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Pragmatic Pathways:
Critical Perspectives on Research Uptake in the Global South

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Abstract

One of social science's core roles is to inform evidence-based policy making and policy interventions that produce pro-poor outcomes. This paper explores prominent debates on research uptake and policy making by scholars working on several relatively underexplored issues in the 'Global South.' Drawing parallels from previous studies and reflecting on working in research uptake activities surrounding domestic and international migration, this paper calls for more nuanced ways of thinking about policy change and impact in questioning normative assumptions underlying the 'Theory of Change' approach, as well as for greater awareness of national and sub-national political values, structures, and opportunities. It does this by drawing attention to four important variables. First, the nature of the policy issue, particularly how it is framed in public and political discourse. This bears on the issue's popular appeal and, ultimately, the policy demand for research and the kind of policy changes that are possible. Second, institutional and political contexts that define and shape what issues are taken up on the policy agenda, who the key policy actors are and, how policy making processes are structured. Third, the issue of voice and audience: who is talking and who is being heard in any approach to research uptake and policy making. Lastly, it surfaces the semi-stochastic elements of timing: about how opportunity windows are sought, exploited and ideally if occasionally created, and the amount of time it takes to achieve change. It ultimately suggests that research translation demands a broad and non-linear approach to change that capitalises on back routes, solidarities and opportunism. Its conclusions are two-fold. First, that policy impact cannot be universally defined. Second, while the potential power of evidence to transform policy remains strong, we can assume neither that it will influence policy or that policy change will produce real, practical improvements for those about whom we are concerned. Indeed, the very nature of political and policy practice in the Global South questions the importance of laws and institutions as determinants of social outcomes.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary

Achieving research impact demands a better understanding of the potential role of research in policy making in the Global South. Research uptake, the process whereby research findings enter the 'domains' of intended and unintended multiple audiences, is a priority in many research programmes and a condition of many grants. Yet, there is little empirical or theoretical analysis on the research-policy interface in low and middle income countries. This raises serious concerns as models and approaches developed in the often more institutionalised, legalised North may transfer poorly to other regions. Indeed, realising evidence-based change in the Global South is particularly challenging due to the dynamic complexities of policy formation and implementation. Political realities suggest three aspects for researchers and research uptake professionals working in these resource-poor, less institutionalised and often highly politicised contexts. There is an acute need to understand how policy changes, who the key policy actors are and identify the exact role and place of evidence in the policy process within contextual and issue particularities. Whiles these factors are important in all environments, the variations and peculiarities of southern policy making demand further attention. Such a focus can improve how we approach research uptake and, moreover, our standards of success.

This paper proceeds through a series of steps in guiding scholars as they seek improvements in their policy influence and engagement in the Global South. First, it argues that research uptake requires more context and issue specific approaches across different spaces. In making this argument, it explores prominent debates and questions normative assumptions underlying the 'Theory of Change' approach. It calls for a greater awareness of national political values, structures, and opportunities. Second, drawing from experiences working in research uptake on domestic and international migration in South Africa, this paper calls for an approach that points to the importance of four variables: the nature of the issue at hand, political and institutional context, the importance and politics of voice and the semi-stochastic elements of timing

While these four factors are not unique to developing countries, the specificity of these variables to the Global South illustrates the issues more clearly, providing grounded perspectives on pragmatic pathways to realising change. This paper concludes that despite the evolution of the literature on research impact and policy making approaches from one overtly presuming a linear, connection to a more interactive 'Theory of Change' approach, there remains a positivistic, almost mechanical presumption about the production and impact of knowledge in some research projects funded by the North. The persistence of such perspectives is founded on lingering presumptions in the *knowledge-driven* and *problem-solving* models, both of which place undue faith in the autonomous power of scientific analysis. In challenging these perspectives, this paper reaches two important conclusions. First, that policy impact cannot be universally defined. While measuring and attributing impact serves administrative purposes, it should not cloud our judgement of what change is possible across diverse spaces and over time. Second, while the potential power of evidence to transform policy remains strong; we can assume neither that it will influence policy or that policy change will produce real, practical improvements for those about whom we are concerned. Indeed, the very nature of political and policy practice in the Global South questions the importance of laws and institutions as determinants of social outcomes.

These conclusions suggest that while the 'Theory of Change' approach provides important insights for researchers and those who fund it, it remains an inadequate guide for resource poor, less institutionalised and highly politicised contexts. Effective research translation demands a broad and non-linear approach to change that capitalises on back routes, solidarities and opportunism. This requires making leeway for other models of research utilisation like the *enlightenment model* and the *political model* in approaching and evaluating change. Incorporating these models in the 'Theory of Change' approach can allow more sensitivity to the four variables identified in this paper, and produce more holistic definitions of impact and the role of evidence. That said, there is a need for more research to understand the various variables in other parts of the Global South using case studies.

Introduction

Effective research impact demands a better understanding of the potential role of research in policy making in the Global South. Yet, little empirical or theoretical analysis on the research-policy interface exists in low and middle income countries. Even less explore debates over unpopular issues like domestic and international migration. This is striking given that influencing evidence-based policy forms a high impetus for development agencies like the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) (Delany-Moretlwe *et al*. 2011). DFID funded projects and consortia envisage evidence-based policy making as achievable by investing a minimum of 10 per cent of total research budget allocations towards research uptake in the work of DFID Research Programme Consortiums (Theobald *et al*. 2011). The guiding assumption is that by using evidence to inform ideas and narratives that shape institutional agency responsible for the hostile policies in many developing countries (Stone *et al*. 2001), the plight of migrants can be improved in a manner that contributes to the development interests of sending and receiving countries.

Funders and researchers have been seduced by the almost mechanistic models of production and consumption. However, political realities raise three important questions for researchers and research uptake professionals working in these resource-poor, less institutionalised and often highly politicised contexts. How exactly does policy change in these developing and low and middle income areas, who are the key actors in the policy process, and what exactly is the role and place of evidence in this process within contextual and issue particularities? Knowing these, I argue, can influence how we approach research uptake and how we assess success.

