



Research Notes

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How Can Research Influence Policy Change? Evidence from Africa

By Patricia J. Vondal, Lawrence Cooley, and Susan Scribner

In 1988 USAID's Bureau for Africa awarded a Cooperative Agreement to Cornell University to undertake research on the short-term consequences of macroeconomic policies on lower-income groups. The Bureau hoped to gain an increased understanding of the dynamics of structural adjustment and poverty from the research in order to design better reform programs. Ten USAID Missions cooperated with Cornell as sites for conducting in-depth research. These countries were Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, Mozambique, Niger, Tanzania, and Zaire. In each of the ten countries Cornell researchers collaborated with a participating local institution or organization. Research was conducted in Africa between 1988 and 1992 and resulted in the publication of six books, more than two dozen monographs and roughly 75 working papers.

During the time period in question, both the World Bank and USAID directly used Cornell's findings to confirm the importance of continuing structural adjustment programs in Africa. Numerous independent researchers also cite Cornell's work. The literature also shows that over a fifteen-year period, perceptions concerning what a structural adjustment program should be and should do changed slowly, but significantly. While the role of research in this process cannot be easily divorced from other factors, it appears likely that research on structural

adjustment, including the Cornell studies, contributed to this evolution.

Much less understood are the contingencies that affect when, how, and to what extent, specific research efforts influence policy outcomes. In an effort to shed light on this set of issues, USAID's Africa Bureau asked the Implementing Policy Change Project (IPC) to conduct a study exploring how research affects host country policy, using the Cornell Food and Nutritional Policy Program's research on structural adjustment and its effects on the poor as an illustrative example. The study looked at both the actual policy effects of the research and the residual capacity it created to conduct policy relevant research and influence policy. Although the Cornell research was selected as the basis for this investigation because of scope and obvious policy relevance, this study was not intended to be an evaluation of Cornell's efforts, and *it is important to note that under its Cooperative Agreement with USAID, Cornell was not asked or expected to disseminate the research findings in country, or to influence policy decisions based on its country-specific research findings.*

To investigate the issue of research utilization and policy change, IPC teams traveled to five of the ten countries where Cornell's research was conducted: Ghana, Guinea, Madagascar, Malawi, and Tanzania. One week was

spent in each country interviewing policy makers, donor officials and researchers associated with the original research or subsequent policy decisions. In the United States, IPC conducted

interviews with individuals from Cornell, with USAID staff who were involved in the research in several of those countries, and with staff at the World Bank who had played a role, and reviewed a range of documents and publications. Based on in-country findings and the existing literature on utilization of research for policy formation, an analytical framework was constructed for examining how research can influence policy. This framework was then used to generate a series of propositions that were tested against the information obtained on the five case study countries.

The study also included an assessment of the current policy research capacity of the organizations that participated with Cornell. Finally, the study assessed the degree to which Cornell's syntheses of the case studies on the topic of structural adjustment's impact on the poor have influenced the international community involved with policy research and analysis, and with structural adjustment programs. This Research Note summarizes the study's findings in terms of its five propositions regarding policy impact and institutional capacity.

Proposition 1: Policy research will not have an effect unless the research agenda is developed in collaboration with government officials.

In the five cases assessed, there was no clear evidence that government officials were actively involved in setting the research agendas for Cornell. Yet in four out of the five cases, governments took policy actions that were informed by some of the findings. This is somewhat counterintuitive, particularly in light of a number of other studies indicating a clear relationship between ownership of the research agenda and policy action.

While some decision-makers took policy action despite the absence of official government participation in developing research agendas, in Ghana, Guinea, and Madagascar, many of the research findings were not used by the government for policy formation. The study posits, but cannot prove, that government decision-makers in those countries may have used a higher percentage of those findings if they had been closely involved in setting the research agenda with the USAID Mission.

Proposition 2: Policy research will not have an effect if that research is written up in highly technical and academic language and never translated into terms and implications that decision-makers can easily understand.

Simplification of the research findings into more accessible language so that decision-makers can readily understand the findings and their policy implications, and literally translating those findings into local languages when necessary, appear to have facilitated the use of research findings for policy action in two of the cases, Malawi and Tanzania. Furthermore, the study found that not doing this generates complaints from decision-makers. It also found that researchers are not the only, nor necessarily the best, candidates to simplify and translate research findings.

Proposition 3: Policy research will not have an effect unless those findings are then developed into targeted messages and disseminated through appropriate fora and media.

The study did not find sufficient evidence of messages being precisely targeted for decision-makers to comment on the necessity of this task. However, the findings do point to the fact that dissemination of the information is mandatory as a means of engaging stakeholders and attracting advocates for the findings. The evidence suggests the importance of researchers being involved in initial dissemination events since they are typically best able to explain and defend their methodology, conclusions and any recommendations based on their findings. Such an event might be, for example, a briefing, a seminar, a workshop, or a symposium. The study found that the effectiveness of those initial dissemination events depended on whether the tasks of simplifying and translating the research findings was done, including a careful explanation of the research methodology. Dissemination events beyond the initial research presentation are also necessary, but when they enter the realm of advocacy it is less obvious that they have to be conducted by the researchers themselves.

