

Stimulating Demand for Research Evidence: What Role for Capacity-building?

Kirsty Newman, Catherine Fisher and Louise Shaxson

Abstract There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in supporting evidence-informed policymaking in developing countries. In particular, there have been efforts to build the capacity of researchers and research intermediaries to supply appropriately packaged research information (for example in the form of policy briefs) to policymakers. While supply of research information is important, it will only be used to inform policy if it is accessed, valued and understood by policymakers. In this article, we discuss our understanding of demand for research from policymakers; the capacities which underlie it; and how these might be supported.

1 Introduction

There has been much focus among development practitioners on the *supply* of relevant research to decision-makers; however, recently, some key actors have begun to consider the need to stimulate the *demand* for this research. Some people refer to this as the distinction between 'knowledge producer push' and 'user pull' (Stone 2002). We consider that demand in this context encompasses both the *capacity* to find, evaluate and use these different forms of evidence and the *motivation* to use them to make evidence-informed policy.

The authors represent three UK-based institutions which have an interest in supporting knowledge brokering and research uptake in the global South. The reflections included here emerged from discussions during and following the recent International Conference on Evidence-Informed Policy. This article considers a number of key questions:

- What is evidence-informed policy?
- Why use research evidence?
- What is (and what isn't) demand for research evidence?
- What capacities are needed for demand?
- What interventions could stimulate demand?

By answering these questions we hope to clarify what demand for research evidence is and what capacities underlie it. We will also outline some thoughts and suggestions on the types of capacity-building interventions which could contribute to an increase in demand for research evidence.

2 What is evidence-informed policy?

We argue that evidence-informed policy is that which has considered a broad range of research evidence; evidence from citizens and other stakeholders; and evidence from practice and policy implementation as part of a process that considers other factors such as political realities and current public debates. We do not see it as policy that is exclusively based on research, or as being based on one set of findings. We accept that in some cases, research evidence may be considered and rejected; if rejection was based on understanding of the insights that the research offered then we would still consider any resulting policy to be evidence-informed. Evidence-informed policy does not necessarily imply a linear transition of research findings into policy decisions. Research can inform policy discourses in multiple and sometimes subtle ways. This can range from influencing the language which is used to discuss a certain issue to changing behaviours of key policy actors (see Weyrauch and Diaz Langou 2011).

Figure 1 Capacity and motivation are two overlapping factors which make up demand for research evidence and examples of each are given



For the purposes of this article we have focused on public policy formulation; however, we recognise that the concept of policy can be interpreted much more widely.

3 Why use research evidence?

We are openly writing from the perspective that use of research in policy formulation is, on the whole, a 'good thing' that can contribute to positive policy outcomes. In doing so we share assumptions that have led to large quantities of development assistance pumped into funding research as a strategy towards achieving development outcomes.

However, we do not see the relationship between research and policy as linear or unproblematic. We locate ourselves closest to what has been described as the 'pluralism and opportunism paradigm' (Jones 2009) that sees policy processes as messy and opportunistic but retains assumptions about the potential for research to contribute to better policy formulation.

We acknowledge that there are some who question the value of research and in particular its claims to objectivity and neutrality. They would argue that knowledge and power cannot be separated, and that this plays out in the way that research is conducted, how research agendas are set, and who is included and excluded from supposedly neutral processes of knowledge identification. This could be particularly important in development contexts, as research processes may reflect Western norms and traditions and marginalise other intellectual agendas and ways of knowing (Alatas 2000). We agree that the way in which research agendas are

set and research is carried out is affected by values and culture, but would argue that research evidence can provide (relatively) objective and specific answers to *specific* questions and that it is therefore a valuable source of evidence to inform policy.

Having said that, we also acknowledge that research evidence can be distorted or used to back up regressive policies. Thus we do not believe that policy which is (purportedly) informed by research evidence is necessarily better but we believe that, where the will to develop policies which benefit society exists, better policies can be achieved when research is systematically considered as one factor in decision-making.

4 What is demand for research evidence?

Recent years have seen an increased focus on research and research communication from international development organisations (Conway *et al.* 2010; Young and Mendizabal 2009).

