Policy Studies Organization

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Winter 2009

- RAPID Knowledge: ‘Bridging Research and Policy’ in International Development at the Overseas Development Institute

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/diane_stone/5/

“RAPID Knowledge:

‘Bridging Research and Policy’ in International Development”

Diane Stone

Abstract

Numerous organizations advocate the need to ‘bridge research and policy’. Donors such as philanthropic foundations, national social science funding regimes and international organizations have sought to improve knowledge utilization. Similarly, research consumers such as NGOs and government departments complain of research irrelevance for policy purposes. The concern of this paper is with ‘evidence informed policy’ within the field of international development in which the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), a London based think tank, forms the case study. Think tanks are important brokers in processes of ‘bridging research and policy’. Most think tanks are driven by the need to influence immediate political agendas but ODI has also developed organizational strategies of policy entrepreneurship that extend to longer term influence through creating human capital, building networks and engaging policy communities.

Key words: international development, think tanks, ‘bridging research and policy’
Introduction

In 2007, an independent research institute – the Overseas Development Institute – was named 'Think Tank of the Year' by Public Affairs News, the European political information, public affairs and policy communication magazine. On receiving the award, the Director said the Institute’s “research, policy advice and public affairs are all directed at a single aim: to inspire and inform policy and practice…”¹ The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) is one among many organizations that seek to ‘bridge research and policy’. Philanthropic foundations, national social science funding regimes, development agencies and international organizations have long sought to improve the use of development research in policy. Similarly, research consumers – such as NGOs and government departments – have bemoaned the lack of relevance of research disseminated by (social) scientists. As a consequence, some universities, think tanks and scholarly societies have initiated programs to go beyond research communication to promote knowledge utilization in policy processes.

This paper takes the Overseas Development Institute as a case study of research communication in international development policy.² Established in 1960, ODI is a London based think tank that is large by European standards. The Institute has extensive networks outside the UK. Like most think tanks, ODI seeks to inform policy:

> We expect researchers to be policy relevant in their work and to make sure that their findings reach policy makers in a form that is accessible and useful. We expect policy makers to find research-based evidence, to think about it, and to use it (Maxwell, 2005: ix).


² [www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk): Information has been drawn from ODI publications, its web-site as well as a participant observation in numerous ODI workshops and meetings from 2001 to 2007 and personal communication with the ODI and RAPID Directors. All web-site references in this paper were accessed on July 28th 2008.
ODI is distinctive among think tanks in having a dedicated programme on ‘Research and Policy In Development’ – RAPID. The objective of RAPID is to improve the communication and utilization of ODI research. For RAPID, research communication is about organizational strategies of policy entrepreneurship that start with immediate political agendas but extend to longer term influence through creating human capital, building networks and close engagement within policy communities.

The first section provides an overview of the knowledge utilization literature and various approaches to ‘bridge research and policy’. Rather than a dichotomisation of the separate worlds of (social) science research and that of politics and policy making, the paper argues that knowledge production and utilization is intimately bound with governance. Think tanks do not have the luxury of standing on the “academic sidelines” or ask questions “whether we can or should engage directly in the policy world or remain at a critical distance from it” (Tickner, 2006: 383). They must engage in dissemination and policy recommendation. For these organizations, it is a question of how to maintain a critical position within their engagements with the policy world.

The second section focuses on how ODI has translated its organization mission to inform international development policy into tools and practices of individual and organizational entrepreneurship. The Institute has also evolved towards seeking policy influence in global domains of decision making. The third section concentrates on RAPID. The case study illuminates the role of think tanks as interlocutors shaping the flow of expert knowledge.

1. The ‘Parallel Universes’ of Research and Policy

In common with other think tanks, ODI operates in a policy environment where donors want to see utility from their investment in research. Although figures are tentative, ODI estimates that “Northern and international sources provide around US $3 billion for international development research” (Court et al, 2005: 3). Given such an investment, some development
agencies have initiated work to evaluate and document the effectiveness of research. The World Bank commissioned an independent evaluation of its own research relevance (Banerjee et al, 2006) while UNESCO sponsors a long term programme on the transfer of social sciences research findings and data to decision-makers (Anon, 2004). Other reports have been produced by national development agencies such as Danida (2001), the International Development Research Council in Canada (Nielson, 2001) and the Swiss Commission for Research Partnerships with Developing Countries (Maselli et al, 2004).

Alongside these developments has been a mushrooming of research programmes and capacity building activities. In 2002, the Global Development Network (GDN), a worldwide federation of think tanks, initiated a five year ‘Bridging Research and Policy’ project. Other think tanks like the International Food Policy Research Institute (Ryan & Garrett, 2004) also place considerable emphasis on research-policy linkages. So too, the Researchers Alliance for Development (RAD) conducts a ‘Research to Policy’ international seminar series.

