

Linking research, policy and livelihoods

Researchers can influence policy and hence livelihoods



Natural resources research has become increasingly focused on influencing policy as a means of improving the livelihoods of the rural and urban poor. Researchers recognise the importance of this but often do not include crucial elements of the policy process – power and politics – in their investigations. So how can natural resources researchers take better account of the complex and dynamic world of policy processes? A review of 35 NRSP research projects – a rich source of information about the relationship between natural resources research and policy – provides some suggestions.

Researchers often have a simple picture of the relationship between research and policy. Policy-makers are thought to systematically and rationally analyse problems, define solutions using the results of research and then implement them. But researchers are beginning to realise that the picture is much more complex and that policy-makers take up research findings in a variety of different ways.

The role of power

Power and politics play a vitally important role in policy processes and this was well recognised in many NRSP research projects. Some illustrated power relations at work, but few systematically analysed them and so power and politics were generally overlooked in efforts to influence policy. As a result, managerial and technical solutions to problems were produced

that largely downplayed the reality and importance of institutional change and politics. This matters because failing to take account of power and politics reduces the chances of research having a pro-poor impact on policy.

Interdisciplinarity is key

Connecting the technology and productivity interests of natural scientists with the policy, institutions and political interests of social scientists is one approach to strengthening policy influence. Researchers undertaking NRSP projects were predominantly from a natural science background. But over the 11-year life of NRSP they were encouraged to adapt their research to accommodate a shift in emphasis towards policy and institutions. Some did this well, others less so; but the important point was that it was not part of what they were trained to do.

The few projects that explicitly engaged with policy formulation and implementation processes were led by researchers whose primary academic training was in social science. This allowed them to describe policy processes in the language of politics and power, context and contingency. This was less easy for natural scientists, for whom the linear language of cause and effect is more normal and acceptable.

So positive livelihood outcomes are more likely to emerge from development-oriented research when there are close relations and good communications between natural and social scientists, and transparency when addressing the



Policy on paper and policy in practice are not well connected

sometimes difficult clashes or competition for resources that can often mar their collaboration.

Characteristics of research that influences policy

The review revealed several key characteristics of research that influence the likelihood that research findings will have an impact on the policy environment:

- *Reflexive practices.* If, as they are urged to do, researchers are to engage directly in the processes they seek to influence, then they must consider their own position, and the implications this has for what can and cannot be done with their findings. If research is really to influence policy, researchers need to become more visible, and clearer about the kind of changes they are aiming for, and are able to achieve.
- *Networks and support for learning.* Influencing policy is often about building stronger bridges between institutions and stakeholders at different levels. It is also about supporting policy-makers in their efforts to learn, rather than simply giving them access to more information.
- *The role of individuals.* Individuals have a key role in either catalysing or inhibiting institutional change. Their pivotal role demands a focus on the micro-politics of how decisions are made and the consensus required for different kinds of action. Trusted individuals are key to effective communication and learning processes. But change initiatives that over-rely on individuals may become fragile and vulnerable.
- *Time, continuity and commitment.* In those projects where change has been successfully stimulated through research, significant investments of time and the construction and maintenance of local alliances have proved essential. This implies ownership of the research agenda by local partners and a long-term commitment from the research funding body.

Policy and livelihood outcomes

Livelihood changes can be very unpredictable and occur for a wide variety of reasons, many of which have little to do with policy – either its content or the manner of its implementation. The research projects reviewed contained a wealth of insights into local and national factors that influence these changes. These exist

regardless of what researchers do, and it is important for policy-makers to understand them and engage with them. The most important factors are economic status, age, and gender, which play a critical part in shaping opportunities to sustain or improve livelihoods.

So the link between policy and livelihoods is not always as clear as it is often assumed to be. Policy on paper and policy in practice are also not well connected. Indeed, implementation sometimes has little to do with the merits of the policies themselves. There are many examples to show how policy can have unintended impacts on livelihoods. These may be positive impacts for some, but negative impacts for others, some of whom may not have even been the original targets of the policy. Those badly affected are often marginalised or disadvantaged groups. One example from Ghana demonstrates the diverse and unexpected impacts of the country's decentralisation policy (Box 1). Despite the policy's good intentions, it did not always have a positive effect on natural resources management.

Box 1 – Decentralisation in Ghana

Local government decentralisation in Ghana has its origins in reforms first introduced in 1987. While devolution is still far from complete, a progressive transfer of decision-making and legislative control to district-level authorities for many aspects of environmental management is underway. However, despite the stated aims of decentralisation policy, there is little evidence that attempts at decentralisation are increasing the chances that marginalised voices will be heard in the policy process. Even at local level, the prevailing narrative that the poor are responsible for environmental crisis is very strong. This reinforces the continuation of a top-down approach that draws on received wisdom about the environment rather than actual conditions on the ground. In addition, new institutions and decision-making processes are located in an environment where rights and claims to natural resources are shaped by factors such as ethnicity, age, gender, and length of residence. New decentralised institutions seldom take adequate account of these contextual factors.

Based on NRSP projects R7957, R8258

Box 2 – Influencing aquaculture policy in India

In eastern India, in remote areas where poor, severely disadvantaged people rely on natural resources for their livelihoods, influencing policy was an important part of improving opportunities for them to undertake fish culture and access the services that they needed for this enterprise.

Studies of how poor people undertake fish culture were presented in a range of media – videos, slide shows, a village drama – to bring the ‘voices of the poor’ to the attention of policy-makers and service providers.

Information in the studies was the basis for discussion and gathering recommendations for policy changes that took good account of those most affected by existing aquaculture policy – poor rural fishers and farmers.

Importantly, before the studies, researchers discussed the research plans with the most senior national fisheries policy-maker. He was supportive and empowered other government officials to take part in the project’s consultative process. He also requested the project to provide a concept note on aquaculture policy revision for possible inclusion in India’s Tenth Five-Year Plan.

The portfolio of policy change recommendations was shared with administrators at national and state levels through a semi-anonymous consensus building process. This process avoided hierarchical decision-making and built consensus on the main priorities extracted from the first longer list of recommended changes. Follow-up has been relatively rapid. Both policy-makers and policy-implementers have acted on some of the recommendations and poor people have responded to the more supportive policies and services. Already there are plentiful examples of improved livelihoods that can be linked with the changes that this project engendered.

Based on NRSP projects R6759, R8100 and R8334

Lessons for the future

The review draws upon a rich source of lessons about policy processes for natural resources management and the potential for research to influence policy as a means of improving livelihoods. But the review also cautions that the pathway from research to improved livelihoods via policy change is an unpredictable one. So if researchers are to be more effective in influencing policy they will need to understand more about what policy is, how it works, and how it interacts with other factors to influence development outcomes.

This appears to be a tall order, but some research projects were successful in influencing policy and some favourable livelihood outcomes did follow. A common feature of such projects was that they included several of the positive characteristics listed above. An example is shown in Box 2.

Researchers will need to know much more about what it takes for research to influence policy

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