

“The last thing the world needs is another website”: the role of evidence in integrating information and communication into development policy

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This summary paper outlines the interim findings from the ICD (Information and Communication for Development) Knowledge Sharing and Learning programme carried out by the GAMOS led consortium for the Department for International Development (DFID). It summarises the communication processes that are needed to engage with policy makers in order to embed effective information and communication within their development policies and practice.

Providing evidence to policy makers on the impact of information and communication on development outcomes is important. But it is also crucial to question whether the provision of evidence alone will achieve the goal of informing policy debates on the role of information and communication in development. Recent studies demonstrate how important dialogue is: communication must be iterative, multi-directional and fit context. This applies to communication with policy makers as well as to communication at community level.

In recent years there has been considerable discussion regarding policy making, particularly with respect to how to communicate research to policy makers.¹ The conclusion is that policy making is a “messy process” and it depends on “windows of opportunities”.² There are significant challenges to getting the evidence in front of the decision maker. If the evidence contradicts political expediency it may be sidelined. If evidence comes from

the wrong source it may be ignored, the professional language used by the researcher may not match the language of the decision maker.



How then do you improve the access of passively disengaged policy makers to evidence that communication plays a vital role in development outcomes?

The ICD Knowledge Sharing and Learning Programme focused on processes to engage policy makers. Through the initial stages it emerged that the information and communication needs of policy makers went beyond evidence. This meant that the original project framework – which emphasised the provision of evidence to policy makers – was revised to include communication processes that engage policy makers who are less familiar with communication for development.

The project took a view of the demand for such evidence. It conducted an email survey and an invitation only online discussion for known policy makers and supplemented this with interviews. In all, over 150 policy makers gave their views during these initial activities, with most being described as passively disengaged with the subject of communication for development, but with some being ICD specialists or academics working in this area.

“There has been a big push for evidence to play a more central role in policy making, particularly in the UK but also in the field of development, based on the premise that ‘better’ evidence produces ‘better’ outcomes, in a rational sense.”

Respondent



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Key findings: awareness of information and communication for development

In the email survey the decision makers, ICD specialists and academics were split in their opinion over the awareness among decision makers of the importance of communication. Some agreed that decision makers have little understanding of the importance of communication, although there may be a number of reasons for this such as lack of skills or vision. Others felt that there is indeed an awareness (albeit small but growing) of the need for communication (especially amongst donors). Where there is a high awareness of the impact of communication, this tends to be one way communication used to get a message across – PR, image, and promoting compliance. Interestingly, the decision makers themselves had a more pessimistic view of awareness amongst policy makers (than ICD specialists or academics).

“While policy makers routinely mention the need to tell others what is happening, and to listen as well as tell, I sense there is a big difference between what people say and what they do”

Respondent

The online discussion explored the level of importance attributed to integrating information and communication into policies for delivering outcomes more effectively. The general view was that it is of relatively low importance. Even where importance is recognised, this is not translated into do-able policies, implying that there is a vacuum between policy making and policy implementation. Participants offered explanations for low priority, including lack of budget and expertise, lack of understanding of the power of communication. There is a clear role for communication which remains to be exploited.

Key findings: influencing how policy is made

Respondents to the email survey noted:

- policy making is a messy process, decision makers are subject to an enormous range of pressures and constraints
- decisions tend to be based more on political expediency than the basis of evidence
- there are a number of difficulties with the use of evidence in practice, mostly related to reliability and accessibility
- despite the obstacles there was widespread agreement that there is a need for evidence in making informed policies and decisions.

What counts as evidence?

Senior level decision makers emphasised that new forms of aid make the role of impact assessment more important. However, different types of evidence are of value for different purposes: stories can be powerful in getting a message across; academic research is needed to justify decisions; donors need data. Decision makers tend to lack the time, technical and academic background to read and digest rigorous research reports, so they naturally rely more on stories and case studies to gain understanding.

“If the ‘stories’ (I would call it experiences) are well described they are more useful than academic research (which always conclude ‘more research is needed’)”

Respondent

“anecdotes can influence policy makers or those who have the ear of the policy maker but when preparing advocacy materials, there is always a need for the theoretical underpinning or evidence base”

Respondent

Some participants called for new evaluation methods to be used to strengthen the evidence base. They noted that both communications “inputs” and the development “outcomes” are not easy to quantify, and therefore they are not surprised that there does not seem to be clear evidence emphasising the need for good practice regarding communication as a part of all development.

Senior level decision makers interviewed thought that policy makers do make good use of information (eg satellite coverage maps) but this is not necessarily the same as making use of evidence pertaining to development impact.

Respondents remain sceptical about the interpretation of research data. There are also examples where political positions override evidence; in development, the institutional interests dominate the policy and practice.

“in our experience they mine evaluation reports selectively to find information to support decisions made on policy grounds passed on from the top”

Respondent

Asked what type of evidence would be most helpful in raising the profile of information and communication, participants addressed the messy nature of policy making – lack of capacity, lack of transparency and self interest.