These initiatives attest to concern about communication between researchers and policy-makers. Both researchers and policy-makers might be accused of holding unrealistic expectations of the other. The Danish Commission on Development-Related Research summarised the perceptions of the two different communities: Researchers often consider that there is no political audience for their work despite the important observations they make and policy relevant explanations they develop. By contrast, policy-makers believe that what researchers contribute does not resonate with the needs of policy because it is irrelevant or too esoteric and theoretical: ‘… one group feels nobody listens, the other feels their opposite numbers have little to say’ (Danida, 2001: 9). This sentiment is echoed at ODI:

Researchers find it hard, often impossible, to abstract sufficiently from their case material to be useful, and to avoid equivocation. Policy makers find it hard, often impossible, either to read research or make it count in the political cauldron of policy information. Both sides struggle with a shortage of time, under-funding, information overload, poor channels of communication and competing priorities (Maxwell, 2005: iv).

Researchers and policy makers operate with different values, language, time-frames, reward systems and professional affiliations to such an extent that they live in separate worlds (Nielson, 2001: 5). As the RAPID director puts it: “they live in parallel universes” (Young, 2005: 727).

Supply and Demand

RAPID researchers have identified different explanations as to why research is or is not utilized in policy making (Stone and Maxwell, 2005). These perspectives are organized into three general categories: (i) supply-side, (ii) demand-led and (iii) political explanations.

The first set of explanations identifies problems in the flow of data, analysis and information into the policy-makers world. Supply-side explanations focus on inadequate conditions to ‘push’ research into policy domains and exhibit at least three strands of argument:

1. The public goods approach argues there is insufficient research and researchers for policy planning because of inadequate incentives to fund the production of research. This logic is used to justify public support to education and in development research to the World Bank as the “natural candidate for taking the lead in providing these intellectual public goods” (Banerjee et al, 2006: 15). The use of research in policy once it is generated tends to be assumed. In other words an increase in supply will generate its own demand.

2. Rather than a lack of trained researchers, there is lack of access to research, data and analysis for both researchers and policy makers. Although there is a wealth of research
and analysis available, there is differential or inequitable access to knowledge. Developing country scholars often complain of the difficulties in gaining research resources. Recommendations to improve both access to and the diffusion of knowledge—often through improved communications technology—follow.

3. The supply of research can be flawed due to the limited policy awareness of researchers about the policy process. Researchers can be poor communicators. Research recommendations can be impossible to implement because political realities (such as cost-effectiveness) are not addressed. Overcoming this lack of understanding requires researchers to study the policy process, to find approaches to demonstrate the relevance of research, and to build methodologies for evaluating research relevance (Ryan & Garrett, 2004).

Improved research communication and policy entrepreneurship will amount to nought without a receptive political audience that ‘pulls’ in research. A further set of explanations outline why the ‘pull’ of policy makers is weak.

4. Research uptake is thwarted by the ignorance of politicians or over-stretched bureaucrats. Research is a lengthy process, whereas political problems usually require immediate attention. Politicians are driven by immediate political concerns and often employ information from trusted sources—usually in-house or close to the centre of power. They may be unaware of cutting-edge research. Even researchers based inside policy organization face resistance from operational staff and their Boards (Banerjee et al., 2006: 19). This is a political issue but also a barrier to consumption that requires improvement in governmental capacity to absorb research.

5. There can be a tendency for anti-intellectualism in government. In other words, “too many policy makers still think of research as the opposite of action rather than of ignorance” (Ahmed, 2005: 768). Albeit varying from one country or regime to the next, anti-intellectualism can undermine the use of research in policy-making when the policy process itself is riddled with a fear of the critical power of ideas. More extreme
conditions (such as the censorship and oppression of researchers) are not uncommon in some developing or undemocratic states.

6. Problems arise from the politicisation of research. Through selective use, decontextualisation, or misquotation, research findings are easy to abuse. Decision-makers face incentives to do this to reinforce their policy positions (or prejudices) as well as to legitimise decision outcomes. The social and political context is important to understanding uptake of research. Institutional arrangements, the nature of regime in power, and the culture of public debate (or lack of it) impinge on what is considered ‘relevant’ or ‘useful’ knowledge.

The difficulties encountered by both researchers and policy-makers – presented in binary terms of supply and demand – contribute to the making of the ‘bridge’ metaphor. These accounts focus on clearly determined sets of producers (researchers) and a one-way traffic to consumers (policy-makers). Communication gaps can be resolved by building bridges between the policy and research worlds (see also Jacobson, 2007: 117-18).

A third set of perspectives complicate the simple notion of building communication bridges. Referred to as ‘political models’ (Nielsen, 2001) or as ‘social epistemology (Jacobson, 2007), these explanations emphasise the close or embedded character of knowledge in policy.

7. There is a societal disconnection of both researchers and decision-makers from those for whom the research is about or intended, to the extent that effective implementation is undermined. In particular, decision-makers are more likely to use internal sources of information. External sources of research are likely to be discounted. In some scenarios, ‘group think’ may result in government and an ‘ivory tower’ culture in research communities. Yet, even where there is a constructive dialogue between decision-makers and experts, there may be joint technocratic distance from the general public. Counter-intuitively, ‘good social science’ is ‘both social and scientific’ (Anon, 2004: 7).