Southern research-policy interfaces reveal no easy answers. Because so little is known about the research-policy interface in the Global South, this paper presents principles for action and analysis based on what is known by the author. It proceeds through a series of steps in guiding scholars as they seek improvements in their policy influence and engagement in the Global South. By exploring the prominent debates on research uptake and policy making by scholars working on several underexplored issues in the Global South, I first make the argument that research uptake requires more context and issue specific approaches across different spaces. In making this argument, I question normative assumptions underlying the 'Theory of Change' approach in calling for a greater awareness of national political values, structures, and opportunities.

Second, drawing from experiences working in research uptake, this paper calls for an approach that points to the importance of four variables. First, I argue that the nature of the policy issue, particularly how it is framed in public and political discourse, bears on the issue's popularity and ultimately what research demand and policy changes it attracts. Second, I draw attention to institutional and political context. I argue that institutional and political context defines and shapes what issues are taken up on the policy agenda, who the key policy actors are, and ultimately how the policy making process is structured. Third, I highlight the importance and politics of voice and audience: who is talking and who is being heard in any approach to research uptake and policy making. Lastly, this paper surfaces the semi-stochastic elements of timing: about how opportunity windows are sought, exploited and ideally if occasionally created, and the amount of time it takes to achieve change. While these four are

not unique to developing countries, the specificity of these variables to the Global South illustrates the issues more clearly, providing grounded perspectives on pragmatic pathways to realising change. Ultimately, this paper suggests that research translation demands a broad and non-linear approach to change that capitalises on back routes, solidarities and opportunism.

Methodological Approach

This paper is a culmination of the exploration of prominent debates identified in the literature review carried out in Johannesburg from February to August 2015. It also reflects the author's experiences working in research uptake surrounding domestic and international migration in South Africa. First, the exploration I conducted focused on the various theoretical frameworks and models used in scholarly policy analysis and policy development processes, most of which were developed from western case studies. Second, I conducted a thorough literature review on research uptake over the six months period. It examined research uptake, particularly a 'Theory of Change' approach, what it actually means and its relationship to policy making. The search did not consider all works on the subject of research uptake. However, it was adequately comprehensive to provide a robust assessment of the extant literature.

Literature reviewed was gathered during the review period from resources including the Wits University online library catalogue and general web searches. I also selected literature based on recommendations from key informants that I conveniently consulted, who have worked on research uptake and policy making in the Global South. The key search terms I used included policy making, policy analysis, evidence-based policy and research uptake. Thirdly, from this list, I chose only the literature related to research uptake and policy making on unpopular issues. For my own purposes, I classified an unpopular message, cause or policy issue as having these characteristics:

1. Perceived to threaten powerful interests or commonly held perceptions within a society;
2. Is currently on policy agenda but is not a major point of deliberation or debate because of weak interests.

This spanned many issues including not only migration but also LGBTI rights, sex workers, neglected tropical diseases, and others.

This paper forms part of an ongoing study currently underway at the African Centre for Migration & Society (Wits University) using case studies to assess the effectiveness of research uptake and advocacy in South Africa and the Global South at large. Consequently, many of the arguments presented here are effectively pilot-findings, some of which are reiterated and reinforced within the pre-existing literature. More importantly, the arguments I make are drawn from my experiences working in migration research and research uptake in South Africa. This paper should be read as a provocation and outline for continued debate and research.

Rethinking the 'Theory of Change' approach

Policy makers, civil society and researchers are some of the key actors and stakeholders in the policy-making process constituting the 'advocacy coalition' (Sabatier 1988). One of the normative roles of social science research is to contribute positively to social transformation. Some scholars argue that, without contemplating its relevance to society, the activity of social science is meaningless (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006: 109). Social science's purpose is to help citizens and policymakers understand the world better 'with an eye to changing that world' (ibid: 110). Research uptake is, therefore, the process whereby research findings enter the 'domains' of intended and unintended multiple audiences (policy makers, the public, scholars, practitioners) (Boshoff 2012).

Development research, particularly, strives to make a difference by 'addressing global poverty and inequality and catalysing change' (Sumner *et al.* 2011: 2). Research uptake forms a key component of development communication which McPhail (2009: 3) defines as:

> the process of intervening in one's day to day in a systematic or strategic manner with either media (print, radio, telephony, video and the internet), or education (training, literacy school) for the purpose of positive social change.

Research can generate evidence that can make a vital difference if utilised in decision-making and practice 'helping us to save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life' (Court and Young 2003: 1). Policy, in this regard, is a powerful agent for realising social change as it drives action to address the many issues surrounding poverty and injustice (Fisher and Vogel 2008: 1). For many, the possibilities of positive outcomes are greatly enhanced when informed by scientific evidence.

While research undeniable can help to improve policies and their outcomes, this is not always the case due to the complexities of policy formation and implementation. Policy changes in a

variety of different ways and the reason why policy changes is not a well-understood phenomenon (Bennet and Howlett 1992). Moreover, the research-policy interface is similarly little understood, particularly in low and middle income areas (Burris *et al.* 2011). In this regard, there is a conceptual gap that requires more empirical probing.

Over time, our understanding of policy influence and research communication has evolved from linear, top-down assumptions about influence to 'more complex and multi-sited Theories of Change' (Anderson 1999; Byrne 1998; Harvey *et al.* 2012a: 2; Marion 1999; Sanderson 2006). This has been necessitated and facilitated by the development of new ICTs and social media which have contemporarily become alternative channels of knowledge production and dissemination. These new technologies have led to the 'pluralisation of "expert knowledge"' and the adoption of participatory methods creating a more convivial environment and space for policy influence from other pockets of society (Harvey *et al.* 2012a: 2).

