IKM Summaries

State-of-the-art literature review on the link between knowledge and policy in development

What is the link between knowledge and policy in development? The key question at stake here is how our understanding of the hugely significant problems we currently face in the development sector, and the ways in which they can be addressed, are translated into action.

At the moment, despite the fact that a great deal of knowledge is being generated through formal research, this knowledge is all too rarely used to feed into or inform the policies drawn up by governments or development agencies. To compound the problem further, the voices of the poor that have the potential to inform policy with a grounded understanding of the problems they face are seldom drawn upon; knowledge and learning generated in the course of implementing programmes is rarely shared with those who could use it to improve their work; and power imbalances in the development discourse mean that policy-making is dominated by organisations or institutions which do not have adequate knowledge of the contexts in which they work. It is vital to address these issues if we wish to improve the effectiveness of development work, and improve development agencies' and Southern governments' abilities to tackle the problems they currently face.

Five years after the ground-breaking work carried out in this area by the Overseas Development Institute's Research and Policy in Development (RAPID) group, this review by Harry Jones attempts to map the current understanding of the 'knowledge-policy-practice' interface in development. It aims to useful for researchers by helping them to make the most of their work and facilitate the changes they would like to see in policy; for policy-makers, to contribute to a better understanding of the link between knowledge and policy that will help to inform the policy design and implementation process and facilitate more effective uptake of new knowledge in their work; and for intermediaries who are trying to strengthen the link between knowledge and policy this paper should provide a theoretical overview of the knowledge-policy landscape and some potential avenues for work.

This study was commissioned by Working Group 3 of the IKM Emergent Research Programme to investigate the role of knowledge in the way in which policy is formulated and implemented. It was carried out using a modified form of the systematic review methodology pioneered by the Canadian Health Services Research Foundation, complemented by a narrative-mapping technique. This involved systematic electronic searches and hand-searching of journals and grey literature, complemented by recommendations and sources provided by expert informants, and a mapping of various 'research traditions' relating to the topic. It also includes feedback and interviews from experts on the policy process.

The paper begins by defining what is meant by knowledge and policy, discusses the various approaches to understanding the link between them and outlines three 'paradigms' that run through the literature (Part 1). Next, it examines the theoretical work carried out since 2004 on the role of knowledge in policy, bringing together work from the newest paradigm which focuses on the link between knowledge and policy, politics and legitimization (Part 2). Part 3 moves away from the theory and examines two areas of practical interest: firstly, the production of knowledge and secondly, the processes that link knowledge to policy. The author then highlights the areas advocated as key sources of knowledge for policy, after first outlining the reasons why they are important, the practical steps required to facilitate their link with policy, and the challenges involved in doing so. Part 4 looks at the other side of the practical literature, focusing on the various processes which mediate between the generation of knowledge and its use in the policy process, and how they can be improved. The final

section arrives at three broad conclusions and summarizes the key issues and future avenues for research.

Two caveats must be made about the scope of the paper. While the focus of the review was nominally 'post-2004', it proved impossible to adequately map out the terrain without referring to earlier work. The pre-2004 sources were selected for comparison and theoretical grounding, for example the seminal works of different currents or 'paradigms' running through the literature were published pre-2004, and some policy-focused work applies theories developed before this date. Secondly, while every effort was made to find sources that focussed on Southern contexts, this was limited by two factors: a large amount of the literature on the link between knowledge and policy focuses on - or is grounded in - Northern settings, and the author was only able to properly assess work available in English.

At the end of the paper, the author draws three broad conclusions about the link between knowledge and policy. Firstly, that it is crucial to acknowledge the role of power in shaping the knowledge-policy interface. Policy is produced in the interaction between actors, institutions and discourse at different stages of the policy process and in different spaces; this determines not just what knowledge is 'used' in policy, but 'how' it is used. It is crucial to gain an understanding of these dynamics in order to inform action that helps the powerless. Secondly, there are many types of knowledge which need to be incorporated in order to make effective policy for poverty reduction. As well as policy-focused research, critical and 'reflexive' work should be promoted in order to ensure that policy is based on the right values, systems should be set up in order to take advantage of information generated in the process of implementing development programmes, the voices of the poor should be recognized as valid and instrumentally useful inputs to the policy process, and the importance of integrating these types of knowledge cannot be over-emphasized. Thirdly, a number of activities can facilitate the process of incorporating knowledge in policy: communication, translation, interaction and exchange, using social influence and intermediaries. The message that is emphasised over and over again is that these are more of an art than a science, requiring considerable amounts of judgement and luck. Policy approaches which offer longer-term solutions to these need careful planning, but it is important to ensure that 'uptake' is not promoted ahead of getting the 'right kind of influence'. Finally, although complexity has been moving up development agendas, and some conceptual headway has been made, there is scope for beginning to bring complexity more concretely into the knowledge-policy debate.