Understanding impact and why policy engagement matters

Impact is “the demonstrable contribution that excellent research makes to society and the economy.”

(Research Councils UK)

The UK’s Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) outlines three main types of academic, economic and social impact that research can have;

- **Instrumental** – which relates to changes in policy, practice or services
- **Conceptual** – making a contribution to discourse and debates around policy issues, and the way people think about them
- **Capacity Building** – developing the technical and professional skills, knowledge and expertise of others.

At the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) we also refer to a fourth type of impact – **networks and connectivity** – which relates to the building and strengthening of networks and improving the connections between those producing research and those using, commissioning and funding research.

Ideas around impact and how change happens are highly contested and debates around the challenges of attributing changes in policy, thinking and behaviour to a particular piece of research continue apace. Nevertheless, requirements on researchers to demonstrate impact, whether as part of a research programme they are working on, or for their own individual career progression, are growing. Therefore understanding and identifying the audiences who researchers believe are critical to achieving the change they wish to see and being able to design and deliver audience-targeted engagement strategies have never been so important.

Who are these ‘policymakers’?

To engage effectively you know need to understand who you are trying to engage with – their position in the policy landscape in which you are seeking to making a change, how they access and consume information and research and their relationship to you and/or your organisation or partners. Time and energy is required to more clearly define the ubiquitous ‘policymaker’ term before policy briefings are written, panel discussions convened and press releases carefully crafted.

Stakeholder mapping and analysis is key to developing this understanding and ensuring messages resonate with those that you are seeking to engage with. There are a number of different approaches to stakeholder mapping and analysis (with more information signposted in the further reading section) which should be adopted as early on as possible in the research process. The most effective engagement often starts well before the research begins, and is integrated throughout a programme and project. Key components of any process of mapping and analysis include:

healthsystemsglobal.org
• **SCOPE:** Being clear about the scope of your mapping and analysis - is it in relation to a particularly programme or project or is it needed at a more institutional level, for instance in relation to an institutional strategy.

• **OBJECTIVES:** A clear objective or goal for the mapping can help you articulate the scope and purpose of your mapping and it’s important to keep referring back to it throughout the process. It needs to be articulated as a clear outcome i.e. *The health of children aged 0-5 in xx country is improved as a result of more effective and evidence-based nutrition policies and programmes.*

• **INVOLVE:** Think about who else – colleagues, partners, stakeholders you already think could play a part in achieving the change you wish to see - you need to involve in the mapping who understand the policy environment and context.

• Identify: Create as comprehensive a list as possible of the people you think can help you achieve the change you wish to see.

• **CATEGORIZE:** Take the list of stakeholders and categorize them into groups e.g. media, national government, international non-government organisations (INGOs)

• **MAP:** Create a map of the relationships between these stakeholders and your own organisation or project and programme, where you have direct relationships and more indirect ones through a partner or intermediary organisation.

• **RANK:** Discuss with the group you have brought together the level of influence each stakeholder has in relation to your objective and goal and how aligned they are in terms of interest in achieving the objective.

• **ANALYZE:** Based on the information you have gathered start to piece together a pathway to achieving the change you want to see. Which stakeholders do you need involve? Are there are some who can act as champions? Are the others you will need to focus on changing behaviours or attitudes?

• **PRIORITIZE:** Every project, programme or institution has limited time and resources. Deciding what’s achievable based on capacity and resources available is essential.

### Tools and tactics for engagement

An effective engagement strategy needs to be informed by your stakeholder analysis in order for it to be sufficiently tailored to include the right mixture of tools and tactics that will reach and engage with key audiences. In trying to design this type of strategy or plan it is helpful to think about the following in relation to each of your priority audiences or stakeholders:

• **HOW:** What do you know about how they access information and who influences them

• **WHO:** Who in your organisation or amongst your partners is best placed to communicate with them – both in terms of capacity and who you think they will listen to or perhaps has an existing relationship

• **WHEN:** When is the best time to engage with them – is there a policy window or hook you can use, and is there a project deadline or time frame within which you need to engage?

• **WHAT:** What do you think the best tool or tactic will be to engage with them i.e. an opinion piece, a policy briefing etc.