8. Rather than direct policy impact, there are wider domains of research relevance. A group of researchers may have huge impact on the media or among non-governmental
organizations but little or no input to policy. Likewise, “new institutional developments associated with networking, alliances, partnerships, “knowledge agencies” and organizational learning” mean that international agencies like UNRISD engage with research communities in different and evolving formats.\(^4\) In more gradual processes called ‘enlightenment’ (Weiss, 1991), “one should not just think about how to influence the current generation of politicians, but also how one creates another generation of politicians who have a commitment to research and policy rigour embedded in them” (Taylor, 2005: 755).

9. Building research to policy bridges does not necessarily resolve conflict over policy choices. Instead, the improved flow of knowledge can highlight the contested validity of knowledge(s). Researchers disagree (Kanbur, 2001). There is scientific competition. Reference to ‘research’ does not signify a single body of thinking, data or literature that is consensually recognised and accepted. To the contrary, there are struggles between different ‘knowledges’ or what are often described as ‘discourses’, ‘worldviews’ and ‘regimes of truth’. There are also deeper questions about what is knowable? Attention is then focused on different epistemologies and ‘ways of knowing’ (Leach et al, 2005).

_Bridging Research and Policy_

How research-policy dynamics are interpreted has implications for the methods adopted to improve the relationship. If the problem is located on the supply side, then approaches to improve research communication and dissemination are adopted. This could involve initiatives such as the establishment of research reporting services (on web-sites and traditional media); and training activities for researchers such as media workshops and exercises in public speaking; how to write policy briefs and so forth. The product of the researcher is not usually in a format that can be used by policy makers. Consequently, an

intermediary — a ‘research broker’ or ‘policy entrepreneur’ — with a flair for interpreting and communicating the technical or theoretical work is needed. This is usually an individual but sometimes an organization such as think tank or a network plays a similar role.

A common position in ‘supply-side’ perspectives is that initiative and action comes from the research end in efforts to customise research for policy uses. The consumers tend to be portrayed as relatively passive absorbers of research. The GDN motto – ‘better research\better policy\better world’ – is indicative of this linear rationalistic thinking. The focus on making development research useful, and researchers better communicators, has seen the creation of numerous guides, tool kits and capacity building workshops that are “rather prescriptive and cookbook-like in form and content” (Jacobson, 2007: 120).

If the problem of research uptake is located on the demand side, as in points 4-7, then strategies focus on improved awareness and absorption of research inside government, expanding research management expertise and developing a culture of ‘policy learning’. Measures that encourage official agencies to become ‘intelligent consumers’ of research include: establishment of in-house policy evaluation units; research sabbaticals for civil servants, the creation of civil service colleges; in-house training on ‘evidence based policy’. Such measures often assume that knowledge utilization in government is a technical problem to be solved with improved knowledge management.

Rather than developing appropriate research dissemination or knowledge management techniques, political models stress the need for long term engagement of researchers with policy makers that create common understandings and identities. This implies developing practices that take researchers beyond brokering research in a one-way direction and allow a more productive exchange between decision-makers and implementers on what does and does not work in the transition from theory to practice. Practices could include mechanisms that bring researchers into government such as through internships, co-option onto advisory
committees and official patronage of policy research networks as well as broader practices that encourage societal interaction. These approaches see knowledge-in-policy as a more organic process and focus on the social construction of policy problems. The emphasis is on shared problem definition in communities of researchers, policy makers and stakeholders.

These approaches do not separate the world of research and the world of policy making but see knowledge and power as inter-related discourses. The very idea of ‘bridging research and policy’ is considered a false one as it presents a biased view of two autonomous communities. As a consequence, there is less agonising in the third set of perspectives about the ‘weak link between research and policy’. Instead, research and policy are viewed as mutually constitutive in the sense that knowledge is power (Leach et al, 2005).

There is, however, a policy paradox. The political symbolism of positing a divide between policy and research communities is considerably more manageable in terms of project activity for think tanks, and in their public relations with partners and stakeholders. The perception of a ‘divide’ or ‘parallel universes’ establishes an agenda that can be translated into concrete capacity building initiatives, network initiatives or research communication projects – that is, building bridges. The bridge metaphor implies both instrumentality and linearity, with think tanks re-shaping knowledge usually in uni-directional movements from basic to applied science, from problem to solution, from abstract theorists to enlightened policy-makers. This approach is compounded by development agencies and foundations that wish to see tangible projects producing developmental results (for sound reasons of their public accountability).

