESSAGES

- Policy change is rarely achieved through high-quality research alone; political economy dynamics can constrain or facilitate policy change for agricultural transformation and economic inclusion.
- This brief reviews PIM research in multiple policy domains and across various geographic regions to provide a synthesis of experience with four dimensions that shape political economy environments.
- These four dimensions are: the nature of a policy, the interests of diverse agrifood system actors, the structure of political institutions, and the capacities and incentive systems within government bureaucracies.
- Being attuned to political economy dynamics can help researchers identify credible partners and engage in strategic outreach activities that increase the likelihood of policy influence.

terviews with researchers to gain insights on both successful and failed policy impact stories across Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and on the role that political economy factors played in these outcomes. The

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FIGURE 1: Key political economy factors for agrifood policy influence

framework presented in this note (Figure 1) aims to encourage researchers to be more cognizant of the broader political economy environment in which decisions are being made. This framework is structured around four key dimensions: nature of the policy, interests of agrifood system actors, political institutions, and bureaucratic governance. By taking these features into account, researchers can identify credible partners and pursue strategic outreach efforts that resonate with decision-makers.

The Political Economy Environment

Nature of the Policy

Different policies can have diverse implications and characteristics. For instance, some policies have distributive goals that benefit a concentrated constituency, such as conditional cash transfers or food relief intended only for the poor or food insecure. Others may have a regulatory rationale, such as seed safety or food safety laws that constrain the actions of a few to benefit the majority (Lowi 1972). Moreover, some policies, such as subsidies, cash transfers, and infrastruc-

ture investments, have much higher visibility to citizens, demonstrate impact in relatively shorter timeframes, and can be more easily attributed to the government than others (Batley and McLoughlin 2015). Considering the nature of a policy is useful because it delineates the range of winners and losers, supporters and opponents, and the range of institutions required for implementation.

For instance, high visibility policies tend to be favored by politicians who rely on citizen support to remain in office. By contrast, less visible goods and services, such as agricultural extension, tend to receive lower levels of public investment (Mogues and do Rosario 2016). The low visibility of agricultural extension reflects the fact that it involves the transfer of an intangible item, i.e., knowledge, its benefits are only evident in the longer-term, and attribution is difficult, since the benefits of extension advice can be undermined by bad weather, economic shocks, or improper implementation by smallholders (Anderson 2008). PIM-supported surveys of rural households in Ghana (Resnick 2021) and Nepal (Kyle et al. 2017) revealed that, despite low levels of access to extension services, those employed in

agriculture preferred greater government investment in roads, irrigation, and public works projects.

Relatedly, it can be difficult to gain traction among policymakers for complex, long-term, and/or multisectoral interventions. For example, in Bangladesh and India, PIM researchers examined the prospects for implementation of weather index-based crop insurance for smallholder farmers. However, this is a multifaceted initiative requiring an understanding of agricultural seasons, financial instruments, and risk management practices, and the potential benefits of such insurance products take significant time to materialize. In addition, the research in Bangladesh overlapped with the January 2014 elections, a period when the government was more focused on distributing subsidized seeds and fertilizers – more tangible products with immediate impact – to farmers. In India, the work coincided with the expansion of a politically high-profile national crops insurance scheme. Owing to these factors, the PIM analyses (Hill et al. 2019; Ward et al. 2020) had less impact on policy decisions than was anticipated.

Beyond the timeframe for impact and the complexity and visibility of policies, it also matters where a policy issue is located within the five key stages of the policy cycle—agenda setting, design, adoption, implementation, or evaluation.

The Kaleidoscope Model of Policy Change highlights which subset of factors appears most relevant for generating momentum at each of these stages (Resnick et al. 2018). The Model has been applied to multiple countries and food policy issues, including input subsidies, micronutrient interventions, and land governance, to show when and why research is more likely to be relevant for driving policy change and how it interacts with other dimensions of the policy system.

Interests of Agrifood System Actors

Just as policies are diverse, so are the interest groups in agrifood systems. These interest groups represent not just the traditional dichotomies between producers and consumers but also incorporate processors, wholesalers, and retailers, as well as many other public and private sector actors (Swinen 2015). In some countries and policy domains, viable coalitions exist among these actors, while in others, clear divides can emerge.