We believe that increasing the availability and accessibility of research, its relevance, and effective communication are all important factors if policy is going to be evidence-informed. However, these aspects relate to the supply of research and are not sufficient without a corresponding demand for it from decision-makers.

For us the demand for research evidence encompasses two overlapping factors: The *capacity* to access, evaluate and use research and the *motivation* to do so. To be clear, we take a broad view of capacity including knowledge, skills, structures, resources, attitudes and

behaviours (see below). Thus we would regard a positive attitude towards research as part of an organisation's capacity. Since attitudes are a component of motivation, it is clear that capacity and motivation are not distinct entities but rather exist on a spectrum (Figure 1).

A growing number of papers focus on the motivations which drive policymakers in developing countries to use research (e.g. Datta *et al.* 2011; Porter 2010). However, we feel there has been a lack of discussion of capacity issues. One reason for this is reluctance on the part of international development organisations to acknowledge a lack of capacity within partner organisations. Thus, just as David Booth (2011) has argued that we make the 'diplomatic assumption' that policymakers are pro-development, we tend to assume that policymakers are evidence-literate and that if evidence is not used it must be due to a conscious decision to reject it. Unfortunately this is often not the case; we have seen many cases where decision-makers do not use research simply because they don't know how to find it and evaluate it or because there is no organisational system for incorporation of research.

Another reason why capacity tends not to be mentioned is that there is a perception that focusing on policymakers' capacity '[assumes] that knowledge utilisation in government is a technical problem that can be resolved with technical "fixes" and improved knowledge management' (Stone 2002: 292). We would distance ourselves from this assumption. For one thing, we take a broader view of capacity than 'technical fixes'. In addition, we do not think that improving capacity is the only key to driving better research evidence utilisation; however, we do think it is a necessary foundation.

Therefore, while we acknowledge the importance of a wide range of factors in influencing policymakers' decisions, we focus here on the issue of policymakers' capacity to consider research evidence.

5 What is not demand for research evidence?

We feel it is useful to further clarify the concept of stimulating demand by outlining some of the things that, in our opinion, it is *not*.

First, stimulating demand for research is not the same as achieving policy influence with a given research project. The latter is a supply-driven

process where a researcher or intermediary takes on what Pielke (2007) describes as an 'issue advocacy role'. While this is an important part of the knowledge 'ecosystem', it does not necessarily stimulate future demand for research. In some instances, researchers may incorporate efforts to educate or influence attitudes in decision-makers into their dissemination strategy; however, the two are not the same.

A second concept which is sometimes confused with stimulating demand is demand-driven research (i.e. research commissioned to inform a particular policy decision; Pujar and Fisher 2011). Such research can be very useful and may be more likely to inform subsequent policy decisions. However, we feel that stimulating demand is more concerned with influencing the behaviour of decision-makers such that they access and use a range of research sources (not only those which they have commissioned).

A final point is that stimulating demand is not the same as supporting more supply! Although this may seem obvious, it is surprising how often researchers and research intermediaries propose producing more and/or better policy briefs or making research more available as a way to stimulate demand. We suspect that issues around supply are often used as a means of obfuscating the more serious issues around demand such as issues of capacities and motivations among policy stakeholders.

Based on these understandings of demand we now go on to explore what capacities are needed for demand for research and how these might be strengthened.

6 What capacities are needed for demand?

We have considered capacity (to demand research evidence) at three levels – individuals, organisations, and environmental. However, we have also drawn on the 'knowledge incentive structures' model introduced by Jones *et al.* (2012) which highlights the often overlooked area of organisational processes as an important area of capacity.

Individual capacity is commonly defined as a combination of knowledge, skills and attitudes which together affect behaviour. In order to find, evaluate and use research evidence, individuals need to have a broad range of capacities

including: knowledge about what research is and how it can be used; skills in searching for and evaluating research information; critical thinking skills to absorb, critique and amalgamate information; and a positive attitude towards research evidence. The importance of attitudes means that individual capacities, particularly of senior decision-makers, can have a major impact on organisational capacities.