2. The Overseas Development Institute and Policy Entrepreneurship

Established in 1960, the Overseas Development Institute is one of Britain’s oldest and largest in the booming London think tank community. Its activities are concerned with international development and humanitarian issues.
Our mission is to inspire and inform policy and practice which lead to the reduction of poverty, the alleviation of suffering and the achievement of sustainable livelihoods in developing countries. We do this by locking together high-quality applied research, practical policy advice, and policy-focused dissemination and debate. We work with partners in the public and private sectors, in both developing and developed countries.\(^5\)

Its mission statement is very much one of science communication and knowledge utilization. But the Institute is also a knowledge producer in its own right as well as being a consumer and synthesiser of academic and other sources of research. This is typical of a think tank.

There is little normative consensus – within think tanks just as much as in academe – of what the relationship between social science and decision making should be (Court & Maxwell, 2006: 5). There is also little agreement or incontrovertible evidence of when, where and why research does sometimes have some kind of impact. First, there is considerable dispute over the meaning of ‘policy’ and who is a policy maker. Within the ‘RAPID Framework’ a broad understanding of ‘policy maker’ is adopted rather than focusing narrowly on politicians in executive positions or senior civil servants. Accordingly, senior NGO opinion formers who are co-opted into international development policy communities are considered to have informal policy making roles as agenda setters.

Second, there are many unanswered questions as to the criteria of the ‘utilization’. Some would argue that ‘use’ means that research insights affected a decision. However, others might suggest that if research is given a serious hearing within policy circles, but not acted upon, then that also constitutes ‘use’. And if research has altered the way individuals and decision-making groups comprehend certain policy problems, or affected their world view, how is this to be known?

\(^5\)\hspace{1em}http://www.odi.org.uk/about.html
Third, there are significant methodological difficulties in establishing influence; that is, providing proof or evidence. The causal nexus is a very complicated one with numerous other contributory factors to the development of policies. Quantitative indicators tend to focus on the measurable and are less able to capture the intangible dimensions of knowledge influence. Qualitative evaluations – such as interviews and case studies – adopt ‘softer’ approaches that do not satisfy those with strong positivist preferences.

Fourth, what is to be evaluated? Should assessment be of specific items of research – such as a book, a data set, models – or an entire body of knowledge? The codified research product or the knowledge, expertise and research experience within the mind of a scholar or institutional memory of an institute? And is it the most excellent research that has impact, or the mediocre?

Contemporary analysts of think tanks are sceptical of think tanks exerting consistent direct impact on politics (see essays in Denham, 2004). Instead, they depict think tank policy influence and social relevance in their roles as agenda-setters who create policy narratives that capture the political and public imagination. For instance, the advocacy coalition model emphasises a long-term enlightenment function of research in altering policy orthodoxies (Lucarelli & Radaelli, 2004; also Burton, 2006). By contrast, discourse approaches emphasise the role of language and political symbolism in the definition and perception of policy problem. These analyses fall into the political models of knowledge utilization identified earlier.

Organizational pressures internal and external to Overseas Development Institute entail that the products of the RAPID programme is designed mainly around the first six perspectives. Indeed, the metaphor of the ‘bridge’ is a regular signifier in ODI book titles, journal articles, meeting series and podcasts.
‘Political explanations’ of the social construction of knowledge are also heard in RAPID workshops and publications but they are less amenable to project related activity or codification. Instead, these issues of power and meaning are discussed in workshops, in ‘corridor discussions’ and face-to-face meetings. Or they are found in ODI Working Papers on RAPID’s web-site. Notwithstanding the best efforts by ODI staff to incorporate procedures for deliberative processes with partners or a reflexive awareness of the ‘social construction of expert discourse’ (Jacobson, 2007: 123), such a priority becomes a time-consuming impulse in the Institute that could become organizationally paralysing. To be ‘reflexive’ – consistently (as opposed to sporadically) – places additional demands on executive, administrative and research staff who are already stretched significantly by the day-to-day need to fund-raise, write reports, meet deadlines or engage with partners and political audiences. This presents a conundrum for ODI. That is, the paradox of ‘knowing’ the complexity and contingent character of research communication – especially in the longer term – alongside practical requirements to do something about it by creating communication tools and conducting capacity building events for policy impact. Such projects are more identifiable or observable to Institute stakeholders giving immediacy to transparency and accountability not so readily available in reflexive approaches.

In sum, there are not just varying definitions of (think tank) research influence on policy and different epistemologies for conceptualising the relationship. But for a policy institute there is also the question: “What then, is to be done?” (Court and Maxwell, 2006: 13). At ODI, there has been support for RAPID as a programme, wider Institute advocacy for rigorous research but also recognition of the value of ‘policy entrepreneur’ skills.

**ODI as a Policy Entrepreneur**

A policy entrepreneur is an individual who invests time and resources to advance a position or policy (Kingdon, 1995). One of their most important functions is to change people’s beliefs
and attitudes about a particular issue. ODI has gone further in identifying different policy entrepreneur styles: *story-tellers* whose sense of complex realities is conveyed through simplified scenarios and policy narratives, *networkers* who facilitate coalitions and alliances; *engineers* who are engaged on the ground with street level bureaucrats rather than isolated in a laboratory; and political *fixers* who have a Machiavellian understanding of the policy process and those who hold power in it (Court and Maxwell, 2006: 9).