Besides the influence of new media, there are other varied ways scholars have come to understand policy processes. Several typologies of research utilisation models also exist (see Hanney *et al.* 2002; Kogan and Tuijnman 1995). Whereas *social pressure* was a traditional orthodoxy of understanding policy change, it was challenged by Walker (1974) and Heclo (1974) for suggesting that government is a passive actor whose policy action is a mere response to social forces and conflicts. Walker (1974) posited an alternative view arguing that civil servants, consultants, and other policy specialists play an influential role in shaping the intellectual premises employed by policy-makers. This paradigm is associated with the *knowledge-driven model* (Weiss 1979), which describes research uptake and policy making as a linear sequence. In the *knowledge-driven model*, policy-making is seen as a form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf steered by 'policy middlemen' who have access to information and ideas (Heclo 1974: 305). Policy-making ceases to be just about ideology, conflict and power.

Scholars like Havelock (1969) and Weiss (1979) forefront a second approach: the *problem-solving model*. In this model, research and 'ideas' are seen as having a direct, positive impact on state policy by answering a policy question. There is also an assumption in this model that policy-making and the role of research and ideas are linear and mechanistic (Belkhodja 2012; Cherney *et al.* 2013; Weiss 1979. This model suggests that policy making entails problem definition that leads to the identification and evaluation of alternatives (through research and ideas) followed by policy implementation (Patton *et al.* 2012). According to Weiss (1979: 428), in the 'problem solving model,' 'the usual prescription for improving the use of research is to improve the means of communication to policy makers'. These two approaches have informed most early western approaches to policy making around the world (Cherney *et al.* 2013) and account for the heightened expectations bestowed upon research in directly influencing policy.

While earlier models are largely linear, at the turn of the new century there was a shift. A new *interactive model* of 'modern' policy-making articulated by the British government (UK Cabinet Office 1999) challenged traditional assumptions which viewed research uptake and policy making as a linear process. In this model, evidence is an integral part of any 'modern' public policy making. Also, research uptake plays a crucial role in contributing to the

realisation of 'progressive' policies (Davies *et al.* 1999). Policies should be 'forward-looking and shaped by the evidence rather than a response to short-term pressures' (UK Cabinet Office 1999: 15). Unlike earlier models, most evident in this model is the shift from linearism and reductionism to holistic concepts and interactive approaches of understanding the process of change in societies (Anderson 1999; Byrne 1998; Marion 1999; Sanderson 2006). The simple linear model conceived by scholars like Havelock (1969) where research results are disseminated to target audiences who assimilate this new knowledge and act upon it (Datta 2012: 10) is too mechanistic and places an undue faith in the autonomous power of scientific analysis.

Building on this model of understanding research uptake and policy-making, the 'Theory of Change' approach is a contemporary standard for most research programme designs in UK DFID funded projects (Valters 2014). It is an approach that seeks to address the problems inherent in existing models of analysing change (Valters 2014: 3). There is no consensus in the literature as to the meaning of the 'Theory of Change' approaches (IDS 2013). In this paper, it refers to any theory-based approach to change that provides a way to consider what will change and 'the underlying dynamics and assumptions around *how* and *why* change will happen' (ibid: 2). This approach involves a set of beliefs and mapped-out assumptions of policy change where research has been commissioned. Interaction is considered in setting research priorities, commissioning research and communicating findings (Hennink 2004). The 'Theory of Change' approach to research uptake and policy-making, by its interactive nature, is an undeniable step forward in guiding research translation. However, certain implicit, normative considerations and assumptions remain about the nature of policy making and the value of evidence that appear to be driven by the ideology that research affects policies and these policies have important repercussions. This does not resonate with our observations and practice and is not sufficiently problematised. In this regard, the 'Theory of Change' approach encourages 'linear, mechanistic and teleological thinking, based on the idea we can accurately predict the outcomes of our interventions' (Valters 2014: 3). This rarely plays out in reality suggesting that while the 'Theory of Change' approach provides important insights, it is an inadequate guide for resource poor, less institutionalised and highly politicised contexts (see IDS 2013).

Shortcomings in the 'Theory of Change' approach's assumptions become more starkly visible when exploring marginalised and unpopular issues like migration, sex work, LGBTI rights, neglected tropical diseases, and others. On such themes, public opinion is hostile, myths are deeply entrenched, an issue is often not on the policy agenda or lacks a domestic constituency. I argue that in these cases, there is the need for a more context and issue-specific approach that is more holistic and pays greater awareness to national political values, structures, and opportunities. This requires making leeway for other models of research utilisation, like the *enlightenment model* and the *political model,* in approaching and evaluating change. Incorporating these models in the 'Theory of Change' approach can allow more sensitivity to the nature of the policy issue at hand, institutional and political context, the politics of voice and audience and the semi-stochastic elements of timing. These four variables are explored in the following pages.

The Nature of the Policy Issue

The nature of the policy issue at hand, particularly how it is framed in public and political discourse, bears on the issue's popularity and ultimately what research demand and policy changes it attracts. In arguing, I use a South African illustration. South Africa is generally regarded as a 'rainbow' nation due to a number of different races residing in the country. However, forging a common South African national identity has remained elusive (Alegi 2010; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011). South Africa receives some of the largest numbers of foreign migrants in sub-Saharan Africa and the developing world. Migration is portrayed, in public and political discourse, as a threat to the populist interests of the ruling party and an obstacle in distributing economic resources to 'indigenous' locals. Immigration issues have undeniably been hotly contested in South African policy and popular press circles (McDonald *et al.* 2000). Moreover, questions of domestic and international labour migration are further stigmatised by a long history of 'organised labour regimes', which were racist, exploitative and politically disempowering to the country's majority.