It also appears to increase the interest and involvement of stakeholders in the findings when researchers do not wait until the research is completed to make their initial presentation. Researchers can present for discussion their work in progress throughout the research period. This was done very effectively, for example, in Malawi by researchers from the Institute of Development Anthropology and Bunda College of Agriculture by request of USAID/Malawi; and by Cornell and University of Dar es Salaam researchers in Tanzania.

Proposition 4: Policy research will not have an effect unless its messages are taken up and promoted by influential advocates, either inside or outside of the government.

Internal Advocates: Evidence from the study supports the proposition that having an advocate to promote the research findings and policy implications inside the government is critical. In all countries where research findings affected policy actions, an identifiable government insider actively advocated for the reforms. While perhaps obvious, the correlation of this factor with the extent of research utilization in the countries investigated was striking and reconfirms the personal experience of policy advocates in a wide range of countries.

External Advocates: In the countries visited as part of this study, donors were typically the primary external advocate. The study looked at the differing roles taken by donors in these countries in prompting government decision-makers to take policy action. The five cases furnish information on the extent and manner in which donor agencies use research findings to influence policy processes and support the following tentative conclusions:

In a closed political environment, donor advocacy of findings can help create an atmosphere where an internal advocate can emerge.

Donors can support a climate of change by highlighting policy implications for decision-makers in a way that researchers may be less able to do, and by presenting relevant parallel experience elsewhere.

Proposition 5: Policy research will not have an effect unless (by intention or serendipity) it addresses a problem acknowledged by government officials and proposes solutions that these officials become convinced are the right actions to take.

Our findings do not support this conclusion absolutely. In Malawi, government decision-makers and key stakeholder groups in the country who profited by existing policies did not wish to enact major agricultural liberalization reforms, although the government eventually did. In this case, donor pressure and a seriously faltering economy prompted the reforms that top decision-makers in the government did not favor. The donors used the research findings in their discussions with the government to promote policy changes in the agricultural sector. However, in three of our cases, Guinea, Madagascar, and Tanzania, the research presented actionable findings to issues of poverty that were of concern to the respective governments. In these cases, policy-makers took action. The most we can conclude from these mixed findings is that government officials **may be more likely** to take policy action if the research addressed a problem acknowledged by officials

and proposed actionable findings. The current political and economic strength of key stakeholder groups and their level of support for the proposed policy changes are important intervening variables.

Although it is a more obvious point, our data demonstrate that in order for research findings to influence policy decisions, they must be relevant to either the **current political agenda** of government decision-makers or the agenda of influential advocates, or both. In all cases where policy action was taken, the research findings directly addressed current issues of concern to either influential donor advocates, government policy makers, or both. To cite two examples, in Malawi the government's policy agenda did not include enactment of major agricultural sector reforms. However, such reform featured prominently on the agendas of USAID/Malawi and the World Bank, who were prepared to design and actively promote reforms. In Tanzania, the research findings on liberalization of the agricultural sector were relevant to the current policy agendas of both the Government of Tanzania and the World Bank. The survey findings on the location, nature and extent of poverty in Tanzania were relevant and useful to the poverty alleviation agenda of the Tanzania Planning Commission and the Office of the Vice President.

Proposition 6: Attention to timing can influence the success of dissemination and advocacy events in affecting policy decisions.

Based on our findings from all five cases, we conclude that the issue of timing is an important, but not always controllable, factor that influences the use of data in policy decisions. Research findings must be available at the time when either advocates or actual policy-makers are ready to act. For example, Cornell's background paper and analysis in Malawi were available at a time when the Mission was poised to develop a major agricultural sector adjustment program for proposal to the Government of Malawi, and the World Bank was developing programming and conditionality for a Structural Adjustment Program. Ongoing presentations of subsequent findings from other researchers contracted by USAID/Malawi, **as they became available**, were instrumental to the final design of USAID's Agricultural Sector Adjustment Program and for keeping the major agricultural reforms moving. In Tanzania, early presentations by the researchers from the analysis of secondary data on the liberalization of the economy, the national household survey, and the private grain trader survey came at a time when the Government of Tanzania was anxious to understand the effects of liberalization, and helped convince them to continue with their reforms.

In Guinea, the findings on poverty, health and nutrition

issues in Conakry were available at a time when the Ministry of Health was poised to address these issues both in Conakry and nationwide.

The study identified several corollaries to the above propositions. These provide additional information on how to increase the extent to which research findings influence policy decisions.

Corollary 1: The tasks of simplifying research findings, putting them into terms that clarify the policy implications, developing targeted messages for decision-makers, and disseminating the findings are important. Nevertheless, the original researchers may not necessarily be the most appropriate actors to carry out these tasks. (Corollary to Propositions 2 and 3 above.)