At ODI not all members of staff could be said to be policy entrepreneurs, or indeed to act as such much of their time. And as the typology suggests, different personalities and individual traits entail that research communication takes different forms and styles. Yet, policy entrepreneurs are not just individuals. ODI has established itself as an organizational policy entrepreneur by developing advisory ties to governments and international organizations, and institution building of policy communities via networking and partnerships in order to amplify its policy research.

For ODI, one of its most important strategic alliances is its long-standing relationship to the UK Department for International Development. Indeed, DFID is the single most important source of funding for the Institute, accounting for well over half its income. But ODI has other national development agencies such as IrishAid and Norad supporting its work, amongst 90-odd funders (ODI, 2006: 44). And there are other kinds of institutional relationships. For instance, ODI is a convenor of APGOOD – the All Parliamentary Group on Overseas Development for the UK Parliament.

Not only do think tanks seek to act as a bridge between the scholarly and policy worlds, many of them are also interlocutors through their research networks between the regional or global.

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6 What kind of Policy Entrepreneur are you?:
ODI currently manages three international networks linking researchers, policy-makers and practitioners:

- Agricultural Research and Extension Network (AGREN)
- Rural Development Forestry Network (RDFN)
- Humanitarian Practice Network (HPN)
- Evidence Based Policy In Development Network (EBPDN)

In addition, the Institute hosts the Secretariat of the Active Learning Network on Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP). AGREN is dormant due to lack of donor funding. With around 2,900 members, the forestry network also faces challenges in maintaining donor support. But in common with HPN, these networks provide “a forum to share and disseminate information, analysis, experience and lessons…” with the overall aim to contribute to “individual and institutional learning” (ODI, 2006: 35). For instance, the claim to fame of the forestry network is that it gradually instituted a ‘new policy discourse’ from the mid 1980s onwards. Yet, establishing the causal links of the influence of the network on the thinking of decision-makers or the catalytic role of ODI is not subject to definitive demonstration. Instead, it is more a matter of institutional memory among those privy to the forestry policy community. The recently established ‘Evidence’ network is designed as a ‘community of practice’ to promote better use of research in policy through capacity building and training for budding policy entrepreneurs.

Think tanks are a means of career advancement or a stepping stone for the politically ambitious. This has lead to the ‘hollowing out’ of British think tanks after election of a new government (Denham & Garnett, 2004). The ‘revolving-door’ of individuals moving between executive appointment and think tanks, law firms or universities is a well known phenomenon in the USA. Rather than specific policy analysis papers – or published output – having influence, it is the policy analytic capacity – or human capital – that has long term influence and resonance inside official agencies.
ODI acts as a training ground for development specialists, where they can work on enhancing their experience and personal career prospects through networking, cultivating contacts, becoming known in policy circles. As noted in point 8, such movements are not necessarily a loss for the Institute (despite the disruptions that may result and the constant ‘churning’ of appointment processes). ODI staff moving to positions in DfID, or into the international financial institutions, (and sometimes back again) helps embed the Institute in the organizational policy webs, builds social capital and inter-institutional loyalties. Furthermore, such movements are symptomatic of indirect knowledge utilization in that ODI researchers bring both their research experience and ODI history with them into the new employer organization.

The ‘ODI Fellowship Scheme’ has been running for over 40 years and is one of the Institute’s most respected programmes. In many respects, it is a response to weakened sources of demand for research as noted in points 4 and 6. As it mobilises post graduate economists into employment with “governments facing capacity problems” (ODI, 2006: 36). These economists enjoy a two year placement in a developing country, usually with a government department.

These official engagements, fellowships and networks are the formal or institutionalised mechanisms and practices of ODI policy entrepreneurship. But there are also the informal connections and ad hoc personal contacts that result from face-to-face engagements at conferences or in meetings with officials. A glance at ODI’s meetings programme indicates a continuous rotation of senior officials from UK government ministries, ambassadors and other foreign dignitaries, representatives of the European Commission, the World Bank and other international organizations as well as executive directors of NGOs and sundry professors in the development studies field. The ability to attract high ranking officials and world renowned scholars contributes to the research reputation of the Institute.
Think tank legitimacy in communicating research and analysis is carefully cultivated by building their epistemic authority (the supply side). Think tanks also acquire credibility in policy and political circles through patronage and funding for their services (demand side). Think tanks appropriate authority firstly, on the basis of their scholarly credentials as quasi-academic organizations focused on the rigorous and professional analysis of policy issues. Many British think tanks also use their status as civil society organizations (registered with the Charity Commissioners) to strengthen their reputation as autonomous, independent and distinct from both the state and the market.