As a result, policy ideas and responses to migration in the country are more focused on the negative outcomes of migration. These responses aim towards clamping human trafficking and perceived national security threats that migrants supposedly pose. These two issues have gained remarkable prominence in local and global policy debates (de Haas 2008; Gould 2008). Because of how migration is conceived by policy makers and 'indigenous' locals, a largely shared feature of contemporary migration responses is their restrictive nature (Pecoud and de Guchteneire 2006: 70). These restrictions are implemented at two levels. Firstly, policy makers approach migration in security terms and rhetoric (Landau and Amit 2014). This rhetoric is framed within the supposed need to protect the nation-state from external 'threat' by militarising the borders. Second, increased human trafficking necessitates tightening immigration controls using hostile policies (Kyle and Koslowski 2001) meant to avoid trafficking in persons (Pecoud and de Guchteneire 2006). Controlling migration has become an important field in policy (ibid).

These two are substantially valid concerns for sovereigns. However, the strong bias to treating migration with hostility creates an oversight that makes it difficult to harness and maximise the positive impacts of migration to national and regional development. This has not stopped policy in southern Africa persisting on viewing migration as essentially a bad thing (Crush and Frayne 2007: 13). In fact, migration in South Africa and most of the Global South remains largely unpopular. The South African immigration regime is dominated by concerns about economic physical security, rather than regional development and human rights (FMSP 2010). Migration for states disturbs the 'national order of things' (Malkki 1992: 32) and this results in migrants becoming 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966), socially, economically and politically. This categorical exclusion is also achieved through negative stereotyping of foreign migrants in media and policy circles (Peberdy and Crush 1998). Migrants in South Africa are perceived by 'indigenous' locals as criminals, vectors of HIV/AIDS, people that steal jobs, housing, education and health-care from ordinary citizens. Migrants are also held responsible for promoting poverty and moral-cultural decay in urban dwellings (Morris 1998; Murray 2003; Nyar 2010; Tacoli 2009). Anecdotal evidence proves that migrant stereotyping is not unique to South Africa alone and is also found in other contexts (e.g. Rohingyas in Bangladesh, domestic migrants living in the urban slums of Accra, Bangladeshi workers in Singapore).

Political discourse is just one of the many ways in which migration and migrants are portrayed negatively. Prejudiced comments by senior politicians and state officials are reflective of the kind of rhetoric that permeates South African public debate about foreign migrants in political and policy circles (Landau 2011: 9-11; McDonald *et al.* 2000) Peberdy and Crush 1998). While political discourse is informed by the negative stereotyping of foreign migrants, migration remains overlooked and overtly silenced in scholarly, popular and political discourse (Landau 2011: 2). Scholars like Black *et al.* (2006) and Misago (2011) have persuasively shown that dominant narratives and perceptions about migrants are largely based on myth rather than fact with no substantive evidence and create 'a *doxa*' in which outsiders are expediently excluded (Crush and Frayne 2010; Landau 2011: 10).

The empirical facts are that foreign migrants contribute significantly to country development by buying goods and services, importing skills, paying tax and creating jobs through entrepreneurship. For example, a study conducted by the Centre for Development and Enterprise (2008) in South Africa found that 12 per cent of immigrants employ nearly 4 people in the informal sector, many of whom are locals (Maharaj 2002; Muller 1999, cited in Vorster 2002: 304). This is a significant contribution in a context where a 2002 estimate also showed that the informal sector contributed 7.1 per cent of the country's GDP and accounted for 22.3 per cent of all jobs (Davies and Thurlow 2009; Devey *et al.* 2006).

Such findings are not unique to South Africa alone. For example, Martin (2003) and IOM (2006, both cited in Chi 2007: 500) similarly found that:

> Considering the interests of both sending and receiving countries, international organisations and individual states have largely reached the consensus that, if properly managed, temporary labour migration can promote sending countries' interests in economic development and protecting migrant workers' rights while simultaneously fulfilling receiving countries' demand for labour and desire to limit permanent immigration.[1]

On a global scale, the World Bank (2006) concluded that migration often generates great benefits for migrants and their families. Furthermore, it can also generate substantial welfare gains for migrants, countries of origin, and their host countries (World Bank 2006: 5). In light of such compelling findings, it can be safely concluded that, indeed, immigrants are not parasites but net contributors to development (Maharaj 2002). Nonetheless, migration remains a contested and marginalised issue predominantly portrayed by policymakers as an impediment to development. Given the marginality of migration and how it is negatively portrayed in media and political discourse, the abundance of such empirical evidence has proven insufficient to influence policy change in the country. This indicates that, clearly, research evidence alone is not a guarantor of policy change.

The subject matter of research and how it is framed in public and political discourse is always critical to consider in any approach to research uptake. Firstly, issue framing bears significantly on the issue's popularity and ultimately what research demand and policy

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[1]Martin *et al.* (2004); van der Mensbrugghe and Roland-Holst (2009) and Ortega and Peri (2009) reach similar conclusions.

changes it attracts. This can influence what spaces and methods are best for research to engage with policy. Crichton and Theobald (2011) reiterate that policy influencing processes vary with different issues. Furthermore, they argue, issues that are sensitive and challenging (like migration, LGBTI rights, neglected tropical diseases, sex work) require careful consideration and further empirical and conceptual understanding. This understanding enhances strategising about the messages and processes through which to engage with different stakeholders in different contexts (ibid).

Grasping issue particularities allows for uptake strategies that are more cognisant and aware of the different forms of resistance to evidence awaiting research. These, as aforementioned, are embedded in public and political discourses that shape or are shaped by belief systems, culture, public opinion and attitudes. Having such knowledge helps inform research agendas, research uptake strategies and planning towards more creative message processes. For example participatory methods are a good way to generate evidence and engage with policy stakeholders at various stages of the research process when dealing with marginalised groups. Participatory methods are more inclusive and utilise more 'exciting', visual and captivating elements in the generation and communication of evidence. This allows for the research message to be more acceptably read as opposed to merely getting policy briefs in front of policy makers. Such participatory methods could include film, photography, music, poetry and art; to captivate audiences and allow research to 'speak for itself' in a less technocratic manner. Participatory methods challenge generic definitions of evidence by providing an extension to what we call 'evidence', which can be anything from a photograph to a story. This approach works best when dealing with underexplored groups and issues like sex work, gay rights and migration (see Oliveira and Vearey 2015).