In Malawi, for example, maize export bans have been implemented and lifted several times since 2005 (Fuje and Pullabhotla 2020). PIM-supported research and dissemination events led by the International Food Policy Research Institute's Malawi Country Strategy Support Program over several years consistently showed that the export bans caused the government to lose revenue, pushed maize trade into the informal sector, and generally suppressed commercial cultivation of maize (e.g., Aragie et al. 2016; Edelman and Baulch 2016). One study suggested that Malawi lost between \$34 and \$95 million in revenue from the ban in the 2016/17 agricultural year alone (Gondwe and Baulch 2017). Along with key international donors, commercial farmers organizations, such as the National Association of Smallholder Farmers and the Farmers Union of Malawi, have questioned these bans (Chitsulo 2017). However, since the majority of Malawians are net buyers of maize and prefer the lower costs that typically emerge from oversupply, the export

ban was viewed as a way of mobilizing votes. The preferences of maize trading companies have been more varied, with some favoring the ban only when stocks are low and advocating for ban removals in surplus contexts (such as when a humanitarian crisis led to an influx of maize from Zambia in 2017). For instance, some maize trading companies with strong political connections lobbied for removing the 2017 ban to allow them to export surplus stocks; the ban was lifted in October of that year, then reinstated in March 2018 after traders had sold their stocks. The maize export ban was lifted again in March 2021, when good weather and an expansion of the input subsidy program led to increased maize production and falling prices.

Similar to maize in Malawi, baladi bread plays a central role in the political economy of food security in Egypt. For decades, the Egyptian government has routinely subsidized both this bread and other food staples to keep prices low for consumers, and these subsidies constitute a large share of the government's budget. PIM-supported research contributed to reforms led by the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade to encourage dietary diversity by broadening food subsidies to a wider range of goods (Ecker et al. 2016). Further PIM analysis suggested that reducing the number of beneficiaries and shifting from subsidies to cash transfers to better target the program to the poor would improve government

savings, enhance economic growth, and reduce poverty (El-Enbaby et al. 2019). However, these recommendations received less traction among policymakers given how important the subsidies are for the poor, how politically entrenched the program has become, and the range of vested interests involved in the program. For instance, wheat farmers often are paid slightly more than the world price as an incentive to keep producing wheat. The Ministry did start to eliminate several hundred thousand beneficiaries from the list, but further decisions were postponed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some interest groups in the agrifood system are not immediately apparent. In both Pakistan and Uganda, the military is an important group in the agriculture sector, creating challenges for gaining the political will for needed reforms. In Pakistan, fertilizer subsidies promote the use of urea (i.e., nitrogen) over other nutrients such as phosphorus and potassium, to the detriment of the environment. The natural gas that urea producers use is also subsidized through gas prices that are significantly lower than those charged to other industries. Despite PIM research showing the high costs of such policies for agricultural productivity, the environment, and the national budget (Ali et al. 2016), policymakers have been unwilling or unable to address market concentration and rent-seeking behavior in the fertilizer industry. This is especially so since Fauji Fertilizer, one of the two main urea producers in Pakistan and the largest beneficiary of the subsidy, is part of a large foundation run by serving and retired army officers, which was established as an incentive to keep the military from intervening in electoral politics (Staniland et al. 2020).

In Uganda, responsibility for agricultural extension was ceded by the National Agricultural Advisory Services to the army in 2014 under Operation Wealth Creation (OWC), which is coordinated by the President's brother (Tapscott 2021). Under OWC, logistical challenges are assumed to be the main barrier to technology adoption rather than information inefficiencies

among farmers; this leads to a disproportionate emphasis on procuring and distributing subsidized inputs (Van Campenhout et al. 2018). This emphasis further supports efforts by the regime to attract votes in rural areas (Kjaer and Joughin 2019). In this context – and despite strong relationships between CGIAR Centers and the Ministry of Agriculture – innovative PIM analyses showing how extension could be improved through ICT-enabled approaches (Van Campenhout et al. 2021) have thus far received little uptake in the public sector.

Finally, actors external to a country can also exert influence on domestic policy processes. For instance, in Guatemala, PIM work has demonstrated that community forestry concessions established in the Maya Biosphere Reserve contribute both to ecological sustainability and to improved socioeconomic performance of local communities (Stoian et al. 2018). However, because the region is near the famous Mirador Mayan site, a US archaeologist who is politically well-connected in Guatemala aspires to transform the area into a tourist destination, including building a railway and depriving communities of their rights to sustainably harvest timber. A bill, known as the Mirador-Calakmul Basin Act of 2019, was even submitted to the US Senate to finance this undertaking. As several of the concessions will soon be up for renewal and therefore vulnerable to revocation, the continuous provision of evidence-based analysis to Guatemalan policymakers about the benefits of the concession system remains critically important.