Simplifying the language of the findings and drawing out the policy implications. The study's findings suggest that these are not necessarily tasks that the original researchers must do in order for the research to influence policy. In three of the four cases where policy action was taken, donors and advocates of the findings within ministries performed this role.

Dissemination. The study concludes that researchers must make the initial presentation of research findings. In all five cases, the research teams made initial presentations to disseminate and explain their findings before audiences comprised of government officials, technical analysts, and donors. However, as was found with respect to Proposition 4, this initial dissemination event is not sufficient. Additional dissemination is needed, and the findings must also be actively advocated.

Corollary 2: The task of advocating the research findings to policy makers is critical, but does not have to be done by the researchers themselves. (Corollary to Proposition 4 above.)

Study findings demonstrate that the task of advocating findings and associated recommendations is not a task that the researchers themselves must perform. In three of the four cases where policy action was taken, a combination of donors and analysts within government ministries played this role after the initial dissemination events where the research teams made the presentation of their findings. In the fourth case where policy action was taken, this function was performed entirely by the analysts of the relevant host country Ministry.

Corollary 3: Political circumstances and the political environment in which research is carried out often determine who can play the role of advocate to the best effect -- researchers, local technocrats, or donors, for example. (Corollary to Proposition 4 above)

In all cases where policy action informed by the research findings was taken, the study found that analysts within the government ministries were involved in advocating policy change. However, the findings suggest that it may be especially important for donors to take a more active role in cases where the political environment is relatively closed. For example, while Banda was in power in Malawi, it would have been dangerous for the advocates of the research inside government to push for policy change based on those findings without USAID/Malawi and the World Bank concurrently exerting strong pressure on government officials to take action.

Even in Tanzania, the one case among the five countries reviewed in this study where there was a level of political stability and openness throughout the research period, the study concludes that it was nevertheless helpful to have a donor advocate the findings alongside advocates within the government. The World Bank played an important role by further clarifying the policy implications of the findings with respect to agricultural liberalization for government officials, and was able to present relevant parallel experiences in Uganda.

Institutional Capacity for Policy Research and Advocacy

Although the primary purpose of this study was to assess the impact of research on policy, the policy impact cannot be divorced from the impact of research on capacity and institutions. This final section reviews the study's major lessons on institutional capacity.

Choice of Institution

To increase country's long-term policy research capacity, as well as the policy impact of research, the nature of the institution conducting policy research is critical. The study concludes that capacity and impact are best engendered when:

The research is conducted in partnership with an organizational unit within a ministry whose mandate it is to conduct research to inform policy; or,

The research is conducted in partnership with an established policy research institute, or a policy research unit within a university.

The study suggests that if a private institution or organization is chosen, it is important that the unit have prior policy research experience, and have credibility and good ties with decision-makers in government. The task of assisting the development of an institution's capacity to conduct relevant policy research, attract advocates for research findings, and influence government policy is extremely difficult to achieve otherwise. Where it is possible to do so, there appears to be a higher pay-off in collaborating with organizations or institutions that have these characteristics from the outset rather than investing in establishing new policy research units in government or in private institutions. However, if the research is conducted in partnership with an organizational unit within a ministry whose mandate it is to conduct research to inform policy, it is extremely important that the unit be allowed to conduct critical research, and that it not be compromised by government interference.

Analytic Methods

While many of the local research partners had experience with collecting survey data, they had less experience analyzing those data. Therefore, it is critical that expatriate researchers provide local researchers training in analytical methodologies and the use of appropriate computer software programs, and that this training be reinforced in the context of actual analysis conducted throughout the research period. Training or upgrading of skills in the use of SPSS or similar programs for processing and analyzing survey data should be standardized. When more sophisticated modeling techniques are employed for further data analysis,

additional training and skill building within the partnership research institution are usually required.

Locus of Database and Database Development

The analysis of large data sets collected from national surveys entails the need for powerful computers. The cost of hardware and software needs to be included in research budgets to preclude the necessity of sending nationally important data sets overseas for analysis by the expatriate researchers' home institution. This also increases the capacity of the participating institution to conduct policy research and analysis in the future.

Involvement of Local Partners

The capacity for policy research and advocacy is increased, as is goodwill, when expatriate researchers collaborate with host country research institutions in all phases of the research effort, including:

- choice of specific research topic
- design of research protocol
- collection of the data
- cleaning the data and data entry
- basic analysis of the data
- analysis of the data for its policy implications
- translation of the findings into language understandable by policy makers
- presentation of the findings in various fora for discussion with potential advocates and with decision makers
- development of local databases for follow-up research
- development of jointly authored research publications

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The IPC project's contract team consists of Management Systems International (prime contractor); Abt Associates Inc.; and Development Alternatives. The IPC Project Office is located at MSI, 600 Water Street, S.W., Washington, D.C., 20024. Telephone: (202) 484-7170; Fax: (202) 488-0754.