Last, research is unlikely to affect policy if the reforms on the policy issue go against the interests of important political players (Court and Young, 2013: 13). South African national values and interests, for example, stress national cohesion and homogeneity leaving little room in the 'rainbow nation' for policy reforms and practices that are migrant-inclusive. In as much as some inclusive policies do exist (the Refugee Act of 1998 for example), because migration is unpopular, bureaucratic autonomy often creates a gap between policy and practice that works against desired judicious outcomes and social protection for migrants (Landau and Amit, 2014). Knowing this can shape research-policy interventions that engage more with 'street-level' bureaucrats or frontline workers whose prejudices to the issue, coping mechanisms and political interests are responsible for poor policy delivery (Lipsky, 2010).

Institutional and Political Context

This paper argues that institutional and political context defines and shapes what issues are taken up on the policy agenda, who the key policy actors are, and ultimately how the policy making process is structured. Policy impact and the role of evidence therefore varies by context in terms of what alliances can be forged, how much change can be achieved against existing opportunities and constraints and ultimately what it is that we call impact within possible interventions (Harvey *et al.* 2012b). As such, definitions of policy impact and the role

of evidence vary vastly according to the political and institutional determinants of what change is possible and not.

Policy impact is how research findings are utilised to influence policy and it can either be instrumental or conceptual (Sumner *et al.* 2011). Research may have a conceptual use by generating changes in levels of knowledge, understanding or attitudes about social problems or policies required to tackle them (Gilson and McIntyre 2008: 751). It may also have an instrumental use by generating changes in behaviour and practice that may solve particular problems (ibid). However, impact means different things to different actors across various political and institutional contexts. In highly politicised and less institutionalised contexts, the indicators of success are not easy to identify or classify. In these contexts, the policy process is often 'chaotic and messy'. In these spaces, it is difficult to have a set of clearly mapped assumptions, flowed diagrams, universal models and abstract projections of how policy change will occur in the foreseeable future. In complex environments, it is difficult to plot relatively clear or stable change pathways (Valters 2014). Moreover, allocating the role and type of evidence that is relevant and appropriate in realising envisaged change is also problematic (Datta 2012; Sanderson 2009). Having little or no conceptual and practical understanding of the policy process and limited knowledge of who the key policy actors are, as is the case in most of the Global South, does not make theorising and planning for change any easier.

Despite its importance, this variable is often ignored in the 'Theory of Change' approach to research uptake, especially in defining impact and the role of evidence. For all of the 'modern' advancements made to research uptake and policy making, we do not get an approach that acknowledges the need to better understand these processes in the context of broad political and institutional formations. These formations determine what counts for impact and what space there is for evidence, dependent on existing opportunities, constraints and possible alliances. Concerns of context are not only unique to my argument but have also been identified by scholars like Theobald *et al.* (2011). These authors have similarly argued for the need to undertake reflective assessments of the policy relevance of evidence, the scope and limitations of this relevance and the policy actors and policy processes within contextual and institutional particularities.

National level variables (political and institutional) must be considered to explain the uptake of evidence into policy settings (Hutchinson *et al.* 2011: 8; Sumner *et al.* 2011). This is because linear understandings of the research-policy interface do not sufficiently account for the complexities and political natures of policy making that necessitate contextual meanings and valorisations of impact and the role of evidence (Bowen and Zwi 2005). Despite 'new' and interactive understandings of the research-policy interface in the 'Theory of Change' approach, there is a return to linear and preconceived understandings of what research impact is (Harvey *et al.* 2012a) and the role of evidence, that rarely takes political and institutional context into account.

Scholars like Sumner *et al.* (2011) and Harvey *et al.* (2012a) are thus critical and sceptical of the faith – of many donors and institutions driving research agendas in the south – in the efficacy of directly influencing policy targets and processes through research uptake. They are also sceptical about the emerging focus on measuring research communication impact and

attributing that impact to specific actors. Certainly in highly politicised and less institutionalised contexts, research is not the only source of influence on policy. Policy change is largely influenced by other actors like politicians, and it is a highly politicised and closed process. Politicians and policy makers also have to take politics, not just data, into account (Sumner *et al.* 2011). Therefore, even in instances where policy changes are well aligned with certain research findings, they may also have been influenced by political interests. Attributing policy change to a particular piece of research evidence or to a specific non-political actor in such instances and contexts is quite misleading. Many impact assessment studies reveal that analysing attribution and impact of research is not an easy task (Boaz *et al.* 2008; Sumner *et al.* 2011). This is due to the 'uncertainty in determining a causal link between research and the outcome of a policy or the value of a policy outcome' (Sumner *et al.* 2011: 5). In this regard, measuring and assessing impact in any research programme can be likened with 'trying to prove a murder in the absence of a body' (Alder 2015).

Institutional and political contexts vary to the extent that definitions of what research impact or influence entails are often incoherent and cannot always be shared across the board. This often turns problematic as it creates a disjuncture among 'competing interpretations of the most effective pathways to producing social change' (Harvey *et al.* 2012a: 3). These competing interpretations stifle prudent creativity and opportunism by encouraging an overly linear approach even where change can be more organic or systemic (Valters 2014). Jacobson (1996: 80) therefore argues that 'while positivism may be declared philosophically dead its effects still seem evident in textbooks, in the research agendas of many communication researchers and indeed certainly in those of funding agencies'. Because of the bias towards measuring direct policy impact, linear assumptions of research impact and the role of evidence resurface and influence research uptake approaches in a manner that is oblivious to and incompatible with political and institutional context. These assumptions are strongly aligned to a development research communication paradigm that is informed by early modernisation and behaviourist theories of communication influence, with an underlying assumption that research influence is linear and should thus be heftily targeted at policy audiences (Harvey *et al.* 2012a: 3). This creates a disjuncture between such paradigms with the operational realities of research uptake and policy making, making it difficult for researchers to capitalise on back routes, solidarities and opportunism.

