

research evidence for policy



Linking research with policy: experiences and lessons from South Asia

NCCR
north
south
47nos



Case studies featured here were conducted in Nepal and Pakistan.

Policy message

- Consultative research processes are crucial to improve the impact of research on policy. Research findings are more likely to be used in policymaking if concerned stakeholders – researchers, practitioners, policy and political decision makers, and government officials – come together to define problems and help design research.
- Dissemination strategies are very important. Findings must be translated into simple, short, readable, and attractive messages and communicated via appropriate means.
- Mechanisms such as regular roundtables, discussion forums, workshops, conferences, and radio and TV programmes bring policymakers, media and researchers together and help research findings reach the policy community.

- **Linking research with policy is a major concern in South Asia, where few politicians and policymakers base their decisions on evidence. Reasons for this include weak research planning, poor dissemination of research findings, ineffective use of media outlets, and a lack of engagement by researchers with policymakers. This issue of *evidence for policy* shows how NCCR North-South research in South Asia has contributed to policymaking and change processes by following a proper planning and dissemination strategy, mobilising media effectively to disseminate findings, and by proactively engaging researchers with media and policymakers.**

Connecting research and the policy community

- Evidence-based policymaking connects research with the policy community, as research is one of the major sources of evidence on which policymaking relies. The information generated through research is considered to be apolitical, neutral and objective, so it has high credibility and acceptability (Jones 2011, Sutcliffe and Court 2005). NCCR North-South's decade-long research partnership in South Asia shows that an appropriate research planning and dissemination strategy helps to connect research with the policy community.
- One effective way to do so is to involve policymakers and politicians in

planning research. Ways to do this include holding periodic meetings and briefings, inviting suggestions, and where feasible incorporating them into research objectives, themes, and the choice of study sites. This develops ownership and so contributes to evidence-based policymaking (Sutcliffe and Court 2005, Upreti *et al.* 2007).

Strengthening relations between researchers and policymakers

Relationships between researchers and policymakers may be hindered by existing attitudes and mutual biases, and a lack of understanding of potential mutual benefits and the complementary role of research and policy. These barriers can be overcome by bringing researchers and

Featured case studies

Sustainable Development Policy Institute

Each year, this NCCR partner in Islamabad, Pakistan, organises a 3-day conference on sustainable development for stakeholders from South Asia. It focuses on a different theme each year. Researchers present their findings, policymakers reflect on policy deficiencies and knowledge gaps, civil-society representatives bring up societal concerns, and the media ask questions. This offers excellent opportunities for researchers to plan research, disseminate their findings, and link with policy needs. This forum has enabled researchers to contribute to changes in forest policy and prioritising food security provisions.

Land reform debate in Nepal

Another NCCR partner, the Consortium for Land Research and Policy Dialogue, is regularly engaged with high-level land policymaking bodies such as the Ministry of Land Reform. It provides research-based evidence on land reform and agrarian transformation, and facilitates discussions among various ministries, the national parliament, the National Planning Commission, academia, and the media. This has led to provisions on landlessness in the recommendations of the High Level Land Reform Commission and to the inclusion of land issues in the new constitution.

Mobilising media to disseminate research results

NCCR research partners in Nepal and Pakistan put high priority on working with the media. Researchers give radio interviews, appear on television talk shows and expert panel discussions, write articles in national daily newspapers, and disseminate their results regularly as columnists, analysts, resource persons, trainers, and commentators. This engagement has connected researchers with policymakers, politicians, and the general public, improved the visibility of research, and enhanced the effects of research on policy.

- policymakers into contact, by
- providing policymakers with readable
- research findings, and holding periodic
- meetings. Successful approaches used
- by NCCR North-South's Pakistan and
- Nepal research groups include working
- through publicly recognised
- researchers and social leaders with
- high standing, engaging with expert
- advisors of high-profile people, and
- writing on nationally important issues
- in national newspapers read by senior
- leaders. Such means provide avenues
- for researchers to gain access to
- high-profile personalities, enhance the
- visibility of researchers, and help to
- influence policymaking. High-profile
- individuals include the president and
- prime minister, members of the
- national planning commission,
- ministers and top officials of related
- ministries, and the heads of
- constitutional bodies.