These endowments (real or imagined) of research excellence and independence give think tanks some legitimacy in seeking to intervene with knowledge and advice in policy processes. For example, the objective of making knowledge relevant or useful is never far from the ODI’s public rhetoric:

We describe ourselves deliberately as a think-tank, because we work at the interface of research and policy. On the one hand, we work hard to help shape the agenda and contribute to debate. That’s why so much of our output is short, written in non-technical language and designed to be accessible. On the other hand, our core mandate is research. That’s why we have 60 researchers on our staff … whose job it is to know the theory, apply it to the real world and help develop policy.7

These organizations also acquire political credibility by performing services for states and providing public goods. By providing reputable research and analysis, ideas and argumentation or by delivering services such as policy training for civil servants, conference

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organizations or public platforms for visiting dignitaries, think tanks get used, thereby demonstrating their relevance. They intellectually subsidise and supplement government research capacities. It is less the case that think tanks have an impact on government and more the case that governments or certain political leaders employ these organizations as tools to pursue their own interests and provide intellectual legitimacy for policy.

Without a doubt, British think tanks attract considerable airplay from journalists and news producers chasing ‘informed opinion’ and the ‘expert sound-bite’. Media attention also confers status on these organizations but relatively few acquire an international profile. Most of the 100+ think tanks in the UK are focused domestically on the UK policy scene whereas for ODI:

“ Ouagadougou is every bit as important as Whitehall, Dar es Salaam as Downing Street. It’s gratifying that the UK think-tank world has recognised the importance of our subject and the global nature of policy problems and solutions”.  

Due to its international and development focus, it makes no sense for ODI to have a ‘voice’ only in Whitehall. Instead it needs multiple voices, and in numerous international forums. This means targeting regional and global decision making venues such as the international financial institutions. With the ever changing global context of the Institute’s work, ‘internationalisation’ means that ODI needs to be “engaged in constant renewal” as well as exploit new venues and tools for research communication. 

Global Knowledge Utilization

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Social scientists have long been taxed by questions of how, why and when policy advice and expertise is incorporated into government. It is a traditional question. A more novel question is to understand how policy knowledge is transferred by non governmental actors between and above countries. That is, to address the trans-nationalisation of research communities. Researchers, experts and scientific consultants have built transnational networks communities – the so-called ‘invisible college’ – often bank-rolled by international foundations (Roelefs, 2003), universities (Gross Stein et al, 2001) and development agencies.

The European Union, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, UN agencies and the World Health Organization are just some of the international organizations that have become important financiers and consumers of research and policy analysis. ‘Blue ribbon’ international taskforces such as the ILO Commission on the Social Dimensions of Globalisation stimulate demand for and supply of trans-national research and independent policy analysis. Policy research and scientific insight is also used extensively in multilateral initiatives such as the Consultative Group on International Agriculture Research or the Global Water Partnership which are reliant on various expert communities for scientific input as well as for monitoring and evaluation. There are also unofficial global forums such as the World Economic Forum in Davos that make substantial use of experts for punditry as well as for more rigorous analysis.

Networks, international meetings and global partnerships are more fluid policy structures than traditional nation-state bound organizations like government departments. Policy negotiation often moves in an issue-specific and institutionally fragmented manner between (the networks of) bodies as diverse as the G-24, the International Business Leaders Forum, the European Parliament, Transparency International and the International Finance Corporation (just to mention a few of ODI funders 2005-06). For ODI, ‘bridging research and policy’ means
keeping pace with diverse currents of debate within these changing venues policy deliberation.

Think tanks are increasingly interconnected with each through their own formal networks. The GDN is the most notable and ambitious international think tank network having transmogrified from a non-governmental organization to an intergovernmental organization. But regional and issue specific associations are more common place – such as the Soros-Open Society Institute funded PASOS network in Central and Eastern Europe, or the Network of East Asian Think Tanks. And ODI has interacted with many other international NGOs and institutes, as policy agendas internationalise and transnational public debate strengthens.

Some policy issues, of course, are purely local: levels of tax for example, or the precise structure of decentralization. Even here, however, the typical developing country debate is much influenced by the international zeitgeist, as represented by World Bank or UN reports. Other policy issues are primarily international: UN reform, the future of aid architecture, international trade regimes, debt relief. In these cases, bridging research and policy in one country will not do: it is necessary to build ‘bridges across boundaries’ (Court & Maxwell, 2006: 7).

The transnational character of policy problems establishes rationales for research collaboration and the international diffusion of science. Indeed, one of RAPID’s partner institutes – the Argentine think tank CIPPEC – has produced a handbook for civil society organizations seeking policy influence via global and regional policy networks (Weyrauch, 2007). Global knowledge networking has paralleled the growth in global governance (Stone & Maxwell, 2005).

3. RAPIDity in Policy

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10 CIPPEC – Centro de Implementación de Políticas Públicas para la Equidad y el Crecimiento: www.cippec.org
There is a well known distinction between ‘research on’ policy and ‘research for’ policy. *Research on policy* is more reflective and academic in style whereas *research for policy* is portrayed as policy evaluation (Burton, 2006: 187). ODI does both types of research and this is reflected in the RAPID programme. On the first score, RAPID has commissioned literature reviews, contributed to academic books and journals on ‘bridging’ or ‘knowledge utilization’ as a scholarly subject. On the second score, RAPID projects include workshops, capacity building activities, advisory services and toolkits to build individual and institutional capacity for bridging activities.

