CONSTRAINTS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICY IMPACT ON UNPOPULAR CAUSES IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Background

The South African academy has taken a principled stance against "alternative facts" or government sanctioned, unsubstantiated falsehoods. It is committed to addressing, topics and issues that affect the well-being of the nation. Today, this commitment is far from being realised. Despite this, donor pressure for researchers to produce and supply evidence for pro-poor policy development and for that knowledge to be translated into policy and practice, is increasing.

South Africa held its first, non-racial, democratic elections on 27 April 1994. The African National Congress (ANC), led by Nelson Mandela, won 252 of the 400 seats in the National Assembly. On May 9 1994, the National Assembly unanimously elected Nelson Mandela president, while Thabo Mbeki and F.W. de Klerk became deputy presidents. This democratic government inherited a discriminatory socio-economic system and a disorganised politico-administrative system, which was ill-equipped to deal with the mounting pressure from citizens to deliver an improved quality of life for all. Today, South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Although gender equality is an important aspect in the government's rhetoric, there is a disjuncture between the gains of women in the public sphere and their daily lives as indicated by increasing levels of poverty, gender-based violence, and HIV infection among women. Civil society in South Africa is vibrant and diverse yet political opposition and public participation are stifled in democratic institutions like parliament and there are frequent attempts to curtail the media and access to information.

The South African state is weak, not only because it lacks capacity, but also because the government lacks the political will to implement policy. Government is politically fragmented, representing different constituencies and ethnic groups, and, as a result its political will is also fragmented. While not overtly repressive, a predominantly populist political landscape is reducing the spaces and opportunities for consideration of the policy implications of empirical research, or for responsiveness to advocacy campaigns.

While the processes by which campaigns and advocacy about populist or popular causes influence policy in developing countries have been recorded and investigated, neglible research has been conducted on how change on marginalised, 'unpopular' or contentious policy issues is affected using evidence. An unpopular cause is conceptualised as dynamic and evolving in the sense that it is an issue which is perceived to threaten powerful interests or commonly held perceptions within a society or is currently on the policy agenda but is not a major point of deliberation or debate because of weak interests at the time. This brief explores the research uptake and advocacy experiences of researchers and activists working on three unpopular and politically contentious causes; immigration, human trafficking and sex work in South Africa. It finds little evidence that the communication of concerted empirical research has resulted in much uptake of the research or in sustained practical improvements for citizens and residents.

Methods

This brief is based on 12 months of qualitative research undertaken from February 2015 to March 2016. The study aimed to establish the role and place of evidence on unpopular issues in policy making in a country where the maturity of the policy apparatus is low, the resilience of political institutions is fragile and/or defensive of existing political ideologies. The study sought to explore how the uptake of evidence is mediated by contextual, institutional and issue-related particularities. Methods included literature review, open-ended interviews held with eight activists from non-profit migrant organisations who lobby for different groups of migrants and kinds of migrant rights (e.g. gender rights, refugee rights, sex worker rights, detention rights etc.), four researchers from key migration think tanks, and two key informants.

Factors that constrain effective research uptake in South Africa

Financial vulnerability constrained research uptake activities

The financial precarity of the NGO sector was an issue raised by respondents which can be encapsulated by the phrase 'NGOs are always poor', a claim made by one of them. Activists believed that a lack of organisational economic stability negatively affected their ability to promote change or influence on policies related to unpopular causes. The dominant view was that financial vulnerability translated into the reproduction of a weak and fragmented NGO sector which was something that worked against desired pro-poor policy outcomes. In addition, it led the non-profit migrant organisation sector to enter into 'exploitative' partnerships with funders; which impacted negatively on several aspects of their practice.

Public values and beliefs impacted negatively on desired policy outcomes

Research uptake efforts had to contend with negative public values and belief systems attached to the unpopular causes activists and researchers were working on. On the one hand, values and beliefs meant that the government were able to fast track negative policy outcomes that activists and researchers did not consider desirable. For example, government were able to mobilise support for antitrafficking policy by playing on moralising attitudes held by the general public. Antitrafficking legislation was passed very quickly due in part to its popularity with citizens and moral appeal. On the other hand, values and beliefs undermine perceived progressive policy outcomes. An example is the hotly debated policy issue of decriminalisation of sex work. The moral and gendered backlash against sex work resulted in negative state policy positions despite compelling evidence proving the benefits of such a policy

The mediating role of politics

Interviewees believed that an understanding of politics and power was crucial when doing research uptake and advocacy work on unpopular causes. They perceived South Africa's political climate as having an impact on research uptake of unpopular causes in several negative ways. Unlike most overtly oppressive political contexts of the South, South Africa appears to have a more liberal political context but one-party dominance of the ANC in various institutions can influence democratic policy processes. Consequently, respondents argued that the ANC's policy desires, which are often not sufficiently informed by scientific evidence, particularly when it come to unpopular causes, mostly tend to materialise as the governing party seeks re-election. In the words of one respondent, "for them politics is more important". This has been compounded by the ANC government's loss of key constituencies in the 2016 municipal elections and a looming crisis of state capture which has heralded President Jacob Zuma's presidency and sanctioned exit.