Use of media to disseminate research findings

- The NCCR North-South has found that
- in South Asia, the media are the most
- effective means of disseminating
- research findings and raising
- awareness among the policy
- community. This means policy briefs,
- summary notes, thematic public
- meetings and planning workshops,
- and opinion articles in national and
- local newspapers – but not peer-
- reviewed journal articles. For this
- reason, the NCCR North-South has
- focused on the maximum use of the
- media in this region. Many senior
- researchers are active in the media:
- they write articles based on research
- findings, work as resource persons
- and analysts with the media, and
- participate in radio and television
- interviews, panel discussions and
- analysis. All these sensitise the general
- public and policymakers on the role of
- research in policymaking.
- To be effective, research findings must
- be translated into accessible forms:
- simple, concise, convincing, and
- disseminated through suitable
- channels, such as print and electronic

media, interactive forums, pictograms, posters, documentaries, summary sheets, and fact sheets.

Matching policymakers' expectations

Policymakers are often generalists who are extremely busy and must work under pressure. They need short, simple and politically relevant evidence. Researchers, on the other hand, often produce lengthy, complex documents in technical language, making it hard for policymakers to use them. Other actors who try to influence policymaking, such as public relation experts, consultants, and advocacy groups, produce simple, brief, and attractively presented materials, often in the local language. These depict people's experiences and concerns, report on programme evaluations, advocate particular themes, or tell success stories. Policymakers often prefer to use these materials than scientifically written research papers. As a result, even if the findings are based on good-quality research, they will not influence policy. For example, decisions on dividing Nepal into provinces in a major government restructuring are influenced more by advocacy materials than the research-based evidence about the capability of these provinces.

Evidence generated through a rigorous and systematic process of inquiry is more credible than that based on opinion-based advocacy. But policymakers may be unaware of the research because they are not involved in it. Hence, it is important for researchers to engage policymakers in important steps in the research process (such as in stakeholder consultation meetings) so they are aware of the research and can contribute to it. The NCCR North-South has found that it is important not only to maintain methodologically sound, conceptually strong, independent research findings, but also to make them easily accessible to policymakers (Upreti *et al.* 2012).

Realising the determinants of policymaking

Researchers must know what determines policymaking so they can make their research findings relevant

Table 1. Publicity tools and their influence on policymaking and effect on public awareness

Publicity tool	Influence	Public awareness
Journal articles	Low	Low
Policy briefs, discussion papers	Medium	Medium
Opinion articles in daily newspapers	Medium	High
Books in local language	Medium	Low

to policy. Policymakers use various criteria in deciding whether to accept or reject evidence: its quality (accuracy and objectivity), credibility (analytical rigour, clear presentation of conclusions), relevance (timely and topical evidence, generalisability), practicalities (accessible to policymakers, feasible and affordable), and the cost for policymaking (Sutcliffe and Court 2005). Researchers should consider these criteria if they aim to influence policymaking.

Policymaking is influenced by many factors: the policymakers' knowledge and skills, experience, expertise, and judgment; the policy institutions' capacity, resources, policy, and priority; the external context (e.g., urgency, donor conditions, etc.); and the priorities of the ruling political parties. In this context, policymaking is a political process. To be relevant to policy, researchers have to engage in this political process.



Reaching top-level policymakers is vital if research is to have an impact. Here, NCCR North-South's Bishnu Raj Upreti meets the President of Nepal with research publications.

Definitions

Dissemination: refers to a process of spreading useful messages or information extracted from research findings to wider audiences through appropriate channels.

Policy: refers to a set of principles, rules, plans, and procedures for a course of action intended to guide decision-makers or persons with the authority to achieve the stated goals. It includes stated commitments to a plan of action or guidelines among those in government, the private sector, research, and academic organisations.