At the time of RAPID’s establishment late 2001, there was a sizeable literature on science communication and knowledge utilization, but the vast majority of it was focused on OECD policy contexts. Moreover, the ‘evidence-based’ movement in the health sector uses different language, methods and assumptions to those deployed in STS (science, technology and society) studies. RAPID’s literature reviews involved synthesis work to make the connections to development contexts. A further stage of analytical work was the development of a conceptual framework that could be applied across different policy fields or developing countries (see *inter alia* Crewe et al, 2005; Young, 2005). RAPID’s web-site has become an important resource bank for scholarly analysis on ‘bridging research and policy’.

Stepping beyond the analytical work, the first challenge in launching RAPID as a programme of events and activity was finding purchase within the Institute. This has been a gradual process, and not one without disinclination from some ODI staff who considered ODI first and foremost a research body rather than engaged in policy analysis. Even so, RAPID grew quickly. It has been consistently promoted by ODI’s Director building on initial ODI research in the late 1990s (Sutton, 1999). RAPID has been able to secure substantial funding and interest from DFID as well as a number of other donors. The mission and goals of RAPID are outlined in Box 1., and mirror the supply and demand side problems identified in section 1., while also emphasising the need for engagement of researchers in policy communities.
RAPID objectives are being ‘mainstreamed’ throughout the Institute and implemented via ODI’s standard products – the academic papers, Briefings, Opinion pieces and meetings. For instance, RiPPLE – Research-inspired Policy and Practice Learning in Ethiopia and the Nile Region – is an ODI lead research consortium to advance evidence-based learning on water supply and sanitation focusing specifically on issues of financing, delivery and sustainability.

Blogs are one mechanism for ODI to reach to wider audiences on international development issues. These blogs allow ODI “to respond to events as they unfold – and give you the opportunity to comment and engage”.11 It is a means to break down the ‘societal disconnection’ (point 7.) that think tanks sometime encounter or erect. A British parliamentarian has also argued ODI’s blog to be an additional mechanism to promote political accountability.12

The RAPID team have become well-recognised in international circles in parallel with the boom in global knowledge networking. Institute fellows have undertaken research projects for global networks like GDN (which has its own global research project on ‘Bridging Research and Policy’) and numerous other NGOs and development agencies. RAPID staff also help ‘clients’ with advice, training and programme design on maximising policy impact via


12 Alan Hudson, ‘Research - accountability – policy’, Saturday, February 03, 2007. “As such, the active engagement of politicians such as Peter Lilley MP in ODI-hosted discussions is in my view welcome. Clear public statements of intention - such as his comment on this blog, and others’ comments available in Hansard - provide a very useful benchmark against which politicians of whichever party can at a later date be held accountable. Processes of accountability - asking those with power to explain their actions - can play an important part in maximising the impact of research on policy”: http://blogs.odi.org.uk/blogs/main/archive/2007/01/31/Arms_exports.aspx
research, research communication and operations in organizational development. RAPID also conducts evaluations of the work of research-policy interventions.

One client has been DfID’s Engineering Knowledge and Research (EngKaR) programme which provided technical, managerial and policy solutions in the infrastructure and urban development sectors. Over 15 years, EngKaR invested over £100m across some 600 projects. For DfID, the evaluation provided “the endorsement of continuing commitment of DFID to research and dissemination activities in the transport, water, and energy sector as supportive to the DFID programmes as a whole and also the contribution to global public good”.¹³

In general, the value of external evaluation for the commissioning agency is independent validation of program activity. An evaluation can also be a ‘sounding board’ and a source of critical feedback to help improve the efficiency of operations. For donors, an evaluation is also a device of transparency and accountability via monitoring and evaluation. This is well known, but less frequently considered is the reward or benefit (other than the fee) for the commissioned evaluator. For the Institute, the government contract provides tangible official affirmation of RAPID expertise and indirect recognition of ODI as a reputable organization. It is a process of mutual validation.

Civil Society Partnerships Programme¹⁴

Commencing in 2005, RAPID’s flagship Civil Society Partnerships Programme (CSPP) is a seven year program funded by DFID with the aim to strengthen the voice of civil society to use research-based evidence to promote pro-poor development policy. One key objective is knowledge utilization “by establishing a worldwide network for think-tanks, policy research


institutes and similar organizations working in international development”. CSPP allows ODI to broach (as in Point 8., above) a wider domain for influence by engaging with a more diverse community. There is a stronger focus on capacity building within civil society organizations (CSOs) and their networks to strengthen their use of research based evidence to engage with development policy. As part of the CSSP funding, the Evidence Based Policy in Development Network (EBPDN) was created aiming to be “a worldwide community of practice for think tanks, policy research institutes and similar organizations working in international development”. 15

The EBPDN network is characterised by great enthusiasm at its meetings, but energy lapses between meetings as participants disperse to their countries, and it has been difficult to engineer south-south engagements. As a consequence, the product and activities programme is dominated by materials collected by ODI and managed through the EBPDN web-site. Internally, the challenges over the next years will be to create wider ownership among network participants around ‘bridging’ research as well as genuine collaborative projects that lead to sustainable network and governance.