Voice and Audience: Who is Talking and Who is Being Heard

Recognising the importance of political legitimacy in the public sphere, it is important to analyse and understand who is talking and who is being heard in any approach to research uptake and policy making. The polity, which is a configuration made up of formally organised institutions, defines the setting in which policy making and governance take place (March and Olsen 2006). Certain policy actions are made possible within 'structure of resources' (staff, finance and organisational capabilities) and 'structures of meaning' 'that explain and justify behavior – roles, identities and belongings, common purposes, and causal and normative beliefs' (ibid). Institutional setting provides vocabularies that 'frame thought and understandings and define what are legitimate arguments and standards of justification and criticisms in different situations'. As a result, different actors are constrained differently within the prevalent structure of resources and meaning. According to March and Olsen, this

ultimately affects 'whose justice' and 'rationality' has primacy and who become 'winners and losers'.

This forms the basis of my argument on the variable of voice and audience. I argue that research actors are constrained within different structures of meaning, which are defined by the polity, that render certain justifications, rationalities and criticisms illegitimate. As suggested in the *political model* of research uptake, 'policymakers use research as ammunition to support certain political points of view and to refute others' (Hennink, 2004: 6). There have been many calls for the use of evidence in social policy by funders and development agencies. Nonetheless, elucidations of what 'good evidence' for policy is are often lacking (Abeysinghe and Parkhurst 2013). For example, in the evidence-based medicine movement, there has been an embrace of the 'hierarchy of evidence' in framing the selection of evidence. These hierarchies place high regard to 'experimental trials as preeminent in terms of methodological quality' (ibid: 1) to the detriment of considerations about evidence appropriateness.

Social scientists have argued that such a hierarchy is not always an effective policy guide. This is because the accepted method of Randomised Control Trials shifts the focus away from broader structural issues such as the social determinants of health, as experimental methods are not always conducive for complex structural interventions. Therefore, rather than adhering to a single hierarchy of evidence, there is need to examine evidence through the lens of appropriateness in judging what constitutes good evidence (ibid). This argument is from a public health perspective focusing on the credibility assigned to certain methods over others. However, it invokes questions of what counts for good evidence in migration policy (is it a matter of quality or appropriateness?) and if evidence can be classified essentially as a relevant voice to policy.

Unlike natural science, 'expertise' and 'good science' in social science are harder to define and not as generally respected (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006). In South Africa, 'good evidence' is not only evaluated based on methodological rigour but on the basis of who is producing the evidence and whose interests the evidence serves. This is a phenomenon that is immersed within political power struggles that ultimately determine which actor has a voice. From my experiences, I have learnt that in the South African migration policy field, method is not as important a determinant of evidence credibility. There is a huge mistrust of research and evidence by policy makers in the country, especially if it is research being commissioned by western donors and funders. Scholars like Delany-Moretlwe *et al.* (2011) view the failure of evidence to adequately inform policy through the lens of South African apartheid history, which they argue left a legacy of suspicion and mistrust in research and evidence (especially in the medical community). Such conspiracies have resulted in donor-funded research being frowned upon by staunch politicians and policy makers as 'intelligence' and 'spy' work meant to destabilise the nation-building aspirations of the post-apartheid state.

In such contexts, researchers themselves are stereotyped and ostracised as villains (Delany-Moretlwe *et al.* 2011), while some are labelled CIA. Because of these underlying suspicions, migration research evidence is seen as the work of a 'third force'. This suspicion of research contributes to the unresolved xenophobia-afrophobia debacle that remains prevalent in South African media and policy debates. It also means that research critiquing inadequate

government responses to migration and xenophobia, for example, is marginalised in formal policy arrangements, giving it little opportunity to be heard beyond the academy even if it is empirically good evidence. South African politicians and policy makers, therefore, prefer to quote Human Science Research Council's (HSRC) flawed and inflated statistics on migration (about there being 5,000,000 foreign migrants in South Africa). These numbers, which were cited in 1995 but officially withdrawn in 2001, continue to be cited by policy makers and are more aligned with the government's interests of constructing images of an 'immigration crisis' and a 'Human Tsunami' (Danso and McDonald 2000; FMSP and Musina Legal Advice Office 2007). These numbers are false. International migration is far less numerically significant than many South African citizens and policy makers suggest (FMSP 2010: 2). FMSP (2010) extrapolated census data and found that the overall foreign population (documented and undocumented respectively) is likely 1.6 and 2 million; 3-4 per cent of the total population. The 2011 census then found that there were 2,199,871 international migrants in South Africa (Statistics South Africa 2011) while Statistics South Africa (2012) found the total number of documented migrants to be 142,833. The HSRC numbers have been challenged by researchers time and time again. Still, little critique is given to HSRC's methodological rigour and credibility by the government, likely because HSRC is a South African statutory research agency. The lack of empirical credibility has not stopped government policy institutions from using HSRC figures in public statements and in informing policy-making agendas and decisions. What we see here is that what matters more to policy makers are questions to do with 'whose evidence' and 'whose voice' rather than 'what evidence' or 'what voice'.

This experience also holds true for experiences in other parts of the Global South. In their study on getting HSV-2 treatment research into policy in Ghana, Burris *et al.* (2011: 8) found that evidence alone is unable to influence policy without the engagement and alignment of multiple factors. Therefore, in as much as social science may strive mightily for social utility, problems like racism, poverty, and the spread of AIDS require much more than good social science to solve them (Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006). Beyond rhetoric, social change also requires power (ibid). The primacy and autonomy of social science evidence in approaching change are indeed questionable in resource poor contexts and there is a need to rethink this in the 'Theory of Change' approach. A rationalist approach that appeals to use the best evidence in policy making 'bellies underlying complexities relating to how evidence can be constructed and used in political and ideological ways' (Valters 2014: 16). Migration research evidence in South Africa has instead contributed to what some scholars have called 'policy-based evidence gathering' (see Sharman and Holmes 2010). This is an approach that is geared towards the flawed evidential justification of certain policies, existing and forthcoming. Here we see evidence being 'tailor-made' by policy makers to suit certain agendas that serve political and ideological state interests. This is achieved by inflating numbers of trafficked persons or commissioning research that produces convenient and purposive findings. Data that does not suit the interests of those in power is totally ignored or used marginally or symbolically (see DiMaggio and Powell, 1983 and March and Olsen, 2006).