Political Institutions

Political institutions – characterized by different levels of electoral competition, degree of decentralization, and party competition – strongly interact with the nature of policies and determine which groups' interests are favored by policymakers. For instance, PIM research in an autocratic but decentralized setting – Ethiopia – found that, despite being a lower visibility pub-

lic good, investment in agricultural extension at the local level was larger than investment in other services that are a higher priority for citizens, such as drinking water. According to Kosec and Mogues (2020), this is because investment in agricultural extension contributes to higher agricultural output, from which local and central government officials can extract rents, while provision of drinking water does not generate a public sector revenue stream. Also focusing on Ethiopia, Kosec et al. (2020) further find that political institutions can exert differential impacts on interest groups. They observe that men, more than women, had greater engagement with local government officials as a result of the country's decentralization, resulting in men having greater access than women to agricultural public services.

In democracies, party competition further influences which constituencies are favored or marginalized by policymakers. For example, PIM-supported analysis examining patterns of crackdowns on informal traders in African cities between 2000 and 2016 (Resnick 2019) has shown that these forms of violence are less common when mayors are elected rather than appointed, when traders are a critical constituency for a mayor's re-election, and when cities have exclusive authority to regulate vending following administrative decentralization.

PIM studies further argue that when political parties are weak, which is common in many young democracies, political competition can worsen the provision of public goods. Using the case of Mali, Gottlieb and Kosec (2019) found that the legislative bargaining process required for raising money and procuring labor and equipment for public works projects is impeded by the high number of coalitions that emerge from the country's weak and fragmented party system. Because these multiple coalitions need to agree on spending and procurement decisions, bargaining inefficiencies emerge that ultimately hinder construction and improvement of health clinics, schools, water boreholes, and roads.

Bureaucratic Governance

Finally, the capacities, incentives, and preferences of actors within the bureaucracy make a significant difference in how and why policies are implemented (or not). Economically beneficial policies may require a shift in jurisdictional mandates that is not politically accepted. For instance, in Egypt, cash transfers fall under the mandate of the Ministry of Social Solidarity, and a shift from food subsidies to cash transfers would require a loss in mandate and resources for the Ministry of Supply and Internal Trade. As a possible first step for closer collaboration, the two ministries recently started contributing to a joint social protection database. In Kenya, the priorities

for value-chain investments identified through PIM-supported economywide modeling analysis have been questioned by the Ministry of Agriculture because the recommended prioritization would result in unequal allocation of resources to the ministerial departments that oversee the different commodities.

A related dynamic emerges in PIM-supported research by Suhardiman et al. (2019) on land governance in Lao PDR. The authors highlight how institutional fragmentation across multiple ministries and departments that all have a mandate over land administration – including agriculture and forestry as well as natural resources and environment – have resulted in each ministry advocating for its own surface area targets to be incorporated into the country's National Master Plan on Land Allocation. The PIM analysis finds that, collectively, meeting all these targets would result in only 11 percent of the country's land being available for infrastructure, urban areas, manufacturing, mining, hydropower, and national defense zones. The researchers argue this is because more targets allow each ministry to amass more resources in the development budget, which elevates each ministry's profile.

Hierarchies and established modes of operation within the public administration are also important. In many countries, public servants have minimal policy discretion and must defer to ministerial authority before any decision can be made. In addition to impeding quick decision-making, this can derail efforts to integrate PIM research findings into the policy process, especially when there is frequent turnover at the ministerial level. For instance, between 2008, when IFPRI's Malawi country program began, and 2020, the country's minister of agriculture has changed nine times, with a concurrent churning of directors and permanent secretaries. Using the case of Zambia, Resnick et al. (2019) have shown that rapid and often unexpected turnover of civil servants within local government also affects service provision and bureaucratic morale.

Implications for Policy Engagement

Successful modalities for policy engagement to enhance research impact can be shaped by the political economy factors described above. PIM researchers have used lessons learned about these dynamics to inform their choice of local partners and outreach strategies.