Sustaining reflexivity in an international network is difficult, particularly when the participants are geographically dispersed around the world and face funding dilemmas in their home institutes. Nevertheless, EBPDN annual meetings have confronted issues of elitism, participation, ownership, the “logic of joint engagement” and governance. That is, contested issues of how to run and fund a network as well as how research agendas are set. Substantive issues of content – including issues of power and ideology – are also voiced regarding the “art and craft” of generating knowledge for policy use. But while there is scope to pursue such discussions within ODI and through the EBPDN workshops, to represent to policy makers equivalence and uncertainty in knowledge claims, and the different social epistemologies of

15 EBPDN: http://www.ebpdn.org/
‘utility’, is less viable given their instrumental need for policy decisions and programs that are
‘evidence informed’. Gradually, the orientation of EBPDN and RAPID has moved from
research on knowledge and power towards using theory to explain, plan and execute
‘bridging’ development projects. That is, an instrumental concern to build a EBPDN
‘community of practice’ that appeals to the funding agency DfID, than to “understand
knowledge and the relationships between knowledge and these (bridging) processes”
(Jacobson, 2007: 121 my insertion).

4. Conclusion

ODI constantly needs to adapt and diversify its strategies of research communication.
Through its networks, its meetings and workshops, the blogs, the publications as well as the
more informal behind-the-scenes engagements with officials, personal networks, currying of
favour at conferences, the career movements of staff, and the invitations to participate in
semi-official discussion, ODI embeds itself in a thick web of relationships. As noted by the
director of IDRC, a Canadian counterpart organization, for RAPIDity to occur “means
forming relationships with policy makers that can endure over many years” as well as
becoming “participants in democratic governance, active at every level, from community
deliberation and decision making to national and international policymaking” (O’Neil, 2006:
54). At the same time, the Institute needs to maintain a reputation for research that is sound
and rigorous within its engagements with the policy world. This is secured through a circular
process of mutual recognition between ODI as a producer of policy knowledge and
consumers (often the funder) of the research.

The consequences of brokering research are not neutral. Institutional and individual interests
are served through activity that goes beyond the mechanical sharing of information. Instead,
the communication of development research entails a complex set of mutual affirmations.
Legitimation for both the ‘institute’ as a reputable provider of policy research and analysis;
and legitimation for the commissioning government department or international agency in
having sought an ‘evidence base’ or scientific foundation for policy and decision processes. This circular process of legitimation is buoyed and politically symbolised by the discourse of ‘bridging research and policy’. The discourse reinforces the scholarly/scientific/expert credibility of the think tank as an informed authority. Furthermore, official patronage or public funding of ‘bridging’ projects can be used as ‘evidence’ of government interaction with the public and incorporating expert ‘stakeholder’ group in debates on international development even when the critical substance of communicated research might fall by the wayside with political contingencies.

The focus has been on the Overseas Development Institute because it has a dedicated program on ‘bridging research and policy’. Nevertheless, the issues faced by ODI are pertinent for similar bodies like the Center for Global Development a new think tank in Washington DC., for ODI’s partner institutes like CIPPEC in Argentina, as well as thousands more policy research organizations around the world. But it is also relevant to organizations that commission and fund development research; official agencies like DfID in the UK, or philanthropic bodies like the Gates Foundation in the USA. The (social) science they fund is not inherently persuasive in debates on international development. Investment and lessons on good practices in research communication will remain necessary.
Box 1. The Research and Policy in Development Programme

**RAPID**

Better utilization of research and evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life. For example, the results of household disease surveys in rural Tanzania informed a process of health service reforms which contributed to over 40% reductions in infant mortality between 2000 and 2003 in two districts. On the other hand the HIV/AIDS crisis has deepened in some countries because of the reluctance of governments to implement effective control programmes, despite clear evidence of what causes the disease and how to prevent it spreading. Donors spend around US$3 billion on development research annually, but there has been very limited systematic understanding of when, how and why evidence informs policy. A better understanding of how research can contribute to pro-poor policies is urgently needed. In particular we need to know more about:

- how **researchers can best use their findings** in order to influence policy;
- how **policy-makers can best use research**, for evidence-based policy-making;
- how to improve the **interaction between researchers and policy-makers**.

ODI's **Research and Policy in Development (RAPID)** programme is working on these issues and aims to improve the use of research and evidence in development policy and practice through research, advice and debate. The programme works on four main themes:

- The role of evidence in policy processes;
- Improved communication and information systems for policy and practice;
- Better knowledge management and learning for development agencies;
- Approaches to institutional development for evidence-based policy.

References