In media circles, the South African Department of Home Affairs has been exposed for using falsified and inflated numbers of trafficked children per year. These are presented as 30,000, supposedly based on the 'evidence'. Gould (2008: 84), however, convincingly argues that 'the numbers of trafficking victims presented in the reports were not based on rigorous quantitative research, but on estimates which are almost certainly inflated based largely on

anecdotal evidence'. Yet, this inaccurate evidence produced by Molo Songololo (2000), which does 'not provide a sound basis for policy-making and resource allocation', successfully placed trafficking on the policy-making agenda (Gould 2008: 84). It also informed the Department of Home Affair's recent immigration policy reforms (to the Immigration Act) as it successfully swayed public opinion into believing that trafficking is taking place at an alarming rate on South Africa's borders. Recommendations by the Songololo delegation (24 June, 2005) argued that one of the root causes of the increase in human trafficking was that border controls had been relaxed.[2] The HSRC *Tsireledzani* Report (2010) produced similarly controversial findings based on flawed methodology and over-generalisations. There is, in fact, little evidence that South Africa is a significant destination or transit country for international trafficking (FMSP 2010; Gould *et al.* 2010). In 2010, the International Organisation on Migration (IOM) had dealt with only 300 cases of trafficking in southern Africa from 2004 (Gould *et al.* 2010). These numbers, which are nothing more than a justification for a host of hostile immigration policies that we see today, were challenged by many researchers who were often labelled 'trafficking denialists'. These policies however managed to sail through parliament because certain actors were given more voice in the policy arena than others, thereby increasing their political legitimacy and chances of being heard.

Semi-Stochastic Elements of Timing

This paper emphasises the semi-stochastic elements of timing: about how opportunity windows are sought, exploited and ideally if occasionally created, and the amount of time it takes to achieve change. Realising change requires both time and timing. First, despite the unpopularity of migration, achieving impact relies on creating, seeking and exploiting windows of opportunity. These windows of opportunity provide researchers some fair leverage to realise cumulative impact by allowing them to participate in public sphere contestations about migration. In these instances, achieving impact relies on perfect timing and calculated opportunism in which researchers can manoeuvre to steer public opinion, policy agendas or influence prevailing rhetoric and discourses. Tarrow (1988; 1994) has gone into greater depth to explain the importance of 'political opportunity structure' in any approach to change involving 'contentious politics'.

In South Africa, myth-busting knowledge and evidence sometimes allow the 'dissenting' voices of science to create opportunities for influence by commenting and providing insight into the migration discourse in media and policy circles. This is done by soliciting interviews, participating in relevant policy dialogues and writing opinion pieces in newspaper editions. Second, xenophobic violence also opens windows of opportunity for civil society and researchers to lobby for evidence-based change. For example, 'opportunity structures' created by xenophobic violence make space for evidence in media narratives, dialogues and policy debates on migration and development. The 2008 xenophobic violence is a good example of a 'crisis' that received global media coverage and was debated publicly thereby creating 'political opportunity structures and universes of political discourse' for collective action (Polzer and Segatti 2011: 200). Similarly, I have observed that in times of xenophobic

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[2] These recommendations were presented to the Improvement of Quality of Life and Status of Women Joint Monitoring Committee meeting on Human Trafficking in 2005. The minutes can be found on: https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/5286/

violence, there is high demand for researchers at our centre to comment on migration and migrant-related issues in various public fora, especially in the mainstream media.

These intervals of high research demand from media and policy makers allow epistemic communities to publicly forefront the argument that, on the contrary, managed migration can contribute to economic development in both host and sending countries. Such findings, that portray the positive impacts that migration has on development, lead to issue and power contestations. This is because they question the status quo, anti-migrant policies, popular discourse and commonly held perceptions that portray migrants as threats to citizens' rights, welfare and their interests (Crush and Frayne 2010). Nonetheless, if they are carefully capitalised upon, such timely opportunisms can yield gradual and conceptual impact on policy attitudes.

In the 'Theory of Change' approach, there is more emphasis on linear and instrumental impact, leaving little room for such opportunism and manoeuvre. This is not made any easier by the strong emphasis and focus on the direct influences that research should have on policy. This focus is implicit in the research agendas driving many funders of the Global North. The focus on maximising the direct impact of research is justifiable in that it brings researchers to account on what they have managed to achieve with the funds allocated to them. However, this focus often neglects the more cumulative and indirect impact that research can have (Hovland 2003; Lewin and Patterson 2012) and how redirecting efforts to long-term change can yield more positive policy-outcomes.

This brings to fore the aspect of time. Impact is a process that requires time to realise (IDS 2013), especially when dealing with 'unpopular' topics like migration, sex work, LGBTI rights and neglected tropical diseases. This argument invokes what Weiss (1977) and Walt and Gilson (1994) call the 'enlightenment function' of research: 'the process whereby research findings and new concepts "percolate" and gradually filter through policy networks thus indirectly influencing policy' (Weiss 1977 cited in Lewin and Patterson 2012: 39). Walt (1994) argues that in the *enlightenment model* research permeates gradually and indirectly into the policy process through various information channels. In this regard, policy scholars like Sabatier (1991) convincingly argue that it is rare for a single piece of research to strongly influence a major policy decision. Instead, Sabatier further argues, what is to be realistically anticipated is a process of 'enlightenment' 'whereby the findings accumulated *over time* gradually alter decision makers' perceptions of the seriousness of the problems' (Sabatier 1991: 148) (italics mine). What can be realistically anticipated in the lifetime of any research programme is the enlightenment function of its research through cumulative information. This is because research alone is not an attributable influence of policy change, which is often a 10 to 15-year process that requires creating and capitalising on opportunity windows as they present themselves.