It is important to also consider *which* individuals require capacity to demand research evidence. When people think of policymakers, they usually think of Ministers and/or Members of Parliament. However, in reality there are many other important actors, particularly staff within both the legislative and the executive arms of government. Given the important role that such staff can play in making policy, and their tendency of staying in their roles for longer periods of time than those in elected/appointed posts, supporting them to build their capacity can yield important long-term results.

Organisational capacity encompasses factors which either support or impede use of evidence within organisations. Some factors are tangible – such as the existence of adequately maintained computers and sufficient bandwidth. Other factors are less so; the political context, for example, can hugely influence use of evidence. Carden (2009) describes five potential political scenarios with regard to evidence use ranging from clear government demand for research to overt disinterest/hostility. Organisational culture can also impact on demand for research – for example, whether critical enquiry and challenge are acceptable. Organisational culture may not be static; crisis or change may lead to short-lived ‘policy windows’ during which the organisation is temporarily more receptive to research uptake (Kingdon and Thurber 2010).

Organisational capacity is embedded in the processes by which the organisation operates. Some processes which clearly encourage use of evidence include, for example, evidence-based peer review processes for internal policy briefings and parliamentary committee inquiries which require MPs to gather evidence to scrutinise government policy. Other processes are less visible but may have a more deep-rooted effect on the demand for evidence. These include processes related to strategy and planning, policy

appraisals and, importantly, budgeting. Divisions of Research and Statistics are often seen as ‘poor relations’ in the policymaking process but if involved in planning processes they can make real contributions to evidence-based policymaking.

Again it is important to think about *which* organisations are actually making (or influencing) policy and therefore where the capacity is needed. This will be highly context-specific but it is worth considering whether local or national bodies are most influential and remembering that parastatal or semi-autonomous bodies may sometimes be as important as government ministries. The legislature is sometimes an important influencer of policy via its function of scrutiny but legislatures in many developing countries are weak and thus may only act as a ‘rubber-stamping’ institution (Salih 2006; Johnson *et al.* 2008).

Wider environmental capacity, which affects demand for evidence, consists of factors in both formal and informal institutions within a country or region (Broadbent 2012). This might include whether there is a culture of enquiry and how this is developed through institutions such as higher education; what influence wider societal values and beliefs have on use of research; and the extent to which it is socially acceptable to challenge power structures. Attitudes towards the institution of policymaking itself, and what and who should drive it will shape the role of research in these processes. Related to this are ideas about accountability: to what extent policymakers are held accountable for the ‘quality’ of their decisions and scrutinised by other state or civil society organisations including the popular media.

As can be seen from the above, the capacities which favour a demand for evidence are multilayered and complex and exist within an interrelated system which, in the case of public policy institutions, is highly political in every sense of the term. In the next section, we will discuss some interventions which could be used to strengthen these capacities.

7 What capacity-strengthening interventions could stimulate demand?

We feel that capacity-strengthening goes far beyond a simple response to technical deficits. Furthermore, while we believe that external actors can *support* others to build their own capacity, we would argue that capacity-building is

essentially a self-led endeavour (Walters 2007). There are, however, some tensions at the intersection between this conception of capacity-strengthening and the drive for evidence-informed policymaking.

We believe that policy informed by evidence is more likely to lead to better development outcomes. However, the view that policymakers need to have capacity to deal with research may not be held by those policymakers prior to engaging with external partners. Thus capacity work could be seen as being not only about strengthening skills and abilities, but also about imparting a world view and implying that others should change their behaviour in response. We have struggled to reconcile this 'hidden agenda' approach – whereby interventions claiming to build capacity are intended to change attitudes – with our understanding of capacity development as a fundamentally endogenous process with the aim of emancipatory development (Clarke and Oswald 2010). This is particularly problematic when capacity-building programmes in policymaking institutions in the South are driven from the North.

At the same time, our experience tells us that policymakers, many of whom have only experienced didactic models of education, often find the exposure to research and its application to be a positive and eye-opening experience, which is a necessary precursor to a decision to develop their own skills.