Participants did not spontaneously offer examples of “good” evidence, and gave limited suggestions on strategies for raising awareness – the emphasis was on personal contact.

Effective communication with policy makers

A number of the respondents closely identified information and communication with technology and people gave examples of how technology provides good information. However, the project asked specifically about websites and web portals and there was almost universal agreement that a website is not the best means of raising awareness among policy makers. Perhaps surprisingly, it was the ICD practitioners who were most strongly opposed to the use of websites for this purpose, arguing that policy makers simply do not look at the internet – they do not have the time, skills or connectivity.

“policy makers are swayed by demonstration and interaction, not by accessing a website”

Respondent

Senior level decision makers also thought that different formats are appropriate for communicating with different groups. For example journal papers are good for academics, but not for the private sector; policy makers like to use stories.

“when it comes to scientific reading our policy makers are out of it”

Respondent

Using networks to reach policy makers

The decision markers surveyed listed the networks they find valuable as sources of information relevant to their area of work. The list contains over 140 contacts covering donors, international institutions, special interest groups, ICD websites, research institutions, as well as local civil society groups. The networks most commonly referred to are:

- World Bank
- Communication Initiative
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
- International Telecommunication Union (ITU)
- Overseas Development Institute (ODI)
- Association for Progressive Communications (APC)
- Online groups in general
- International Development Research Centre (IDRC)
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)



How to handle evidence in such a way as to influence policy makers? How can it match the priorities of a diverse set of heterogeneous policy makers?

Next steps

We need to develop an emphasis on networks of policy makers, engaging the passively disengaged as much as possible and find entry points to those networks which do not normally discuss communication. There is a need to ensure that, in the longer term, there are mechanisms for presenting the evidence base to be dynamic and changing – both to the needs of the policy makers and to the contexts it is accessed from.

The engagement with policy makers so far, has confirmed that websites are only one tool they use to inform themselves. There are more effective ways of reaching policy makers, most of which are more proactive and involve face to face contact, eg workshops, consultations, email bulletins, briefing papers and advocacy meetings.



Given that policy making is messy and relies on windows of opportunity how can the internet address the varying and diverse needs of policy makers in a timely way?

We also need to consider the conditions by which those less invested in the idea of communication might be exposed to key material on development that they are not necessarily looking for. For instance, ICD champions will need to ensure that a search for good practice in health policy will include examples of current practice in communications. This way policy makers might begin to value the integration of communication in mainstream development sectors.

We suggest that since policy making is about networks and communities of interest the internet is best utilised when it builds on those networks. Listening to the passively disengaged respondents who have participated so far in this project, we suggest the web presence needs:

- an ongoing connection to the network of people that the policy maker trusts
- to use the network connections to direct the user to the key material as quickly as possible
- to present the material in the language of the network community
- to present the material of key concern to the network, and demote interesting but essentially lower value material.

A key challenge will be how to make this web presence dynamic and effectively involve the policy making community.

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Conclusions

- Evidence plays a relatively modest role in policy making, which is dominated by political expediency.
- Policy makers tend to use stories rather than “hard” evidence as they are easy to understand and effective in getting a message across.
- Decision makers tend to focus on communication to get their message across rather than the application of information and communication in participatory development processes.
- Donors have a key role in stimulating the integration of information and communication into development practice – they have influence on developing country priorities; they can also lead by example by developing effective communication strategies.
- New evaluation methods are needed to strengthen the evidence base on information and communication for development as the processes do not lend themselves to impact assessment.
- Personal interaction remains the most effective means of communicating with policy makers. Policy briefings are widely used. Websites and email in particular can support personal communication.
- Communication strategies should build on existing networks and communities of interest.
- Engaging policy makers less invested in communication in development means integrating evidence into learning about mainstream development.

Activities for the next phase in the ICD Knowledge Sharing and Learning Programme

- Synthesis papers
- Cooperation with significant players in this arena beyond the project team
- Continued engagement with stakeholders – email contact, more online discussion groups, opening it out to more invited personnel
- Exchange events
- Web presence – synthesis papers will be put on related websites, and there will be systematic work to ensure a suitable web presence.

Examples of policy-making research

International Development Research Centre: www.idrc.ca

Overseas Development Institute: www.odi.org.uk

Paris Declaration of Aid Effectiveness, OECD: www.oecd.org/document/18/0,2340,en_2649_201185_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html

The Policy Hub: www.policyhub.gov.uk

Footnotes

- 1 DFID Communication of Research: Guidance Notes for Research Programme Consortia www.dfid.gov.uk/research/communication-research.pdf
- 2 Background papers drew on valuable resources such as: RAPID, Overseas Development Institute (ODI); International Development Research Centre (IDRC); ID21, Institute of Development Studies (IDS); Communication Information Management Resource Centre (CIMRC), (DFID CRD); and Natural Resources Research commissioned by DFID among others.

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