It is, therefore, difficult and problematic to exclusively focus on the aspects to do with direct, instrumental and measurable impact of research on policy because at times these are not so obvious. Such an approach is oblivious to the gradual, indirect and opportunistic impact that research has on policy. In so doing, it disadvantages long-term strategies, creativity and timely sustained policy interventions to realising broader systemic and purposive change. South Africa is a good example where, even though migration policies remain hostile, there has been

a noticeable change in language about migrants in parliament rhetoric from 1996 to date. Does this then not count as research impact on the policy process (even though it may not be easy to attribute)? Surely in the South African context it does as parliamentary deliberations form the core foundation of the policy process. Against this backdrop, there is need to understand policy impact more broadly within research's long-term and indirect influence rather than narrowly focusing on direct change. Such an approach allows researchers to capitalise on sustained engagements over long periods of time and exploit opportunities as they present themselves in a timely manner.

Any 'effects' based approach to communicating research and measuring impact is itself problematic. Katz (2001: 274) asserts that:

> …effects can be immediate or delayed, or short-duration or long-lasting. Effects upon individuals [knowledge, attitudes, opinions and behaviour] might slowly become transformed into institutional changes.

Building on Katz's position, I argue that research-policy impact comes in 'simple reactions or complicated chains' (ibid: 274). Such non-linear impact happens when research translation influences institutional practices or makes way for conversations that in turn lead to direct policy change.

Conclusions: Toward Holistic and Pragmatic Pathways to Change

The debates explored in this paper reveal the multifaceted ways in how policy making and research uptake can be understood beyond normative assumptions. Despite the evolvement of research impact and policy making approaches from linear ones to a more interactive 'Theory of Change' approach, there is a persistent return to linear definitions of what impact is and what role evidence plays in research projects funded by the North. This back-peddling assumes some problematic presumptions of the *knowledge-driven model* and the *problem-solving model*, which both place undue faith in the autonomous power of scientific analysis. Political realities reveal a different picture. They reveal that realising change requires more pragmatism.

Recognising this, this paper has identified four important variables. Firstly, that the policy issue at hand and how it is framed in public and political discourse influences its ascendency on the policy agenda and what change is possible. Second, political and institutional context defines the policy process, leading to various definitions of what we call impact against existing constraints and possible interventions. Third, political realities point to the importance of voice and audiences. The polity defines what arguments are illegitimate, leading to some research actors' voices being preferred over others and ultimately influencing who gets heard and who doesn't. Last, policy change takes time and as such, it requires timely and sustained engagements that rely on calculated opportunism. Knowing these is important in determining appropriate pathways, messages, processes and channels to engage various research stakeholders for pro-poor outcomes. Ultimately and most importantly, this knowledge informs how we assess success.

First, this conclusion suggests that policy impact cannot be universally defined. While measuring and attributing impact serves administrative purposes, it should not cloud our judgement of what change is possible across diverse spaces and over time. Second, while the potential power of evidence to transform policy remains strong; we can assume neither that it will influence policy nor that policy change will produce real, practical improvements for those about whom we are concerned. Indeed, the very nature of political and policy practice in the Global South questions the importance of laws and institutions as determinants of social outcomes.

This suggests that while the 'Theory of Change' approach (by its *interactive* nature) provides important insights, it is an inadequate guide for resource poor, less institutionalised and highly politicised contexts. There remains a positivistic, almost mechanical presumption about the production and impact of knowledge in the approach and in some research projects funded by the North. The persistence of such perspectives is founded on lingering presumptions in the *knowledge-driven* and *problem-solving* models, both of which place undue faith in the autonomous power of scientific analysis. This requires making leeway for other models of research utilisation like the *enlightenment model* and the *political model* in approaching and evaluating change. Incorporating these models in the 'Theory of Change' approach can allow more sensitivity to the four variables identified by this paper, among many other possible ones.

This paper is by no means exhaustive. Rather, it provides a series of steps in guiding scholars as they seek improvements in their policy influence and engagement in the Global South. It achieves this by presenting principles for action and analysis and a provocation and outline for continued debate and research. It calls for more research to understand the various variables in other parts of the Global South and recommends the use of more case studies in order to better understand policy processes in greater context. This can help shape definitions and expectations of research impact, making researchers more aware of what change is realistic over a certain period of time. The use of case studies can also generate missing knowledge that is useful for donors and funders funding research projects in the Global South because, often, their experiences with the research-policy interface in the institutionalised West do not resonate with political realities in resource poor, less institutionalised and highly politicised environments.

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About the Migrating out of Poverty Research Programme Consortium

Migrating out of Poverty is a research programme consortium (RPC) funded by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). It focuses on the relationship between migration and poverty – especially migration within countries and regions - and is located in five regions across Asia and Africa. The main goal of *Migrating out of Poverty* is to provide robust evidence on the drivers and impacts of migration in order to contribute to improving policies affecting the lives and well-being of impoverished migrants, their communities and countries, through a programme of innovative research, capacity building and policy engagement. The RPC will also conduct analysis in order to understand the migration policy process in developing regions and will supplement the world renowned migration databases at the University of Sussex with data on internal migration.

The *Migrating out of Poverty* consortium is coordinated by the University of Sussex, and led by CEO Professor L. Alan Winters with Dr Priya Deshingkar as the Research Director. Core partners are: the Refugee and Migratory Movements Research Unit (RMMRU) in Bangladesh; the Centre for Migration Studies (CMS) at the University of Ghana; the Asia Research Institute (ARI) at the National University of Singapore; the African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) at the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa; and the African Migration and Development Policy Centre (AMADPOC) in Kenya.

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