Alternative strategies, opportunities and levers for influence

Adopting grassroots, participatory approaches

Respondents believed that grassroots, participatory approaches to research and dissemination, that 'democratise' the policy process, could support the uptake of evidence on unpopular policies. These methods can support marginalised communities to take up their own struggle and to better represent themselves as actors in various policy forums. Using research to give power to affected groups was important as it had the potential to allow purported 'victims' and 'research subjects' to take on the roles of 'activists'. However, affected groups are often neglected in research and policy processes, and in framing research uptake strategies. Their ability to understand, process and strategically use research evidence is often underestimated.

Working in partnerships, networks and alliances

There was a view that working in partnerships, networks and alliances between NGOs and think tanks and with government ministries and departments was an instrumental strategy for influencing policies on unpopular causes. Instead of using adversarial approaches, interviewees argued that those seeking policy influence on unpopular causes must use strong argumentation as their stock in trade to win policy makers and the public over to the correctness of their ideas. Networks and alliances were seen as crucial to strategic positioning in the policy process and critical to the efficacy of research uptake and advocacy work.

Implications

Research uptake approaches that are mechanical, or rely on blueprints, without adequately responding to the needs of the operating environment and issue particularities, are unlikely to be successful. Models and approaches suited for popular, mainstream development issues, which usually attract positive policy traction may not be suited for unpopular causes. Notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap, which are prominent in the recent literature, may correspond poorly to the political complexity of the migration, sex work and human trafficking policy processes.

Recommendations

1. When doing research and advocacy work, funders, researchers, and civil society organisations need to understand each policy issue within its own set of interests, opportunities and actors. Complementing research and advocacy work with a parallel study of an issue's policy processes is recommended. This approach allows researchers and activists to identify environmental incentives that are driving certain kinds of exclusion and obstacles and who can be mobilised. Researchers and activists should construct strategies to influence the policy process that build on existing evidence in this area.

2. Financial vulnerability is not distinctly an economic phenomenon or confined only to the non-profit sector. Rather, the financial vulnerability of the NGO sector intersects with questions of local political environments, low levels of collegiality among non-profit organisations and with funders', limited technical capacity, and local economies more generally. Since 'exploitative' relationships emerge when more funds are injected into non-profit migrant organisation operations given the need that arises to meet funders' agendas; injecting more funds into the sector is only one part of the solution. There is a need for funders to engage with local problems so that their agendas are aligned with realities on the ground.

3. The two worlds of research and activism should be brought together by researchers facilitating the inclusion of marginalised groups in the research and policy processes. Researchers should create a space for marginalised groups and communities to mobilise and strengthen their own voice using research.

4. Knowing who to work with and how to present available evidence is crucial. Adversarial approaches and relationships only lead to the closing of ranks which are crucial to policy impact. Coalitions and networks, that come together to work on unpopular policies, are central to change.

Conclusion

There is little evidence to date that the communication of concerted empirical research has resulted in much uptake of the research or in sustained practical improvements for citizens and residents in South Africa when it comes to unpopular policies such as on migration, sex work and trafficking. The efficacy of using existing research uptake best practices that are mechanical or blue-prints without adequately responding to the needs of the operating environment is questionable. Models and approaches suited for popular, mainstream development issues may not be suited for unpopular causes. Notions of capacity building, knowledge brokering and building trust by bridging the science-policy gap that are gaining prominence in the recent literature alone may generate narrowness that corresponds poorly to the political complexity of the migration, sex work and human trafficking policy processes. The South African state is weak, not only because it lacks capacity, but also because the government lacks the political will to implement policy. There is a lack of political will which ties into the potential of an issue's unpopularity to antagonise and fragment different constituencies and ethnic groups that politicians and policy makers represent. Funders, researchers, and civil society organisations have a responsibility to constantly (re) organise and (re) mobilise themselves effectively with a full understanding of local contexts to influence the use of empirical research outputs towards achieving shared goals of pro-poor outcomes and social justice. When doing research and advocacy work, funders, researchers, and civil society organisations need to understand each policy issue within its own set of interests, opportunities and actors. This requires complementing research and advocacy work with a parallel study of an issue's policy processes. This approach allows researchers and activists to identify environmental incentives that are driving certain kinds of exclusion, obstacles and who can be mobilised