Credible Partnerships

The choice of credible partners has long been recognized as an essential ingredient for enhancing researchers' influence on local and national policy processes (Court and Young 2006). PIM research on collective action for natural resource management in India has gained growing resonance with policymakers thanks to a partnership with the Foundation for Ecological Security (FES) (e.g., Meinzen-Dick et al. 2018). Over a decade ago, FES recognized that working at multiple levels (block, district, state, and federal levels) was essential to effectively secure rights to the commons. By building strong multilevel governance relationships and staying closely attuned to the country's political environment, FES successfully advanced this agenda by navigating the policy priorities of successive government administrations.

Similarly, in Guatemala, the partnership between the Center for International Forest Research (CIFOR) and a well-respected local organization, the Association of Forest Communities in Petén (ACOFOP), has fostered trust from the local communities. Established in 1997, ACOFOP has played a key role in negotiating with the government, industry, and environmental organizations to create community forest concessions. Recognizing that timber concession renewals, which fall under the mandate of the appointed National Council for Protected Areas, can be politically contentious, ACOFOP has striven to support concession renewals in advance of the recent government turnover to ensure the continuity of the initiative.

By contrast, in Bangladesh, the PIM research activity on weather index-based crop insurance described earlier in this note (Hill et al. 2019) was carried out in partnership with a local organization that lacked sufficient clout with the government at the time. Along with factors related to the complexity of the policy discussed earlier, this contributed to a low level of government uptake of the findings.

Strategic Outreach

Beyond building relationships with credible partners, outreach to policy actors requires a careful reading of the political context. In Malawi, frequent turnover of ministers and senior bureaucrats has prompted PIM researchers to adopt a scattershot approach to outreach, striving to convey empirical findings to multiple influencers within the government, farmers associations, donors, and the media. However, in a more politically centralized environment such as Egypt, working closely with the relevant minister is key for policy change. In some cases, outreach to the most important actors in a particular agrifood policy domain, such as the military in Pakistan or Uganda, may be impossible or taboo within the broader development community.

Along with the targeted audience for outreach, attention should be given to the timing for sharing policy recommendations from research. Economic circumstances or the timing within the electoral and budget cycle may impact the degree to which policymakers are amenable to change. In Egypt, despite the potential cost savings from transitioning from food subsidies to cash transfers, researchers chose to recommend better targeting of subsidies to the poor; this choice was made because, at the time of the research, the combined effects of a currency devaluation, a cut to energy subsidies, and the introduction of a value-added tax all likely contributed to increased poverty and reduced the political feasibility for further reforms. In Malawi, research on the negative impacts of the maize export bans resonated more strongly with policy-

makers in 2021 than in previous years due to an increase in domestic maize stocks after a bumper harvest in the 2020/21 farming season.

Iterative learning allows for refinement of outreach strategies over time. In Peru, for example, PIM researchers recognized that the committees in charge of managing naturally protected areas – a kind of multistakeholder forum – were not viewed as equally effective by the different participants. Through the “How are we doing?” tool, and specifically a version co-designed with, and adopted by, the Protected Areas Service (SER-NANP), forum participants have the means to acknowledge power asymmetries and feelings of exclusion, enabling the organizers to be more intentional about how to design the committees in a more equitable manner (Sarmiento Barletti et al. 2020; SERNANP-CIFOR 2020). In Guatemala, due to the politically contested nature of the community forest concession system, researchers are gradually recognizing that providing scientific evidence is not sufficient to gain policy traction and that efforts should also focus on getting the policy community to believe the evidence in the face of contradictory discourses from advocates of mass tourism development. To this end, a better understanding of how such counternarratives are created and disseminated is crucial.

Conclusions

As noted by Cairney (2016, 7), “many contemporary discussions of policy making begin with the problematic belief in the possibility and desirability of an evidence-based policy process free from the worst excesses of politics.” PIM research demonstrates that this belief is indeed problematic and that embracing political economy considerations is necessary to understand which policies are likely to be prioritized and implemented. As shown by the review of several PIM studies in this note, PIM has been a major contributor to the CGIAR’s portfolio of political economy studies on agricultural services, public goods, and rural development more generally.

Across multiple policy domains, from land to agricultural inputs to social protection and trade, there is a growing recognition that the uptake and scaling of technical findings are rarely, if ever, based on assessments of economic costs and benefits alone. Rather, such decisions are, inter alia, conditioned by the nature of the policies, the preferences of disparate interest groups across the food system, prevailing political institutions, and bureaucratic governance. Being aware of these factors can help researchers make choices about partnerships and outreach modalities that have the highest likelihood of leading to desirable policy changes.

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