In this light, it may be preferable for the objectives of a capacity-building programme to be developed as an iterative process. During the initial phase, those leading the programme need to be clear what they are aiming for; if they are aiming to shift attitudes and behaviours then they should be honest with themselves and others about this. At present, programmes providing pure technical assistance and those aiming to change behaviour are generally conflated in both action and intent. Subsequent objectives should be set by participants themselves, as unless they are seeking to build their capacity it is unlikely that any programme will succeed. Further, we feel that capacity-strengthening programmes should present research evidence as just one form of evidence which can and should be critiqued and evaluated, and which should be considered alongside a range of other factors.

With these points in mind, the following examples illustrate capacity-strengthening programmes (primarily from the South) which aim to stimulate demand for research. It should be noted that at present most interventions have consisted of isolated events rather than a more systematic programme, and not enough is known about the effectiveness of these interventions.

Diagnostic processes

A key first step in any capacity-building programme is understanding the range of existing capacities; understanding if there is a desire for change and how and where that is felt; and finding out which of the core processes of policymaking support or hinder an evidence-based approach. In the case of research demand and use in policymaking, one starting point may need to be a recognition that there is a gap in capacity that needs to be addressed. Sometimes highlighting that there is a capacity problem may be enough to stimulate people to find ways to build their own capacity.

In Canada, some public policymakers from the health sector have made use of a self-assessment tool which aims to assess organisational capacity to 'acquire, assess, adapt and apply' research evidence (CHSRF 2005). The authors recently collaborated along with colleagues from the Overseas Development Institute to develop an 'Evidence-Literacy' diagnostic tool to allow public policymakers to assess their level of understanding of research and ability to make use of it.¹ This tool is currently being used by a number of African policymaking institutions.

Training

In some circles, capacity-building is used almost synonymously with 'training workshop'. As we have explored, stimulating demand for research may require significant changes in behaviour from individuals working in policymaking institutions, and these changes are unlikely to be achieved in a single training workshop, especially if the workshop is delivered in a didactic manner. This does not mean that training has no role to play in capacity-building programmes. It *can* help build knowledge about research; build skills in searching for and evaluating research information; and provide space and time for critical reflection on attitudes to research. However, to achieve these benefits training needs to be delivered in a learner-centred and

participatory manner, preferably as part of long-term professional development. In Nigeria, for example, health researchers have implemented a long-term programme with policymakers including capacity assessment and training in a variety of skills (Uneke *et al.* 2012).

Although training is aimed at individual capacity-strengthening, it may have indirect impacts on other levels of capacity. For example, following training delivered by the International Network for the Availability of Scientific Publications (INASP), a member of staff from the Zimbabwean parliament felt inspired to lobby internally for a greater emphasis on use of evidence within the parliament. This example illustrates how an external-driven intervention can trigger, catalyse or support endogenous action for change.

Mentoring

Mentoring is another approach which can be used to support individual capacity-building. The UK Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology (POST) is supporting a remote mentoring scheme for parliamentary researchers in the Parliament of Uganda as part of their POST Africa programme.² In this scheme, parliamentary researchers who are working on a policy brief are paired up with experts outside of Uganda who will provide ongoing support and advice on writing the brief.

Linking schemes

A scheme which has been run by the Ugandan National Academy of Science with support from POST is the MP–Scientist pairing scheme where Ugandan MPs are paired up with Ugandan scientists. The pairs make reciprocal visits to each others' place of work. The major aim of this scheme is to raise awareness of, and positive attitudes towards, science amongst MPs. In this respect the scheme seems to have been successful. However, a potential danger of such a scheme is that it could give disproportionate influence to the scientists involved and may suggest to policymakers that linking with individual scientists is a good approach to gathering evidence, whereas in fact it would be preferable to gather evidence from a range of scientific experts.

A scheme run by the UK Centre for Science and Policy³ aims to avoid this by linking policymakers with a range of experts through 'Policy Fellowships'.