• **EXPECTED OUTCOME:** What do you expect to change as a result of this engagement, how will you know if it has happened (indicator of success) and how will it contribute to your overall objective or goal.
Example

**Overall objective:** The health of children aged 0-5 in xx country is improved as a result of more effective and evidence-based nutrition policies and programmes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUDIENCE</th>
<th>HOW</th>
<th>WHO</th>
<th>WHEN</th>
<th>WHAT</th>
<th>OUTCOME</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adviser to health minister in national government</td>
<td>Time-poor so wants concise and accessible information.</td>
<td>Principal investigator on project alongside the Chief Executive of the organisation who has an existing relationship with adviser.</td>
<td>Minister currently preparing to attend high-level World Health Organization meeting on meeting 2020 hunger and nutrition targets so needs to feed into this process of preparation.</td>
<td>Policy briefing focused on financial and social benefits of more effective nutrition policies and programmes.</td>
<td>Minister and adviser more positive attitude towards improving nutrition policy and programming.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**What can a policy briefing achieve?**

A policy brief is a concise summary of a particular issue, the policy options to deal with it, and some recommendations on the best option. It is aimed at government policymakers and others who are interested in formulating or influencing policy. (FAO)

Aim to provide high quality analysis and practical recommendations for policy makers on important development issues. (IDS Policy Briefing Terms of Reference)

The policy briefing often becomes the default option for engaging with ‘policymakers’. There continues to be much debate over the effectiveness of policy briefings and as a stand-alone tool for engagement it is not that effective. However the process of drafting a policy briefing can prove invaluable in shaping and honing the key messages from your research which can be used to underpin your whole engagement strategy and other tools and tactics such as press releases, one-to-one meetings, infographics and events.

As with any engagement tool or tactic it is essential to start with your audience – what information do they need in relation to the broader policy environment they are operating within, which messages do you think are most likely to resonate with them.

Other questions you will want to ask when developing your policy briefing are:
• What are your intended policy impacts? These could range from change in a particularly policy to decisions around programming and funding to broader change in behaviour and ways of working.
• What’s the problem and why do things need to change?
• What will need to be done differently and who will need to do it to achieve the change you want to see? This will be key to developing your recommendations.
• What are the obstacles and challenges that have stopped these changes from happening already? Are there opportunities that now exist to make changes and do things differently?
• Are there one or two facts or statistics that can you bring to the fore that are central to, and strengthen your arguments?
• Have you used language that is accessible and explained any technical terminology or jargon?
• How do you plan to ensure your briefing is read – do you need to organise a meeting or event to include relevant people, or place an opinion piece in a relevant outlet?

Impact Case Study: A social science response to the Ebola outbreak

The Ebola Response Anthropology Platform (ERAP) and the related Ebola: lessons for development initiatives the prestigious ESRC International Impact Prize for their rapid and effective response during the epidemic.

In awarding the prize, the judging panel highlighted that the work had a direct impact on lessening the amount of deaths and spread of Ebola by ensuring that learning from years of research in the area was highlighted to the right people in the right organisations.

The project team designed and delivered a multi-pronged engagement strategy that promoted the ERAP to on the ground practitioners, clinic personnel and donor agency staff amongst others. All the materials on the platform were published open access, and translated and publicised 70+ other key anthropological works. The platform provided a focal point for dialogue as the epidemic unfolded, the website energised US, European and West African networks and was accessed by 16,000+ users. Platform members delivered pre-departure training for 362 clinical personnel; co-designed and delivering teaching content for a MOOC on Ebola in Context; and conducted training sessions on ‘Outbreak Anthropology for Epidemiologists’ in London and Berlin.

Alongside these efforts engagement also targeted development donor agencies, INGOs and the academic community, in the UK, Europe and West Africa, around longer term lessons from the Ebola crisis for development. A series of 9 briefing papers were produced through a collaboration of global partners that addressed issues of strengthening health systems and building resilience, and provided concise and clear recommendations for the target audiences. These were also shared at a high profile event in London that brought priority stakeholders together.

In addition, the initiative boosted the reach and engagement of its key messages through a mix of social media, blogs and podcasts, as well as media engagement with outlets including BBC Science in Action, BBC News Channel, The Guardian, Washington Post, Canadian Public Service broadcast). The project lead and Director of IDS, Professor Melissa Leach, also provided advice during the crisis to the UK Government on their response.
Further reading

- Utafiti Sera - transforming research evidence-based knowledge for policy uptake
  http://www.pasgr.org/utafiti-sera/
- Economic and Social Research Council Impact Toolkit,
  http://www.esrc.ac.uk/research/impact-toolkit/
- Research Uptake – A guide for DFID-funded research programmes
- Evidence informed Policy Network (with WHO), http://global.evipnet.org/
- Overseas Development Institute (ODI) ROMA guide to policy influence and policy engagement
- Future Health Systems Programme, Success Stories,
  http://futurehealthsys.squarespace.com/publications/category/success-story
- IDS-led team wins first prize for social science response to Ebola,
  http://www.ids.ac.uk/news(ids-led-team-wins-first-prize-for-social-science-response-to-ebola

healthsystemsglobal.org