The Sustainable Development Policy Institute conducts conferences on sustainable development for researchers, policymakers, NGOs, and the media.



Bishnu Raj Upreti, PhD

Regional Coordinator
 South Asia Regional Coordination
 Office, NCCR North-South
 Kathmandu, Nepal
 bupreti@nccr.wlink.com.np

Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

Research planning process

Developing mutual trust and relationships between policymakers and researchers requires commitment, time, and the right procedures. Reliable, quality research results are vital for developing trust. Research planning should ensure quality results and facilitate positive interactions between researchers and policymakers.

Dissemination strategy and skills

Packaging research results suitable for policy audiences is a skill. No matter how topically relevant and methodologically and conceptually sound the research is, it will have no effect if it does not reach policy circles. Using the media should be an integral part of a dissemination strategy.

Establishing structures and mechanisms

Enhancing linkages and cooperation between research and policy requires ways for researchers and policymakers to engage in discussion and reflections, provide feedback, and develop mutual understanding. Research institutes have to establish such mechanisms. They may include periodic roundtables and discussion forums, planning meetings and workshops, annual conferences and review meetings where policymakers, media, and researchers participate and reflect.

Building researchers' capacity to engage with policymakers

Researchers often work on their own, with limited engagement beyond their disciplinary areas. They need to develop their capacity in engaging with the policy community.

Further reading

Jones B. 2011. Linking research to policy: *The African Development Bank as Knowledge Broker*. Working paper series 131. Tunis, Tunisia: African Development Bank.

Sutcliffe S, Court J. 2005. *Evidence-based policymaking: What is it? How does it work? What relevance for developing countries?* London, UK: Overseas Development Institute.

Upreti BR, Geiser U. Müller-Böcker U. 2007. *Research and Capacity Building in South Asia*. Kathmandu, Nepal: South Asia Regional Coordination Office of NCCR North-South.

Upreti BR, Debele B, Cissé G, Zimmermann A. 2012. *Partnership Dynamics in Development Oriented Research: Reflections on Activities in the South on NCCR North-South Programme*. Kathmandu, Nepal: NCCR North-South, South Asia Coordination Office.

The National Centre of Competence in Research (NCCR) North-South is a worldwide research network including six partner institutions in Switzerland and some 140 universities, research institutions, and development organisations in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Europe. Approximately 350 researchers worldwide contribute to the activities of the NCCR North-South.

evidence for policy

evidence for policy provides research highlights from the NCCR North-South on important development issues. The policy brief series offers information on topics such as governance, conflict, livelihoods, globalisation, sanitation, health, natural resources, and sustainability in an accessible way. *evidence for policy* and further research information are available at www.north-south.unibe.ch

Regional Coordination Office

Bishnu Raj Upreti, PhD
 NCCR North-South
 Ekantakuna, Kathmandu Nepal
 GPO Box: 910, Kathmandu
 bupreti@nccr.wlink.com.np
www.nccr-nepal.org

This issue

Editor: Paul Mundy
 Series editor: Bishnu Raj Upreti
 Design: Simone Kummer and Siddhi Manandhar
 Printed at Heidel Press.

The NCCR North-South is co-financed by the Swiss National Science Foundation (SNSF), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the participating institutions. The views expressed in *evidence for policy* belong to the author(s) concerned and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the funding agencies, the overall NCCR North-South network, or other institutions.



FONDS NATIONAL SUISSE
 SCHWEIZERISCHER NATIONALFONDS
 FONDO NAZIONALE SVIZZERO
 SWISS NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION



UNIVERSITÄT
 BERN



Schweizerische Eidgenossenschaft
 Confédération suisse
 Confederazione Svizzera
 Confederaziun svizra

Swiss Agency for Development
 and Cooperation SDC

Citation: Upreti BR. 2012. *Linking research with policy: experiences and lessons from South Asia*. Evidence for Policy Series, Regional edition South Asia, No. 6, ed. Bishnu Raj Upreti. Kathmandu : NCCR North-South.