Organisational policies

Policymaking institutions can institute internal policies which incentivise or even mandate the use of research evidence. An example of this comes from the UK's Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' (DEFRA) Evidence and Innovation Strategy. This was designed in response to a report which concluded that DEFRA 'should be at least as well focused on using knowledge as it is on advancing knowledge' (Taig 2004). A comprehensive strategy to 'put policy in the lead' and create a 'pull' for evidence aligned to strategic outcomes was implemented (Shaxson *et al.* 2009). In part this process allowed policymakers to identify evidence gaps and to commission research accordingly but it also aimed to help them to gather and interpret existing research results. Undertaking these sorts of strategy processes is complex and may have implications for the organisational structure of departments: the effort needed to do them thoroughly should not be underestimated.

The UK Department for International Development (DFID) has also recently committed to increasing its use of evidence by scrutinising the evidence base underlying every new project (DFID 2011).

Such formal requirements to draw research into policy formulation processes may incentivise use of research but there is a danger that without sufficient resourcing, busy policymakers could rely on a narrow evidence base. There is also a risk of 'policy-based evidence-making' where research is commissioned to support a predetermined position.

Societal interventions

Societal interventions are generally longer-term interventions and they may not look like typical 'capacity development activities' not least because they generally seek to change attitudes rather than specific skills and capacities. Interventions of this kind are aimed not just at the tiny cadre of people who may end up in policymaking institutions but more broadly.

Some countries have run 'awareness weeks' to build public understanding of, and appreciation for, research including the Development Policy Research Month (DPRM)⁴ in the Philippines and the National Science Week run by the Uganda

National Council for Science and Technology (UNCST).⁵ Similarly, critical engagement with research issues can be promoted by running public events such as science cafés (Yamey 2009).

Finally, improving education and developing critical thinking capacities more broadly are longer-term solutions to stimulating demand for research evidence.

8 Conclusion

With the increasing focus on stimulating demand for research, it will be important to be clear about what this term means and in particular, to avoid conflating it with policy-influencing agendas. Here we argue that efforts to stimulate demand need to consider capacities of policymakers and the institutions in which they work to use research as well as being aware of broader contexts and factors that enable or constrain engagement with research. A five-year research programme on capacity change and performance undertaken by the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) concludes that:

Notes

- 1 See www.surveymonkey.com/s/RNMLWMJ/ (accessed 19 June 2012).
- 2 See www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/offices/bicameral/post1/about5/ (accessed 20 June 2012).

References

- Alatas, Syed Hussein (2000) 'Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems', *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28.1
- Booth, David (2011) *Aid Effectiveness: Bringing Country Ownership (and Politics) Back In*, London: Overseas Development Institute
- Broadbent, Emma (2012) *Politics of Research-based Evidence in African Policy Debates: Synthesis of Case Study Findings*, London: Overseas Development Institute
- Carden, Fred (2009) *Knowledge to Policy: Making the Most of Development Research*, Ottawa: International Development Research Centre
- CHSRF (2005) *Is Research Working for You? A Self-assessment Tool and Discussion Guide for Health Services and Policy Organizations*, Ontario: Canadian Health Service Research Foundation

In practice, a combination of entry points may be needed. These might include: organisational development work, adjusting internal and external incentives, promoting knowledge and understanding, tackling underlying organisational values and meaning, and adapting formal and informal structures and systems (Land 2009).

This may seem daunting to anyone setting out to stimulate demand who thought that they could run a couple of awareness-raising workshops! It implies the need to identify synergies with others from within and outside the system who have similar agendas (even if they do not use the same language to describe their work). It might also mean starting small and building from there and not expecting transformative results overnight.

Finally, it is noticeable that despite the increased interest in stimulating demand for research, there is still very little evidence about which interventions best achieve this. Evaluating the impact of interventions will be a key priority for the future.

- 3 See www.csap.cam.ac.uk/ (accessed 20 June 2012).
- 4 See www.pids.gov.ph/ (accessed 25 June 2012).
- 5 See www.uncst.go.ug/ (accessed 20 June 2012).

- Clarke, Peter and Oswald, Katy (2010) 'Introduction: Why Reflect Collectively on Capacities for Change?', *IDS Bulletin* 41.3, Brighton: IDS
- Conway, G.; Waage, J. and Delaney, S. (2010) *Science and Innovation for Development*, London: UK Collaborative on Development Sciences
- Datta, Ajoy; Jones, Harry; Febriany, Vita; Harris, Daniel; Kumala Dewi, Rika; Wild, Leni and Young, John (2011) *The Political Economy of Policy-making in Indonesia: Opportunities for Improving the Demand for and Use of Knowledge*, London: Overseas Development Institute
- DFID (2011) *Operational Plan 2011–2015*, Research and Evidence Department, London: Department for International Development
- Johnson, John; Nakamura, Robert and Stapenhurst, Rick (2008) *Legislative Oversight*

- and *Budgeting: A World Perspective*, Washington DC: World Bank Publications
- Jones, Harry (2009) *Policy-making as Discourse: A Review of Recent Knowledge-to-policy Literature*, Bonn: Joint IKM Emergent–ODI Working Paper
- Jones, Harry; Jones, Nicola; Shaxson, Louise and Walker, David (2012) *Knowledge, Policy and Power in International Development*, Bristol: The Policy Press
- Kingdon, John and Thurber, James (2010) *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*, 2nd edn, London: Longman
- Land, T. (2009) *Capacity Development: Between Planned Interventions and Emergent Processes*, Maastricht: European Centre for Development Policy Management
- Pielke, Roger A. (2007) *The Honest Broker: Making Sense of Science in Policy and Politics*, Cambridge University Press
- Porter, Caitlin (2010) *What Shapes the Influence Evidence has on Policy? The Role of Politics in Research Utilisation*, Young Lives Working Paper, Oxford: University of Oxford
- Pujar, Shamprasad and Fisher, Catherine (2011) ‘Stimulating Demand for Research: Exploring Cultures of Information Use in South Asia’, EADI–DSA Conference, 19–22 September 2011, York, UK
- Salih, M.A. Mohammed (2006) *African Parliaments: Between Governments and Governance*, Pretoria: HSRC (Human Sciences Research Council) Press
- Shaxson, Louise; Harrison, Michael and Morgan, Molly (2009) *Developing an Evidence-based Approach to Environmental Policy Making: Insights from Defra’s Evidence and Innovation Strategy*, SPRU Electronic Working Paper, Brighton: Science and Technology Policy Research
- Stone, Diane (2002) ‘Using Knowledge: The Dilemmas of “Bridging Research and Policy”’, *Compare* 32.3
- Taig, Tony (2004) *The Development and Use of Scientific Advice in Defra*, Marston: TTAC Ltd
- Uneke, Chikozie Jesse; Ebeh Ezeoha, Abel; Ndukwe, Chinwendu Daniel; Gold Oyibo, Patrick and Onwe, Friday (2012) ‘Promotion of Evidence-informed Health Policymaking in Nigeria: Bridging the Gap between Researchers and Policymakers’, *Global Public Health*, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/22394290 (accessed 20 June 2012)
- Walters, Hettie (2007) *Capacity Development, Institutional Change and Theory of Change: What do we Mean and Where are the Linkages?*, http://portals.wi.wur.nl/files/docs/successfailuredvelopment/Walters_CapacityDevelopmentConceptPaperFIN.pdf (accessed 25 June 2012)
- Weyrauch, Vanesa and Diaz Langou, Gala (2011) *Sound Expectations: From Impact Evaluations to Policy Change*, International Initiative for Impact Evaluation Working Paper 12, New Delhi: 3ie
- Yamey, Gavin (2009) *Serving a ‘Cup of Science’ in Kenya*, PLoS Blogs, <http://blogs.plos.org/speakingofmedicine/2009/09/08/serving-a-%E2%80%9Ccup-of-science%E2%80%9D-in-kenya/> (accessed 20 June 2012)
- Young, John and Mendizabal, Enrique (2009) *Helping Researchers become Policy Entrepreneurs*, London: Overseas Development Institute